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# How Size and Setting Impact Education in Rural Schools

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*School variables, such as school size and school location, matter. School size and location impact many areas of education, including the characteristics of the school, curriculum, and post-school outcomes. Research reveals that students in rural schools face many personal and education hardships – from living in poverty to having less opportunity and sophistication in technology. Rural schools also have fewer course offerings. While rural schools are a unique, urban and rural schools may be more similar than expected, particularly as compared to more affluent suburban districts. Rural and urban schools have larger rates of poverty and more dire financial situations, which do impact the educational offerings, experiences, and outcomes of their students.*

Ever since Coleman and his colleagues (1966) wrote *Equality of Educational Opportunities*, researchers have been trying to prove that school variables or factors matter – from the size of schools, to their financial considerations, teacher quality, and their setting (Fowler, Jr. & Walberg, H. J., 1991; Hanushek, 1986, 1989; King, & MacPhail-Wilcox, 1994; Raywid, 1997/98; Wenglinsky, 1997). Rural schools and rural education cannot be neglected from this discussion. The country's eyes and concerns were brought to attention by Kozol (1992); yet, the focus on rural education has not been as strong. Rural education matters – rural schools serve over 40% of the nation's students, but do not receive this much federal education funding (NEA, 2003). Rural education must be discussed – its characteristics teased out and its similarities and differences from other settings examined.

## Urban versus Rural

And yet we stop to tell ourselves: *These are Americans*. Why do we reduce them to this beggary – and why, particularly, in public education? Why not spend on children here at least what we would be investing in their education if they lived within a wealthy district like Winnetka, Illinois, or Cherry Hill, New Jersey, or Manhasset, Rye, or Great Neck in New York? Wouldn't this be natural behavior in an affluent society that seems to value fairness in so many other areas of life? Is fairness less important to Americans today than in some earlier times? Is it viewed as slightly tiresome and incompatible with hardnosed values? What do Americans believe about equality?

This excerpt was written by Johathan Kozol (1992, p. 41) in his book *Savage Inequalities*, as he reflected upon his visit to schools in East St. Louis, a school district located in a town referred to as “an inner city without an outer city” (p. 20). It is a school system in which teachers run out of chalk and paper, where teachers pay checks arrive late, and schools get closed down because sewage floods the floors.

In *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol brought national attention to the fact that the setting of schools matters. He highlighted the vast differences in education that exist between schools in urban settings and in suburban settings. He not only illuminated the gap in funding that occurs between schools depending on their location, but also within the content of instruction. To illustrate the difference in funding, Kozol gave the average per pupil expenditures in New York City

in 1987, which were approximately \$5,500, while in the suburbs of New York, funding exceeded \$11,000, with the greatest spending at \$15,000. However, as Kozol pointed out, the funding gap is not just an issue between urban and suburban schools, but a more complicated one involving race and culture. As evidence, the average per pupil spending in a black suburban town in Illinois was \$5,000, virtually the same as the expenditure in the urban schools in Chicago. This was about \$3,000 less than what was spent in the highest spending predominantly white suburbs in Illinois.

And yet, while Kozol (1992) did an excellent job of bringing the plight of the urban schools to national attention and highlighting for the nation the vast inequalities that occur within our system of public education, he forgot something in his book, something so very important – the plight of the rural schools. Rural schools cannot be considered akin to suburban schools. They not only face their own challenges and hardships, but also share similarities with urban schools. The effect of education in rural schools cannot be dismissed from the debate regarding the equality, or rather inequality, of schooling and schools' location and status.

The location of a school, as in an urban, rural, or suburban setting, has been shown to effect various factors related to education. For example, the location of a school is often associated with the socioeconomic status level of the school, or in other words the poverty of the school, which is frequently measured by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunches. Schools in more urban settings are associated with high level of poverty and in consequence have a lower amount of money to spend per child on education (Anyon, 2003; Kozol, 1992).

