

The Rural Gap: The Need for Exploration and Intervention

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Abstract

Research shows that rural students face increasing challenges to academic, social-emotional, and career success. An understanding of student culture, background, and needs is required for a school counselor to advocate for all students. Research into the needs of rural students is lacking when compared to other populations. Research suggests that poverty, geographic isolation, cultural isolation, lack of school and community resources, and barriers to educational success as factors influencing the development and success of rural students. This article reviews the available literature and provides suggestions for the direction of future school counseling research.

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Rural settings contain 57% of American school districts and 33% of all school buildings, providing education to 12.5 million students, nearly 25% of the total student population (Aud et al., 2013). Despite these numbers, scholarly literature revolving around the needs of rural students is limited (Griffin & Galassi, 2010, Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Johnson & Strange, 2007; Sipple & Brent, 2008). Schafft and Biddle (2014) found only five results for article titles containing the word rural versus sixty-four containing the word urban in a review of publications from the top five educational journals from 2004 to 2014. This suggests a lack of study and understanding regarding a significant portion of the population.

Effective school counseling requires an understanding of the unique social-cultural dynamics and challenges faced by a counselor's school and student population (Grimes, Haskins, & Paisley, 2013; Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015). There is little research explaining the needs, approaches, and techniques used to most effectively counsel rural student populations (Breen & Drew, 2012; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Grimes et al., 2013). Rural students have unique needs and challenges for school counselors to consider and address, but the research base for these issues is slim (Grimes et al., 2013). For a school counselor to be an effective advocate for their students and profession, they need to have an understanding and willingness to work with the unique social-cultural dynamics all students are facing (Grimes et al., 2013; Young et al., 2015). This begins with understanding rural culture and how this impacts students' worldview and learning environments.

Walsh (2012) suggests that rural Americans are operating under a “rural consciousness” that includes distrusting cities and government viewed as elitist and discriminatory. Rural consciousness entails a perspective that society unfairly allocates more resources and support to cities, focusing on the needs of minority populations while ignoring rural community needs. Higher education is viewed with suspicion and distrust, since it is tailored towards careers that are few and far between in rural settings, having no relevance to a rural way of life, and often serving to take children away from their hometown, rarely to return (Schafft, 2016). American television and media culture does not value the rurality and portrays it to be socially acceptable to stereotype and mock rural individuals and culture (Herzog & Pittman, 2003). These factors illustrate a combination of social status, race, economic status, cultural marginalization, and media portrayal influencing the development and outlook of the current unique rural identity (Kreiss, Barker, & Zenner, 2017). Schools are designed to reflect the politics and needs of those living in their district, therefore these ideologies and characteristics are key to examine when create the best learning environments for students. This article explores the needs of rural student populations to bridge a gap within literature and society, providing suggestions for the direction of future school counseling research.

Governmental and scholarly literature do not have a singular definition for what constitutes a rural setting (Coburn et. al, 2007; Hawley et al., 2016). The U.S. government has definitions of rural ranging from areas with populations less than 1,000 to areas with populations containing 50,000 residents (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2016). Under the blanket of these definitions, approximately 70% of

the counties in the United States are rural, with approximately 46,000,000 people living in these areas (Johnson, 2017; Scala & Johnson, 2017). These broad definitions lead to areas typically thought of as suburban being included in the rural definition, impacting the validity of research results and their implications for working with rural populations (Cromartie & Buchholtz, 2008).

Research and outreach aimed at assisting rural populations may miss the mark due to padded statistics provided by communities which are less economically, geographically, and culturally isolated (Cromartie & Buchholtz, 2008; Hawley et al., 2016). Cromartie & Buchholtz (2008) found the percentage of adults with a college education dropped from 28% to 18% when removing the suburban areas from the rural definition. The average household income fell from 56,000 to 40,000, illustrating a vast difference in the makeup and potential needs of rural areas. The lack of a standardized definition of rural presents a challenge to the validity and generalizability of research results due to researchers treating separate rural definitions as interchangeable within their designs (Hawley et al., 2016).

