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Stories We Don't Tell: Research's Limited Accounting of Rural Schools

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Stories We Don't Tell: Research's Limited Accounting of Rural Schools

Education practitioners and policymakers, within or without rural settings, who intend to improve PK-12 settings need a well-researched evidence base (Penuel et al., 2017). However, educational research is only useful when it accurately accounts for schools' contextual variables, especially regarding geographic locale (Greenough and Nelson, 2015). How can school leaders address, for example, professional development needs in rural areas if their knowledge depends upon a research base that disproportionately represents cities or that otherwise fails to resonate locally? How can policymakers create defensible policies in support of all schools without mapping those policies onto the issues that are most salient to the widest range of communities?

To amplify conversations around questions such as these, we designed the current study to quantify the frequency with which education research accounts for geographic locale. The current study can show education leaders and policymakers what available research might and might not reveal about the rural and remote schools with which they concern themselves. Findings depict troubling disproportionalities between scholarly treatment in certain locales and the numbers of schools and students who reside in those places. Before presenting this study's research questions, we have briefly reviewed literature on challenges to locating context-specific scholarship and the importance of rural nuance.

Locating Context-Specific Scholarship

Like most social sciences, education faces a paucity of context-specific research to inform prevention or intervention efforts (Thier et al., 2019). Exacerbating this limitation, professionals such as school leaders or policymakers in education often have limited access to scholarship that can guide their work. Furthermore, rapid paces of work afford such professionals minimal time to seek and discriminate among vast amounts of potentially relevant studies (Spoth et al., 2013). Predictably, many education professionals hastily employ research in their decision-making processes (Penuel et al., 2017). As one barrier to context-specific uses of research, whole swaths of articles might surface during queries of electronic search engines but provide limited or no utility for a practical or policy-oriented need, mismatching knowledge and the seekers of it (Thier et al., 2019). Meanwhile, copious examples highlight the benefits of adapting interventions for local or cultural specificity, namely increases in effectiveness (Soto et al., 2018).

Understandably, any barriers to accessing timely research that targets local or situational needs can thwart improvement efforts (Corcoran et al., 2001). Still, school and district leaders report myriad efforts to apply accessible research that they find relevant, engaging in purposes often more complex than the instrumental

tasks laid out in educational mandates such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (Penuel et al., 2017). Thus, it seems evident that researchers should clearly provide their studies' consumers with information about their samples and the practical implications of their findings (Dynarski and Kisker, 2014). Doing so can mitigate trends in several developed nations where educators see limited utility for research (Bérubé, 2006; Cooper and Levin, 2013; Dagenais et al., 2012).

Rural Nuance

Rural places present considerable complexity, both by containing residents who demonstrate deep connections to place and by varying enormously from each other regarding their defining, contextual features (Eppley, 2015). Thus, educational research might benefit especially from adhering to contextual specificity when situating studies within certain spaces and among their salient geographical aspects. For example, findings from studies of school and district leadership are unlikely to align automatically with rural realities. Many rural contexts feature individuals who serve dually as principal and superintendent, a combination of roles that demands a distinctly different leadership approach than a city or suburb might invite (Canales et al., 2008). Complicating this greater potential for overlapping roles, principals in towns and rural areas have demonstrated lower scores on measures of quality, bring less experience to the job, and are less likely to have advanced degrees than their peers in suburban schools (Grissom et al., 2019). In concert, the potential for both an enlarged role of district/building leadership and weaker applicant pools foreclose the possibility that leaders of rural schools and districts can simply or generically take up research that is agnostic to—or silent upon—issues of place.

Simultaneously, the centrality of schools within, and community strengths of, rural places (see Hunt-Barron et al., 2015) can magnify the importance of fostering trust between district leaders and principals and between principals and their staffs within rural communities (Davidson and Butcher, 2019; Willis and Templeton, 2017). Thus, it is imperative that education leaders and policymakers understand the overall importance of trust within school buildings or larger systems (Davidson and Butcher, 2017). Meanwhile, education leaders and policymakers need to recognize the rural-specific aspects of how trust might operationalize differently in their localities because trust, like many other constructs, is context-bound and context-dependent (Combs et al., 2013).