While the high levels of poverty are associated with urban schools, evidence suggests that rural school districts serve a large percentage of students living in poverty as well, in fact a larger percentage than when urban and suburban schools districts are combined to form a non-rural category (Hatfield, 2002; Office of Special Education, 1995). Research by Sherman (1992, as cited in Office of Special Education, 1995, p. 2) “indicates that 22.9 percent of rural children live in poverty, compared to 20.6 percent of all American children and 20 percent of non-rural children. The report also reveals that 41 percent of poor rural children live in ‘extreme poverty,’ defined as a family income below 50 percent of the Federal poverty threshold.”

The debate over who receives the most inferior education is an endless debate. While some contend it is students from urban schools and cite Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, others believe that students from smaller and more rural schools receive educational experiences inferior to those of students from either urban or suburban schools (Edington & Koehler, 1987). Reasons cited as to why these students receive inferior education range from fewer curriculum options, such as electives and advanced placement options, to communities and hence teachers setting lower expectations for students. In fact Capper (1990 as cited in Office of Special Education, 1995, p. 2) found "the lower the income level and the more rural the community, the lower the expectations teachers had for students." Those on the other side of the debate, claiming that rural schools do not offer inferior education, cite that smaller communities tend to have more community support and thus that should spawn better achievement results (Edington & Koehler).

Kozol's disheartening portrayal of school life in urban settings is supported by others who concluded that the American educational system hurts its urban students. Haberman (1999) declared that urban schools have a deeply embedded curriculum within their culture – the unemployment curriculum, which ultimately prepares students for failure in the labor force. However, Kozol would contend that it is not just a curriculum that fails to prepare its students for the workforce, but rather urban schools have become institutions that prepare students – minority students – for the harshness of society. Students in the poor, urban schools are not immune from seeing that the education they receive is of lower standard than their counterparts in suburban and predominantly white schools. Kozol discusses the looks of lessened expectations and cynicism in the eyes of urban middle school students, as they gain an awareness of an educational system that continues to disadvantage them.

Besides poverty levels of students, funding availability, and curriculum options, or lack thereof, differences exist between school settings on other dimensions. A difference that is ever-increasingly noticeable and consequential is the access to technology. Not surprising given the previously discussed advantage of suburban schools over urban schools; suburban schools have significantly more computers than both urban and rural schools. The differences also go beyond just physical access, but also involve what computer skills are taught (Owens & Waxman, 1996). The issue of technology is furthered complicated by the increased availability and interest in online courses which enable students to take college courses or virtual high school-like courses. Even in technology, like other areas, the overwhelming advantage of suburban schools is present, leaving rural and urban school to compete for the title of who has the least access and/or does the least with technology to benefit its students (Owen & Waxman). However, if appropriate technology is available urban, as

well as rural, students could gain access to the same courses that are made available to suburban students (Farley, 1999).

The impact of school variables also affects socio-emotional outcomes as well, as Young (1998) concluded that differences in school size affect students' feelings regarding their school and education. It was found that students in rural schools report being more satisfied with their school, that their teachers are more supportive, and that they feel safer, as compared to urban schools.

The consequences of school size and setting is not limited to the time students spend in K-12 public school system, but extend beyond to impact higher education and occupations. Downey (1980) found that while students from rural schools believe that they can compete fully in higher education settings and in fact view their work in school as more important, reality is that they face more limited occupational role opportunities and tend not to branch from familiar areas, as compared to students from more urban and suburban schools (Haas, 1992). However, compared to students from other settings, students from rural schools felt that attending colleges was not as supported by their parents as other post-school options, such as getting a job, attending a trade school, or entering the military (Cobb, McIntire, & Pratt, 1989). The lack of models and experiences with occupational opportunities is a life-long limitation.

### **School Variables Impact on Curriculum**

Minority status, poverty, and location of schools are shown to be closely associated with certain curriculum priorities in the research (Alexander, 2002). Analyses by Alexander concluded that as the percentage of "poor" students in a school increases, the allotted class time to core courses decreases. She found that while school size plays an important role, the size or setting of schools is often interacted with poverty or socioeconomic status and minority status. In addition, large schools did tend to have lower percentages of student class time allotted to non-core classes and more scheduled for traditional curriculum (Alexander).

