

Practitioner versus Researcher in Four Rounds: Evaluation Tensions and Tradeoffs in Rural Communities

Panel Discussion - Justification

While rural schools face many of the same challenges as urban and suburban schools, they may experience them differently or more intensely, be more vulnerable to capacity short-falls, and less-likely to benefit from new solutions and innovations in the field. Closing achievement gaps in rural areas is therefore a different and more complex problem than elsewhere, requiring a new set of solutions. Moreover, the unique needs of rural schools are often overshadowed by those of their urban counterparts, neglecting a significant portion of our student population. Nationally, about half of school districts and one-fifth of students are in rural areas (NCES, 2016). And rural areas typically experience more poverty—64 percent of rural counties have high rates of child poverty compared to 47 percent of urban counties (Schaefer, Mattingly, & Johnson, 2016).

Like their peers in other areas, rural educators remain committed to high quality instruction and data-driven decision-making to improve student educational outcomes. However, conducting research studies in rural areas has a unique set of challenges, and the lack of population density and travel distances can make evaluations prohibitively expensive. But at the same time, interventions need to be applied and tested in the rural context. For example, if an evaluation needs a sample of 3,000 students (for acceptable levels of power), researchers could find those students in a couple of square miles of New York City, but would require a thousand square miles in a rural state. And although both sites might be interested in the intervention, findings from New York City may have limited applicability in rural areas. In fact, some interventions simply may not be feasible for a rural setting. For example, an effective approach to teaching reading by grouping students according to skill levels might be easily implemented in an urban school but not in a rural school with only a few students per grade.

There are an average of 3 students per square mile in Montana, Nebraska, Kansas, and North Dakota. Compare this to 3,500 students per square mile in NYC.

The proposed panel is comprised of practitioners, developers, and researchers working in the rural context. The goal is to provide an overview of the challenges of conducting evaluation studies in these settings. We also will discuss approaches that can help a research team overcome these challenges. We suggest a future focus on building capacity for practitioner-researcher collaboration and developing a network for more widespread implementation of the partnership model.

We envision the format of this panel as being more of a conversation with the audience, rather than a series of stand-alone presentations. We anticipate brief introductory remarks to provide context, and then opening the discussion to audience questions, brainstorming, and comments.

The proposed panelist represent both practitioners and researchers in rural education:

- Moderator: Jennifer Hamilton NORC at the University of Chicago
- Practitioner: Victoria Schaefer, SRI international
- Researcher: KaiLonnie Dunsmore, NORC at the University of Chicago
- Researcher: Maryann Corsello, BARR Center
- Developer: Linda Friedrich, National Writing Panel

The Practitioner Perspective

Dr. Schaefer will respond to questions from the perspective of a practitioner. Having attended rural schools herself, rural education issues have been her professional focus for the past two decades as she has taught, co-designed and co-implemented interventions, provided technical assistance, and supported grantees conducting research in rural schools. She currently provides training, coaching, and technical support services for the Appalachian Regional Education Laboratory (REL Appalachia) in her position at SRI. Her talking points include the following:

Understanding the Rural Context:

- Rural districts and schools are vibrant, constantly evolving, living organisms, where families affect the school ecosystem every day, in practical, tangible ways. Unlike most of their larger urban and suburban counterparts, rural schools and districts are small enough that anything that happens within the area is known by residents very quickly. This means that children, and teachers and leaders, attend schools closely impacted by their environment.
- Researchers should do their homework and understand the local context in terms of all kinds of information; it's important to take an interest in where you propose to work, and the people who will be impacted by your research. Some useful questions to ask are: What does rural opioid crisis have to do with your project? What does rural student homelessness look like in your project? What does student mobility mean in this region?
- In some rural schools, especially those that serve large populations of high poverty students, teacher and leader turnover is quite high. Such turnover poses real threats to rigorous research. Develop a strategy for how to implement with high fidelity in the face of high teacher turnover.
- Remember that your priorities as a researcher are not necessarily shared by the rural districts and schools on a day to day basis, owing to the myriad of challenges they face daily. For example, researchers require a strict adherence to implementation guidelines to ensure fidelity. But teachers often have to adapt interventions to make them work in the rural classroom.

Focus on Relationships

- It is critical for researchers to understand the importance of relationships as, arguably, it is the most essential part of conducting research in rural areas. Relationships, at every level of the organization, matter. As independent, third-party, evaluators there is often a perceived need for professional distance from participants and local staff. However, from the perspective of local stakeholders, it is important to know that the goal is to ultimately help.
- Researchers need to explain what they are doing in terms that teachers and administrators can understand – build a common language for your work. Statistical significance is important, but having teachers and leaders understand what it means for their work and their students is more important.