Research Questions

The current study aims to help build capacity among PK-12 school leaders and policymakers whose decisions can impact rural settings, often without full

understanding of the nuances that are most salient within rural places. Simultaneously, we seek to (a) inform practitioners and policymakers about the extent to which education research might not account for their locales of interest and (b) remind researchers of the importance of specifying context if they intend their work to offer utility for the change agents who work with and within schools. Thus, we asked two related research questions:

1. To what extent do education researchers account for geographic locale in their reporting?
2. Do highly ranked journals account for geographic locale in their reporting more readily than education research in general?

Method

The systematic process for this review adhered to the Search, Appraisal, Synthesis and Analysis (SALSA) framework (Grant and Booth, 2009). The tactics we have described in this section reflect our hybridization of three review types—rapid, mapping, and scoping—a fusion meant to capitalize on the unique strengths of each and offset their perceived weaknesses.

Various government social science agencies endorse *rapid reviews* for policymakers' searches. Those agencies consider the rapid review to be a "quick but not dirty" approach to systematicity when one's goal is to acquire and appraise topical knowledge (p. 100). Mandated by time and feasibility, rapid reviews often feature narrowly defined questions, broader-than-typical search strategies, exclusions of grey literature, and less-sophisticated quality appraisals, accelerating the process but potentially introducing bias into a review. *Mapping reviews* can concretize conceptual or geographic gaps in a literature base, prompting further reviews for greater depth after first highlighting narrower questions of relevance for practice and/or policy. *Scoping reviews* make preliminary assessments of a literature base's size or depth. Like traditional systematic reviews, scoping reviews emphasize transparency and replicability. Often eschewing assessment of quality, both mapping and scoping reviews can mask heterogeneity within a literature base. Thus, no singular finding or cluster of findings from mapping or scoping reviews should independently inform policy or practice. Applying the SALSA framework, all three methods that inform the current study feature broad search tactics meant to categorize and expose extant gaps. Unlike mapping and scoping reviews, rapid reviews apply formal, but time-limited approaches to quality assessment. Syntheses for all three methods mix narrative and tabular elements. Analyses for all three methods quantify potential gaps, raising future directions either for in-depth reviews or narrower primary/secondary empirical inquiries.

To explore the state of scholarly reporting in education regarding geographic locale, we applied aspects of rapid, mapping, and scoping reviews to

literature culled systematically from the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). Our literature pool included peer-reviewed articles written in English that referenced “school” from January 2006 to December 2015. Aiming to detect what school leaders’ and policymakers’ potentially uncritical searches would likely unearth, we employed this 10-year period to allow time to elapse from the articles’ publication dates. By doing so, we accounted for algorithms of platforms such as GoogleScholar, which emphasize citation frequency. We used Boolean operators and other variants to ensure a comprehensive pool.

To address Research Question 1, we calculated proportions of articles that referred to the terms for describing geographic locales. Recognizing the growing utility of the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) Urban-Centric locale codes (Greenough and Nelson, 2015), but their lack of regular application as a scholarly definition of geographic locale (Thier et al., 2017), we searched articles for mentions of city/urban, suburban, town, and rural and/or remote. We conducted a deeper review to address Research Question 2 regarding any accounting of geographic locale within highly esteemed journals under the assumption that highly ranked journals might offer more precise reporting of methodological choices. We examined qualifying articles within 10 education-focused U.S. journals that SCImago ranked highly during 2015, the last publication year for our dataset: *American Education Research Journal*, *American Journal of Education*; *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Educational Researcher*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Journal of Learning Sciences*, *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, and *Review of Educational Research*. Absent a consensus gold standard to rank academic journals, we selected SCImago for its interdisciplinary focus, a useful criterion given education’s status as a multidisciplinary field and SCImago’s transparent specification of metrics for rank-ordering journals. SCImago ranks journals overall and per social science based on numbers of articles and citations both in a particular publication year and via multi-year moving averages. Therefore, we chose SCImago to approximate our assumption of highly esteemed journals featuring the most rigorous applications and reports of research methods.