Monk and Haller (1993) also demonstrated the impact high school size and setting has on course offerings. Again, while socioeconomic status plays an important role, when controlling for that, the setting had significant effects. These researchers found that students from small schools are offered fewer educational opportunities than students in larger schools. The researchers concluded that clearly there is not equity in the offering in curriculum and availability of courses (Monk & Haller). In terms of other courses, rural schools have less to offer; fewer elective classes, such as art and computers, as well as advanced placement offerings (Alspaugh, 1998; Edington & Koehler, 1987). Furthermore, Stringfield and Teddlie (1991), in their analysis of rural schools' effectiveness, found that rural schools were more conservative in terms of education. The researchers concluded that while this conservatism sheltered rural

schools from some of the negative effects of educational “fads,” it also prevented them from participating in the valuable movements in education (Stringfield & Teddlie, 1991).

The differences between nonacademic course offerings also play into the divide between school location or setting. Research has shown that offerings for vocational education are dependent on school setting, in that urban and suburban settings have more to offer in terms of vocational courses than rural schools (Hudson & Shafer, 2002). Furthermore, not only do rural schools offer fewer choices in vocational courses, the programs offered by rural schools are less likely to be ones that prepare students for occupations that are expected to grow (Hudson & Shafer).

### **A Common Ground**

When one looks beyond the surface of urban and rural schools, one can see that more similarity exists than meets the eye. In fact, research points to the similarities between small and rural and large and urban districts, which extend from school effectiveness factors to curriculum and instructional issues. Wilson (1985) concluded that small districts are more similar than dissimilar to large districts.

Besides the cry of both types of schools to enable their students to share in the same rich and diverse educational opportunities available to students in wealthy suburban school, model schools in both types utilize similar approaches and resources. When two administrators, each from a turned-around school – one from rural and one from urban – contemplated on what factors assisted in the schools’ transformation to a “technologically rich, collaborative learning community,” both stated such elements as the value of teachers and recognizing their role as an untapped asset as well as the use of teams to make decisions within the school, from curriculum and program development to the hiring of new staff (Raymond, 1995; Spilman, 1996).

While the value of teachers has been echoed from practitioners to researchers, the equity in terms of who can recruit the “best” teachers is dependent on school setting. As Kozol wrote in *Savage Inequalities*:

The number of teachers over 60 year of age in the Chicago system is twice that of the teachers under 30.

The salary scale, too low to keep exciting, youthful teachers in the system, leads the city to rely on low-paid subs, who represent more than a quarter of Chicago’s teaching force. “We have teachers,” Mrs. Hawkins says, “who only bother to come in three days a week. One of these teachers comes in usually around nine-thirty. You ask her how can she expect the kids to care about their education if the teacher doesn’t even come until nine-thirty. She answers you, ‘It makes no difference. Kids like these aren’t going anywhere.’ The school board thinks it’s saving money on the subs. I tell them, ‘Pay now or pay later.’”

Urban schools are not alone in the evidenced lower standard of teachers. Research by Monk and Carlsen (1992) found that the educational preparation of teachers is more limited in rural districts. Particularly, they studied secondary science teachers and concluded that rural teachers tend to be less experienced, more likely to teach outside of their content area, less likely to have majored in their teaching content area, and less likely to have graduate degrees (Monk & Carlsen).

While some similarities shared between the two types of schools are positive and challenge the assumption of “lower” educational standards in schools of these settings, other shared traits are not so positive and create a barrier to helping students from these institutions succeed. Besides the decreased opportunities that exist in urban and rural schools, particularly when the schools face issues of poverty and little funding, the expectations that teachers and schools have for their children matter greatly (Edington & Koehler, 1987). Teachers in both settings have lower expectations for their students. Students can internalize the messages sent by teachers and other educators when, because of their social class or other demographic variables, they are offered more, or only, low-level classes. Students in rural and urban schools understand that they are not expected to have high achievement (Nieto, 2003).