“They won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care!”

Conclusion:

- Rural schools that serve higher concentrations of poor and disadvantaged students face unique barriers to participating in research; yet, those are the ones that researchers really need to include and understand.
- A partnership approach may be the best! Recognize the expertise of your district and school partners. Project success hinges almost entirely on their knowledge, commitment, and willingness to partner.

Panel Discussant 2: KaiLonnie Dunsmore, Ph.D.

Research in, with, and for Rural Schools

Dr. Dunsmore recently directed the Literacy Improvement through Rural Education Collaborations, a U.S. Department of Education \$4.55 million grant involving partnerships between three national non-profits (Institute for Educational Leadership, National Council of Teachers of English, and Rural School & Community Trust) and 21 high poverty rural elementary schools in five states to build capacity for sustained early literacy improvement through attention to teacher professional learning, family engagement, community collaboration and targeted support for student summer learning. Dr. Dunsmore brings experience as a teacher in rural schools and now as a researcher who both studies and provides technical assistance to rural districts and states. Her talking points will focus on the challenge of implementing and evaluating the efficacy of an intervention in high poverty rural schools and include the need to:

- Examine the impact of definitions of “rural” on research design and population: Researchers must first define what they mean by “rural.” And usually, ‘rural’ means more than a simple statistical coding systems that focuses on population density and distance from urban centers. Rural is also a sociocultural and political construct, with rural schools sharing located in an intersection between place and culture. They are also diverse, and may be located in areas with a legacy of inequity (e.g., the South or Appalachia), may have high concentrations of Native American or immigrant students, and may be shaped by economies focusing on agriculture, mining, tourism, or nearby urban centers.
- Examining the methodological affordances and challenges posed by rural schools. Geographic isolation and small student populations in rural areas impact the cost of research and the power of an overall study. Qualitative and ethnographic research require a long length of time to demonstrate change that involves building community and family partnerships. Researchers can address the methodological challenges, and leverage affordances, with designs that addresses the unique needs of rural contexts and by planning for the realities of rural contexts.
- Foregrounding context: Our focus on rural education begins with the premise that context matters, and that context. As Bryk (2015) wrote, “Every student is not the same, nor is every context. The complexity is real, and it cannot be sidestepped by standardizing all activity in an effort to teacher proof instructional environments”. Rural learners are important in research given the number of students and districts, yet much existing research set in rural schools does not adequately interrogate rural contexts.
- Strategies that successfully address the contexts and challenges of rural education. With

recent interest in rural communities, a nuanced understanding of the complexities of doing rural educational research is critical. This talking point considers rural educational research broadly and distinguishes a “rural convenience study” from “rural educational research.” Specific examples will be shared, including:

- Ways to engage in partnership building;
 - Strategies for designing studies that are both context specific yet designed to be scalable;
 - Methods that invite opportunities for reciprocity between subject and researcher; and
 - How to address access issues unique to rural communities.
- Designing interventions that can be scaled and/or studied with fidelity across multiple contexts but yet be implemented in ways that ensure that local context and participants influence design as well as the key players that impact successful implementation (e.g. church and civic leadership and involvement in project development) and that such work challenges deficit models of rural communities.
 - Recognizing and challenging research biases: In the U.S., rural narratives are central to American values but at the same time, rural people and places are often demeaned. Popular press suggests to rural children that their way of living is archaic, foolish, or both. Deficit models of rural places and communities are commonplace, and rural schools are accordingly often under-resourced and under-served.

Panel Discussant 3: Maryann Corsello, Ph.D.

Assessing Impact in Rural Schools

Dr. Corsello is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of New England and was the external evaluator for the U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation i3 Building Assets Reducing Risks (BARR) Development grant, and provides program evaluation oversight of the BARR model for the i3 Validation and Scale-up grants. Dr. Corsello’s talking points will be grounded in her experience conducting rigorous evaluations for the Department of Education in rural schools for the i3 grant program.

Introduction to the Intervention

- Building Assets, Reducing Risks (BARR) model is a proven high school intervention that serves a network of over 100 schools in 15 states, supporting 1,900 teachers and impacting 23,000 students. The BARR model uses eight interlocking strategies that build intentional relationships, use real-time data, and enable schools to achieve concrete academic, social and emotional outcomes. Students experiencing the BARR model show increased educational achievement and enhanced non-cognitive factors (e.g., student engagement, supportive relationships, rigor and expectations, future aspirations) and improved school climate. The BARR Center serves a network of over 100 schools in 15 states, supporting 1,900 teachers and impacting 23,000 students
- BARR has conducted student-level and school-level randomized controlled trials, as well as program evaluation in rural schools in Maine, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Wisconsin over the last eight years. In the process of

testing and scaling the model, we have encountered several examples of tensions and tradeoffs in response to diverse demands for evidence.

