

Voices in the Hallway: Three Rural Iowa Schools

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*Students, faculty, administration, and community members of three Iowa rural school districts were interviewed to identify educational issues in their communities. The results of the Iowa investigation are compared with the results of the Claremont Graduate School investigation published in *Voices from the inside: A report on schooling from inside the classroom* (1992). The Claremont study investigated large urban schools. The Iowa study provides insight into small, rural school districts. Although similar issues emerged from the two studies, other issues demonstrated the different realities of education in rural Iowa and education in a large culturally diverse urban setting.*

In 1992, The Institute for Education in Transformation at The Claremont Graduate School published *Voices From the Inside: A report on schooling from inside the classroom*. The research undertaken by the Claremont Graduate School attempted to determine if the conclusions reached by previous studies on schools were consistent with the experiences, observations, and perceptions of the real experts in schooling: the students, teachers, administration, and staff who work everyday in those schools. The conclusion reached in *Voices from the inside* was that current policies and proposed solutions "could be counter-productive to the improvement of schools" (p. 6). Many of those proposed solutions addressed surface problems of school, whereas these surface problems are consequences of deeper problems not addressed in the current policy.

Although the research methods and conclusions reached in *Voices from the inside* were appropriate for the schools involved in the study, it seriously raises the question whether similar conclusions would be reached in schools not urban or suburban in nature. The Claremont research is an example of the extensive attention focused on large populations in urban and suburban schools. However, the National Education Association (NEA) estimated that forty percent of American school children can be classified as rural. Further, NEA estimates that nearly half of American schools are located in rural areas and small towns. These estimates, which are surprising to many, beg the question, "Are the issues, experiences, and realities of schooling the same for small rural schools as for urban schools?" If the Claremont study documents the voices of urban and suburban students, teachers, and community members, should we not document the voice for one-third to one-half of the nation's school population, the rural student? Do the voices from rural Iowa schools match their urban counterparts as described by the Claremont Graduate School researchers?

The current study seeks to answer these questions by

building on the original Claremont research by examining the central issues of rural schooling through the eyes of those who attend, teach, administer, support, and participate in the rural schools and then comparing those issues identified with the issues raised in the Claremont study over 10 years earlier.

The Claremont Graduate School chose to extensively investigate four public schools in urban and suburban areas. The investigation spanned 18 months and consisted of in-depth group and individual dialogues with students, teachers, staff and administrators of those four schools. The four schools were all located near Claremont College, which is located 35 miles east of Los Angeles, CA. The four schools (two elementary, one middle and one high school) had enrollments ranging from 350 students (one of the elementary schools) to over 2,300 students (at the high school) in 1991-92. The population of each school was racially and ethnically diverse, reflecting the rich diversity of the communities.

Method

This study was conducted in three rural Iowa community school districts having fewer than 600 students in K-12 as determined by district enrollment data available from the Iowa Department of Education. Forty-two percent of Iowa's school districts in 2001-2002 had fewer than 600 students (Iowa Department of Education, 2003). In addition, the communities chosen are located further than 40 miles from a metropolitan area of 25,000 so as to represent a truly rural setting rather than a rural area influenced by its proximity to a larger community. Finally, the three districts are in different regions of the state. Unlike the Claremont research, the Iowa schools were racially and ethnically homogeneous which is consistent with the overall racial profile of Iowa. The 2000 U.S. Census reports Iowa being 93.9% Caucasian.

As in the Claremont research, the Iowa study placed the research team in the school and community on numerous occasions. Participants in the study were students, parents, teachers, administrators, staff, and community members within the districts who were willing to share their experiences. The team of researchers gained access to the school settings by contacting the superintendents and secondary principals.

On-site interviews were conducted by a team of three university faculty members, and were arranged and accommodated by the principals, who provided the use of a meeting place. In addition, the principals made students and staff aware that the researchers would be in the buildings and would be seeking input and participation. Interviews with community members and others not directly associated with the school took place throughout the towns. All interviews were conducted during the 2001-2002 school year.

As research progressed, the researchers employed network or snowball sampling advocated by McMillan and Schumacher (2001). The researchers believe firmly, as promulgated by Bogdan and Bicklin (1982), that the questions posed in the study can be best understood through direct involvement with the participants over an extended period of time. Participants in the study ranged in age from 15-year-old high school freshmen to retired senior citizens. To adequately address design and validity issues, the researchers utilized triangulation, also set forth by McMillan and Schumacher. Specifically, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders and subjects in the schools and communities. The university faculty who conducted all interviews had considerable teaching and administration experience in rural education and communities. Tape recordings were used on many occasions, as were follow up sessions with participants to confirm the content of previous interviews. Finally, the researchers utilized peer debriefing with an experienced but uninvolved faculty member experienced in qualitative research and rural education.

