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Picturing Rural America: An Analysis of the Representation of Contemporary Rural America in Picture Books for Children

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A quiet but persistent dialog about the importance of place is happening in educational research. This study contributes to that conversation by offering a critical analysis of how picture books show a “placed,” rural America. To increase understanding of the social constructions of rurality, 24 picture books were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to determine how contemporary rural life is represented in picture books for children. Results indicated images falling into six categories: Rural people are self-reliant; rural people are connected; rural people are satisfied and happy; rural people are diverse; rural areas are expendable and, rural people are ‘Other’.

Key words: Picture books; children’s literature; representation; semiotics; contemporary rural life.

Children’s literature portrays particular aspects of reality and the human condition (Serafini, 2004), offering children insights into worlds like and unlike their own. Picture books that portray rural America represent a tiny fraction of picture books published each year, yet 30 percent of school-aged children live in rural America (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009, n.p.). At the very least, this statistic points to a disconnect between the imagined audience for picture books and the actual context in which a significant percentage of their readers live. A report by The Rural School and Community Trust (2009) indicates that although the children of rural America are “widely dispersed, and richly diverse in many ways, these students are largely invisible, ignored in educational research, overlooked in state and national policies, and sometimes caricatured as backward or worse” (n.p.). Rural representation in picture books is a decidedly smaller domain than policy or educational research, but one that is perhaps equally relevant in the everyday life of a child. Countering a general preoccupation with all things urban (Johnson & Strange, 2005), this qualitative visual content analysis of contemporary rural America in picture books adds to understanding about the social construction of rurality. The choice of the picture book genre is important because the texts contribute to children’s understandings of place and what it might mean to be rural.

The Genre of Picture Books

Nodelman (1998), in Words About Pictures, the seminal text about the picture book genre, defines picture books as “books intended for young children which communicate information or tell stories through a series of many pictures combined with relatively slight texts or no texts at all” (p. vii). They are written for children and thus are short texts compared to novels or juvenile literature. The text is often, but not always, succinct and undetailed (Nodelman, 1988). Picture books ranked in the top ten on Publisher’s Weekly most recent list of all-time bestselling children’s books include The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Green Eggs and Ham, and Pat the Bunny (Roback, Brittan & Hochman-Turvey, 2001). The illustrations in such picture books function differently than pictures hanging on a gallery wall. Print and pictures are combined, working together to tell the story (Nodelman, 1988), and often the pictures assume more than a supporting role in the narrative. The illustrations confirm and make more specific both the print and the other pictures in the book; they explain and clarify words, and not only take up most of the space in a picture book, but also bear the burden of conveying most of the meaning (Nodelman, 1988). The picture book’s reliance on visual information makes the genre somewhat of a literary anomaly. The setting of a picture book, included in what Nodelman calls “the way things look” (p. 202) is most often portrayed visually, rather than in the prose. The setting also establishes what Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) describe as a “pervasive affective climate” (p. 61), such as a sense of nostalgia that orients readers’ emotional responses. The amount of visual support offered in books for children is directly proportional to the age of the intended audience. Younger readers are often the intended audience for picture books because typically, the visual information in picture books offers more support than texts with fewer pictures (Nodelman, 1998).

Picture books are common in early elementary classrooms: The benefits of reading aloud to children are well-established in language and literacy education research (Beauchat, Blamey, & Walpole, 2009: Fisher, Flood, Lapp & Frey, 2004; Hickman, Pollard-Durodola, & Vaughn, 2004). In addition, picture books are frequently used more directly for reading instruction
(Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Thompkins, 2011).

In response to the whole language movement of the 1980s, adapted versions of picture books frequently appear in commercial reading materials (see Goodman, 1988; Goodman, Maras, & Birdseye, 1994; Hade, 1994; Shannon & Goodman, 1994). Commercial reading programs, often called basal readers or core reading programs, include abridged versions or full texts of children’s literature grouped in grade-specific reading anthologies (Goodman, Maras, & Birdseye, 1994; Hade, 1994; Shannon & Goodman, 1994). These reading anthologies include previously published picture books in their entirety or re-formatted and abridged versions, and are used as the main reading instructional material in many school districts across the country (Faison & Ruetzel, 2000; Kersten, Apol, & Pataray-Ching, 2007).

We know that literature has the power to bridge the known to the unknown (Marshall, 1998), can work in support of an anti-bias curriculum (Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Harris, 1997), and can be an impetus for social justice. Equally important, is the knowledge that literature also validates children’s identity and knowledge of self (Agbaw, 2008; Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd, 2001). Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001), writing about African American children’s literature, ask “What if you can’t find yourself?” (p. 810).

The notion that the texts with which children interact influence their views of themselves and others is not new territory in the study of children’s literature. Scholars of children’s literature have analyzed the portrayal of Native Americans (Lewis, 1987; Roberts, Dean & Holland, 2005), the portrayal of African Americans (Agbaw, 2008; Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Hughes, Barkley & Koehler, 2010), and gendered images (LaDow, 1976; Peterson & Lach, 1990) in children’s literature in an effort to understand the representation of marginalized groups. The printed texts of childhood are powerful sources of information, both positive and negative, that readers use to inform and revise their understanding of the world and themselves (Fleckenstein, 2002). The images we see, in printed texts and elsewhere, not only structure our worlds, but also position us in our worlds (Fleckenstein, 2002).

Children’s literature is uniquely powerful in that the most revered texts, such as Winnie the Pooh or the Little House on the Prairie books, “become assimilated into the ongoing development of discourses as they are re-read by subsequent generations” (Jones, 1997, p. 160). The visual images that we see become a part of us, anchoring us to our identity and our place in reality (Fleckenstein, 2002). The images we see structure our perspective of and relationship to rural life (Bell, 2000).

These images are not always complimentary and sometimes show whatDonehower (2007) characterizes as extreme deficiency, for example, “illiterate hillbillies” and “ignorant rednecks” (p. 37). Appalachian writer Gurney Norman claims that “hillbillies” are the last group it is acceptable to ridicule (Billings, 1999, p. 9). As adult readers of these books, we present them to children because we approve or at least are comfortable with the values and images they contain. Both the writing and sharing of the books work to reinforce their messages for the children and adults who engage with them. The result is a contribution to a cycle of socially acquired knowledge about what it means, and does not mean, to be rural.

Bell (2000) argues that stereotypical representations should not be dismissed because decoding them helps us understand more about the ways we construct the world around us and how “we” are constructed by others. Bakhtin (1981) observes that learners’ “struggles” with discourses of others are enormous important (p. 348). Though Bell does not use the term, he is advocating reading the texts from a critical stance. Critical literacy means approaching texts with the awareness that they are not neutral. Power relationships and identities are reinforced and contested in text and their interpretation is open. Reading from a critical stance means that readers question how events and people are created in texts (See Christensen, 1999 for examples). Both the complex act of critical deconstruction where readers begin “to see how we see things” and the consequences of the new understandings, are difficult (Jones, 1997, p. 158).

The study explores the following set of questions: How is rural life constituted in picture books? What elements of rural life do the authors reinforce? In what way do the texts caricaturize rural residents? The analysis engages poststructural ideas about discourse, representation and text.

**Poststructural Concepts**

Poststructuralism, according to Davies (2000), “open(s) up discourses and practices to questioning” (p. 169) and provides strategies to interrogate what might be considered common sense discourses and practices. Discourse in poststructural theory is similar to ideology in that both are ways of making sense of the world (Davies, 2003). In the Foucauldian sense, discourses are bodies of knowledge (McHoul & Grace, 2002) through which we understand and express meaning. The language and language-like communication system of a group (Davies, 2000), such as ‘rural’ or ‘teacher’, is discourse; everyone has membership in multiple discourses (Davies, 2000). One discourse about rural people, for example, includes ideas about the passivity of rural citizens. Billings, Norman & Ledford (1999) offer stories about activism in Appalachia that counteract this discourse. A portion of their edited volume highlights a rural tradition of grassroots efforts to improve and maintain rural life by actively resisting political and economic repression. Another “commonsense” view or discourse about rural life is that Appalachia is isolated and homogenous (Lewis, 1999).
Any text, this analysis included, is both authored and interpreted from a “situated interpretation” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 101) based on one’s multiple discourses. The text of this analysis is authored from the perspective of a lifelong rural resident who has used poststructural and critical theories to consider the complexity of rural life and its representation (see Epplcy, 2007). In the Derridean sense, all texts are ambiguous and invite multiple rather than one conclusive interpretation. Within this view, no text is neutral, and interpretation is value-laden. Texts are not only created within discourses but also actively position readers within discourses. The books in this study define rural in particular ways and the analysis is based on the premise that their defining of rural is neither accidental nor neutral. Semiotics assert that even the most literal representation is not literal at all because our social context informs the meaning we make from the representation (Barthes, 1985). Our social context and cultural experiences, then, dictate the sense we make from text, but this relationship is dialogic in that what we read influences our other meaning-making. In Bakhtinian terms, the reader/text dialogue, “leaves its imprint on both the reader and text, and that dialogically contributes to others’ readings and uses of language and the construction of other texts and utterances across time/spaces” (Dressman, 2004, p. 43).

Method

The methodology used was qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). Although content analysis is more often quantitative than qualitative, quantification is not a “defining criterion” for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 87). A qualitative content analysis of the visual images in the books was especially appropriate for this study for two reasons. The categories derived from a qualitative analysis can include either explicit or inferred information (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Because of the rather “slippery” nature of the concepts being analyzed and the small sample size, this approach was a necessity in this study. Subjective judgment was necessary because visual representations of a construct such as “rural” cannot be quantified and still retain a meaningful whole. Additionally, conventional qualitative content analysis, where coding categories are derived from the data, is appropriate for new lines of inquiry such as this one because there are no preconceived categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) from existing research to color the analysis.

The Sample

A list of potential titles was generated using a variety of strategies and sources: Internet and university library catalog searches, a post to a children’s literature listserv, recommendations from colleagues, book store browsing, and the author’s personal knowledge of children’s literature. Because the intent of the analysis was to analyze the portrayal of contemporary rural American life being lived by child readers today, scores of books with historical settings were excluded. Subjective judgment was required to determine which texts counted as contemporary. “Contemporary” meant modern life in general, rather than a particular span of dates, but many of the books appear to take place in the 1980s. Defining contemporary in this way was also compatible with the author’s own identity as a contemporary rural resident. If the setting of the book depicted a rural life as lived by contemporary children, it was included. Most books were set clearly in either historical or contemporary time; automobiles and clothing were frequent indicators. For example, a text by Patricia McLaughlin, What You Know First (1995), was excluded because a Model-T Ford dates the story. What remained was a small pool of 24 texts that were either clearly contemporary, such as The Chicken Chasing Queen of Lamar County (Harrington, 2007), borderline, such as Prairie Town (Geisert, 1998), or nondescript such as Old Henry (Blos, 1987).

To maintain an adequate sample and accommodate the varying definitions of what counts as rural, qualifying portrayals of rural life were not strictly defined. Judgments about what could be a portrayal of rural life were generous and based on the author’s own identification as a lifelong rural resident. Open space was the clearest indicator, but there were exceptions. Old Henry (Blos, 1987) shows what appears to be a rural village, even though the residents form a “committee” and tell Old Henry to clean up because, “We are proud of our city” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). “Committee” and “city” work within the rhyming scheme of the story, and so, because there are no other indications that the book is set in a city, the book was included in the sample. Outdoor scenes usually offered clear signals about the setting of the book. It was easier to determine if the books had a rural setting (or not) than it was to determine if they were contemporary (or not) because characters were often shown outdoors. Although only four of 24 books were authored by African American writers and showed rural African American children, an eye was kept to diversity during the sampling process. Because the analysis concerns the representation of children in rural America, picture books that depict animals as characters were excluded. Books based on childhood memories of Canadian authors such as If You’re Not from the Prairies (Bouchard, 1993) were also excluded, as were alphabet books such as S is for Sooner: An Oklahoma Alphabet

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1 See list of cited children’s literature in the bibliography.
Banks (2001) notes the importance of differentiating between the form and content in the analysis of visual data. The analyzed images are in the “form” of picture book illustrations, while the “content” is the depiction of objects, characters, activities, and places. Banks refers to the content of the images as constituting an “internal narrative” (p. 44). While this study analyzes the internal narrative of the books, that is the content, the findings are contextualized within “external narratives” (Banks, 2001, p. 44) about rural life in contemporary America.

Data Analysis

As suggested by Tesch (1990), data analysis began with repeated readings of the data pool to get a sense of what remained after the exclusions. The overarching question kept in mind during the initial reading was *What does it mean to be rural?* Because pictures and print work closely together in picture books (Nodelman, 1998), while the words of the story cannot be ignored, particular attention was paid to the pictures in each book. After and during the repeated readings, notes were made about each title related to how objects, characters, activities, and places were depicted. The initial notes were early codes; related codes were then grouped into larger categories. Most books were represented in multiple categories. Characterizations of rural life not common to several other books were discarded or subsumed within a larger category. The coding categories were open in the sense that they were not identified in advance, but were derived through the process of analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) characterize this type of qualitative content analysis as conventional. In other words, this was not a process of identifying data to validate or disprove a theory about the representation of rural American. While the data analysis was linear, especially early in the process, it was often recursive, too. Numerous repetitions of each step led to new insights and clarification of the themes. The exemplars used in the findings and discussion were titles that offered particularly clear examples of a code such as “slovenly appearance” or category such as “rural as Other”.