Neither the American Counseling Association (ACA) nor the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) have definitions for what constitutes a rural area. A scaled definition of rural would provide ACA and ASCA research standards dividing rural into several categories, allowing for more valid and generalizable results. Having such a basis and consensus on what is meant by rural would be beneficial for describing the needs of rural students and the appropriate approaches to follow. This article will utilize the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2006) definition of rurality for conceptualizing problems and implications. The NCES definition breaks rural

down into three categories, rural fringe (areas within five miles of an urbanized center), rural distant (areas between five and twenty-five miles from an urbanized center), and rural remote (areas greater than twenty-five miles from an urbanized center). These definitions include a problematic conceptualization of rural purely upon its relationship to urban; however, it presents rurality on a scale, providing room to evaluate the nature of problems depending up how remote, isolated, and removed from resources an area is located.

Challenges of the Rural Student

Rural Poverty

Rural areas represent a disproportionate amount of persistent poverty. Murray and Schaefer (2006) found that since 1970, 95% of counties with continuous poverty rates of 20% or higher are rural. The USDA (2018) expresses that “persistent poverty tends to be a rural county phenomenon that is often tied to physical isolation, exploitation of resources, limited assets and economic opportunities, and an overall lack of human and social capital” (para. 8). Persistent poverty among children is of particular concern as the cumulative effect of being poor may lead to especially negative outcomes and limited opportunities that carry through to adulthood. There are currently 708 persistent child poverty counties, 558 (about 80 percent) of which were non-metro (USDA, 2017b). One-fourth of children growing up in rural environments are living in poverty as compared to one fifth of children raised in urban environments (USDA, 2017a). 12.6% of children under 6 raised in rural environments are living in deep poverty (income half of the family’s poverty line threshold) versus 9.2% of children

raised in urban areas (USDA, 2016). Rural poverty presents several major barriers to wellness that need to be understood and addressed by school counseling researchers.

Growing up in an impoverished environment increases the likelihood of an individual remaining poor as an adult due to an increased likelihood of moving multiple times during childhood, transitioning to several schools, attending underfunded schools, limited parental access to resources, parental impairment due to the struggles of poverty, and less parental investment in education (Wagmiller & Adelman, 2009). Persistent poverty and poverty-related stress increase the likelihood of a child experiencing educational, physical, and psychological challenges, including trauma, and put students at an increased risk of lower lifetime educational achievement, violent behavior, and teenage pregnancy (Wadsworth et al., 2008). The prevalence of poverty amongst rural populations highlights the need for an increase of research and training centering around the needs of rural low-income students for the sake of counselor training and intervention development.

Academia and greater society have overlooked rural homeless and its corresponding challenges (Lawrence 1995). Individuals in these situations face several unique challenges within homelessness including the lack of community resources such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and community advocacy groups (Hilton & Trella, 2014; Trella & Hilton, 2014). The lack of shelters along with the lack of other structures also put homeless rural populations at increased risk of health risks from the weather and natural elements, especially during times of winter (Hilton & Trella, 2014; Trella & Hilton, 2014). Student transience, or a student moving to multiple school districts throughout each year, is common in economically impoverished rural areas (Schafft,

2006). Families who are economically strained or facing homelessness will move multiple times to secure a living space, stay with a friend or relative, or pursue a job opportunity. This results in students experiencing multiple educational transitions, putting them at risk for academic, social, and emotional difficulties (Schafft, 2006). Rural schools have difficulty in responding to these student needs as they attempt to piece together multiple students' needs and academic histories (Schafft, 2006). This highlights the need for research on school counseling interventions to best aid students suffering the extreme effects of rural poverty and homelessness.

Access to Health Care Services

Rural individuals face increased challenges in accessing health care due to geographic distance from services, an inequitable distribution of qualified professionals, and fewer available community resources, while facing a higher preponderance to serious medical and mental health conditions (Kenny et al., 2013; Riva, Curtis, Gauvin, & Fagg, 2009; Williams & Kulig, 2012). Within 1,253 counties with populations ranging from 2,500 to 20,000, nearly three-fourths of these counties lacked a psychiatrist, with 95% lacking a child psychiatrist (Holzer, Goldsmith, & Ciarlo, 1998). Rural areas have a lack of mental health services and infrastructure along with a lack of specialized professionals, with 20% of non-metro counties lacking mental health services versus only 5% of metro counties and non-metro counties averaging less than two specialized mental health organizations to thirteen for metro counties (Hartley, Bird, & Dempsey 1999).

