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ABSTRACT

Several problems exist with the rural knowledge base as it is traditionally conceived: (1) there is no useful rural definition with the diverse rural reality; (2) rural is undervalued as reflected in teacher education and training and in the stereotyping of regions in the country; (3) issues of sparsity, scarcity and size are disregarded, and (4) the positive attributes already present in many rural schools are ignored. The type of education available in rural schools typify, on a small scale, the recommendations of effective schools research. Rural educators have experienced the limitations of the current knowledge base and rely on practice and experienced-based knowledge. New knowledge to improve practice comes from personal interactions with other rural educators rather than from research or outside resource persons. State departments of education establish monitoring and compliance relationships with rural schools, mirroring the larger society's undervaluing of rural education. They assume that rural schools are financially inefficient and educationally ineffective, although all state-wide test data proves contrary. New models for knowledge production and utilization are necessary for improving rural education. Three alternative models are: (1) clustering schools with similar interests to share programs, personnel and equipment; (2) sponsoring grassroots research on rural education and rural schools; and (3) creating Centers on Rural Education at colleges and universities. This document contains 22 references. (ALL)

THE KNOWLEDGE BASE IN RURAL EDUCATION:

THEIR NEEDS ARE UNIQUE

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THE KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR IMPROVING POLICY AND PRACTICE: THE REGIONAL LABORATORIES EXPERIENCE

THE KNOWLEDGE BASES FOR IMPROVING RURAL EDUCATION: THEIR NEEDS ARE UNIQUE

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The knowledge base as traditionally conceived is not useful for and thus not used by rural educators. The problems are several fold: there is no useful definition of rural, a problem noted by all serious observers of rural education since the Commission on Schools in Small Communities in 1939 that continues to the present (Commission on Schools in Small Communities, 1939; Butterworth and Dawson, 1952; Department of Rural Education, 1957; Sher, 1977; Nachtigal, 1982; Stephens, 1988).

This posture leads to situations in which settings as diverse as the glitzy mountain resort of Aspen, Colorado; the largely Hispanic, chronically economically deprived agriculture area of Conejos in the San Luis Valley, the desolate, desperately poor reservation village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota and the primarily Black areas of the Bootheel in Missouri, are all lumped together, as if their problems were singular and solutions generic. Factors that differentiate even communities of similar size and isolation in different parts of the country appear related to the availability of economic resources, cultural priorities of the local community, commonalty of purpose, and political efficacy (Nachtigal, 1982).

Secondly, knowledge is not neutral, it is value laden. The ususal education knowledge base is created in a context that reflects the prevailing view that rural is at best, invisible and more realistically, unvalued. Given that a fourth of the students in the country and three fourths of the districts meet the current definitions of rural, does it not surprise anyone that there are few institutions of higher education that prepare teachers for rural schools? A survey of teacher preparation programs in 27 rural states suggested that only ten percent of the 208 public and private institutions responding offered a preservice program to prepare rural teachers, and that was self report data (Jones, 1987).

Specific preparation particularly important for training rural teachers includes course work in rural sociology, work directly related to rural school teaching, experience in teaching two or more grade levels in the same room, practicum or student teaching in rural environments and an emphasis on multicultural issues of schooling (Barker & Beckner, 1987; Miller, 1988).

Young scholars looking for academic careers are steered away from research on specifically rural issues (a situation analogous to research on women's issues fifteen years ago) and few established scholars likewise concentrate on this area. A survey by Barker and Beckner (1987) reported that fewer than two percent of the 14,000 faculty reported that they were engaged in research and/or publications on rural education or small schools. I serve on the National Rural Education Research Forum Committee, which annually recognizes the most outstanding research in rural education and each year from across the nation we receive fewer than twenty submissions for this singular honor.

Rural is undervalued in the general society, not just on campuses. This is most evident in the language we use to describe rural residents, as explained by Cosby and Charner (1978), by stereotyping regions of the country, particularly the South (Howell, 1989), and by cultural imperialism that assumes all the universe should fit a Eurocentric, urban model, the most recent example of which is the Popper's notion that the Great Plains be converted by the federal government to a "Buffalo Commons" of native grass and livestock (Popper & Popper, 1989).