Findings

The representations of rural life in the books were grouped into six major categories: the number of incidences appears in brackets after the category: (a) *Rural people are self-reliant* (11); (b) *Rural people are connected* (18); (c) *Rural people are satisfied and happy* (22); (d) *Rural people are diverse* (5); (e) *Rural areas are expendable* (2); (f) *Rural people are depicted as ‘other’* (8). The small sample size confirms the relative invisibility of rural America (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2009, n.p.) in children’s literature.

**Rural people are Self-reliant**

In roughly half the books, rural characters display self-reliance and a positive work ethic. Instead of purchasing goods and services, they frequently produce agricultural products for others to buy or operate a small business, such as the junkyard in *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997). They demonstrate self-sufficiency in ways that allow them to consume less frequently by vacationing at home, heating with firewood, collaborating with neighbors on construction projects, gardening, and making their own toys and found art. Nonna’s grandson who visits from the city in *Everything is Different at Nonna’s House* observes, “We don’t get flowers at the corner shop. They grow right outside the kitchen door” (Cohen, 2003, n.p.). In *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992), it is not the community as a whole that demonstrates self-reliance, but rather the individual. Indeed, the reader wonders if his community has not deserted the Paper Bag Prince who subsists entirely on the town’s garbage. He rejects electricity and lives in the town dump.

Rural communities as a whole also exhibit self-reliance by taking care of their own needs. Every page of *Prairie Town* (Geisert, 1998) shows townspeople completing various outdoor tasks together. In *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005), the main character, Darrell, plows 21 driveways, gives a neighbor wood for heat “to keep those kids warm,” excavates the neighbor’s foundation, puts in a pond for a child, and approaches neighbors to ask what they need for winter. In turn, the neighbors reroof Darrell’s barn without being asked. The reciprocity between Darrell and his neighbors enables them to live independent of outside assistance. When one family needed assistance with heating, it was a community member who assisted, rather than a social service program.

Images of outdoor manual labor were very common, suggesting a specific kind of self-reliance. Rural people were not seen carrying briefcases, doing paperwork, or using technology. Images of reading were limited to one instance of newspaper reading in *Auction* (Seymour, 2005). Traveling to and from construction jobs in pick-up trucks was common, as was engaging in work around the farm or home. Women typically completed indoor work consisting of washing dishes by hand or cooking. The rural characters rake, garden, repair broken items such as fences and toys, paint, farm, hang laundry out to dry, work on construction projects, and do auto repair. One character who owns his own business quips, “Ain’t nobody that don’t need a mechanic” (Borton, 1997, n.p.).
Rural People are Connected

Fifteen out of the 24 books in the sample clearly demonstrated positive family relationships. Shared meals were overwhelmingly common, suggesting wholesome, safe, and nurturing rural family environments. Relatives of all ages talked, hugged, walked, slept, worked, explored, vacationed, and played together. Seven of the 15 books depicting positive family relationships displayed explicit efforts to strengthen intergenerational ties. In five of the books, storytelling was the tie between grandchild and grandparent. Grandparents offered life lessons and shared particular places and activities that were significant in their own childhoods. The Auction (Andrews, 2007) tells of how a grandfather and grandson use storytelling to cope with the loss of the family farm. While the child in The Auction (Andrews, 2007) will not be able to realize his dream of becoming a farmer like his grandfather, supporting a young child’s efforts to participate in farm work was a common activity in the books.

Rural people are also connected to nature. The rural characters in the book were often explicitly connected to the outdoors. The nature of the work rural people do is highly seasonal, but almost all of the books take place in the summer. Time is frequently measured explicitly by the sun and moon, and characters often comment on, and are outside under, the night sky. Sometimes the connection is more intentional. In Grandpa and Bo (Henkes, 2002), for example, Grandpa teaches Bo the names of multiple plants and animals. Prairie Town (Geisert, 1998) is organized seasonally, and the length of the vacation in The Relatives Came (Rylant, 1993) is measured by the amount of time it takes a grape crop to ripen. The depth of The Paper Bag Prince’s (Thompson, 1992) connection to his land is such that it presents as mental illness.

Rural People are Satisfied and Happy

In all but two of the books, The Paper Bag Prince (Thompson, 1992) and The Auction (Andrews, 2007), rural people appear satisfied and happy, regardless if they are living in poverty or lead uneventful lives: “Exciting things don’t happen very often in Crabtree County” (Nolan, 2003, n.p.). The plots of six books are based on vacations to the country, often to visit elderly relatives. Rural life is romanticized, evidenced by the noticeable lack of tension in most of the stories, the repeated references to quiet and the slow pace, the bright colors used in the illustrations, and the pastoral scenery. Sensory details are prevalent and interior scenes are appealing and often depict family mealtimes. Even when the books appear to be depicting poverty, such as The Relatives Came (Rylant, 1993) and Junk Pile (Borton, 1997), it is not offered to the reader as germane to the story.

Rural People are Diverse

Diversity was limited not only to race, but conceptualized broadly to include other markers of difference. Just three of the books depict rural African Americans; all other characters are Caucasian. However, other differences within rural communities are shown, contradicting a commonly held misconception of the homogeneity of rural communities (Lewis, 1999). Difference in aesthetics and class, for example, is offered in Junk Pile (Borton, 1997) and Old Henry (1987). Robert, in Junk Pile, “just moved into the big house on the ridge” (Borton, 1997, n.p.) and teases Jamie Kay because of the junk in her yard. Similarly, Henry’s adult neighbors in Old Henry (Blos, 1987) object to the rundown condition of his rented home. They confront him, demanding that he maintain a neater yard that meets the neighbors’ standards. He initially resists, but unlike Jane Yolen (1995) details the effects of the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir on a number of small towns in western Massachusetts. The story is told from the point of view of a former resident who returns home to reflect on the changes to her growing-up place. Finally, The Paper Bag Prince (Thompson, 1992) offers readers insight into how an individual’s property rights can be usurped for governmental interest and alludes to the use of rural areas as toxic waste depositories.

Rural Areas are Expendable

While only two of the books explored the expendability of rural spaces, it is a significant theme that reflects current struggles in many rural communities and thus bears mentioning. Neither text in the sample suggests that the citizens resisted the government-initiated changes to their community. In Letting Swift River Go, Jane Yolen (1995) details the effects of the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir on a number of small towns in western Massachusetts. The story is told from the point of view of a former resident who returns home to reflect on the changes to her growing-up place. Finally, The Paper Bag Prince (Thompson, 1992) offers readers insight into how an individual’s property rights can be usurped for governmental interest and alludes to the use of rural areas as toxic waste depositories.

Rural People are Depicted as Other

One-third of the total sample fell into the category in which rural people were depicted as other. These books were grouped together not only because of messages about aesthetics and poverty, but also because the characters exhibited a variety of what could be considered atypical or stereotypical behaviors. Sometimes this presented as “hillbillie” imagery.

Three books: The Relatives Came (Rylant, 1993), The Paper Bag Prince (Thompson, 1992), and Junk Pile (Borton, 1997) depict rural people as slovenly or unkept. Characters wear ill-fitting, dirty, or tattered clothing. Consistent with such a depiction of rural people, a segment of books focused with varying detail on the “un-suburban like” condition of the homes and outbuildings. Exterior spaces are shown replete with
broken down cars, cluttered yards, half-completed construction projects, and houses in various states of disrepair. Two notable characters, both older men, choose to live in stereotypically “junky” surroundings. Of the books that depicted poverty, only one, *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) does so without stereotypical representations.

Four of the books explicitly depict rural people as dim-witted or, in some texts, mentally ill. The rural residents in *The Lizard Man of Crabtree County* (Nolan, 2003) mistake flipper tracks for monster tracks, a dog howling for monster wailings, and a pool toy for a monster. In a much darker book, the 69-year-old male, paper bag collecting main character from *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992) refused to leave his land after a forced sale to the city. The city purchased his property for a new town dump, but the Paper Bag Prince does not leave. In suit and tie, he scavenges and hoards: 12 wardrobes full of paper bags, 19 television sets, and 87 odd shoes. The book reinstates the discourse of rural residents as victimized by outside interests. In another book, *Old Henry* rents a dilapidated home, choosing not to “live like the rest of them, neat and the same” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). He lives in his dirty, falling-down house, “With enough money to pay the rent, his books, and cooking pots, he was content and never did notice (or else didn’t care) that people whispered everywhere: ‘That place is a disgrace’” (Blos, 1987, n.p.). Old Henry is eventually run out town for his refusal to conform, but later asks the neighbors if he can return. The book never tells why the neighbors felt Old Henry, rather than the landlord, should be responsible for fixing up the house.

*Auction* by Tres Seymour (2005) portrays a family’s experience at a country auction. The author attempts to portray the country auction as the unique part of rural culture that it is and for this he should be commended. The book captures the fun of making an impulsive purchase and the pleasure of outbidding competitors. More importantly, Seymour represents the country auction as an important site of interaction in this rural community. These positive aspects of the text, however, are overshadowed by its garish portrayal of rural people as “hillbillies”. While the characters’ appearances are slightly odd, with ruddy red complexion and similar to Li’l Abner, and clad in ill-fitting, homemade clothes, it is the enthusiasm with which they bid on junk that is offensive. The objects that they purchase at the auction not only appear to be worthless, if not broken (“a guitar with no strings”), but are stereotypical icons of rural life: a washtub, potbelly stove, a “ragged old” cowboy hat, stuffed groundhog (sold for $175), an old saddle, plastic flowers, and deer antlers. While an estate auction is a great place to find unique or interesting items at bargain prices, the message here is that these rural people either lack the commonsense to know junk when they see it, or lack impulse control and adult judgment about money management. Despite the positive aspects of the book, the result is a parody of the country auction and a missed opportunity to candidly represent this element of rural life.

**Discussion**

The last category, *Rural People as Other*, is the most negative and thus additional contextualization is required. Clearly the books in this category present stereotypical ideas about rural people and their lives. Because of this, it might be tempting to simply avoid them. However, these books in particular invite opportunities for children to interact critically with the texts. Depictions of rural people as slovenly or unkempt such as *The Relatives Came* (Rylant, 1993), *The Paper Bag Prince* (Thompson, 1992), and *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) invite critical discussions about assumptions regarding the relationship between appearance and poverty. For example, the automotive “junk” in Jamie’s yard in *Junk Pile* (Borton, 1997) initially is a source of ridicule from a more prosperous peer, Robert. However, after Jamie is given the opportunity to demonstrate her specialized automotive knowledge, Robert understands that the “junk” is useful for auto repair, art material, and imaginative play. Borton offers readers an opportunity to re-think the presence of “junk” in the yards of rural homes like Jamie’s. Further, Jamie herself is cast not as a “hillbillie” or “ignorant redneck” (Donehower, 2007, p. 37), but rather as smart, artistic, and forgiving.

Critical reading of these books is not simply an act of defensiveness, but one of political participation because the images affect both commonsense behavior and rural policy actions (Eller, 1999). In the hands of a skilled teacher or parent, the texts in this category can be useful tools to interrogate the construction of rural life. Together, children and adults can analyze the variety of discourses around rural life offered in the texts, consider their own acceptance or refusal of the messages, and begin to explore the political consequences of the representations.

Would it be better, however, if books set in contemporary rural America depicted a more flattering vision of rural life using imagery that reinforces long-standing ideas about the rural idyll? Such a portrayal might avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and casting rural American as a site of deficiency. Relying exclusively on images of the rural idyll, however, may instead replace one platitude with another, and also result in an incomplete representation of rural life that reinforces political and cultural tendencies to ‘otherize’ or ignore rural life and people. Thus, there is a tension between reinforcing negative caricatures of rural life and relying on more comfortable, but equally inaccurate fantasies or childhood memories. Books such as *Here Comes Darrell* (Schubert, 2005) and *Down the Winding Road* (Johnson,
2000) that achieved a balance between these two positions did so with careful, current and sensitive portrayals of the complexity of rural American life.

Seeing Yourself and the Other: Representation of Rural America

Recall that The Rural School and Community Trust (2009) state that the children of rural America are widely dispersed and richly diverse, but also invisible, and sometimes, caricatured as backward or worse. While picture books showing the romanticized past of rural America are numerous, contemporary rural America is too often invisible or caricatured. While there are a few books that portray rural America with respectful authenticity, the sample as a whole echoes a general confusion and naïveté about rural America.

One of few characteristics common across the sample was the clear delineation of a rural setting. While scholars of rural educational research vigorously debate what counts as rural, rural settings are easily identifiable in the books. Two books are set in Appalachia: Junk Pile (Borton, 1997) and The Relatives Came (1993). Quaint villages or open farmland signal the rural settings in the remaining 22 books and there is no ambiguity between these categories. The settings do not reflect the reality of a "widely dispersed" (Rural School and Community Trust, 2009, n.p.) rural America. While the books as a whole reinstate a variety of discourses about what it means to live a rural life, the physical settings in which the characters live are noticeably homogenous and heavily reliant on the adult-created rural idyll. The books insist that rural is a small, specific, and homogenous context. Although the assumption must be that the uniform and romanticized settings of the books were drafted with the intent to construct a positive portrait of rural life (because, generally, they do), the reliance on the rural idyll has the unintended consequence of reinforcing ideas of rural America as separate from mainstream America. Who identifies with the rurality presented in these texts? "Fiction captures an author’s version of what really is, what used to be, and what ought to be" (Agbaw, 2008, p. 4). The author’s descriptions are not random, but reflect assumptions constructed socially from observation and discussion (Nodelman, 1992).