Rural schools lack the monetary and human resources needs to address student mental health problems while reporting a higher percentage of students who are eligible

for school-based mental health services (Anderson-Butcher, Hoffman, Rochman, & Fuller, 2017). Rural adolescents are at a higher risk of substance abuse and drunk driving (Carlo, Crockett, Wilkinson & Beal, 2011) while economic and geographic constraints hinder their ability to receive treatment services (Pruitt, 2009). Rural individuals must travel 2 to 3 times the distance to receive specialized mental health services than those living in a city, with long distances corresponding to a willingness to forgo treatment (Chan, Hart, & Goodman, 2006). The geographic challenges in accessing health services highlight the differences between areas considered rural. An area that is rural fringe (five miles from an urban center) has closer proximity and thus significantly easier access to the greater array of services and specialties found in urban areas than areas that are rural remote, or twenty-five miles from an urban center.

Rural individuals are less likely to utilize mental health resources due to difficulties in accessing them and stigmas associated with mental health care (Gamm, Stone, & Pittman, 2010). Rural culture often encompasses the view of someone seeking mental health services as being weak due to their inability to handle the issue on their own (Judd et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2009). People living in rural areas tend to believe the stigmas associated mental health services at a higher rate than those living in urban settings (Judd et al., 2006; Talbot, Ziler, & Szlosek, 2017; Rost, Smith, & Taylor, 1993). Thus, rural students may have higher mental health needs with lower access to resources, and cultural stigmas resulting in avoidance of services, a challenge to the school, the school counselor, and most of all, the student. This speaks to the need for school counseling research regarding best practices of coordinating the delivery of

mental health service in rural areas and combating the stigma associated with mental health services in rural areas.

Academic and Career Barriers

The growth rate of rural school districts exceeds that of non-rural districts (Johnson et al., 2014). A diverse array of students is moving into rural districts that historically have not had sizable minority populations. The percentage of rural students eligible for free or reduced lunch has increased from 41% in 2008 to 46.6% in 2011 (Johnson et al., 2014). The percentage of rural students qualifying for special educational services has risen from 12% to 12.8% (Johnson et al., 2014). Despite the increases in challenges to rural schools, rural education receives a decreased amount of state policy, attention, and funding, with majority of the resources and attention going towards urban districts and concerns (Johnson et al., 2014). Rural school districts often operate with below average funding due to many states using property taxes as a primary source of income for schools, with rural areas having below average property values compared to towns and cities (Maiden & Stearns, 2007). Underfunding schools results in more stressful environments for students and teachers due to a lack of financial and human resources (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). Rural schools have difficulty keeping qualified teachers and staff due to these financial burdens, resulting in a lack of human resources and increased role allocation for all staff (Hines, 2002). A lack of human resources in rural school districts results in school counselors being asked to perform duties beyond their ideal roles, such as lunch duty, administrative tasks, disciplinary actions, mental health counseling, and special education testing (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006). This

deficiency in resources and strain upon the educational system creates barriers to wellness in students, who may not have adequate access to resources they need to succeed. Research into how to establish a rural school counseling identity and role amid these systemic and geographic pressures would be beneficial to guiding incoming professionals as they transition to rural schools.

Many rural areas are not near institutions of higher education, reducing student exposure to higher education as well as increasing the logistic and financial challenges of attending college (Schafft, 2016). Rural communities often do not have many employment opportunities for those with college degrees, limiting student exposure to professional job opportunities while also framing college as a vehicle destined to take a student away from the community in which they were raised (Corbett, 2007; Schafft, 2016). Many parents of rural students did not attend college, limiting their exposure to and understanding of what opportunities are available and how to pursue those (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004). Rural school districts also emphasize Advanced Placement courses for college credit less than districts in other settings, with 69% of rural high schools offering these as compared to 93% and 96% for urban and suburban districts respectively (Waits, Setzer, & Lewis, 2005). Research regarding whether these dynamics impact rural student self-image and career aspirations could be beneficial in guiding rural school counselor practice and intervention.