Third, the knowledge base as traditionally constituted holds little of value for rural educators, because it disregards issues of sparsity, scarcity and size and because it ignores the positive attributes already present in many rural schools, trumpeting as new and revolutionary practices that have been in place in rural America for some time. A few short examples of why this is true.

Sparsity refers to the few numbers of students in large geographic areas that typify rural education in many parts of the country. The median size high school, grades 9-12 in North Dakota this year is 68 students. There are fewer teachers in the entire states of North Dakota or South Dakota than are represented by the bargaining unit in Fairfax, Virginia. Many districts cover more than 500 square miles and students spend more than two hours each day just getting to and from schools. These vast distances preclude organizing into larger units, unless we are going to mandate residential schools for even very young children (and in parts of the country, mothers do move into town for the school year so their children can attend school and older children either live independently during the week and return to the ranch on weekends or board with relatives or friends.)

Sparsity impacts on scarcity, which refers to the general lack of resources felt by rural educators, both in terms of finances and time. Buildings must be maintained and heated, whether the class holds thirty or thirteen students, but the cost per student is obviously higher in the latter case. Transportation, which may or may not be funded by the State, represents a larger portion of the educational budget than instructional costs in some areas. Many rural States depend heavily on property taxes and local support for education budgets, yet the relative per capita income of nonmetro people has sagged to roughly 73 percent of that of metro citizens in the 1980's (Deavers, 1989). Nonmetro employment growth is roughly one third the metro rate, nonmetro urban unemployment is over two percentage points higher than the metro rate in 1987, and nonmetro earnings per worker are roughly two-thirds what urban workers earn (Horowitz & Dunn, 1989). The fastest growing segment of poor families in rural areas are those with two wage-earners, and a rural family in which the head of the household works in nearly twice as likely to be poor as a comparable city family. This dire finding applies to whites as well as Blacks, and full time as well as part time workers, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities 1989 data.

Districts economize by employing extraordinarily lean administrative staffs, both Superintendents and Principals often also have teaching duties, which severely limits their ability to either search out new research or supplemental sources of funding. Anyone who has read proposals for funding competitions will recall the differences in quality of presentation (not ideas) in proposals written by rural educators with little time and/or experience in competing for funds.

While sparsity and scarcity represent the down side of the size issue, research has generally ignored the positive benefits of schooling on a small scale. Consider, if you will, the recommendations of the body of literature that has come be known as effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; 1981; Rudder, et. al., 1979). The purposeful leadership, high teacher expectations, participation in leadership by teachers, consistency among teachers, structure in instructional settings with limited focus, intellectually challenging teaching, work centered environments, maximum communication between teachers and students, positive climate, and parental involvement in the life of the school all typify the kind of education on a small scale prevalent in rural education. To be asked to disrupt on-going practice

and incur additional expense as a result of state mandates is, at least, galling and more typically, an indication to rural educators that research has little to teach them.

While the effective schools movement is not the only research available, it typifies the experience rural educators have with the limitations of the current knowledge base. Practice and experience-based knowledge supercede "the literature" for rural educators for two other reasons. Traditional research and implementation paradigms not only ignore the strengths and actual state of practice in rural education, they also ignore the culture that typifies rural education.

In the context of the great rural diversity introduced earlier, we can made some generalizations about rural/urban differences that illustrate the importance of culture and the limitations of the current models for producing and disseminating knowledge. Rural settings tend to be personal and tightly linked, as opposed to the impersonal, loosely coupled nature of larger areas. Rural people are generalists, not specialists and value self sufficiency rather than depending on experts. Rural organizations also tend to be personal and nonbureaucratic. Communication is usually verbal rather than written and who says something is easily as important as what is said (Nachtigal, 1982).