A clear majority of the books positively reflect rural life. Readers learn that rural people are happy and content, that their lives, by and large, are devoid of complications and challenges. The books do not hint at the need for any support from research or governmental policy. The theme of self-reliance is contradictory in that it does perpetuate stereotypical ideas about the rugged individualism and independence of this “other” America, but at the same time, self-reliance is an authentic attribute worth celebrating. When problems exist in the rural communities of the books, residents take care of them (and each other) independently, do not notice their circumstances, or adapt out of necessity. This contrasts to well-known picture books that deal directly with urban poverty such as We’re all in the Dumps with Jack and Guy by Maurice Sendak (1993), Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting (1993), and Something Beautiful by Sharon Dennis Wyeth (2002). In books like these, urban environments are presented as places imperfect and complex, where citizens are hopeful and committed to social and economic progress. Urban citizens are portrayed as people who resist the influence of outside forces on their community (see for example DiSalvo-Ryan, 2000) and work actively to improve their living conditions (see for example DiSalvo-Ryan, 2001). None of the rural books analyzed made similar overtly political statements about their rural communities.

Representation of the Rural Idyll

In addition to the representation of self-reliance in the books, other tensions exist among the range of potential stories that picture books might tell readers about rural life, for example, stories that revolve around notions of the rural idyll depict rural life in ways that are often positive, comfortable, and familiar. Within this view, rural America is a treasured, but “other” America. Life is simpler here. Problems are few. Books that contrast urban and rural life, such as Everything is Different at Nonna’s House (Cohen, 2003), often quite directly tell readers that rural America is a separate, perhaps better, America. Yet another story about rural America turns on “hillbilly” imagery. If we think of the representation of rural America as a continuum, such books fall on the end opposite to the rural idyll. Within the rural people as hillbillies discourse, complex social and political issues are reduced to “personality traits and cultural quirks” (Eller, 1999, p. x). In these books, rural people are more than just characters in the literary sense; rather they are characterizations of strange others. The mainstream populace benefits from the construction of rural in these books because it is absolved of any responsibility to attend to the problems in rural communities. It is easy ignore rural because it is a small and specific (and sometimes quite odd) population and because it either has no problems or does not notice those that are present.

Few books fall in the middle of the continuum, where rural America is neither idyllic nor caricatured. These texts resist representing rural America as a relic of an imaginary and romantic past, but depict it rather as a place that is dynamic, imperfect, diverse, and worthy of authenticity. There are far too few exemplary books. In the hands of a caring adult, these books offer rural children opportunities to make decisions both about their representation in text and how they wish to live in together in their rural communities. Some representations they may choose to discard; others they might build upon.
But, most importantly, children’s literature needs to provide models of successful predecessors. Stories of individual and organized efforts for change, such as those detailed by Billings, Norman & Ledford (1999), for example, are non-existent in children’s literature. The nostalgic lens through which rural communities are most frequently portrayed in picture books is comforting and familiar, but unhelpful. A quiet but persistent dialog about the importance of place is happening in educational research. This study contributes to that conversation by offering a critical analysis of how one group of picture books show a placed rural America. It invites readers to interact with texts critically and seek out others in which rural America is represented in ways that are recognizable and complex.

### Cited Children’s Literature


### References


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Who Ya Gonna Call?
Networks of Rural School Administrators

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When they need help or advice, who are rural school administrators going to call? Relationships among rural school administrators develop into networks that can affect the success of administrators and their schools. Understanding the structure and content of these networks provides insights into how resources, innovations, and communication flow both within and between rural district administrators. Based on network theory and analysis, this study examines the structure, content, and strategic implications of the administrative networks within and across six contiguous rural school districts in the Western United States. Network graphs are included, illustrating both individual district and the combined six-district rural administrator networks. While acquaintance ties and active work ties are evident both within and across districts, relationally embedded ties and greater cohesion of ties are more evident within districts than across districts. Analyses include consideration of administrative assignment, gender, and geographical location of the network structures. Strategic implications of the network structures and content are discussed.

Key Words: Administrative networks, leadership, resources, network theory, school performance

Professional and social network relationships among administrators develop into structures that can affect the success of both administrators and their schools (J. M. Hite, Williams, & Baugh, 2005; Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleeters, in press). Understanding these networks can provide a beneficial perspective on the complexity within which educational leaders must function (Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). Educational leaders intuitively understand the importance of building and maintaining their networks. While many network relationships are formalized in official organizational charts, the majority and often the most commonly used and useful are likely to be intangible and informal, based on the leaders’ social networks (Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Ibarra, 1992; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993).

Educational administrators may not be aware of the potentially critical role such informal administrative network relationships often play in their work toward improving schools. They are even less likely to be cognizant of the larger network structure created when these relationships are combined, or of their own structural positions within this administrative network (Snow, Miles, & Coleman, 1992). Naturally and functionally, leaders in rural education place focus on developing network relationships within their own districts and communities (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). This administrative focus on the internal district network, without a sufficient focus on building broader networks of cross-district relationships, may be both of particular strategic interest as well as of potential concern for rural school districts (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Budge, 2006; J. M. Hite, et al., 2005). With only a few administrators and thus greater need for cross-district collaboration to access information, capabilities, and resources for effective school performance (Awalt & Jolly, 1999), rural administrators may find it to their advantage to understand how to create or enhance cross-district administrative networks. This study examines the structure and content of administrative networks both within and across six rural school districts and identifies potential strategic implications of these relationships among rural school administrators.
Theoretical Framework

The study of organizational networks focuses on the interpersonal and professional relationships and structures of organizations such as schools or districts. Network methods identify these network structures, and network theory seeks to explain both the influences on and strategic outcomes of these networks (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Scott, 2000). For example, in the context of rural education, network analysis can focus on the structure of administrator relationships within a school district or between school districts. By identifying these structures, network theory can explain potential strategic outcomes in terms of school performance and student learning.

Network Structure

The relationship between two rural school administrators creates a dyadic link or tie between them: For example, the relationship between David and Charles is such a tie. David, a rural elementary school principal, has a good friend he can always call: Charles, a vice principal at a nearby high school. David and Charles went to high school together many years ago at the high school where Charles is now vice principal. They are currently next door neighbors, and their children play on the same soccer teams. They were both teachers at the elementary school where David, who is now the principal, was the 5th grade teacher for Charles’s son. However, on the organizational chart, no formal connection or functional integration exists between their present administrative assignments.

Ties can exist between administrators within the same district or across districts. The set of an administrator’s direct ties with other administrators creates a direct network structure, which can be visualized as a star with the administrator in the middle. Figure 1 illustrates a direct network with David in the middle. Any administrator may place himself in the center of this network and consider those with whom he has direct ties.

When the ties among the administrators with whom David has ties are included in the structure, an egocentric network is created in which David is still in the center (see Figure 2). When the egocentric networks of many administrators are combined, such as when including each administrator in the district, an even larger network structure is created within which each administrator occupies a specific position (Carrington & Scott, in press; J. M. Hite, et al., 2005; Scott, 2000).

Figure 1. Direct network.

Figure 2. Egocentric network.

Whereas Figures 1 and 2 indicate David as being central, in the larger combined administrative network Charles has a much more central position than David (see Figure 3). Both the structure of the larger network and administrator positions within this network can have strategic implications for the performance of these administrators and their schools.

An administrator’s position within the larger network can be described in terms of its centrality and whether it fills structural holes in the network. Both centrality and filling structural holes have strategic implications for the administrator’s ability to influence the network and to draw upon the resources that flow through the network.
Administrator centrality is defined by the number of ties an administrator has within the network: The greater the number of ties, the greater the centrality (Bonacich, 1987; Borgatti, 2005; Freeman, 1979; Scott, 2000; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). For example, if David has ties with 5 other administrators while Charles has ties with 8, then Charles would have a more central position (greater centrality) in the larger network (see Figure 3). Greater centrality may provide an administrator with better communication within the larger network, more control over resource flows, greater visibility and prestige, and more ability to generate new ties (Borgatti, 2005; Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Ibarra, 1993; Pappas & Wooldridge, 2007). Greater centrality also suggests that an administrator may have better access to a wider variety of external resources to facilitate the school’s performance.

Individual administrators’ positions in a network can also be defined by the extent to which they fill structural holes in the network (Burt, 2002). When an administrator has a tie that creates a link to a non-or less-connected part of the network, this tie fills a structural hole in the network and places the administrator in a “brokering” position (see Figure 4). For example, if David is the only administrator in his district with a tie to another district, then David is in a brokering position between these two districts and fills a structural hole in the network. If this tie is broken or lost, the two districts would have no other network connection. In this structural position, David functions as a gatekeeper and, as a result, may be more aware of and have better access to additional resources and also have a greater ability to influence the larger network than other administrators in his district. Thus David’s position in the larger network may have strategic implications for the performance of his school and his district.

**Network Content**

Each tie in a network functions as a conduit or bridge for the flow or exchange of different kinds of network content between these administrators. For example, when David shares information with Charles, this information flows across the direct tie to Charles. If Charles also shares information with David, then their tie provides the means for a two-way exchange of information. Network ties can be described by the type of content that flows across them (Borgatti, 2005; Scott, 2000). For example, the network literature examines communication networks, friendship networks, and advice networks. When a tie carries multiple types of content, this tie can become a more critical network relationship (J. M. Hite, 2008; J. M. Hite, et al., 2005). For example, the tie between David and Charles carries not only friendship, personal advice, and emotional support, but also educational advice, resources, and ideas. As a result of their many exchanges over time, the tie also carries norms of reciprocity, favors, and trust. Such ties with multiple content flows can have a particularly important strategic role for schools and districts, including resource acquisition, information seeking, and establishment of legitimacy (Elfring & Hulsink, 2007). Network theory seeks to explain the
influences on and strategic outcomes of the structure of these network ties and their content.

Figure 4. Example of a tie spanning a structural network hole.

Multiple network structures can exist within the same set of school administrators, each network structure facilitating the flow of a different type of content. For example, different networks can facilitate flows for resources, social/emotional support, and/or innovation (J. M. Hite, et al., 2005).

Network content can have important strategic implications for school administrators. One type of critical network content is the extent of relational embeddedness within a tie. Relational embeddedness is defined as a tie embedded within a social relationship. Relationally embedded ties are generally stronger than other ties and demonstrate stronger personal relationships, greater trust, more work-based interaction, more detailed information transfer, greater social capital, and more reciprocity (Granovetter, 1985; J. M. Hite, 2003, 2005; Uzzi, 1996). As a result, information flow and resource access are often enhanced in these types of ties (Borgatti & Cross, 2003) and, consequently, administrators are better able to influence and support each other. Given the increased trust in these network relationships, administrators with relationally embedded ties can better work together, share resources, solve problems, and facilitate each other’s administrative success. In the case of David and Charles, they would be highly likely to consult with each other on sensitive problems or other work issues that require confidentiality. In contrast, a tie with lower relational embeddedness may be characterized as an acquaintance or exclusively work-related tie without the same extent of a social relationship as can be found within a relationally embedded tie (Granovetter, 1973, 1985, 1992). While ties that are not relationally embedded can be very functional and effective, they operate under lower levels of trust within the tie. For example, David would be less likely to confide in another administrator who represents only an acquaintance tie than he would in Charles.

The tie between David and Charles represents high relational embeddedness. These two administrators know each other very well and interact frequently in diverse contexts, which help them to understand each other’s problems, and enjoy social capital in terms of exchanging favors and knowing people in common. This type of network tie can provide critical opportunities for sharing and solving problems within a confidential, trusting relationship. High relational embeddedness contributes to three different types of trust in the relationship (J. M. Hite, 2003). First, the personal relationship builds personal trust in which both administrators have each other’s
interests at heart. Second, high interaction builds competency trust in which both administrators know that the other is highly capable, which facilitates effective interaction. Third, social capital generates increased social trust in which the administrators have common norms of reciprocity and sharing, acknowledge their social obligations to each other, and know some of the same people, which helps to assure their trust in each other. Such multi-dimensional trust, resulting from relational embeddedness in a network tie, can provide many advantages for school administrators, benefiting both their schools and students (J. M. Hite, 2003).

**Strategic Implications of Network Structure and Content**

Administrator network ties, the content of these ties, and the resulting structural position of administrators within the larger network can facilitate the accomplishment of educational goals (e.g. Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Dyer & Singh, 1998; J. M. Hite & Hesterly, 2001; J. M. Hite, et al., 2005). For example, network relationships within districts can affect internal resource acquisition and allocation, information flow, knowledge management, teaming, collaboration, influence, trust, vision diffusion, and ability to foster support for organizational learning and change (Kahne, O’Brien, Brown, & Quinn, 2001; Raider & Krackhardt, 2002; Tsai, 2001). Similarly, cross-district networks can also affect resource flows, breadth of range for resource acquisition, information access, innovation, organizational learning, boundary spanning, political influence, and the ability of a school to strategically manage pressures within the external environment (Elfring & Hulsink, 2007; J. M. Hite & Hesterly, 2001; Hoang & Antonicc, 2003; Honig, 2006). Thus network theory suggests that rural schools can be strategically influenced by the structure and content of administrator network relationships. So David’s high school can benefit or be hindered by the types and numbers of David’s network ties and his consequent position within the larger administrative network.

