

# **Educators' Notebook**

Reviews of Research of Interest to Educators

## **Rural Education and School Reform: Paying Attention to Context**

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This article discusses the disjuncture between provincial and national school improvement initiatives that typically call for schools to prepare students to contribute to national interests, and rural education stakeholders who believe that education should serve local interests. Entrepreneurial social infrastructure is offered as a capacity-building framework that encourages rural educators to invest in their local commitments while building stronger and more effective linkages to provincial/national educational organizations.

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# Rural Education and School Reform: Paying Attention to Context

## Introduction

The assertion that schooling in rural contexts is significantly different than schooling in urban contexts has been made in research around the world. Canadian research on rural education often focuses on how particular educational topics such as teacher preparation (Ralph, 2002), leadership (Wallin, 2001), alternative delivery systems (Amundrud, 2002), or diversity (McKee, 2002) need to be addressed differently in rural areas. Much of the American literature on rural education in the past two years has focused on the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, and its inequitable consequences for rural school divisions (Rural Community Trust, 2003). A United Nations study (Eastwood & Lipton, 2000) reviews evidence that inequalities in rural-urban indicators are on the increase, perpetuating rising urban biases in education, particularly in developing countries. In extension, education policy must allow for local differences and provide flexibility in implementation.

In fact, school reform movements have been criticized by some as universalizing schools and students, paying insufficient attention to context, especially in terms of racial, class and gender differences, national jurisdiction and the differences between urban and rural schools (Kannapel & Young, 1999). In his disparagement of educational research and school improvement, Howley (1997) states that the commitment to forms of education that sustain local communities as thoughtful cultures has deteriorated, and has been replaced by school improvement initiatives that are nationalizing or “globalizing.” Instead, what Howley (1997) advocates is research on rural education that addresses a “practical critique” of current trends in school improvement, so that school improvement initiatives remain salient to the “real conditions in the world” (par 48).

## Creating the Context

Researchers in Manitoba have asserted that “the concerns of urban Winnipeg have often

overshadowed those of the rural areas of the province” in school reform, even if “the city has never achieved hegemonic domination over them” (Henley & Young, 2002, p. 322). As well, the *Manitoba K-S4 Agenda* asserts that the Manitoba education system is serving Manitoba children and families well, citing such factors as increasing educational levels, high school completion rates, highly qualified teachers, and special needs inclusion as evidence. However, research on rural education indicates that often rural settings are plagued with educational problems that run contrary to the claim of educational excellence: isolation from specialized services (Cheney & Demchak, 2001); limited accessibility to quality staff development and university services (Hodges, 2002); teacher shortages especially in key areas of math and science (Lemke & Harrison, 2002); difficulty in recruiting new teachers (Ralph, 2002); decreasing enrolments leading to decreases in funding (Ralph, 2002), and a declining pool of qualified administrative candidates (Waddle & Buchanan, 2002) often due to little administrative support and very high community expectations. As well, the incorporation of technology and the Internet means that many rural school divisions have spent time and much of their budgets creating distance learning systems and technology supported courses. A disheartening example of the lack of attention to rural issues is the fact that the closure of small rural schools has been the single most implemented educational change in rural areas (Carlson, 2002).

Fortunately, studies have also shown that rural students do not suffer disadvantages in academic achievement simply because of their residence in rural areas or their attendance at rural schools (Fan & Chen, 1999). Other researchers identify that aesthetic values and quality of rural life remain important in rural areas (Theobald, 1997), and relationships and connections to other people are given primacy (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). The main idea here is that although challenges exist on a provincial level, they have to be addressed differently in rural areas because rural areas have differing capacities.

At the heart of the matter is the conflict over the purpose of schooling, with provincial and national reform leaders typically calling for schools to prepare students to contribute to national interests, while rural scholars and educational stakeholders believe rural schools should serve local community interests. The uneven effects of economic changes, centralization of services, and the emphasis on regulation and accountability have reduced local control in many rural areas. However, a rural school symbolizes community autonomy because very often it is all that remains of local control. Accordingly, good rural schools help to care for the places they serve and those who live there. The key to building the capacity of rural schools, then, is to focus on the middle ground where both sides can agree: the need for equity of educational opportunity and achievement, intellectually challenging curricula and pedagogy, standards for locally responsive curricula, and professional development tailored to impact student learning.

### **Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure**

One model that may be useful to rural educators in thinking about the capacity of their schools was developed for rural community development (Flora and Flora, 1993). Entrepreneurial social infrastructure reflects the notion of capacity because it includes three components which schools and communities must have in order to be successful in their endeavours: (a) symbolic diversity; (b) quality linkages, and; (c) resource mobilization. Symbolic diversity focuses on community processes, depersonalization of politics, and broadening of community boundaries. Resource mobilization entails private and collective investment in the community that generates some surplus beyond basic subsistence. Quality networks include establishing networks of experience and knowledge with those inside and outside the community. The entrepreneurial social infrastructure model could be used as a framework for determining a rural school's capacity to address educational priorities, especially since rural education researchers have found that community development should be given weight in educational policy development (Pittman, McGinty & Gerstl-Pepin, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Almost half the schools in Manitoba are rural, making it imperative that organized school reform initiatives be sensitive to rural commitments. Educational policymakers must work to understand rural community attitudes and expectations, and to create an educational agenda that meets the needs of rural communities. Research on rural education must focus more strongly on locally relevant issues. At the same time, rural educators must work together locally to determine their school improvement needs. Haas & Lambert (1995) suggest that rural school improvements that are genuinely "rural" (a) are grounded in a sense of place; (b) value outcomes arising from individual situations rather than predetermined, specified results; (c) invite contributions from those who are usually marginalized in reform efforts; (d) are systemic, comprehensive, long-term, multifaceted; and (e) are grounded in and energized by a moral stance of rural communities and schools strengthening themselves.

Flora's and Flora's (1993) model of Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure may provide a framework for rural educators to invest in their local commitments while building stronger and more effective linkages to provincial and national organizations. Such an agenda will help foster school reform initiatives that do not work at cross purposes. For example, local education and community revitalization programs that are built around the components of the model and that are supported by provincial organizations could spark some of the hopefulness that may be lacking in communities affected by poverty, weak infrastructure, and youth migration. As well, communities could benefit from programs designed to maintain and increase their capacity to draw people who wish to maintain a rural lifestyle. If supported, designed and resourced thoughtfully, the technological capabilities we now have could provide rural educators with opportunities to reconceptualize rural education and move forward in different ways. Such a vision would protect the rural way of life rather than viewing its demise as inevitable. But it would also serve to break down some of the barriers between those who conceive of education as a globalizing enterprise and those who would foster local autonomy and difference.

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.