From the pool of articles published in highly esteemed journals, we excluded articles about higher education and those that focused outside the United States. After exclusions, we evaluated rural-relevant articles for whether (a) they also accounted for remoteness, which can be defined as proximity from a city; (b) they defined rurality, which can be defined variously with or without accounting for remoteness; (c) their definitions facilitated locale group comparisons; and (d) their definitions enabled dichotomous or polytomous analyses. In the next section, we have reported proportions of articles that met these criteria overall and for the 10 highly esteemed journals. Where appropriate, we have compared those

proportions to NCES counts or estimates of the numbers of students and schools in the Urban-Centric codes' groupings by geographic locale.

Findings

In this section, we have presented findings per research question.

To What Extent Do Education Researchers Account for Geographic Locale?

Among 108,504 peer-reviewed, school-focused articles in ERIC during the 10-year analytical period, locale-specific patterns occurred as expected (see Table 1). Less than 15%—16,116 of 108,504 such articles overall—accounted for any of the locale-relevant terms (city/urban, suburban, town, and/or rural/remote areas) or their variants. Among the 16,116 articles that accounted for locale, 10,773 considered city and/or urban settings (66.85% or 9.93% of 108,504 articles overall). By contrast, 3,534 articles accounted for rurality (21.93%; 3.26%). In comparing city/urban and rural representation, city/urban accounting occurred 3.05 times as often as rural accounting, a disproportionality in need of additional context. NCES (2018) codes 27.24% of U.S. public schools as being within a city, more than 1% less than the corresponding rural proportion (27.57%), which seems to magnify the disproportion that our data has shown. However, students in cities account for about 12% more of the public-school population than their peers in rural settings do, justifying some added degree of attention from researchers.

Regardless of how much the disproportion in the literature reflects real or technical neglect for rural education—or whether student proportions should, on their own, drive research agendas—both city/urban and rural settings received better representation in our dataset than suburbs or towns. Suburbs account for pluralities of schools (nearly 32%) and students (nearly 40%), according to NCES (2018). By contrast, 1,035 of locale-focused articles in our dataset (6.24%) accounted for suburbs, 0.95% of the overall 108,504 articles. With only 774 articles, towns received even less attention: 4.80% of locale-focused articles, 0.71% overall. Although towns represent the smallest portion of the educational landscape, they still comprise about 13% of schools and 11% of students. With 252 articles in our dataset, remoteness barely appeared (0.23%), despite remote settings being home to about 10% of schools and nearly 6% of students.

Table 1

Research Articles in ERIC that Consider “School” Strongly Favor City/Urban Schools

Geographic locale	<i>n</i>	Article proportion	School %	Diff.	Student %	Diff.
Overall	108,504					
Any locale	16,116	14.85%				
City/urban	10,773	66.85% of locales 9.93% (overall)	27.24	+39.61	30.41	+36.44
Suburb	1,035	6.24% of locales 0.95% (overall)	31.89	-25.65	39.78	-33.54
Town	774	4.80% of locales 0.71% (overall)	13.29	-8.49	11.43	-6.63
Rural	3,534	21.93% of locales 3.26% (overall)	27.57	-5.64	18.37	3.56
Remote	252	2.17% of locales 7.13% of rural 0.23% (overall)	10.48	-8.31	5.57	-3.40

Note. ERIC = Education Resources Information Center; Locales are derived from National Center for Education Statistics Urban-Centric Locale Codes; Diff. = Difference between School % or Student % and proportion of locale-focused articles in dataset; School % = Proportion of U.S. public schools in geographic locale; Student % = Proportion of students attending U.S. public schools in geographic locale

Do Highly Ranked Journals Account for Geographic Locale More Readily?

The 10 highly ranked journals we observed featured 4,001 articles on schools during the 10-year analytical period. Compared to the overall population of articles, proportions for each geographic locale type were remarkably similar among the subset of journals that we presumed to be methodologically stronger and more precisely reported (see Table 2). Among those 4,001 articles, about 60% accounted for cities and/or urban areas, while about 20% accounted for rural areas, producing a nearly identical disparity that favored urbanicity (3.04 times). Proportions for articles that accounted for suburbs or towns (about 18% and 13%, respectively) resembled rural proportions more closely in the highly ranked subset than the overall population of articles. Compared to school and student populations by locale, suburbs were still underrepresented in the highly ranked journal subset. Accounting of towns was roughly proportional.