However, administrators often fail to comprehend the structure, content, and potential benefits of the networks to which they do or could belong. While administrators intuitively understand that they contact different people to accomplish different purposes and that they need to build and maintain their informal networks, these networks often consist of close contacts whom they prefer to seek out or people with whom they have had previous contact (Gulati, 1995). As a result, other critical relationships and resources may be overlooked and remain untapped, although they would benefit the school. Additionally, educational administrators may pay more attention to the more obvious formal organizational relationships and neglect important potential informal network ties and bridges both within and across districts (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; J. M. Hite, et al., 2005).

**Networks in Education**

Network literature has recently begun to address the role and functions of organizational networks in the context of educational leadership (e.g. J. M. Hite, et al., 2005; J. M. Hite, Williams, Hilton, & Baugh, 2006; Kahne, et al., 2001; Wohltesteter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). However, only a few studies have examined educational networks using network methods and analysis techniques common in sociology, management, and organizational theory. For example, using network methods Granovetter (1986) examined school desegregation, and Friedkin and Slater (1994) assessed principal centrality. Moody (2001) examined the role of school integration on students’ friendship networks. J. M. Hite, Williams, and Baugh (2005) found multiple network structures among the same set of administrators, and J. M. Hite, Williams, Hilton, and Baugh (2006) found administrator characteristics related to centrality within an innovation network. More recently, network research in educational settings is beginning to address the implications of network structures (e.g. Daly & Finnigan, 2010; Moolenaar, et al., in press). Most network studies in education incorporate general network ideas and address the advantages of maintaining networks and building relationships. For example, in rural networks, cross-district collaboration was found to be facilitated through administrative networks (Furtwengler, Furtwengler, Turk, & Hurst, 1997).

Rural education presents a fundamentally different strategic context than urban education. Specifically, rural school districts typically have fewer students and fewer administrators, spread across larger geographical areas than urban districts. What is not known is how this “smaller but larger” rural context may affect administrative networks. Networks of administrators within rural districts can be expected either to have dense network structures due to typically fewer administrators or to have sparse network structures due to large or difficult geographical distances between those administrators (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Budge, 2006; S. J. Hite, J.M. Hite, Mugimu, & Rew, 2007). Similarly, administrator networks across rural districts may be expected to demonstrate dense network structures.
because limited internal resources may force administrators to reach across district boundaries for information, capabilities, and resources (Honig, 2006; Mizruchi & Galaskiewicz, 1993) or to demonstrate sparse structures because large or difficult geographic distances between administrators, and the cultural difference that can result, may again result in fewer network ties (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Budge, 2006; S. J. Hite, et al., 2007).

This study uses network theory and analysis to examine and describe the structure and content of administrative networks within and across six rural districts. The study also seeks to explain the potential strategic implications of these network structures and content for the rural districts and their administrators as they seek to improve the performance of their schools in facilitating student learning.

**Methods**

Using network methods and analysis, this study identified the ties between administrators within and across six rural districts to create the structure of the larger administrative network. Network theory and methods guided the sampling, data collection and analysis procedures (e.g. Carrington & Scott, in press; Hanneman & Riddle 2005; Scott, 2000).

**Network Population**

The study included administrators from six geographically contiguous rural public school districts (denoted A, B, C, D, E, and F) in the western United States, covering approximately 18,246 square miles and serving 55 schools and 17,146 students (see Table 1). The six districts cover five counties, with four of the districts each representing an entire county and two districts (D & F) both being located within the same county. District E, the largest district in terms of student population, has the most administrators and the most female administrators. Geographically, Districts B-F are similar; however, District A is separated from the other districts by a mountain range, resulting in it being historically somewhat isolated and thus experiencing some differences in cultural development (e.g. Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Budge, 2006). All the districts have access to the same cross-district curriculum support program and also compete at the same athletic level. The main highway runs southwest to northeast through Districts D, E and F.

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**Six Rural School Districts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Size in Square Miles</th>
<th>Intersects Main Highway</th>
<th>Number of Administrators</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>4,439</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3,412</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2,244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>6,818</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2,329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>1,976</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4,511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18,246</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17,146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using network methods, the initial study population in these six districts was 70 school and district administrators. Administrators were defined as those persons functioning in administrative capacities within the districts and having received state administrative licensure. These administrators all had either a master’s or doctoral degree in an education-related field. Using network census sampling, this study collected data from 69 of the 70 members of this population (see Table 2). Although one principal declined to participate, the response rate of 98.5% is well above the generally accepted response rate of 80% needed for network studies with directional ties to minimize effects of missing data on the network structure (Costenbader & Valente, 2003).
Table 2

Administrators by Rural District, Position and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rural District</th>
<th>Superintendent / Assistant Superintendent</th>
<th>District Director</th>
<th>Principal / Assistant Principal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

The researchers obtained permission from each superintendent to invite the administrators in their district to participate in the study during the late fall of the school year. The superintendents also provided the researchers with a letter of introduction indicating their support of the research. Researchers then contacted each administrator via telephone to describe the study, invite their participation and set up an appointment for one of the researchers to meet with them at their office to personally administer the network survey.

The 69 administrators each met individually with one of the researchers for about an hour. During these meetings, researchers provided the administrators with a copy of the superintendent’s letter of support, clarified that participation was voluntary, and obtained their permission to participate. The researcher then personally administered the demographic and network surveys. The strategies of first obtaining district approval and support and then personally inviting and meeting with each administrator were crucial to obtaining such a high response rate.

The network survey provided a census listing of all administrators across all six districts. The administrators first identified the other administrators whom they knew and with whom they interacted. This egocentric network process identified the dyadic network ties of each administrator. The 69 administrators identified an average of 28 ties (SD = 7, range 7-34) for a total of 1,290 dyadic ties (network density = 28%). Each administrator then answered three relational embeddedness questions for each of their indicated ties. The first question addressed their personal relationship and asked how well they knew each administrator personally from “don’t know them” to “know them very well/close friend.” The second question addressed their dyadic interaction, asking how frequently they had contact with each administrator (phone, email, mail, face-to-face), selecting from none, occasionally, monthly, weekly, or daily. The third question addressed their social capital, asking whether they perceived they could easily ask each administrator a “big favor” (J. M. Hite, 2003). The first two questions related to actual behaviors, while the third related to potential behavior.

Data Analysis

A strength of relational embeddedness score for each tie was obtained by summing the network survey data. As expected, the very low end of the range was not well represented, validating that the informants did indeed know their ties. That is, none of the informants initially indicated that they knew and interacted with someone and then marked that they “don’t know them” on the network question. Thus, the low end of the range (where there were no responses) was dropped and the remaining responses fell within a 10 point range. Using the 10-point range, ties were then identified as acquaintance ties (strength range 1-4; n=380), active work ties (strength range 5-7; n=534), or relationally embedded ties (strength range 8-10; n=386).

Network data, including tie, tie strength, and actor attribute data, were then imported into UCINet software (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 1999) to create the network matrix and support graphical mapping of the network with NetDraw software.
(Borgatti, 2003). Thickness of the ties in the graphical mapping represents the strength of the tie in terms of relational embeddedness. The analyses of these network graphical maps then focused on evaluating network structure (size, centrality, clustering, core/periphery, cohesion, and structural holes) and content (relational embeddedness) of the network at multiple levels, including administrator egocentric networks, district networks, and the combined six-district network. Administrator attributes of district, gender, type of school and position were displayed on the graphical maps by the shape, shading and size of the network nodes. ArcGIS software was used for the geographical mapping of the administrators’ schools, which facilitated the combining of social and geographical space.

**Findings**

The larger network structure of all administrators indicates both within-district clustering and across-district ties. Each district has connections with each of the other districts (see Figure 5). This multiple district network indicates that one district is more peripheral than the others. The administrators in this peripheral district were not as well connected across districts as were the administrators in the other five districts.

![Inter-district administrative network: The whole network.](Figure 5)

This network graph in Figure 5 represents all ties without consideration of the network content or extent of relational embeddedness. However, when the content of these ties in terms of relational embeddedness is taken into account, a more distinct structural pattern of within-district cohesion emerges. Graphical network maps of the acquaintance ties (tie strengths of 1-4) and the active work ties (tie strengths of 5-7) both reflect structural patterns similar to the whole network map in Figure 5. Yet, in contrast, the graphical network map of only the relationally embedded ties (tie strengths of 8-10) demonstrates very obvious within-district clustering and only a few ties across districts (see Figure 6). This greater cohesion within-districts than across districts indicates that ties within the districts were more likely to be relationally embedded than those across districts. Figure 6 also demonstrates that all administrators had relationally embedded ties.
Figure 6. Inter-district administrative network: Relationally embedded ties.
Key: Each district is represented by a different shade/shape combination.

District centrality in this network of relationally embedded ties was a function of the number of boundary spanners between districts. While each district had at least two cross-district relationally embedded ties, the peripheral district in Figure 5 is still peripheral in Figure 6. This district had relationally embedded ties to only one other district, facilitated by only one single administrator. In contrast, the most central district had relationally embedded ties to four of the other five districts, facilitated by five different administrators. This central district had more administrators functioning as boundary spanners, thus increasing the number of cross-district ties, which in turn increased the centrality for this district within the network.

The cross-district network structure of relationally embedded ties also allows for examination of which administrators functioned as boundary spanners. The 23 (33%) administrators who functioned as cross-district boundary spanners were spread across all types of schools and assignments, with 5 (22%) at elementary schools, 3 (13%) at middle schools, 9 (39%) at high schools, and 5 (22%) at district offices. The majority of boundary spanners (69%) were principals. While most boundary spanners between districts were male administrators (83%), this gender pattern likely reflects the larger pattern of there being more males in these administrative positions in general.

The structure of this network of relationally embedded ties also indicates that female administrators were generally peripheral within their districts. Figure 7 illustrates the position of female administrators (20%) within this network structure. Twelve of the female administrators were principals/assistant principals, two were district directors, but none were superintendents or assistant superintendents. Of the 14 female administrators, 12 (86%) were found to be on the periphery of their own district network structures indicating that they were not central within this set of strong, relationally embedded ties. Five of the six districts had only 1 or 2 female administrators. However, even in the most central district which had the highest number of female administrators (n=7), female administrators were mostly peripheral. Of the 12 peripheral female administrators in this network, eight (67%) were peripheral due to having fewer ties or having ties to other administrators with fewer ties while only four (33%) were peripheral within their districts due to having cross-district ties which pulled them closer to the other districts and away from central positions within their own districts.
No clear patterns of within-district centrality emerged across the districts by the type of school setting within which the administrator functioned. The graphical network map in Figure 8 (retaining the district clustering as in Figure 6 and 7 and gender attributes as in Figure 7) uses size of the network node to represent each administrator’s type of school setting (increasing in size from elementary school to middle school to high school to district office).
While district administrators are often considered to be central within their districts, this pattern was not clearly demonstrated in the network of relationally embedded ties. This finding may relate to the specific type of network content creating this structure. The only “type of school setting” pattern evident from Figure 8 is that many female administrators (64%) were functioning in elementary schools.

A clear geographical pattern of relationally embedded ties emerged in the network graphs. The graphical maps in Figures 5 – 8 are based on the social space created by the structure of the network ties. Yet these administrators were also located in actual geographical space. By displaying the intersection of this social and geographical space, with the administrators geographically positioned based on the latitude and longitude of their school, the structure of the administrator network assumes a somewhat different pattern (see Figure 9). The shaded lines represent general district boundaries, and schools are indicated in their actual geographical position by the small squares. Administrators were placed geographically at their schools such that their ties represent the schools’ relationally-embedded ties to other schools or district offices within and across the districts. While each individual tie is represented with equal weight, multiple ties between administrators at the same schools overlap, accentuating certain geographical paths such that they appear darker. Topographical features and transportation routes are not indicated on this map for purposes of maintaining data confidentiality.

Figure 9. Intersection of social and geographical space: Geographically mapping the relationally embedded ties of six rural school district administrators. (Map created by Dr. Patrick R. Wawro.)
A greater number of ties are evident along the main highway through this rural area (going from southwest to northeast). These ties span three main districts suggesting that easier transportation access may be a factor in developing the relational embeddedness of administrators in rural districts (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Another geographical pattern to the network ties is found in the peripheral position of the eastern district in both social and geographic space, suggesting another interaction between these two dimensions. Topographical maps of this area indicate that this eastern district is geographically separated from the other districts due to a mountain range with a few access roads. Historically, culturally, and socially, the communities in this peripheral district have not actively interacted with the communities in the other districts, as is common in rural areas (e.g., Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). This network graph suggests that geographical space may influence the development of relationally embedded ties due to both proximity and ease of transportation. However, although the peripheral position of this district geographically is quite evident in the network of relationally embedded ties, when their ties with lower relational embeddedness, e.g., acquaintance and active work ties, are mapped into geographical space, this district is only slightly peripheral. One last pattern in the intersection of social and geographical space is that all of the schools have at least one relationally embedded tie with another school, and many have ties with schools in other districts.

Discussion

Understanding the structure and content of these administrative networks provides a beneficial perspective on the complexity within which leaders in rural education function (Sparrowe, et al., 2001). Findings suggest that the network structure and content of the administrative network in these rural school districts, both within and across districts, provide useful theoretical and strategic implications.

Theoretical Implications

The first theoretical implication of the findings is found in the interplay between network structure and its content. Different network sub-structures were identified for ties with different types of content. Relationally embedded ties had a clear pattern of within-district tie cohesion or density, while acquaintance ties and work ties were more evenly dispersed both within and across districts with no clear structural patterns. Thus ties with different content exhibit different network structures suggesting that the content may influence the resulting structure. This finding reflects the adage that form follows function or, in terms of organizations, that structure follows strategy (Chandler, 1962). This network structure also suggests that relational embeddedness, as a type of network content, may serve different purposes within and between these rural school districts.