Rural educators, facing five or more preparations each day, working in small, personal organizations with little central office support, do not have the luxury of searching out ways to improve practice, they operate on the "If It Ain't Broke" theory. New knowledge to improve practice comes from personal interactions, with peers in a district (where available) or at occasions where such conversations can be bootlegged onto scheduled activities. Meetings called by State Department personnel begin and end, for instance, with huddles of rural educators informally sharing problems and offering one another experiences over coffee and in bars. Research presented by speakers at conferences will be mulled over, considered and filtered through the local screen, because the presumption is that few speakers understand the multiple rural realities.

Rural administrators similarly count on one another for information and advice. They, too, get together at conferences and meetings and informally share what NIE used to call craft knowledge, often with older administrators adopting and serving as mentors for younger men (and they are almost always men. Women administrators are even rarer in rural areas than in the general population, the exceptions being marginal roles as County Superintendents with responsibility for still existing small elementary districts, women whose husbands are Superintendents of neighboring districts, or occasionally in very small districts that are widely regarded as being close to closing.)

Just as busy physicians receive much of their information from pharmaceutical house salesmen, rural administrators use sales staff as a way to keep up to date. Representatives of textbook publishers, test makers, equipment suppliers and now, technology interests, sense and create needs in the field and are anxious to fill them. The laboratories and other purveyors of services also fit this role in some cases, as we seek opportunities to meet the terms of our rural initiative contracts and provide service to rural schools.

State departments of education, another source of knowledge, in the main still create relationships with rural schools that center more on monitoring and compliance than technical assistance, although there is some positive movement in the latter direction, particularly in Missouri. Most State Departments, operating out of what Tyack called the "one best system" model (1974), mirror the larger society's undervaluing of rural education and assume that rural schools are financially inefficient and educationally ineffective, although all state-wide test data is to the contrary.

In some cases, foundations provide opportunities for new knowledge to enter rural systems. Ford began much of this work with the Rocky Mountain Small Schools projects in the 1960's and other foundations, particularly those with a regional emphasis (Blandon in Minnesota, the Northwest Foundation in the upper Midwest, Lilly in Indiana, Mott in Michigan for example) continue this work. The limitations of foundation assistance center around changing foundation missions and access to funding plans, as well as the preparation time that limit searches for supplemental funding. However, foundations remain a source for imaginative improvement programming and may provide models for other private sector initiatives.

The most logical place for rural educators to look for research-based information, the local and regional institutions of higher education, often play a limited role in on-going professional development. Cohorts of administrators in training programs bond with one another and provide on-going support, and occasionally a bond will form between a professor and individual student seeking credentialing, but despite numerous efforts, systemic linkages for mutual learning between rural districts and IHE's are infrequent and sporadic.

Experience of at least our lab, Mid-continent Regional Education Laboratory (McREL) in rural education suggests that new models for knowledge production and utilization are necessary to impact and improve rural education. The final section of this paper describes three alternative models we have found successful in this effort.

The first model we have initiated successfully in Missouri, North Dakota, Colorado and Kansas is to cluster schools with like-minded other schools and to include local institutions of higher education as partners in the clusters. When it is clear that the participants set the agenda, rural districts are willing to work together. This approach provides personal interactions, attention to real, pressing, self-identified problems and overcomes limitations in resources. In Missouri, for example, a number of rural schools entered into a computer cluster and jointly hired a staff member who circuit rode from school to school, teaching teachers how to use computers for instructional purposes. He was available on call for trouble shooting and the support required to install innovations. The University staff backed him up and offered opportunities for further staff development.

In North Dakota, the cluster we began in two counties in the most northerly part of the state, now is supported by the districts in two counties, Walsh and Pembina. This cluster provides collaborative staff development for all the districts in the counties.

In Colorado, we sponsored clusters of schools who share science equipment too expensive for an individual district to purchase and link that with advanced professional development for rural science teachers. Dean Brown, a faculty member from Colorado State University was the IHE liaison to the original cluster. It proved so successful that Dean has expanded his work to more than 40 clusters around the state, incorporating almost all of the rural schools and gained support for his work from the Colorado Commission on Higher Education.