Table 2

High-Ranked Journals Attended to Geographic Locale Similar to Education Researchers Overall, Typically Operationalizing in Limited Ways

	<i>AERJ</i>	<i>AJE</i>	<i>EAQ</i>	<i>EEPA</i>	<i>ER</i>	<i>JEP</i>	<i>JLS</i>	<i>JRST</i>	<i>JTE</i>	<i>RER</i>	Total
Relevant articles (<i>n</i>)	361	295	266	237	757	732	187	555	389	222	4,001
Referred to city/urban (%)	83.7	63.4	84.2	81.9	57.5	33.5	39.0	58.0	68.1	72.5	60.2
..... suburb/an (%)	29.1	22.4	35.3	22.4	8.2	11.9	6.4	17.7	20.8	23.9	17.8
..... town (%)	20.5	16.6	21.4	10.1	13.9	6.2	6.4	10.5	12.9	20.3	13.0
..... rural (%)	29.9	19.7	38.0	27.9	11.6	11.9	6.4	20.2	22.6	32.4	19.8
..... rural & remote (%)	4.4	1.7	1.5	2.1	0.5	0.8	2.7	2.9	2.3	2.3	1.9
Articles referring to rural (<i>n</i>)	108	58	101	66	88	87	12	112	88	72	792
International exclusion (%)	13.0	3.4	11.9	9.1	6.8	21.8	8.3	20.5	9.1	8.3	13.0
Appendices exclusion (%)	15.7	1.7	8.9	13.6	18.2	0.0	0.0	10.7	11.4	20.8	15.7
Analytical pool (<i>n</i>)	77	55	80	51	66	68	11	77	70	51	606
Explicit definition (%)	9.1	3.6	7.5	5.9	4.5	4.4	0.0	0.0	5.7	0.0	4.6
Implicit definition (%)	5.2	9.1	5.0	5.9	0.0	2.9	0.0	1.3	4.3	5.9	4.1
Place-based groupings	60	43	62	40	42	51	7	52	56	41	454
Dichotomy (%)	45.0	51.2	21.0	32.5	54.8	33.3	57.1	46.2	55.4	48.8	42.7
Triad (%)	48.3	34.9	64.5	57.5	31.0	56.9	42.9	48.1	39.3	48.8	48.2
Quadratic (%)	3.3	9.3	12.9	10.0	7.1	7.8	0.0	5.8	5.4	0.0	6.8
Five or more groups (%)	3.3	4.7	1.6	0.0	7.1	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4	2.2

Note. AEJ = *American Education Research Journal*; AJE = *American Journal of Education*; EAQ = *Educational Administration Quarterly*; EEPA = *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*; ER = *Educational Researcher*; JEP = *Journal of Educational Psychology*; JLS = *Journal of Learning Sciences*; JRST = *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*; JTE = *Journal of Teacher Education*; RER = *Review of Educational Research*. Articles with “school” were coded as relevant; % for City/urban, Suburban, Town, Rural = geographic locales specified; Place-based groupings = definitions with specific geographic locale groupings. Articles featured place-based groupings but failed to define groupings (e.g., three-level approach with urban, suburban, rural without articulating level’s parameters).

Among 792 articles that accounted for rurality, we excluded 89 from further analyses because “rural” and/or its variants appeared only in reference lists, not in substantive portions of articles, and another 97 from international articles where notions of rurality might not generalize domestically. With 606 remaining articles, 553 (91.25%) *never defined rurality* at all. Only 28 articles contained explicit definitions of rurality; another 25 contained implicit definitions. For those that defined geographic locale groups, three was the most common number of categorical groups (48.24%) with Urban-Suburban-Rural occurring most frequently. Dichotomies accounted for 42.73% of named groups, nearly all of which explored an Urban-Rural divide. The 10 highly ranked journals explored remoteness even less frequently than the overall dataset (0.19%).