While network theory suggests that structural cohesion and clustering would be expected among relationally embedded ties (Coleman, 1990; Moody & White, 2003), this research sought to identify whether this clustering would occur within or between-districts. The propensity of relationally embedded ties between administrators in the same districts served to generate within-district clustering which aligned with the formal district structures. This finding may be explained given that administrators within a district have greater proximity, context similarity, and interdependence with each other than with administrators across districts. This cohesion may also be related to the tendency for rural districts to recruit and develop their administrators from within the districts (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Recall the example of David and Charles, who were in the same district: Familiarity, personal interaction, shared context, and interdependence facilitated greater development of personal relationships, work interaction, and social capital. Thus, working in the same district, as opposed to being in different districts, may enhance the development of relational embeddedness. Therefore, the following proposition is supported from the findings:

**Proposition 1:** In rural districts, relationally embedded ties are more likely to occur within district than between districts.

This clustering of relationally embedded ties within the same district suggests benefits to rural school administration. Relationally embedded ties "have greater motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available" (Granovetter, 1983, p. 209). These ties would facilitate trust, shared problem solving, fine-grained information transfer, collaboration, innovation, and interactive learning (Borgatti & Cross, 2003; J. M. Hite, 2003; Moran, 2005; Uzzi, 1996; Uzzi & Lancaster, 2003). Future research should further examine further how rural school administrators develop relational embeddedness within their districts as well as how this internal cohesion of relational embeddedness can serve to benefit rural school districts.
Relationally embedded ties were also found across the rural districts, although to a much lesser extent than within districts. These cross district ties highlight the potential strategic role of rural administrators in boundary spanning (Goldring, 1995). This network structure demonstrates how boundary spanning can create critical bridges and fill structural holes to enhance the flow network content (Burt, 2002). The position of a district on the periphery of the social network implies that less network content may be flowing to and from it; thus peripheral districts are likely to be more isolated from resource and information flows than more central districts (Borgatti, 2005). Among the districts participating in this study, the most peripheral district was connected to only one other district by only one administrator. This administrator is filling a clear structural hole in that without this administrator no ties would exist between this and the other districts (Burt, 1992b). In contrast, the other districts had more relationally embedded network ties to more districts, and these ties were spread among more brokers. Thus, these other districts would likely experience greater benefits from both more and higher quality network flows, such as resources, than the peripheral district.

Across these rural districts, however, boundary spanning functions were not limited to any particular administrative position, such as district administrators, suggesting that individual administrators can seek and create positive strategic advantages for their districts as they intentionally create ties to other districts and facilitate the evolution of these ties toward greater relational embeddedness (J. M. Hite, 2005).

The finding of fewer relationally embedded ties across than within districts aligns with the theory that weak ties, rather than relationally embedded ties, are more likely to “bridge social distance” and provide “access to information and resources beyond those available in their own social circles” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 209). The network of acquaintance and active work ties, which reflected the same structure as shown in Figure 5, highlights this concept given that the ties with lower, rather than greater, relational embeddedness were found more frequently across districts.

However, in contrast to these theoretical expectations, the study did identify that these districts each had between three and eight relationally embedded bridging ties to other districts. While this number is clearly fewer than their within-district relationally embedded ties, they are clearly present, more so than expected, and generate an observable level of cohesion by creating a fully connected network of districts. These across-district ties create the structure in which one district is clearly more central than the others, as a result of having the most ties with other districts (e.g. Scott, 2000). This district-level centrality means that one district would like be better positioned strategically to enjoy greater power, influence and resource and information flows (e.g. Borgatti, 2005; Pappas & Wooldridge, 2007).

When bridging does occur through relationally embedded ties, these ties may provide additional strategic advantages for districts in terms of resource and information access (e.g. Granovetter, 1983). However, having a relationally embedded bridging tie may also have the effect of reducing individual administrators’ centrality in their own district network structure, as they would be pulled into a more peripheral position, as can be seen in Figure 7. This dynamic raises the question of potential strategic tradeoffs for administrators in their decisions regarding how to invest their network development resources. Given that developing and maintaining relationally embedded ties requires more time and effort (J. M. Hite, 2003), administrators may find it difficult to navigate the challenging balance of maintaining both types of relationally embedded ties, such that they can remain central within the district yet also function as a boundary spanner across districts. Therefore, the following proposition is suggested:

**Proposition 2:** Within the network of relationally embedded ties in rural school districts, administrators with more relationally embedded ties that bridge across districts are more likely to have lower within-district centrality.

Future research should seek to better understand why and how rural school administrators develop relationally embedded ties both within their own districts and across to other districts.

Another theoretical implication may also be drawn from the findings in terms of the role of gender. Given that female administrators were most often peripheral within their districts, administrator gender may be related to centrality within rural districts. Only one-third of these female administrators were peripheral due to boundary spanning, which would create a natural pull away from the center within their districts (Burt, 1992a; Scott, 2000). Thus, the question remains as to what other factors may influence their peripheral positions in the administrative network of relationally embedded ties. These peripheral positions may be explained by the nature of their administrative ties.
These female administrators did not have as many relationally embedded ties within their districts as did the male administrators. Further analysis of the network data indicate, however, that this disparity also existed at the level of active work ties (although not at the level of acquaintance ties). Future research should continue to examine the nature and centrality effects of female administrator ties.

This study also has theoretical implications for how social space is influenced by the geographical nature of the work context (S. J. Hite et al., 2007), highlighting the role of geography on rural administrator networks. While the central and peripheral districts can be explained by their between-district ties, the development of these between-district ties may be informed by a geographical perspective. Of the six districts studied, the most peripheral district was also the most geographically isolated, separated from the other districts by mountainous terrain with few roads. While such geographical isolation is common for rural school districts (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Awalt & Jolly, 1999), this study presents a unique view of how this geographical space influences the corresponding social space. In geographical contrast, the most central district, with the most between-district ties, was located along a major highway and contained most of the area’s state educational services within its district boundaries. Thus, the geographical patterns of relationally embedded ties may be explained by ease of access in terms of transportation routes and geographical barriers that limit options for travel (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). In addition, the relationally embedded ties of all six districts were located between-districts in close proximity. Thus, the centrality of rural school districts is suggested to correspond with clear geographical influences (S. J. Hite et al., 2007), as indicated in the following proposition:

**Proposition 3:** Within the network of relationally embedded ties in rural school districts, district centrality will be influenced by geographical factors.

Future research on the geographical isolation of rural schools and districts should also include relational perspectives for richer explanations of the extent and nature of resource flows to rural schools.

**Strategic Implications**

The structure and content of this network suggests several strategic implications for these rural education administrators and their districts. While network ties are developed and maintained between individual administrators, these administrators function as agents for their districts. Given that the structure and content of the set of administrative ties has strategic implications for a district, any discussion of strategic implications is, by nature, primarily focused at the district level of analysis. However, that being said, strategic implications have corresponding practical implications for individual administrators.

With only a few administrators in each district, rural districts have a strategic need for cross-district collaboration to access information, capabilities, and resources for effective school performance (Awalt & Jolly, 1999). Rural administrators may find it to their advantage to understand how to create, manage and enhance cross-district networks. In addition, rural administrators and districts need to strategically choose where to invest in the development of their network ties, as these choices have strategic implications for the roles that administrators serve for their districts.

Both administrators and districts need to balance the distribution of relationally embedded ties such that the district can take advantage of both within-district cohesion as well as the bridging to other districts. District leaders may benefit from intentionally providing opportunities for their administrators to strengthen their within-district ties. This can result in more effective conduits within the district for the flow of information, resources and collaboration as well as create greater cohesion which can increase levels of trust between administrators. Given the high necessary investment in building relationally embedded ties, however, if administrators invest in developing a large number of within-district ties, they may not be as effective at building ties that bridge out into other districts. At the same time, if administrators seek to fill boundary spanning roles and strengthen their ties to other districts, they may be less able to maintain relationally embedded ties within their own district and thus lessen their internal centrality.

Yet another strategic implication of this study is that not all network ties need to be relationally embedded. For example, weak ties, such as non-relationally embedded acquaintance and active work ties, can provide value in spanning structural holes across districts (Burt, 1992b; Granovetter, 1983). The majority of ties in this rural district network were not relationally embedded and they clearly spanned district boundaries (see Figure 5). Thus, districts may benefit from selectively investing in the development of relational embeddedness.
Another strategic implication of this research is that the district’s ability to find and acquire resources depends greatly upon its network. Because rural districts are smaller than their urban counterparts, they may have fewer available internal resources and strategic competencies. Districts may intentionally develop and use weaker network ties, with lower levels of relational embeddedness, to help compensate for resource deficiencies by creating bridges to other districts for finding new information, resources and opportunities for collaboration (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). However, actual resource acquisition is best facilitated by ties that have greater relational embeddedness (J. M. Hite & Hesterly, 2001).

The practical implications of these findings for administrators can be seen in the example of the relationally embedded tie between David and Charles. If David and Charles were fellow administrators in the more peripheral district, they would be largely limited to within-district benefits given so few cross-district ties. They would have less access to resources and information from other districts and thus be more dependent on each other and on other administrators within their district. Yet, if both David and Charles were working together within a more central district, they could augment their within-district network benefits with the network benefits of those district administrators who function as cross-district brokers. Thus rural school districts may benefit from having administrators who fill both within- and cross-district network roles. If David and Charles were working as administrators in two different districts, their close friendship would enable them to function as brokers for their respective districts, creating a relationally embedded bridge across their districts. Such a bridge would benefit their respective districts, enabling the two districts to better collaborate, exchange resources and information, and learn from each other to solve problems.

**Future Research Directions**

Future research should continue to examine the network structures within and across rural school districts. First, given that this research examines only one set of six districts, the question remains as to whether the patterns found in this case are also found among other rural school districts. Second, given the finding of within-district cohesion for relationally embedded ties, how do administrators manage their centrality within this internal network and to what ends? Third, the role of relationally embedded ties as brokers across districts needs further examination.

Given that the literature suggests that brokering would be more likely to occur through weaker ties (e.g. Burt, 1992b), what are the advantages of relational embeddedness for brokering ties? Lastly, research should examine how rural administrators individually choose to balance the development of their relationally embedded ties. This choice to focus on internal cohesion versus bridging districts has clear career implications for these administrators.

This study has examined the structure and content of network ties, and demonstrates that rural school districts may benefit from greater strategic awareness of their own formal and informal networks, both within and across districts. This understanding may facilitate increased network development, monitoring, and maintenance to improve critical strategic administrative relationships that can benefit the improvement of student learning both at the district and school levels. Future research should examine the development and evolution of rural administrator networks and the relationship between these district network structures and district performance.

**Conclusion**

The social relationships among rural school administrators create larger network structures that can strategically influence the performance of administrators, schools, and districts (Moolenaar, et al., in press). This study examined the structure and content of the administrative network both within and across six rural school districts and identified potential strategic implications for their rural school administrators. The network structure of relationally embedded ties was distinctively different than that of the acquaintance and active work ties. It demonstrated a clear cohesion of relationally embedded ties within districts and fewer ties between districts. This network structure has implications for network centrality, boundary spanning and district resources. Both gender and geographical implications were also identified.

Administrators of rural education may find it to their advantage to better understand how to create and enhance both within- and across-district networks to help facilitate greater collaboration, information and resource flows and ultimately school performance (Awalt & Jolly, 1999). By becoming more aware of the role of informal network relationships for school improvement, they can become more aware of the strategic implications of the larger network structures that result from the development of these critical administrative relationships (Snow, Miles, & Coleman,
References


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Numerous studies have found that mentoring has a positive effect on students who participate in it. Mentorship for students in rural communities is both necessary and challenging given the uphill battle these schools and communities face to improve their students’ academic achievement and emotional well-being. Through examining teacher, parent, and student perceptions of the TeamMates Mentoring Program in a rural Nebraska district, this study concluded that TeamMates is providing necessary social and emotional support to its mentees in rural schools, as well as encouraging them to improve their grades. However, TeamMates must continue to heighten its support of low-achieving students and to help fulfill students’ long-term goals.

Key words: Mentoring, rural schools, student achievement, student goals, academic support

I have never experienced someone coming into my life and having such a positive impact on me. I went from not caring about failing school, to passing grades and graduating early. I don’t think I could have done this on my own and having my mentor by my side has made my high school career change drastically. (Student participant, TeamMates Mentoring Program, 2009)

Research has demonstrated that nonparental adult role models (mentors) fill an important positive niche in the growth and development of youth. Programs are expanding rapidly in schools, which provide a natural and comfortable location for youth and community partners to come together. This article explores a particular school/community partnership, implementing TeamMates, which is a Nebraska statewide mentoring program.

The psychological theory base for the importance of a significant adult in a child’s development was described by Bandura (1977) who identified the importance of adult role modeling and by Bronfenbrenner (1979) who described the importance of unconditional love. As Shepard (2009) stated, “All children have a need to belong,” (p. 39), and when families under stress cannot provide this belonging, the presence of a consistent, reliable, and caring mentor can support a child’s development. Indeed, according to Benard (1991, 1995) the development of resiliency in children is the basis for adult-student mentoring.

The presence of at least one caring person – someone who conveys an attitude of compassion, who understands that no matter how awful a child’s behavior, the child is doing the best that he or she can, given his or her experience – provides support for healthy development and learning (Benard, 1995, p. 1).