Challenges Faced

- School size. Finding rural schools that were large enough to support a within-school randomized controlled trial. This required at least 120 ninth grade students and two teams of core teachers in the ninth grade. Recruiting rural schools of this size was challenging, as was keeping the two conditions separate during the study year.
- Grading. Another challenge we faced in some rural communities was the move to proficiency-based grading. We had to account for the learning curve for schools starting proficiency-based grading and how to compare this measure with traditional grading. This challenge took place within relatively smaller schools, compared to urban and suburban schools, where lower statistical power made it more difficult to detect meaningful differences.
- Technology. We found that many rural schools had insufficient IT capacity to help teachers run course failure rates on a biweekly basis. This impacted whether teachers could detect if BARR was making a difference or not during the school year, and thus their motivation to keep working at this new intervention. We also found that many rural schools were in locations where community resources were sparse, and many support professionals were shared among several schools which made it difficult for them to attend weekly meetings at BARR schools.

Innovative Solutions

- Each of these challenges led the BARR leadership team to find creative solutions to implement BARR with fidelity and continue to conduct scientific studies in rural schools. We redoubled our efforts to find rural schools large enough to be part of our study. Once schools became part of the study we worked with administrators to adjust their master schedule to create teacher teams, and brainstormed teacher meeting times that would not incur added expense. We learned how to work with various student information systems to help schools run biweekly failure rates.
- In the process of working with schools, we also learned that educators thrived when they connected with each other across states to share experiences, best practices, and solutions to similar issues. We facilitated a network of educators and administrators, and expanded participation in our National Conference to over 300 educators from across the country. We learned that there are many educational issues that unite us regardless of geography and there is renewed energy and decreased isolation when educators connect around a common goal.
- Finally, our experience with rural schools engendered a firm but flexible approach to BARR implementation that allowed for variability in school resources. We continued to track implementation fidelity and outcomes across all our schools and provided the data to schools with suggestions for next steps. In the end, our focus on establishing strong relationships with educators and keeping a focus on data helped all schools to improve regardless of geography and the challenges each school brought to the table.

Panel Discussant 4: Linda Friedrich, Ph.D.

Case Study: Writing for College, Career, and Community in Rural Settings

Dr. Friedrich is the Director of Research and Evaluation at the National Writing Project, leading their research and evaluation efforts in teacher leadership and professional development, teacher research, professional learning communities, and the diffusion of knowledge and practice. Her talking points focus on her experience with the National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP), which has been implemented in a total of 69 rural districts.

Introduction to the Intervention

- The C3WP program focuses on improving academic argument through an interconnected program of professional development, instructional resources, and formative assessment.
- NWP's independent evaluation partner, SRI International, has completed two cluster randomized trials that demonstrate positive impacts on student writing outcomes and is currently conducting a third trial.

Challenges Faced

- Conducting cluster randomized trials in rural communities presents unique challenges. Many rural districts have too few teachers or schools to support within district randomization.
- Even when there are sufficient numbers of teachers or schools within a district, there are often close community and family ties that make randomization, even when technically feasible, challenging because of social factors.
- Rural communities are often interested in approaching work as a community.

Innovative Solutions

- Rural educators are often presented with programs designed and tested in suburban and urban settings. Building an evidence base that shows what works in diverse rural settings help open doors for introducing innovations in rural communities.
- To mitigate the small size of rural districts, consider randomization at the district level. This approach can help foster community connections and build a shared, district-wide focused effort to improve teaching and learning.
- For secondary interventions, consider within-teacher randomization, engaging teachers as partners in the research effort. This allows teachers to pilot an intervention and determine whether it is a good fit for their students. When multiple teachers in a setting participate in such an evaluation, they can collectively determine with their administrators and intervention developers whether an effort works in their setting.
- Build in a robust formative assessment and evaluation alongside summative evaluations that provide causal evidence. While positive results offer an important starting point for conversations, they do not take the place of data that help educators understand what is happening with their own students in real time.
- The C3WP's formative assessment component has been crucial to building and sustaining support for the program, and for supporting teachers in making curricular and instructional decisions that help their students improve their writing.