Educators are starting to focus on the importance for curriculum to meet the needs of students, whether those students are in urban, rural, or suburban schools, and to encompass the wide range of needs students bring with them. As Dziuban and Kysilka (1996, p. 91-92) wrote, “We must develop a better understanding of the circumstances in which our children live before we can decide what to teach them...Questions of which curriculum and which textbooks to use are trivial unless posed within the framework of the lives of children.” This is an issue similar to all types of school, regardless of size or setting. Advocates speaking on behalf of both rural and urban children stressed the need to adjust curriculum to meet students where they are at and furthermore that curriculum must include more than academics (Dziuban & Kysilka; Ediger, 1999).

### **The Lasting and Detrimental Effects of Poverty Regardless of Setting**

The effects of poverty have been demonstrated on many aspects of life, from education to health, life outcomes to self-esteem. Any discussions regarding education and how school variables affect students’ attainment of education cannot be divorced from poverty, which encompasses poverty of the students, their families, and of the community that inevitability leads to poverty of the school. Coleman’s 1966 *Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey* (EEOS) (as cited in Cohen & Barnes, 1999, p. 23) placed the spotlight on the powerful effects of poverty, as the research demonstrated that “the most powerful predictors of students’ performance were their parents’ educational and social

backgrounds, in comparison to whose effects school resources were trivial.” Interpretation of this study leads to a belief that education is most determined by the actual poverty children experience, as opposed to school variables, such as equality of facilities, per pupil expenditures, and teachers’ competency. However, models of effective schools in poor rural and suburban settings exist and have impacted students and the poverty cycle some might claim they inevitably face (Raymond, 1995; Spilman, 1995/1996).

While poverty is typically associated with urban schools, it cannot be disentangled from rural schools – both experience poverty and its detrimental effects. Being classified as high poverty or low socioeconomic status school conjures up many images in people’s minds, as well as evidence to support some of people’s conceptions. Sparks (2000) reported that high poverty schools are more likely to have teachers with less than three years experience, teaching out of their content areas, to be on emergency credentials, or to be long-term substitutes.

Research by Hallinger and Murphy (1986) examined low socioeconomic status schools (SES) that were considered unusually effective. They found that low socioeconomic status schools differed from high SES schools in several ways. One major way low SES affects schools includes a more basic skills curriculum focus. Additionally, administrators in low SES schools are more involved in instruction decisions and give less autonomy to their teachers and other staff. Given these differences, and others like lower homework expectations and weaker home-school cooperation, between unusually effective low SES schools and high SES schools, it raises concern as to what school is like for regular or “ineffective” low SES schools (Hallinger & Murphy).

### Concluding Thoughts

One does not have to ask many practitioners in the field of education if school variables matter – they would answer yes. Most research supports their belief that the differences in schools do affect children’s educational experience. Each school type – whether it be rural, urban, or suburban – carries with it a unique set of characteristics that are often mitigated by other factors such as poverty and a culturally-diverse student population. In the final analysis, where one goes to school has consequences and we, as educators and members of the larger community, can no longer ignore these inequalities. For this nation to flourish, all schools must be quality and effective schools. Rural, as well as urban, schools need to be supported in new and additional ways so that students from these areas become productive members of an ever-changing complex society.

Rural schools and their educational offerings are impacted by many variables. The poverty faced by rural schools and its students is a large component. Rural schools get less than their fair share of the education funding (NEA, 2003), which then impacts the technology and level of

technological sophistication available to students in these districts. It can also then impact the type of course offerings available at rural schools – from choices to Advanced Placement, and even vocational. Rural schools, by the nature of being rural, also face challenges with quality of teachers. This can impact the expectations for students and their future outlooks. Overall, rural schools must attend to several factors – from financial to curriculum, from teacher quality to community. All these factors impact and interact to create an educational experience for students in rural schools.

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