Findings

Whether talking with students, teachers, administrators or staff at all the schools involved in the study, a generally positive feeling about the school and what was happening at the school was expressed. Frequent comments such as, "It's a friendly place," "Everybody knows everybody," "It's a good school," were common from various groups interviewed. Students recognized that the size of the school gave them more one-on-one attention, which they appreciated, and allowed them to be involved in extracurricular activities at a higher participation level than they would at a larger school.

Teachers realized that their small class sizes allowed them some opportunities that they wouldn't have in larger schools, such as teaching a number of different courses. They often taught a variety of subjects in their content area and were able to know the students very well and know the parents well also. The school was typically seen as the center of the community with its sports and music often a

main source of entertainment in the area. Signs and school mascots were common sights in windows, yards, and car and truck windows. The community pride and support for the schools was evident, as each of the three districts had passed bond issues in the past two years that would allow for remodeling or new additions to be completed.

Although the small size was often mentioned as a positive feature of the rural schools, all groups interviewed also recognized the negative aspects of the small size. "Everybody knows everybody" can be a very positive feature, but many students also noted that gossip and lack of privacy were downsides of this positive feature. The small class size also meant these students had been in classes together since kindergarten. Some high school students reported that when they reached "dating age" their classmates seemed almost more like siblings than potential dates.

Although the students generally rated their schools' education as average to above average, they recognized that they had fewer class offerings. The college-bound students expressed some concern about adjusting to college life, but the concerns were more often about the social adjustments rather than the academic adjustments.

Administrators were sensitive to how the small size made it difficult to recruit young teachers, particularly in content areas that are in high demand throughout the state, such as industrial technology, upper level science and math, and special education. Although each district had a number of teachers who had been in the district for over 20 years, other positions had a high turnover rate. These positions were often filled by young, single teachers who, after teaching one or two years, would accept a teaching and coaching position in a larger community that paid more and offered a wider variety of social opportunities for a single person.

Each school district has tried to address the problem of few class offerings. The schools have attempted to utilize the Iowa Communications Network (ICN), a state-owned fiber optic communications network, by connecting the students in many districts seeking to take higher-level classes. Some districts have increased their class offerings through sharing programs with other districts where the student drives or rides a bus to a neighboring district to take a particular class. While these efforts have met with some success, administrators have struggled with conflicts due to different schedules between districts and the costs of the shared arrangement.

Although all school administrators must address significant budget problems, school leaders in the three rural communities feel that recent state budget cuts and the current state funding formula puts more stress on rural school districts. A decline in enrollment or a small state budget cut can have negative ripple effects throughout the district. Many rural districts and communities have fewer resources to address the problems that plague our society: breakdown of traditional family structure, low income levels, and drugs and alcohol. One district has been able to place a police officer in the building through a DARE grant which has seen positive benefits; but whether the program will continue beyond the life of the grant is unknown. One

principal described how a high school student needed an at-risk or alternative placement but, due to the district's relative isolation, none was accessible. Thus, she said, "Our hands are tied."

Each school district recognized that pressure from the state to reorganize and merge with other districts was a possibility. In fact, Iowa Governor Vilsack in his 2003 Condition of the State Address called for incentives to encourage collaboration and consolidation between smaller districts. (Office of Governor, 2003). The passage of the district's bond vote and the remodeling and building taking place in the districts, indirectly, could benefit the districts if mergers occur in the future.

Students are keenly aware of the financial problems that their schools are facing, and they are aware that a formal sharing with neighboring districts or even a merger with a nearby town are options. Although most students admit that they hope their own children will go to a larger school than they are attending now for the great opportunities, they have a deep concern about merging with another school district while they are still high school students. One student even began crying as she shared her thoughts and reluctance to merge with a neighboring district when the interviewers raised the issue.

Probably the most common negative comment about the schools heard from adults interviewed, whether they were teachers, non-certified staff, or community members, was the lack of respect shown by the students. Long-time staff and community members generally lamented that the students currently had less respect for the building, teachers, and for education in general. Sometimes this lack of respect was attributed to the students' parents or to society in general, but many adults could relate stories that demonstrated to them this lack of respect.

How do the perceptions of the Iowa rural school compare to the perceptions of the urban/suburban California schools in the original research performed by the Claremont researchers? The Claremont study identified seven issues effecting schools according to the people interviewed. These issues were (a) relationships; (b) race, culture, and class; (c) values; (d) teaching and learning; (e) safety; (f) physical environment; and (g) despair, hope and the process of change.