Kansas began with a computer cluster based on the Missouri model that also involves a cooperatively funded technology expert who is perceived as a staff member by the participating schools. A videotape describing how clusters of schools are organized and operate is available on loan from McREL.

The second model is "growing your own" research. There is a growing tendency for grassroots organizations to support rural education. Often formed in response to threats of consolidation, organizations such as People United for Rural Education (PURE) in Iowa, Schools for Quality Education (SQE) in Kansas, the Illinois Association of Rural and Small Schools, the New York Rural Schools

Program, the North Dakota Small Organized Schools (NDSOS), and the Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association move quickly to garner data to support their position that small schools have value and are not as inefficient and ineffective as their critics suggest (Nachtigal, 1990). Laboratories play an important support role for these organizations as we answer requests for information, suggest research readings and identify potential authors and scholars working in the area. Many of these organizations, dissatisfied with the quality and perspective of available research, sponsor their own studies. Two recent examples are Class Dismissed: Examining Nebraska's Rural Education Debate by Jonathan Sher (1988) and Monk and Haller's (1986) Organizational Alternatives for Small, Rural Schools: Final Report to the New York State Legislature.

A third model is the creation of Centers on Rural Education at colleges and universities. These centers mirror the intention of the federal government in creating research and development centers, the differences are that the agendas are developed by rural educators from the bottom up and the funding levels are significantly lower. Some Centers exist on membership fees, others on contributions or endowments, and many on the sufferance of the host institution, who see this work as part of their service mission.

Centers seek funding for sponsored research, provide encouragement and opportunities for scholarly work and hold annual conferences focused on research and development of particular interest to rural educators. The role of the laboratory varies: we are often asked to sit on Advisory Boards, we prepare presentations and materials for conferences, identify and support major speakers and other events and are occasionally able to provide travel funds or scholarships for participants otherwise unable to attend.

Centers in our region exist at Kansas State University, Kearney State in Nebraska, the Missouri Rural Center is at Warrensburg, and at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. The Centers typically house the offices of state-wide organizations concerned with rural education and provide part time staffing to the organizations. K-State, for instance, hosts SQE; the Office for Rural Education at Fort Collins provides an executive director for the National Rural Education Association (NREA) who serves part time in that capacity and is a part-time CSU faculty member.

Finally, there is an agenda shifting model that Laboratories play as boundary spanners between the realities we see in the field and the larger knowledge producing community. It is this model that has fostered work in all nine labs in securing and designing the Rural Initiative which, in our organization, resulted in three new thrusts: Decisions About Technology, a project that designed and is evaluating three collaborative distance technology installations across several states; Project ACCESS to increase rural student's consideration of post-secondary options, and Rural Schools and Community Development, an approach to address both educational and economic issues which is described in Haas, Nachtigal & Parker (1988).

Our work in restructuring, redesigning the educational system to be responsive to student needs in the 21st Century, draws heavily on the strengths of schooling on a small scale and the notion of community. At the request of the Governor of North Dakota, and working with more than twenty-five Washington-based organizations concerned with rural education (OCRE) and the North Dakota Task Force, McREL is coordinating the creation of a new model for education for the entire state of North Dakota, an exciting example of research influencing policy.

Summary

The knowledge base as traditionally conceived is not useful for and thus not used by rural educators. The knowledge base will become useful when it acknowledges the unique and diverse nature and needs of rural education in America, and embodies a paradigm shift away from the generic, one best system approach. Rewards for research specifically targeted on schooling on a small scale are needed to entice researchers and teacher training programs to focus on this area, for the implications for the larger system's redesign are manifold. New models that incorporate values central to rural cultures are necessary, and the Laboratories have an important role to continue to play in that task. It is a matter of equity. Social justice insists that children not be geographically disadvantaged by their parent's choice of residence. It is also a matter of economic survival. The economic health of the country depends on a vibrant rural sector.

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