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TEXT: The problem of defining "rural" is not new. People know when they are rural, but such perception does not satisfy demographers, policymakers, or educational researchers. After all, difficult policy decisions have to be made and resources have to be allocated on some quantifiable basis. Numbers, however, miss the essence of what it means to be rural, and seldom satisfy those on the receiving end of the definition. Rural people know that rural Maine is not like rural Texas, which in turn is not like rural Georgia or Alaska.

What follows makes no attempt to provide the definition of rural or rural education so

eagerly sought by journalists, legislators, and others in their efforts to quickly and neatly pigeonhole rural America and its attributes. Instead, the intent is to show the complexity of the problem of defining rural, provide examples of definitions used by various agencies, and list sample operational definitions derived by educators in the absence of a workable, centralized definition.

WHAT IS RURAL?

In order to define rural education or rural schools, it is necessary to define rural. Developing such a definition has been a conceptual problem for some time. For example, in an analysis of 178 rural mental health and sociology sources published from 1971 through 1980, 43% did not define the "rural" they discussed, 48% used local or "homemade quantitative" definitions, and 23% used "external quantitative" definitions, such as census data (Bosak and Perlman, 1982). This presumedly shared understanding of what rural is, and a preference for other than official definitions of rural, permeates the literature.

WHAT ARE SOME QUANTITATIVE DEFINITIONS OF RURAL?

According to Whitaker (1982), "rural" was first used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1874 when it was defined as indicating the population of a county exclusive of any cities or towns with 8,000 or more inhabitants. Modified over the years, by the 1980 census, a specific definition for rural had been dropped. Instead, the urban population is now defined as all persons living in urbanized areas and places of 2,500 or more located outside urbanized areas; all population not classified as urban constitutes the rural population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983).

One way to define rural is by determining what it is not. The Office of Management and the Budget defines metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) as geographic areas consisting of a large population nucleus, and economically and socially related adjacent communities. Remaining areas are categorized as nonmetropolitan (Morrissey, 1987). To further complicate matters, the Farmers Home Administration considers rural areas to be open country communities of up to 20,000 in nonmetropolitan areas, and towns of up to 10,000 with a rural character in metropolitan areas. (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1980). The Rural Highway Public Transportation Administration defines rural as indicating areas with populations of 5,000 or less. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Social and Rehabilitative Services, and several agencies under the U.S. Department of Agriculture define rural as areas outside MSAs (Pressler and Swenson, 1984).

WHAT ARE SOME QUALITATIVE DEFINITIONS OF RURAL?

According to Blakely (1984), major features previously used to define rural--simple life, agriculture, smallness, homogeneity, and dullness--fail to describe much of rural

America. Instead, rural is increasingly defined by examining numerous broad categories of information. Deavers and Brown (1985) have developed seven categories of rural areas based on social, demographic, and economic information. Economic categories include agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and government; social dimensions include persistant poverty and growth of retirement population; proportion of land in federal ownership comprises the final category. Horn (1985) looks at values, socioeconomic factors, political structure, locus of control, and priorities for schools. Croft (1984) suggests that an ecological approach comprised of cultural values, number of people, and ambiance can be used to work toward a definition of rural. Noting that other authors propose occupational, ecological, and sociocultural definitions, Whitaker (1982) also supports complex, multidimensional definitions. He cites Maine's State Planning Office's 10 category urban-rural typology based on 15 indicators, which include number of year-round residents, persons per household, degree to which jobs are concentrated on a few industries, percentage of resident workers in farming or fishing, monthly fluctuations in employment, percentage of housing built before 1940, etc.

WHAT, THEN, IS RURAL EDUCATION?

Sinced there is no single definition of "rural," it follows that there is no clear definition for "rural education." Carmichael (1980, p. 21) confidently defines rural education as "that education provided the school-age children residing in rural areas," but then notes that there is some confusion over the term "rural." Dunne (1981) affirms that there is such a thing as rural education, but cautions that it is not found in large rural schools and not even in all small schools. Real rural education, she contends, is defined by these characteristically rural strengths (1981, p. 4): --a lack of distinction between what belongs in school and what belongs in the community, --a kind of generalism which expects people to do whatever they are able without filling specialized roles or performing strictly age-graded functions, --close and supportive ties between families and schools, --a sense of comfort and cooperative spirit among school children, and --rural independence and self-reliance translated into the school setting.

WHAT ARE SOME DEFINITIONS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND RURAL SCHOOLS?

Helge's (1983) 3-dimensional approach to categorizing or defining rural school systems includes elements of topography; population; density; and other community and district variables, including district administrative structure, ethnic groups represented in the community, major religions practiced, average age of residents, community communication and power structures, degree to which the district collaborates with other agencies, etc. Citing the inadequacy of Census Bureau definitions for rural, Pladson and Lemon (1982) developed a two-factor model of ruralness for K-12 or 1-12 schools that encompasses population and geographical isolation by means of two sets of criteria: school enrollment and distance from an urban center. Each criterion is divided into three categories which ultimately yield a model of most to least rural

schools. The enrollment categories cover districts with enrollments of 0-100, 101-300, and 300-600; isolation categories cover schools located more than 40 miles, 25-40 miles, and 10 to 25 miles from an urban center.

The National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (1986) considers a district rural if inhabitants number fewer than 150 per square mile, or if the district is located in a county where 60% or more of the population lives in communities of 5,000 or fewer. The New York State Education Department (1984) notes that a rural school district is generally defined as one with 25 or fewer students per square mile. In 1982, the Small/Rural Education Network Review Panel said that a rural school district is located in a rural community, or in a county where 60% or more of the communities are rural. Sheldon Jackson College limits participation in its Early College Incentive Program to 8th graders from rural Alaska--towns or villages of under 2,000 (Craddick, 1986). In Arkansas, the Legislature stipulates that the term rural school shall be interchangeable with the term small high school and shall include schools of 500 or less in K-12 (General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1981). Questionnaires for Hubel's (1986) survey of rural administrators' research concerns went to superintendents of K-12 schools of less than 1,000 students. In their study of very small rural public schools, Dunne and Carlsen (1981) limited the survey to elementary schools with fewer than 15 pupils per grade, high schools with fewer than 200, and K-12 or 1-12 schools or districts with fewer than 300 pupils in all grades.

In the 1986 edition of THE CONDITION OF EDUCATION, issued by the U.S. Department of Education's Center for Education Statistics (1987), five terms were used to define or imply rurality: rural, nonmetropolitan, small town, small place, and school size. Rural and nonmetropolitan were used several times as subsets of metropolitan status, as were suburban and urban. The Center did not initiate procedures to report data on districts with fewer than 300 students until March, 1983 (Helge, 1983).

Listing these examples of efforts to define rural districts and rural schools is not an empty exercise. According to Arends (1987), rural and small schools enroll nearly 10 million students--a significant figure.

SUMMARY

As this sampling of definitions illustrates, the two categories of definition of rural--qualitative and quantitative--generally spring from two different needs. Agencies and researchers need quantitative measures that can be easily manipulated and compared. Others who are closely involved in rural America know that their part is qualitatively different from other parts. These two divergent needs--to quantify and to qualify--present a dilemma in terms of access to resources and programs for rural America and for rural education. It is difficult to capture qualitative measures in ways that readily translate to legislation, policy, or management. Furthermore, rural America's insistence that it is not only different, but also has myriad differences within itself, is both

its strength and weakness. The inability to present a unified, powerful rural America to legislators and other policymakers ensures that rural issues, such as education, will continue to receive a lack of recognition.

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