

Chapter 24

Rural Schools and Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, the author began research on current issues in rural education in which teachers recounted narratives of teaching. As deficits, they spoke of an inability to retain teachers, too little diversity in student programming, and lack of access to extra-curricular activities. They also noted challenges brought on by education reform that increased the use of distance education and long distance bussing. Positively, teachers mentioned how much they cared about their students and their school. They were proud of how they worked hard to meet student and community needs. This paper discusses teacher experiences with distance education and the use of the technology required for the delivery of such programs. Teachers urged that distance education must hold a dominant place of importance in the delivery of a well-rounded education to children in rural areas but that such a focus also requires a variety of supports to schools.

INTRODUCTION

There has been much research in rural education dating back to the classical social theories of Tönnies (1957) and Weber (1964, 1970). Although their writings demonstrate epistemological differences, there are similarities found in their challenge to understand what was happening as a result of a shift from rural to urban styles of living, and how personal relationships and community life

pre-industrial revolution were affected. Since that time others have continued the quest, especially as it pertains to rural education.

As examples, DeYoung asserts that much of the literature on the needs of rural schools, at least in the United States, focuses on ‘more and better data-based studies on rural schooling dynamics’, or ‘on administrative issues ... in the operation of these institutions’ (1987, p. 129). Hathaway (1993) points out an increased interest in rural education in the areas of economics of scale, leadership styles, program enrichment, student

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achievement, student grouping, and transportation (p. 3). Harmon, Howley, and Sanders (1996) add that overall effectiveness of rural schools, curricular provisions, school and community partnerships, human resources, use of technology, financial support, and governance are also pertinent topics. Some writers maintain that much of the quality research on issues in rural schooling is being carried out by anthropologists and historians (DeYoung, 1987), ethnographers (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997) and sociologists (Howley, 1997; Corbett, 2007), and through fictional and non-fictional literature (Chambers, 1999). And, although research from these fields may prove beneficial to rural educators, it has been argued (DeYoung, 1987; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995; Bauch, 2001) that educational researchers need to take the lead in advancing such research and that “the work of the rural school is ... to attend to its own place” (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995, p. 132). The literature and student discussions in a distance education graduate course being taught on current issues in rural education, initiated research which began in 2006. It is believed that, as one example of curriculum research, grounded in the personal and professional knowledge of one group of practicing teachers and their instructor, this work has potential significance for others working in the field of education.

Significance

Teachers, as graduate students, become producers and disseminators of knowledge that can play a central and supportive role in determining curriculum design, curriculum implementation, and teacher training. In recording such knowledge production, the results of this study provides an opportunity to inform rural education as it pertains to teacher knowledge and practice. Also, the research has the potential to build capacity between university instructors and teachers in schools as professional learning communities. Universities are seen as places of theory and schools as places

of practice. A seminar course approach as a means to data collection helps bridge the gap between theory and practice. Such a union provides practicing educators as graduate students an opportunity to have a voice in issues of rural education, not only for accreditation purposes but also for the public advancement of knowledge.

Overview of the Study

The principle research questions were: (a) What are the current issues of education in the community in which you teach? (b) How do these issues compare to those pointed out in the literature? (c) What actions do you think supporting agencies such as governments and universities need to be taking to advance rural education? Aligned with the origin of the research and the methodological process, the inquiry design and implementation is grounded in theories of constructivism (Glesne, 2006) and personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Both position teachers as holders and makers of knowledge. In thinking about educators from this perspective, teaching becomes part of teachers’ professional lives “to be understood...in terms of its significance and value in an ongoing narrative of personal and social experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 25). The common thread for sharing information is reflective, critical dialogue which involves conversations about serious pedagogical issues. It is more than conversation. It is dialogue that leads to deepened understandings.

The Data

Those who enrolled in the graduate course were, for the most part, teachers who taught in rural Canadian schools with a few teaching in other countries such as the United States, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. Approximately 10-15% taught in more urban areas. Students were informed prior to course commencement of the instructor’s intent to conduct research. They were

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