Numerous studies have found that mentoring has a positive effect on students. In personal/social growth areas, several studies have reported a variety of benefits to students who participated in a mentoring program: For example, reduction in alcohol and drug use (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Tierney & Grossman, 1995); decreased incidence of hitting and violence towards others (Jekielek et al., 2002); less likelihood of becoming a teen parent (Jekielek et al., 2002; Mecca, 2001), and reduced odds of joining a gang (Mecca, 2001). Student mentees also had a greater sense of belonging (Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). They showed improved relationships with others in general (Tierney & Grossman, 1995), and with peers, adults, and parents specifically (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). They were more able to express feelings and had increased self-confidence and self-esteem (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999).

Academic benefits were also reported. Students in mentoring programs showed an improved attitude towards school and school personnel (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Jekielek et al., 2002); higher educational expectations (Sánchez et al., 2008); fewer absences (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999); fewer office referrals (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009); better grades (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999; Tierney & Grossman, 1995); and a decreased likelihood to repeat grades (Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch (2000) concluded that “mentors can influence both the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of
adolescents’ approach to school” (p. 1667), citing improvements in scholastic competence and school attendance. Mentored students were also more likely to stay in school (Mecca, 2001), graduate, enroll in post high school training and education, and be more hopeful about the future (Mentoring Institute, 2010).

Accordingly, public attention has been focused on mentoring during the past decade (Rhodes, 2002). From 1996 to 2001, there was a 40% growth in mentoring programs, and a U.S. News and World Report article stated that “discovering” mentoring is “the single greatest policy insight in the last century” (as cited in Grossman, 1999, p. 8). There are now many types of mentoring programs in K-12 public schools, community agencies and organizations, and higher education settings (Guetzloe, 1997). Manza (2005) reported that approximately 21% of the formal mentoring programs in the United States are either Big Brothers/Big Sisters or Girl & Boy Scouts; 20% are school-based; 20% are faith-based; 14% are workplace-based, and 9% are part of an after-school program.

Manza (2005) stated that although 17.6 million young people want or need mentors, only 3 million participated in formal one-on-one mentoring relationships. While there has been growth in the number of programs, many of these programs serve a small number of students. Several studies concluded that programs with the organizational resources and structure required to provide mentors for significantly more youth were necessary (Grossman & Garry, 1997). Manza also found that 35% of mentors thought the mentorship experience could be improved by having more materials and resources, while 30% of mentors wished to receive better training. Already, 31% of volunteers who mentor do so through educational programs (Foster-Bey, Dietz, & Grimm, Jr., 2006). Herrera (1999) stated that school-based mentoring resulted in “strong relationships that can develop within the school context and these relationships can make a difference in the lives of youth” (p. 16).

Mentorship for students in rural communities is both necessary and challenging. However, there is some concern that mentoring programs may not work in rural communities and schools. Some studies have found that rural communities fight an uphill battle to improve their students’ academic achievement and emotional well-being. Herzog and Pittman (1995) described rural communities as having higher unemployment and a lower median family income compared with metropolitan areas. They found that when compared to metropolitan schools, rural schools tended to be staffed with younger, less well-educated, and less experienced teachers, while school leaders received lower pay and benefits. Beeson and Strange (2000) added that retention of staff was a persistent problem, and teachers were expected to teach a wide range of subjects out of their certified area. Mihalynuk and Seifer (2007) explained that rural schools may have less access to the internet and public transportation, as well as fewer available community partners. According to Truscott and Truscott (2005), rural states with low population densities endure higher costs for educational services. Rural schools may have difficulties supporting an active mentorship program, since a school mentoring program is reliant on community volunteers to serve as mentors and a school staff for its operation. Additionally, any mentorship program at a rural school faces the challenge of encouraging students to achieve in an academic and economic environment with few resources. Non-urban students were found to have a significantly less positive perspective than urban students. Similarly, nonurban mentors had a significantly less positive outlook than urban mentors (Dappen & Isernhagen, 2006).

Although some economic aspects of rural communities are disheartening, many rural residents have more positive viewpoints (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Some positive attributes of rural communities include primacy given to people, relationships, and family (Haas & Lambert, 1995; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Nachtigal, 1982; Seal & Harmon, 1995), resulting in a higher level of social-connectedness and community cohesiveness (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007). In a survey contrasting how rural and urban Americans view their communities, Seebach (1992) reported that rural Americans identified themselves as having a commitment to community and providing quality of life for children. In addition, rural schools were described as having a strong sense of community and being the culture and social center of the town (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Larsh, 1983; Nachtigal, 1982; Seal & Harmon, 1995; Stern, 1994). Small schools, such as those found in rural areas, have also been found to be more academically beneficial for poor students than large schools (Howley & Howley, 2004). Despite these more positive aspects of rural communities, there is understandable concern as to whether a student mentoring program could succeed in a rural community. The purpose of the study was to examine teacher, parent and student perceptions about the TeamMates mentoring program in a rural Nebraska school district.

Research Design and Methodology

This study used the explanatory mixed methods design. After collecting quantitative data, qualitative data were collected to further explain the quantitative results (Creswell, 2005).
**Definition of Rural**

For the purposes of this study, Locale Codes provided the definition of rural. Until 2006, Johnson’s Locale Codes (1989) were used to make this determination, with codes 7 and 8 described as rural schools. Based on these codes the school district examined in this study was identified as rural: based in a community or rural area with less than 2,500 population. New Urban-Centric Locale Codes based on a school’s proximity to an urbanized area were adopted in 2006. The new Locale Code assignment taken from the National Center for Educational Statistics Common Core of Data (2010) for this school district is Town, Distant (32): a territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.

**Program Studied**

This study investigated teacher, parent and student perceptions of the TeamMates program, a statewide, school-based, one-to-one mentoring program that aims to help provide support and encouragement to school-aged youth. TeamMates was initiated very informally in the 1991-1992 school year by Tom Osborne, the football coach at the University of Nebraska, who asked his players to volunteer to mentor local youth. He envisioned a program supported by adult mentors from many walks of life that would serve at-risk young people from early adolescence through high school graduation. While many mentor programs focus only on attendance, grades, social competence, and discipline, the TeamMates program also includes high school completion and post-high school education as program outcome objectives. Osborne (2000) stated, “A player ‘plays’ down to a lower expectation if told they won’t make it. Instead they need to hear, ‘I see some possibilities (n.p.),’”

The TeamMates program continued to operate informally and grew slowly until a grant was obtained in 1999 to develop the program into a formal statewide model. At the time of this study in the 2008-2009 school year, over 4000 students from 114 school districts in Nebraska and Iowa were participating in the TeamMates program (TeamMates Mentoring Program, 2009).

The TeamMates State Office provides each participating school with a TeamMates Program Management Manual (The Mentoring Institute, 2010), informing the school about how to initiate and provide the technical assistance to sustain a TeamMates program. Students are referred to the TeamMates program by teachers, principals, counselors, and parents for poor academic achievement, poor attendance, difficulty with peer relationships, school discipline issues, personal issues, or another related issue. Thus the TeamMates program is used in schools with the expectation that students’ achievement and/or behavior will improve. Mentors are adult volunteers from within the community. They commit to mentor the student until he or she graduates from high school in order to ensure continuity for the mentee. All mentors undergo background checks and training, and the school’s local program coordinator supports and monitors mentors in keeping with the TeamMates Program Manual (The Mentoring Institute, 2010). Mentors spend approximately thirty minutes to one hour a week during school time meeting with a student participating in the TeamMates program. The program coordinator works to provide resources for an array of fun or academic activities within the school grounds, including board games, sports, homework, and walks outside. Importantly, these activities are mostly selected by the student’s needs and wants. Converse and Lignugaris/Kraft (2009) found that when mentors engaged in active listening and mentees chose the activities, mentoring relationships were more likely to be successful.

The ultimate goal of the TeamMates Mentorship Program is to encourage students to complete high school and increase their interest in attending a post-secondary institution after graduating. The primary tasks of a mentor are to establish a positive, personal relationship with the student; to help the student develop life skills; to assist students in obtaining additional resources; and to help students in their ability to interact with others.

**Sample**

The sample comprised three groups: students participating in Teammates, their parents, and teachers involved in the Teammates program. All 16 middle school students participating in the TeamMates Mentoring Program through this particular rural school district and their parents participated in the initial survey phase of this study. Four core content teachers and a physical education/health teacher completed a survey for each student. The 16 students participating in the TeamMates Mentoring Program for whom the surveys were completed included 3 in the sixth grade, 5 in the seventh grade, and 8 in the eighth grade. Seven students participating were non-White and 9 were White/non-Hispanic. In phase 2, qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 of the 16 students: 5 girls and 3 boys. Five of the students were non-White, and three were White/non-Hispanic. Two students were in the sixth grade, 3 were in the seventh grade, and 3 were in the eighth grade. One of the male students was unable to participate because his signed letter granting permission for him to participate in the interview was not returned by the time the interviews were conducted.
Instruments

Three surveys were used: one for teachers, one for students, and one for parents. Teachers responded to a 29-item survey, parents completed a 24-item survey, and students completed a 30-item survey. These surveys were based on The Mentoring Change Scale, which had been developed to measure changes in student behavior as a result of participation in the TeamMates program. Thus the survey items concentrated on the goals TeamMates establishes for its mentees, such as personal/social skills and future aspirations. For this study, parent, teacher, and student respondents were asked to rate student behavior observed over the past year that was due to participation in TeamMates. The scale used a 5-point Likert format for each item, with 1 representing “Strongly Disagree;” 2, “Disagree;” 3, “Neutral;” 4, “Agree;” and 5, “Strongly Agree.” The teacher survey also allowed respondents to indicate the answer was “Unknown.” Out of this survey data, mean scores for each item were calculated for the student, parent, and teacher surveys. These scores were reported as student, parent, and teacher means.

Survey items 1 through 21 were the same on all surveys with a minor language change on the parent survey, i.e., the survey began each item with “My child.” Additionally, there was a minor language change for the student survey, i.e., each item began with “I.” Item 22 on the parent and student surveys were the same as Item 28 on the teacher survey. Item 23 on the parent and student surveys was the same as Item 29 on the teacher survey. Item 24 on the parent survey was not included on the student or teacher surveys and Items 24 through 27 on the teacher survey were not included on the parent or student survey. Items 24 through 30 on the student survey were not included on the parent or teacher survey.

In addition, students were interviewed using a protocol of six open-ended questions with prompts. These questions asked the students about their favorite subjects and hobbies, the perceived impact of TeamMates on their academics, attendance, and behavior, their relationship with their mentor, what they hoped to change about themselves, and their future goals. The interviews were conducted by one external evaluator. Student answers to the questions and prompts were recorded in writing by the interviewer. The interview results were analyzed through the process of coding, which entails “categorically marking or referencing units of text with codes and labels as a way to indicate patterns and meanings” (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The interview results were coded to keep track of words and phrases perceived by the researcher to have meaning, and supporting quotes were highlighted. Coding was conducted separately by two evaluators who were in agreement as to the major themes.

Procedure

Quantitative data were gathered using surveys to assess parent, student, and teacher perceptions about all 16 students participating in a rural school district’s middle school TeamMates Mentoring Program. Parent surveys were sent home with the students for their parents to complete and return. Student surveys were distributed to the students in their homeroom class during the school day. Teacher surveys were given to a team of teachers for each of the students. Individual student teacher teams were comprised of 4 core-content teachers and a physical education/health teacher familiar with the student. The survey was designed to be completed by respondents in no more than 10 minutes. To maintain confidentiality, surveys contained only the student identification number. Qualitative data were collected from 8 of the 16 students using interviews. These 8 students were selected to be interviewed based on gender, free/reduced lunch, ethnicity, and grade level.

Results

The following themes were derived from the analysis of the data: social and emotional support, academic achievement, and planning for the future.

Social and Emotional Support

Students in this rural school district indicated mostly positive reactions to the TeamMates program’s social and emotional aspects. The mean for the survey items, “I like my mentor,” “I am comfortable when I’m with my mentor,” and “I can trust my mentor” was 5.00, meaning that all of the respondents strongly agreed with these statements. Teachers and parents were also aware of these positive relationships. The statement that the student liked his or her mentor elicited the highest average response from teachers (4.60) and an even higher response from parents (4.73). Parents also for the most part strongly agreed with the statement, “I’m glad my child is in TeamMates” (4.75).

Most of the students described their relationships with their mentors as comfortable and fun. In addition, the majority of students felt that they have learned to not be so shy and to speak out more. Students gave very high responses to the statements “I feel good about myself” (4.63) and “I have made friends at school” (4.63). A male student said, “Yes, I’m better at talking with other people about things.” The most common statement made by the students was that they enjoyed talking with their mentor. A female student explained, “TeamMates helped me with my homework and I can talk to someone. It’s really nice. We play a lot of board games, walk outside, and play basketball. It gets me away from school a bit and refreshes my memory.”
Academic Achievement

A disparity appeared in the interviews between students who were classified as high achievers and the students who were in the lower achievement range. Students with average to above average achievement (grade point average at or above 2.5) were more likely to feel that TeamMates created a positive change for them, for example, “My mentor gives me confidence and they understand.” By contrast, students in the lower achievement range provided more negative comments about the program. As one female student said, “They need to lay off sometimes.” Additionally, when asked for a favorite subject, students with lower achievement tended to name a subject they enjoyed, such as reading, but would add: “I’m not good at reading.”