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds often have less direction and support from home regarding career choice and illustrate lower academic and career self-efficacy (Metheny & McWhirter, 2013). First generation prospective college students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have less knowledge of how college

operates, how the application process works, and how to finance a college education (Castleman & Page, 2014). This puts them at increased risk of going through *summer melt* or backing out of attending college even after putting down a deposit due to feeling overwhelmed, under informed, or discovering new associated costs with the experience (Castleman & Page, 2014). Rural individuals illustrate an increased attachment to their home community, leading to rural students avoiding the college search and application process (Schafft, 2016). These factors present several challenges to rural students in their academic and career development. On a systemic level, educators and community members may hesitate to provide access to the full wealth of college and career opportunities available due to rural out-migration, or the *brain drain* (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2014; Schaff, 2016). This is when most skilled children of the rural community leave the area to pursue college and professional opportunities and never return to contribute to the well-being and infrastructure of the community. These implications indicate several challenges within rural settings that should be considered by researchers examining how to promote rural student academic and career success.

Discussion & Implications

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors working with rural populations need to be prepared to address issues associated with poverty including physical and mental health concerns, student homelessness and transience, and parents requiring assistance locating and obtaining community, state, and federal resources. Transition to rural life and culture may be difficult for school counselors from other settings (Breen & Drew, 2012). Therefore, acclimation to the local community and its values benefits school counselors as they

integrate with the school district, earning trust, and understanding the perspectives of local students and families (Breen & Drew, 2012). Participation in community events and summits may increase the community's level of trust in the school counselor while reducing the stigma of them as an outsider (Grimes et al., 2013). Rural areas are often looked at through a deficit-based perspective (Corbett, 2016), therefore a validation and appreciation of the strengths of rural communities may also assist student and family buy-in and assure the appropriate approach for interventions (Grimes et al., 2013).

Given the lack of resources available to many rural communities, a school counselor should act as a resource for rural communities (Breen & Drew, 2012) through such roles as coordinating local resources in school fairs, distributing newsletters listing available community resources, coordinating the availability of in-school mental health resources for students, as well as creating local community and educational partnerships. While many traditional career and educational resources focus on taking rural students *away* from their communities, a strength-based approach includes incorporating opportunities *within* the community such as mentoring programs, local career fairs, job shadowing opportunities, and district career development task forces (Grimes et al., 2013).

A rural school counselor should also be prepared to provide information and guidance to rural families (Breen & Drew, 2012). This may be accomplished by hosting FAFSA workshops, creating and sending newsletters home regarding mental health and educational support resources, and providing information regarding community services available to parents. As social justice advocates, rural school counselors should strive to bring more light to rural school and student concerns through advocacy such as

district partnerships, grant writing, and outreach to local and state governments (Grimes et al., 2013). While these approaches have been studied and suggested as ways to benefit rural schools and students, more research is required into how school counselors understand, conceptualize, and assist rural students.

Implications for Research

A more uniform understanding of what constitutes the definition of the term rural is necessary for counseling literature to be more concise, concrete, and accurate when discussing problems affecting rural populations. Access to health and educational resources are more readily available in urban areas than rural locations (Chan et al., 2006; Schaff, 2016). This implies that rural fringe school districts may have greater access to resources than rural distant or rural remote areas. Further, the most extreme differences in voting patterns from urban areas are found in the most rural and isolated counties (Kurtzleben, 2016; USDA, 2016). While there are rural socio-cultural commonalities between rural areas, the levels of isolation from resources and urban culture affect the unique makeup and needs of a particular area. School counseling researchers need to adopt and consistently use a scaled definition of rural, which accounts for the difference in rurality between rural areas.

The NCES scaled definition would appear to be a good starting place for counseling research to provide three comparable rural categories for consistency of research. There are several more specific scaled definitions of rurality that have been developed. Isserman's (2005) rural-urban density typology is based rural definition upon county make up, including urban counties, rural counties, mixed urban counties, and mixed rural counties, providing a gradient of rurality. Waldorf's (2006) Index of Relative

Rurality (IRR) takes this further by evaluating the degree of rurality instead of operating under the threshold of rural or urban. The IRR assigns a value between 0 and 1 based upon the dimensions of population size, population density, extent of urban (developed) areas, and remoteness of the location. This scale measures *how* rural an area is, providing a more accurate insight into the economic, social, and cultural state of an area. While these measures provide insight into how rural an area is, The NCES (2006) definition provides three designations useful in identifying and categorizing and categorize a rural area using terminology understood and utilized within the education field.

