In 2000, Dr. Allan C. Lauzon and Danielle Leahy completed a literature review on rural schools and educational reform, concluding that rural schools were indeed worth saving. In 2017, I conducted a literature review with the goal of offering an update to that article, investigating the post-2001 research on the impact of rural school closures; the effects of bussing of rural students to/from school; and student performance in small schools and mixed-grade classes. The results were mixed and contradictory, equally puzzling to the complexity of defining what is “rural” and what is “small school”. While some researchers continue to point out the unique place of local schools in rural settings, many also note the large lack of scale-studies into the impact of rural school closures, especially impact on students, despite the social burden that has been placed on them and our belief in equality in that “who pays and the price they pay, is always of interest” (bell hooks).

Impact of School Closure on Rural Students

I looked at the effects of school closures on outmigration, local economy and identity, students and families, as well as more general social impact on affected communities. Curiously, the research showed a duality of perspectives. On one hand, the literature reported a number of negative effects including threat to identity and differentiation of communities (Corbett, 2009; Kvalsund, 2009), loss of jobs and skills (Mortz & Sanderson, 2006), the overall weakening of small capital (Auff & Hardy-Beinhammer, 2014), and loss of school as a social centre of community (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006). On the other hand, some researchers argued that school closure was itself a by-product of declining communities and not the other way around (Egelund & Laustsen, 2006; Kulvecova & Kulera, 2012); and that closure may become an opportunity for people to come forward and undertake projects to strengthen the community’s resilience (Oncescu, 2014, Egelund & Laustsen, 2006).

Researchers continually write about the surprising shortage of large-scale research on rural teaching and learning and lack of systematic examination on the effects on pupils, despite the strong emotional response that the threat of closure to rural schooling solicits in affected communities and, more generally, in media.

Method


Impact of School Busing on Rural Students

Generally, researchers comment on the shortage of studies on impact of busing on students (Vincent, et al, 2014; Ramage & Howley, 2005; Galliger, et al, 2009; Howley & Smith, 2000; Gilbert & O’Brien, 2005) despite concerns that parents and local residents express about lengthy bus rides that come with rural school closures and district consolidations. As one trustee put it, “how long can you put a kid on a bus before their brain falls out?” (in Cilliars, 2014).

Research demonstrates that transport and distance issues constrain school choices (Stokes, et al, 1999), may contribute to discipline problems (Henderson, 2008) and reduce time available for homework (Stokes, et al, 1999). The rigid nature of school bus schedules leaves some of the students unable to participate in extracurricular school activities (Bennett & Gillis, 2015; Van Ristell, et al, 2013; Stokes, et al, 1999; Jimerson, 2007). This is particularly unfortunate since research “has shown that participation in extra-curricular activities is highly associated with engaging students in schooling and is one key element in combating adolescent alienation” (Lipsomb, 2000; Mohoney & Cains, 1997; O’Brien & Rolfe, 1995, as referenced in Jimerson, 2007).

Generally, researchers argue that there are few children’s environments as good as school buses when it comes to physical well being (Henderson, 2009). Parents, however, interpret the term “safety” far wider than transportation officials. While not all students have negative experience on the bus, reported bullying, profanity, and incidents of sexual and physical harassment often related to the fact that kids of many different grades are bussed together (Ramage & Howley, 2005; Kearns, et al, 2009; Galliger, et al, 2009; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2008; deLaro, 2008; Howley & Smith, 2000; Stampano–Kanyinga, et al, 2016).

Other topics only touched upon in research but worthy of further exploration include transportation conditions for rural students with disabilities (OHIRC, 2003), absence of bathrooms on buses (Howley & Smith, 2000) and extended sedentary behavior (Bennett & Gillis, 2015).