It is clear, however, that academic achievement remains important to these students. Students for the most part stated that they liked school (3.87). Interestingly, compared to teacher means, students rated themselves more highly on almost all items related to academic abilities. Students (3.81) considered that they completed assignments on time to a greater degree than did their teachers (3.00) Teachers (2.97) were less likely to agree with the statement that ‘the student can solve problems’, while students (4.25) and parents (3.75) rated student problem solving ability much higher.

Most students indicated they wanted to display more positive behaviors and do better in classes. When asked for something they would like to do with their mentor that they do not currently do, two students in the lower achievement range stated that help with homework would be beneficial. When asked for one thing they would like to change about themselves while participating in TeamMates, three students responded. Two students mentioned improving their reading skills and another wanted help in becoming more focused and less distracted. Most of the students suggested that their mentors should give them more advice on doing better in school. One male student said, “I can get mad at myself if I don’t do good. I need to be reminded to calm down.”

Students provided various ways in which their mentor helped them be more successful at school, ranging from talking about college or becoming more independent. A male student stated, “I’m doing bad on reading, so we read once a week and talk about what happened.” And indeed, most students reported that their grades had gone up since joining the TeamMates Mentoring Program. A female student said, “It’s helped me in writing and my grade has gone up.” Still, there is clearly room to improve, and some students stated they still had difficulty with school work. Another female student said, “Quizzes and tests are hard for me. I have to be more independent, but a lot of independent reading tests are hard. Memory problems.”

Planning for the Future

Teachers (4.23), parents (4.75), and students (4.56) agreed that the student planned to graduate from high school. While parents (4.47) and students (4.53) agreed that the student planned to attend college, teachers seemed unaware of students’ future plans. Teachers either disagreed or were neutral toward the statement that the student sets goals for his or her future (2.77), even although students (3.62) and parents (3.81) mostly agreed with this statement. Teachers also gave a low response to “The student knows how important planning is” (2.80), but students felt that they did know how important planning was (4.12).

During the interviews, only two students stated that they talked about the future with their mentor. One female student stated, “We talk about what college I want to go to. We have a good relationship; it is natural to talk to her.” However, three students specifically stated that they hadn’t talked about their future with their mentor. It is possible that for some students, limiting discussion about future plans is helpful in keeping the stresses of daily life manageable. A male student explained, “I like to have someone to talk to about school and play games with. We talk about family. No future discussions, just the future in one week.”

However, almost all students indicated they wanted to continue on to college after graduating from high school, and most of the students had an idea of what they wanted to study in college. A female student shared, “I want to be a vet because I like animals and I want to take care of them.” A male student planned to “go to college for agriculture and do farming.” When asked what TeamMates could do to help them accomplish their goals, most of the students wanted to be encouraged, but also wanted to talk more about their future goals. A male student suggested, “TeamMates can talk about the job, any advice, and good choices to go see people do these jobs.” They wanted to be able to get more information.
programs can indeed foster higher expectations for secondary education. According to research, mentoring students to complete high school is perceived to be more significant by students and their parents than non-rural communities (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007). The TeamMates Mentoring Program has had to compensate for a lack of financial and human resources available to the community. On the other hand, TeamMates might have drawn on advantages of rural communities, such as a strong sense of community and an emphasis on relationships and family (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007; Nachtigal, 1982).

Many students wanted their mentors to provide advice on improving academic habits and more help with homework. Students wanted their mentors to help them accomplish their long-term goals by talking more about these goals and providing more information. Yet only two students reported talking about their future with their mentor. One outcome of this study is that the TeamMates Mentorship Program began implementing visitations to different colleges of various sizes and emphasizing earlier conversations about goal-setting. In this way, TeamMates hopes to enable students to make better connections between their long-term goals and their present behaviors, and thus help students achieve their long-term goals.

**Conclusion**

The social and emotional support provided by the TeamMates Mentorship Program should be lauded. TeamMates' emphasis on academic achievement in a rural community is also noteworthy. However, students in this community have indicated a desire for extra academic support and long-term planning. The TeamMates program has begun to address this issue, and should continue to make efforts to assist with long-term planning. Specialized assistance targeted to students who are low-achievers may also be necessary. The TeamMates Mentorship Program has laid the groundwork for student success in a rural community: It now needs to foster the achievement of student goals.

and advice on how they could attain their goals. One student said, “Help me think of jobs that could be available. Try to understand what they do.”

**Discussion**

Students in this rural Nebraska school district responded positively to the social and emotional aspects of the TeamMates program. They reported good relationships with their mentors, reiterating the importance for school-age children to have a trusted adult to talk to. Students felt that TeamMates had helped them overcome shyness. Most students felt good about themselves and had friends at school. This finding affirms research conclusions that mentoring programs lead to personal and social growth, particularly in regard to self-esteem (Converse & Lignugaris/Kraft, 2009; Curtis & Hansen-Schwoebel, 1999). At the same time, students, teachers, and parents all agreed that the students in TeamMates avoid risky behavior and enjoy being in TeamMates. Parents expressed that they were glad that their child was in the program.

The local TeamMates program should also be credited for helping most of its mentees improve their grades, as well as for emphasizing the importance of academic achievement and for boosting students' confidence in specific academic skills, such as problem-solving. This finding also concurs with prior research conclusions that mentoring can improve academic skills (Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch, 2000). However, the program needs to pay specific attention to lower-achieving students and perhaps innovate new ways to help them attain academic success. The dissatisfaction with TeamMates some lower-achieving students expressed should serve as a warning sign that other strategies may be needed to reach this group.

It is interesting to note that when compared to parents and students, teachers gave lower responses to almost all the items surveyed. This may be an indicator that students and their parents have lower standards of academic performance, or that the improvements taking place are perceived to be more significant by students and their parents. It is also possible that teachers simply do not know the students as well as the parents and students themselves do, and are therefore less able to gauge improvement based on a mentoring program.

The ultimate goal of TeamMates is to encourage students to complete high school and attend post-secondary education. According to research, mentoring programs can indeed foster higher expectations for achievement and lead to a greater likelihood that the mentee will graduate high school and attend college (Mentoring Institute, 2010; Sánchez, Esparza, & Colón, 2008). This study indicates that the TeamMates Mentoring Program has successfully encouraged its mentees to adopt these goals for themselves. Almost every student wanted to continue on to college after graduating high school.

These positive results are especially important given the research indicating that rural communities may face more challenges providing academic and emotional support for their students than non-rural communities (Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007). The TeamMates Mentoring Program has had to compensate for a lack of financial and human resources available to the community. On the other hand, TeamMates might have drawn on advantages of rural communities, such as a strong sense of community and an emphasis on relationships and family (Mihalynuk & Seifer, 2007; Nachtigal, 1982).

The TeamMates Mentorship Program has successfully encouraged its mentees to adopt these goals for themselves. Almost every student wanted to continue on to college after graduating high school.
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Sexuality Curriculum Policies: 
Rural is Not Always More Conservative

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This study examined sexuality education policies of school districts following the enactment of a law by the state of Iowa in 2007 requiring schools to include curriculum related to human growth and development education. The authors compared responses from superintendents in rural and urban areas in the state of Iowa regarding their districts’ sexuality curriculum policies. All public school superintendents in Iowa (n=364) were mailed a survey; 131 (36%) responded. The sample was representative of the state both geographically and by size of district. Findings indicate that while rural states (or more-rural areas within rural states) may be publically perceived to be more conservative than urban areas, their sexuality education policies show little statistical difference. Additionally, Iowa’s sexuality education policies were found to be equally or more inclusive in comparison to previously reported national results. Community opposition to sexuality education was not evident. Superintendents indicated that state directives were the most influential factor driving district policies on sexuality education.

Keywords: sexuality education, abstinence education, curriculum, rural

Although the teen pregnancy rate in the United States among girls aged 15-19, has decreased from approximately one in 11 females in the year 2000 (Henshaw, 2001) to one in 14 in 2006 (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2010), this number is still high. According to the 2007 Youth Behavior Risk Survey (YRBS) (Eaton et al., 2008), nationwide, 47.8% of students have ever had sexual intercourse and 35% of students are currently sexually active. Moreover, 50% of the 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are among teens (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2000). In light of these data, all states, rural and urban, face the challenge of providing quality sexuality education to their students. However, while all students need the same essential information about growth and development and human sexuality, students in rural areas often face barriers to accessing professional help and advice. First, there are limited numbers of reproductive health care providers in rural areas; second, students may reside at geographic distance from available providers (Winstead-Fry & Wheeler, 2001); and third, due to close community ties in rural areas, there exists a real or perceived lack of confidentiality when using those providers (Garside, Ayres, Owen, Pearson, & Roizen, 2002). Overlying these issues is the common public misperception that teen pregnancy is an urban, not rural, issue (Bennett, Skatrud, Guild, Loda, & Klerman, 1997; Levine & Coupey, 2003; Yawn & Yawn, 1993). In fact, rural teens are equally as likely to become pregnant as urban teens, and when White teens are considered alone, pregnancy rates are slightly higher in rural counties compared to urban counties. Additionally, after becoming pregnant, rural teens are less likely to have an abortion, resulting in higher birth rates for rural teens (Bennett et al.).

While studies comparing sexual activity between rural and urban teens are not common, data that do exist across rural and urban areas show rural adolescents have similar and sometimes higher rates of the high risk sexual behaviors that lead to adolescent pregnancy, early childbearing, and STIs. In an analysis of 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey data, Crosby, Yarber, Ding, DiClemente, and Dodge (2000) found that rural adolescent males were more likely than their urban counterparts to report ever
having sexual intercourse, not using a condom at last sexual intercourse, and to having used alcohol or drugs during their last sexual intercourse. While Crosby et al. found no statistical difference in sexual risk-taking behaviors between rural and urban females, in a study of rural African American teens, Milhausen and colleagues (2003) found that rural African American females were more likely than their urban counterparts to report having ever had sex, to initiate sex before age 15, to have had more than one sexual partner in the past three months, and to report having not used a condom during their last sexual encounter. Rural African American males in the sample were more likely to report having ever had sex and to report having not used a condom during their last sexual encounter than their urban peers. Levine and Coupley (2003) analyzed YRBS data comparing risk behaviors by metropolitan status. While they found no differences in risky sexual behavior among urban, suburban, and rural youth when controlled for race, they asserted that urban youths may actually experience an “urban advantage” due to the high density of health care providers, targeted youth services, and access to public transportation in urban areas.

The purpose of this study was to determine the status of sexuality education in Iowa’s urban and rural schools after the passage of the new law related to human growth and development education requiring sexuality education materials to be “research-based” (State of Iowa Legislature, 2008, para 4). Research questions included (a) What are the sexuality education policies of districts? (b) At what grade levels are schools delivering sexuality education? (c) Is the current policy identified as “abstinence-based” or “abstinence-only”? (d) How do these findings differ from an earlier national sample? (e) Do these findings differ in more rural areas vs. more urban areas of the state?

Sexuality Education Policy in Iowa

In an attempt to improve sexuality education, and thus limit unintended pregnancy and reduce the STI rates among teens, the Iowa legislature passed a law related to human growth and development education requiring all public and non-public schools to “incorporate age-appropriate and research-based materials into relevant curricula and reinforce the importance of preventive measures when reasonable with parents and students” (State of Iowa Legislature, 2008, para 4). Research-based was defined as:

[Complete information that is verified or supported by the weight of research conducted in compliance with accepted scientific methods; recognized as medically accurate and objective by leading professional organizations and agencies with relevant expertise in the field, such as the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Public Health Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Association of School Nurses; and published in peer-reviewed journals where appropriate. (2) Information that is free of racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender biases. (State of Iowa Legislature, 2008, para 23)]

Existing Iowa Code both prior to the new law (passed in April 2007) and continuing forward requires that human growth and development instruction include coverage of human sexuality, self-esteem, stress management, interpersonal relationships, domestic abuse, human papilloma virus (HPV) and the availability of the vaccine to prevent HPV, and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in grades one through twelve (State of Iowa Legislature, 2008, para 13). The state does not currently require or suggest that schools follow a designated curriculum and does not restrict any topic from inclusion. Iowa’s state policy mandates that schools teach health in grades K-8 and that high schools offer and teach one unit of credit in health education. The state does not require that students complete the high school health credit for graduation. In terms of sexuality/abstinence education (hereafter referred to as “sexuality education”), each district determines the specific curriculum, resources, and time dedicated to instruction based on community and school needs. Currently, the Iowa Department of Education endorses an abstinence-based approach and allows districts to adopt either an abstinence-based or an abstinence-only sexuality education curriculum.

Abstinence-Only vs. Abstinence-Based Approaches

While nationally 93% of public secondary schools teach sexuality education and most states have a policy to include the topic in public school curriculum (Lindberg, Ku, & Sonenstein, 2000), there is great variability among states’ sexuality education policies. Some states mandate that schools provide sexuality education or STI and/or HIV/AIDS education, some mandate both, and others simply make recommendations (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2008a). Among the states with mandated sexuality education, some include specific requirements or
restrictions in terms of content and others leave these decisions up to local communities. Even in states that do not mandate sexuality education, some have requirements and restrictions for the schools that choose to provide sexuality education (SIECUS, 2008a). It is generally accepted that sexuality education falls into one of two categories, abstinence-only or abstinence-based. Abstinence-only programs encourage teens “to wait until marriage to have sex. If birth control is mentioned, the message says that no birth control is 100% effective at preventing pregnancy and avoiding sexually transmitted diseases” (Barnett & Hurst, 2003, p. 264). Abstinence-based programs “emphasize the benefits of abstinence [and] include information about sexual behavior other than intercourse as well as contraception and disease-prevention methods” (SEICUS, 2008b, para 4).