Utilizing an educational designation can assist school counselors and researchers connecting their domain of education to other results and trends impacting schools using the same terminology. The three categories are easily understood and provide room for comparing results for schools within the same category as well as the differentiation of results between schools in the same category. This allows for greater validity and generalizability for students conducted at rural schools. For these reasons, adopting the NCES definition of rural to school counseling research would be beneficial.

Rural areas and issues have not received the same attention or care by government agencies or academia (Arnold et al., 2005). The facets that represent rural culture and mindset need to be more intensely studied and understood. More research into rural living and cultural concepts is required to empower counselors and counselor educators to meet the needs of this portion of the population. Research focused on rural culture should include research into isolation. Rural areas are often defined by their relationship to urban, ignored in politics and academia, are isolated from community and

educational resources, and thus are left to their own to deal with increasing economic and social problems (Hawley et al., 2016). The sense of mistrust of greater society may spawn from a sense of rural isolation, which has implications for schools, community, and individual student needs and outlook. Research into isolation within rural culture may shed light on how school counselors can best serve as a bridge to an isolated segment of society.

Breen & Drew (2012) recommend that more research is required into the role, function, and required skills of a rural school counselor. They argue that more research is required into the career development and post-secondary transition of rural students and the appropriate approaches and responses by rural school counselors. Research does exist regarding the challenges to prospective first-generation college students in general, but research into the unique group of rural first-generation prospective college students is needed. Exposing counselors in training to practical experiences in underserved rural communities, case studies including rural challenges, and identification of the practical problems faced by rural schools and communities has been suggested as steps towards empowering school counselors to work with rural populations (Breen & Drew, 2012; Morrissette, 2000); however, the effectiveness and outcomes of these measures have yet to be studied. Research that pulls together these general needs along with the practical impact of school and counselor efforts to better work with the rural population will be a critical next step.

Mental health concerns and accessibility to mental health resources is a major impediment to wellness for rural students (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2017). More school counseling focused literature is required regarding the mental health needs and

coordination of mental health services for rural students. This will inform school counselors in training how to best coordinate and manage available services for students in rural areas, as well as how to best serve students facing challenges. By focusing on rural student populations and considering rural culture within studies, counseling literature can better understand what is effective for this unique socio-cultural population and better prepare future counselors to address such issues.

What could be the impact of increased research attention to the needs of rural students? The LGBTQ population serves as an example of a unique socio-cultural group that received little attention in counseling research prior to the last two decades, but which has seen an explosion in literature revolving around the perspectives, lived experience, challenges to wellness, identity and culture of LGBTQ individuals in recent years (Croteau, Bieschke, Fassinger, & Manning, 2008). This research emphasis has led to an increased understanding of professional competencies in working with LGBTQ individuals, a more mainstream conceptualization of the socio-cultural issues at play, and inclusion into multicultural perspectives, literature, and training (Croteau et al., 2008). This information and emphasis has greatly increased understanding by counselors and counselors in training of the needs of this population and prepares them to better address potential concerns of clients. The increased emphasis on research and its application to better support the LGBTQ population serves as an example of the positive progress that can be made in understanding and assisting an underserved population if research and effort is made to bridge the gaps that exist. It is just such an increased research emphasis that is needed for the large and important rural population.

Rural individuals often feel ostracized and marginalized by society (Kreiss et al., 2017) and that society focuses heavily on the needs of select underserved populations but not their own (Walsh, 2012). More research into rural culture and attention to its needs could reduce the understanding and societal gaps that exist, allowing a better understanding of and more integrated help towards a population facing isolation and major barriers to wellness. Like the LGBTQ population, rural individuals could be studied and understood as their own unique socio-cultural population that would allow for better training and advocacy by school counselors. This kind of step could hopefully also assist in bridging the cultural and societal gaps so prevalent in the modern day.

Summary

Rurality is a construct that includes population and geographic features along with cultural identity and experiences. A more concise definition of rural within the counseling literature will help guide the identification of specific needs for an increasing complex rural population. Future research into rural cultural identity within a counseling context will assist in this development. While the term rural is a complex multivariate concept, issues of poverty, isolation, health concerns, and career barriers are visible in rural communities. Research into what school counselors can do to address these issues in a rural context would be beneficial to school counselor training and practice.

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