Discussion

Coladarci (2007) raised awareness about limits to education research that accounts for rurality. The current study quantified the extent to which scholars continue to neglect geographic locale broadly, specifically rural and remote places. Situating geographic locale as a crucial context for education research, the current study hybridized three systematic techniques to review literature: rapid, mapping, and scoping. Findings from this review have highlighted gaps that seem to undermine efforts among rural-focused school leaders and policymakers. Absent research that aligns with and targets their local problems and circumstances, professionals who lead and make policies for schools in rural and remote communities must instead wade through a sea of research, meanwhile foundering amid dubiously informed decisions. The current study shows how frequently those decisions will depend upon studies that failed to account for rurality or remoteness, limiting the value that educational research can offer to certain schools and communities. We conclude by reiterating this study’s key findings, discussing their implications for school leaders and policymakers, noting two limitations, and recommending next steps for fellow researchers who desire their work to have a meaningful influence on practice and policy.

Key Findings

At more than 85% of a decade’s worth of peer-reviewed studies within ERIC (a dataset featuring nearly 109,000 articles), a stunning majority is silent on the issue of geographic locale. Education research’s ignorance of geographic locale belies a variable that might be as salient for some communities as socioeconomic status or ethno-racial composition can be. Particularly, we have demonstrated extreme inattention to rural and/or remote locales. Schools in cities might educate

more of the U.S. public student population than rural schools do, but should a modest difference associate with a 3x disparity in research attention?

Further problematizing rural/remote neglect, we see a near-identical disproportionality that favors attention to city schools in the overall dataset and the subset of studies from the journals most likely to demand more precise methodological reportage. Importantly for education researchers, although perhaps less so for school leaders and policymakers with foci on rural education, suburban and town schools also receive less attention than their share of the U.S. public school market would dictate. Both in the overall data and among highly ranked journals, suburbia is less of a focal point. That said, copious evidence juxtaposes rural disadvantage in comparison to suburban settings (e.g., Grissom et al., 2019), making rural sites potentially more probative for education research. Towns, while underrepresented in the current study's overall dataset, were represented within highly ranked journals proportionately to school and student counts, perhaps indicating a more scientific, less colloquial use of "town." Proportional representation of towns in highly ranked journals, which frequently categorized geographic locale by distinguishing either between urban and rural spaces or among cities, suburbs, and rural areas, further suggested the adequacy of town representation. In totality, a striking overrepresentation of cities, potentially milder need to study suburbs, and mostly proportional attention to towns underscored an obliviousness to rurality across the education research base.

Moreover, sharing the burgeoning recognition that rural schools can be remote or not (e.g., Kettler et al., 2016), the current study tracked whether education research accounts for remoteness. Our findings have shown that school leaders or policymakers with interests in remote schools are receiving nearly no research-informed guidance. Less than 1% of studies addressed remoteness in any way. In fact, the overall dataset surprisingly showed slightly *more* attention than the minimal attention we found in higher-ranked journals. Such an impoverished degree of consideration for remoteness seems in line with another stunning finding: more than 9 of 10 studies in the journals that exert considerable influence on education research and that invoke "rural" failed to define the term.

Implications for School Leaders and Policymakers

Overall, this review has revealed pervasive inattention to issues of rurality and remoteness in extant education research. In more than 4,000 articles from highly ranked journals, we saw a tendency to obfuscate geographic nuance. Among the few articles with serious deliberations of geographies and their impacts on educational opportunity, Apple (2011) recognized the crucial need to observe relations between cities, suburbs, or rural areas. Ironically, however, he never defined his use of those geographic terms, still stating that no education analysis

“can be complete without an understanding of how schooling is implicated in these relations” (p. 35). The mainstream approach among articles in our dataset invoked place colloquially and without rationale, never defining “rural” or the contents of locale-designated groups. Thus, we continue calls to reject researchers’ frequent use of “skim detail” about sites or settings, critiquing “coarse geographic categorizations,” “vague cultural categorizations,” or “generalized demographic descriptors” (Anderson and Stillman, 2013, p. 43).