Comparison between Claremont study and Iowa study

The issues that were recognized in the Claremont study and the issues recognized in the rural Iowa study were similar in a few areas. Relationships were a central issue brought out in both studies; however, the participants in the Claremont study generally found the nature of the relationships within the school to be negative. The large size and the wide diversity of the student populations were seen as contributing to the weak relationships that existed between the teachers and the students and between students in the Claremont study (Institute for Education in Transformation at the Claremont Graduate School [IET], 1992, p.13).

Conversely, the participants in the rural Iowa study found the relationships within the school to be generally

positive. Teachers felt that student respect had declined in the past few years, but the overall atmosphere of the schools was positive and the size of the schools contributed to the greater individual attention the students received from the faculty. It is interesting to note that the researchers in the rural Iowa study often found overall acceptance of students in their home school district, but the students had suspicions and negative views of students in neighboring districts. One student explained, "They're (students in neighboring district) kinda skuzzy." "You can tell a (community name) person when you see one. I can, anyway."

Both studies found that the participants were aware of the physical environment and the shortcomings of the school facilities. The Claremont study found the buildings generally had a lack of upkeep and were unattractive (IET, 1992, p.16). Within the Iowa study all three districts had recently passed bond issues and were at various stages of a building project that would address some of these building concerns.

Teaching and learning were also issues that came up in both studies. The Claremont study found a standardized curriculum and instruction that did little to motivate the students (IET, 1992, p.15). The rural Iowa study raised concerns about the breadth of the curriculum. The quality of the teaching was an issue with some students, but generally the students felt academically prepared for college. Many parents whose children had already graduated from the school district and had gone on to college were satisfied with the preparation their children had received at the schools. Clearly, the administrators were trying to find ways to offer a broader curriculum by relying on technology to meet this need or by pursuing cooperative efforts with neighboring districts.

Two issues not raised by participants in the rural Iowa study were racism, culture and class; and safety. In the Claremont study, the community and school was made up of a wide diversity of races, cultures, and classes. Many students perceived racism and prejudice within the staff and curriculum (IET, 1992, p.13). This issue had implications for many other areas. Safety was also a major concern as many of the participants saw the schools as unsafe. Fear of violence and the presence of verbal harassment between students were prevalent (IET, 1992, p.15).

As noted, the racial and ethnic makeup of rural Iowa is extremely homogeneous resulting in few racial and cultural tensions. Students perceive themselves as welcoming newcomers into their schools, although the researchers did not have the opportunity to visit with any students who had recently moved into one of the districts. This is an area open for further research. Recent media attention on the tragedy at Columbine and other school shootings made the students realize that such an event could happen in their school. But no one in the three Iowa rural districts expressed a fear about daily attendance at school or indicated that a particular group at their school intimidated them.

The original Claremont study identified a general feeling of hopelessness being expressed by the participants. Although they expressed a hope that things would get better and a willingness to be part of an effort to improve, a sense of despair was evident (IET, 1992, p.16). The Iowa study

found the opposite feeling. Generally, the participants were pleased with the education system and had positive opinions about what was going on in the school buildings and the quality of education the students were receiving. Future decisions about consolidation with neighboring school districts were a certainty. The smallness found in the rural districts contributed to an educational community that often provided the individual attention, the connection to parents, and caring relationships between students and between students and teachers that many of the participants in the original Claremont research desired.

Conclusion

In comparing the Claremont College study and the Iowa rural school study, the irony is apparent. The Claremont College study of urban and suburban schools found a general sense of hopelessness towards their education system caused by a lack of real relationship between students and teachers, a sense of prejudice by the teachers and staff, characterized by boring teaching and curriculum. Schools in the Claremont study were not pleasant environments and students and teachers feared for their safety. The participants wanted to be hopeful for the future but were uncertain that real change would occur.

The Iowa study found the three rural schools were safe and friendly environments. This small size allowed for close relationships between students and between teachers and students. The education the students were provided was generally perceived as preparing them for the next phase of their lives.

Clearly, however, all was not idyllic in the Iowa rural schools that were studied. Shrinking budgets, decreasing student populations, attracting and retaining quality teachers, and addressing the problems of our culture and society with limited community resources are real problems facing the Iowa rural schools. While the schools in the Claremont study hope for change that might address the issues they are facing, the rural schools in the Iowa study hope that the changes that they may be forced to deal with in the future will not undermine the education system that they have and that so many other parts of the country can only dream about.

The Claremont study and the Iowa rural schools study reveal two very different realities about education. The Claremont Study concluded that the current policies and proposed solutions in the early 1990's only addressed surface problems and did not address the deeper issues as identified in the seven areas. The Iowa rural schools study raises a similar concern. Will the current push for larger, more efficient schools and the demands of No Child Left Behind undermine the education occurring in rural schools?

Both studies raise the question whether current policies and practices are addressing the issues within two wholly different realities of American education. If current policies fail to address the major challenges faced by both urban and rural schools, the two settings may actually have more in common than previously thought.

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