Insufficient detail hampers school leaders’ and policymakers’ understanding of a host of characteristics, not just geographic ones. Thus, we strenuously advocate that research consumers demand more and better reporting from education scholarship. In conversations with research teams about partnerships for future research, school leaders and policymakers can demand that researchers emphasize geographic locale as a crucial factor for examining school systems’ tangled webs of inputs, processes, and outcomes. In the meantime, decisions will depend upon a literature base littered with abundant examples of studies that sparsely describe the places within which they are set, shrouding rural communities in deficits as if they all suffer:

- low populations that depend upon ill-defined person counts
- isolation from the opportunities that urban places can offer
- being high-poverty, underserved, resource-deprived, economically disadvantaged, and/or bereft of choice
- racial and/or ethnic homogeneity
- low educational expectations and aspirations limited by agricultural and/or vocational inclinations
- an identity-threatening overlap with suburbs or towns, thus undermining any comparisons beyond the blunt force of an urban-rural dichotomy

Leaders and policymakers can commit to employing research only if it clarifies who and where has been studied, enabling informed determinations of whether to adapt from findings or entirely discount them from local use. When the research one reads aligns with the context one is reading to improve, adoption and adaptation are far more feasible. Meanwhile, neglect for and misspecification of geographic locale, especially regarding rurality and remoteness, remains pervasive, requiring remedies that we have suggested below for researchers’ consideration.

Limitations

The current study depicts what might be described as a field’s systematic ignorance of geographic locale, but we still might be *underestimating* what we characterize as an epidemic failure in scholarly reporting on this issue. Most of our rural- and remote-specific findings depend upon an in-depth review of a subsample

of 4,001 articles, not the overall population of 108,504 articles. Our two-person team could only use electronic means to scan the overall dataset, but we investigated more deeply 4,001 articles from prestigious journals that should feature some of the education research enterprise's most rigorous, transparent methodological reporting. In those journals, more than 80% of articles ignore rurality entirely. More than 99% ignore remoteness. Among the few articles that account for rurality, less than 90% define their use of that term. We surmise that these proportions would be even larger in general pools of research articles, assuming a wider range of journals would yield lower thresholds for reportage. As another noteworthy caveat, the vast scope of *the overall dataset* of articles meant that we were not able to exclude articles on higher education, within international settings, or that included key terms only in reference lists. It is unclear whether the overall dataset and the subsample would have been more or less similar had those exclusions been made uniformly.

Next Steps for Researchers

In addition to detecting such a rarity of studies that define geographic locale sufficiently, the current study unearthed copious examples of studies that highlight a field-level need for shared understanding on how to define, categorize, and quantify place as a crucial contextual variable. We reviewed some studies that categorized schools as city, suburban, small city, or rural, entirely ignoring towns and failing to quantify the size upon which they distinguished city types. Other studies employed both urban-rural dichotomies and three-level approaches (e.g., city, suburb, rural) simultaneously, flummoxing readers about how to interpret the geographic locales about which they were reading. Still others made specious references to *rural towns* or *truly rural* places. Even among studies that defined rurality, definitions tended toward superficiality, further threatening the validity of their conclusions. Clearly, there is ample room for future reviews to bring more and deeper criticality, both to our dataset and others that incorporate education research.

Given all the challenges we have observed with a broad overview of a decade's worth of research on schools and a deeper dive into relevant articles from highly ranked journals, we strongly advocate education researchers' shared understanding of geographic locale as an essential and measurable school characteristic. Moreover, we echo calls to embrace the National Center for Education Statistics' Urban-Centric codes as a definitional framework. It can help standardize the operationalization of geographic locale, enabling scholars to parse nuances such as rurality and remoteness (Greenough and Nelson, 2015). Last, we urge researchers to avoid dichotomizing along a seemingly imaginary urban-rural divide. As the default definitional assumption of nearly half the articles that defined rurality in highly esteemed journals, both researchers' and everyday uses of such

crude classifications might make the urban-rural dichotomy seem like a valuable heuristic. But even studies that label places as urban or rural typically force readers to guess at what the *rural* designation means due to insufficient detail. Until researchers come to definitional agreements and apply them readily, scholarship will not tell practitioners and policymakers the stories they most need to hear. Research-based decisions will continue to depend upon faulty schemas that inadequately address rural needs as they uphold urban-normative biases.

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