Sexuality education delivered to the nation’s adolescents is at the forefront of efforts to prevent unintended pregnancies and STIs. School-based instruction is the primary mode of this education and has been shown to reduce sexual risk behaviors by delaying age of first intercourse, reducing levels of sexual activity, and increasing contraceptive or condom use (Kirby, Short, Collins, Rugg, Kolbe, Howard, et al., 1994). In response to the ongoing debate about the most effective approach to sexuality education, there have been numerous studies comparing abstinence-based and abstinence-only approaches. In order to shed light on the effectiveness of each, Kirby (2001) performed a meta-analysis of articles reviewing both abstinence-based and abstinence-only programs. Of twenty-eight abstinence-based programs, nine were found to delay initiation of sexual intercourse, eighteen showed no impact, and one appeared to hasten the initiation of sex. In the evaluation of three studies reviewing the impact of five abstinence-only programs, no scientific evidence of effectiveness was found in delaying the initiation of sexual intercourse. Conclusions similar to Kirby’s were reached by Manlove, Romano-Papillo, and Ikramullah (2004) who evaluated different types of sexuality education programs. Compared to control groups they found that while six of the nine comprehensive sexuality education programs, five of seven HIV/STI prevention programs, and four of four youth development programs delayed the onset of sexual activity, none of the abstinence-only programs delayed onset of sexual activity. An exception to this pattern of findings is a study by Jemmot, Jemmot, and Fong (2010) comparing four curriculums (abstinence-only, safer sex-only, comprehensive, and a control curriculum) delivered to 12-year-olds. Two years later, at age 14, fewer participants from the abstinence-only group were sexually active. The authors, however, noted that that the abstinence-only curriculum used did not: Stress waiting until marriage for sex, contain medically inaccurate information, portray sex in a negative light, or use a moralistic tone, which sets it apart from most abstinence-only curriculums.

While the majority of sexuality education programs in the U.S. take an abstinence-based approach, many school sexuality education policies do not reflect the preponderance of current research (Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999). A Kaiser Family Foundation study (2000) reported that 58% of principals said that their school took a comprehensive (abstinence-based) approach to sex education, teaching that while young people should wait to have sex, they should use birth control and practice safer sex if they do not. An additional 34% of principals reported the main message of their sexuality education program was abstinence-only.

**Federal Policy**

Federal financial support for abstinence-only education began in 1982 with the Adolescent Family Life Act. In 1996, Congress authorized Section 501(b) of Title V of the Social Security Act which established an eight-point definition for abstinence education and provided $50 million a year in funding for state initiatives with the exclusive purpose of “teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” (Howell, 2007, para 6). The more restrictive Community-Based Abstinence Education funds, authorized in 2000, provided increased funding for abstinence-only education, while at the same time requiring that programs equally teach all components of the eight-point definition of abstinence-only education (Howell). Not surprisingly, as annual funding for abstinence-only programs increased, so did their delivery. For example, between 1995 and 2002, as annual funding increased from $80 million to $204 million, there was a corresponding increase in students receiving abstinence-only education from 9.3% to 23.8% (Lindberg, Santelli, & Singhas cited in Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008).

At the time of writing, Title V funding has been renewed for another five years, until 2014, as part of the health care reform law. Annually, $50 million will be provided to states to promote abstinence from sex outside of marriage. However, programs will no longer be required to meaningfully represent each component of the eight-point definition of abstinence-only education, which allows for much
more flexibility in the type of programming delivered (Boonstra, 2010a). In addition to Title V funding, $114 million has been allocated in 2010 for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program. $75 million of which will go to programs proven through rigorous evaluation to reduce teen pregnancy. An additional pool of federal money, the Personal Responsibility Education Program, allocated by the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, will provide $55 million for proven programs to educate adolescents on both abstinence and contraception and prepare them for adulthood by teaching subjects such as healthy relationships, financial literacy, and parent-child relationships (Boonstra, 2010b). Thus, under the current presidential administration approximately $190 million is available in annual federal funding for abstinence-based sexuality education and $50 million is available for abstinence-only education via Title V funds.

Community Pressure

Although national opinion polls show 90% of adult Americans believe it is very or somewhat important to teach sex education in schools (Dailard, 2001), adverse pressure from the community is still of concern to schools (Kirby, 2007). Worry about unfavorable community reaction has been associated with reduced odds of teaching multiple skills and topics related to pregnancy prevention (Landry, Darroch, Singh, & Higgins, 2003) and pressure or fear of pressure from parents, the community, or the school administration has been found to influence the inclusion of topics in sexuality education (Forrest & Silverman, 1989; Yarber & Torabi, 1997). Sexuality education teachers’ personal views also influence the amount and depth of sexuality education that youth receive (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000).

There has been pressure to standardize sexuality education curriculum through national, state, and district policies (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000; Lindberg, Ku, & Sonenstein, 2000). These calls for a more standardized curriculum may be justified as great variability is seen in the depth and breadth of sexuality education programs within districts, and among districts, states, and the nation. Landry, Kaeser, and Richards (1999) found evidence of this disparity in a nationally representative sample of 825 public school district superintendents. They found that although more than two-thirds of school districts had adopted a district-wide sexuality education policy, the remainder left decisions up to the school principal or to teachers. Among school districts with a sexuality education policy, all required that abstinence be taught and 86% required that abstinence be promoted over other options. Approximately 35% of those with a district-wide policy (23% of all school districts) required that abstinence be taught as the only option for unmarried people, while either prohibiting the discussion of contraceptives or allowing discussion only of their ineffectiveness; 51% required that abstinence be taught as the preferred option for young people, but also permitted discussion of contraception as an effective means of protecting against unintended pregnancy and the use of condoms in preventing STIs. An additional 14% presented abstinence as one option as part of a broad sexuality education program (see Table 1).

In light of this great differentiation both locally and nationally, we collected data to determine the status of sexuality education policies in Iowa which allowed for analysis to determine if the policies differ between the more rural and more urban areas of the state.

Methods

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, all superintendents in public schools (N = 364) in the state of Iowa were sent a letter of invitation and a self-administered questionnaire (SAM) and asked to complete the questionnaire or ask a designee to do so. Because of the relatively small number of districts in the state, all superintendents were included in the sample frame. A four-page paper questionnaire addressed to “Superintendent” was mailed to the school district. To improve response, a postcard reminder and second questionnaire were also mailed to non-respondents. Data were collected August–October 2007.

Participants

A total of 131 school superintendents returned usable questionnaires for a response rate of 36%. The responding superintendents represented districts in 70% of the state’s 99 counties. Respondents were geographically well-distributed throughout the state with 47 (35.9%) identified as being from the western third of the state, 40 (30.5%) from the central third of the state, and 41 (31.3%) from the eastern third. The sample was also representative by size of district. The Iowa Department of Education reported 480,609 students enrolled in 364 districts in 2007-2008 (Iowa Department of Education, 2008). When divided into tertiles based on district enrollment, ‘small’ districts were those with enrollments of 1-494 students; ‘medium’ districts were those with enrollments of 495-899 students; and ‘large’ districts enrolled 900 or more students. Of the respondents, 44 (34.4%)
represented small districts; 40 (31.2%) represented medium sized districts, and 44 (34.4%) represented large districts. The total enrollment of school districts responding to this survey was 183,785 students (M = 1,435.8, SD = 2,072.29), representing 38.2% of all students in the state of Iowa. The maximum value for district enrollment among survey respondents was 17,746 students and the minimum was 78. Although Iowa itself is a rural state, within Iowa, size of district enrollment can essentially be used as a proxy for more rural versus more urban locations. Larger school districts are more urban; while smaller districts are more rural.

Instrument

The instrument was based on a questionnaire included in an Alan Guttmacher Institute study conducted by Landry, Kaiser, and Richards in 1999. Two questions were added to the Guttmacher questionnaire to assess district policy and curricular changes in response to a new state law requiring research-based and medically accurate information be included in sexuality education. The questionnaire included 18 questions regarding the presence, type, and scope of policies related to sexuality education, factors influencing the establishment of current policy, the grades in which specific topics are covered, curriculum used, and community support. The question format required respondents to indicate the response that best described their school district’s policy, either in a yes/no format or by choosing one sentence from a set of sentences (see example in Table 3). No scales were developed for the questionnaire. The items were designed to address dynamic policies and procedures and hence, no psychometric measures such as validity or reliability are applicable.

The questionnaire stated that the term, *sexuality/abstinence education*, incorporates any and all health education related to human sexuality, including family life, abstinence until marriage, postponing sexual involvement, and avoidance of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)/HIV and unintended pregnancy, and the term, *policy*, includes any guidance that applies, district-wide, to such education in the schools in your district.

Analysis

Owing to the descriptive nature of the items, frequencies/percentages of responses were summarized to characterize responses and Chi-square statistics were used to assess group differences. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 15.0 for Windows.

Results

The results section is divided into two parts. The first part compares data with regard to sexuality education policies to data from the national survey conducted by Landry, Kaeser, and Richards (1999). The second part examines the data collected from this study more closely.

Comparing Iowa and National Data

Compared to the most recent national data, this rural state is equally or less conservative regarding sexuality education (see Table 1). For example, compared to national data, Iowa school districts were more likely to have policies that portray contraception as effective in preventing pregnancy and STIs. Approximately 85% of Iowa districts reported presenting contraception in this context, compared to 65% nationally. Additionally, fewer Iowa districts seem to be highlighting contraception’s ineffectiveness (14% compared to 35% nationally) (Landry et al., 1999). Nationally, the prevalence of district policy with regard to sexuality education is higher than in Iowa districts (68.8%; 51.2), suggesting that Iowa districts may give schools more autonomy. Neither the national data nor the data from this study indicate community opposition to sexuality curriculum in schools. However nationally there is more community support, whereas in Iowa the community is more silent. While the impact of state directives in influencing sexuality education is very similar nationally and in Iowa at just under 50%, school boards have more influence in Iowa.
### Table 1
Comparison of Results from Landry et al.’s (1999) National Sample and Iowa Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National Sample (n=825)</th>
<th>Iowa Sample (n=131)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of Policy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District-wide policy</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy decisions made by schools or teachers</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation of abstinence in curriculum</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence is one option in a broader educational program to prepare adolescents to become sexually healthy adults.</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence is the preferred option for adolescents; when contraception is discussed, it is presented as an effective means of providing protection against unintended pregnancy and STIs/HIV for sexually active individuals.</td>
<td>50.9%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstinence is the only positive option outside of marriage; when contraception is discussed, its ineffectiveness in preventing pregnancy and STIs/HIV is highlighted. OR Abstinence is only option outside of marriage and all discussion of contraception is prohibited.</td>
<td>34.7% combined</td>
<td>14.3% combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community support for district’s policy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly support</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally silent</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divided</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generally opposed</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most influential factors on the establishment of current policy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State directives</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special advisory committee/Task Force</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School board action</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Comparisons were not made for all items in manuscript as results for all items were not reported for the national sample.

### Sexuality Education Policies

Although the researchers anticipated that sexuality education policies might differ substantially between the more urban and more rural districts, few differences in policy were found in responses based on size of district. Thus, we discuss these results from the perspective of a rural state and do not differentiate between more and less rural areas within the state. In the two instances that a significant difference was found, differences will be indicated.

Slightly more than half of school superintendents (51.2%, n = 66) reported the presence of a district-wide sexuality education policy, while 48.8% (n = 63) reported leaving sexuality education policies up to individual schools or teachers. None of the school districts reported a policy that prohibited teaching sexuality education. Significantly more large/urban school districts reported the presence of a district-wide sexuality education policy, while more small/rural districts reported leaving sexuality education policies up to individual schools or teachers ($X^2 = 6.15$, $p = .046$). Thirty-one percent (n = 41) of school districts reported teaching sexuality education in either 5th or 6th grades, 48.9% (n = 64) of school districts reported teaching sexuality education in 7th or 8th grades, and 49.6% (n = 65) school districts reported teaching sexuality education in high school (see Table 2). Of these, 24.4% (n = 34) of school districts reported teaching sexuality education...
at all three levels and an additional 15.3% (n = 20) of school districts reported teaching sexuality education in both middle school and high school, but not the elementary level. Eight districts reported delivering sexuality education in only one grade (5th grade = 2, 7th grade = 2, 8th grade = 2, 9th grade = 2).

Table 2  
Number (and Percent) of Iowa Districts Teaching Sexuality Education at Each Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>30 (22.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>35 (26.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>48 (36.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>59 (45.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>57 (43.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>48 (36.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td>41 (31.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>33 (25.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were also asked to identify how abstinence is presented in the curriculum they deliver. The five options were:

1. Abstinence is one option in a broader educational program to prepare adolescents to become sexually healthy adults.

Table 3  
Number (and Percent) of Iowa Districts Identifying How Abstinence is Presented in the District’s Curriculum

| Abstinence is one option in a broader educational program to prepare adolescents to become sexually healthy adults. | 33 (42.8%) |
| Abstinence is the preferred option for adolescents; when contraception is discussed, it is presented as an effective means of providing protection against unintended pregnancy and STIs/HIV for sexually active individuals. | 33 (42.8%) |
| Abstinence is the only positive option outside of marriage; when contraception is discussed, its ineffectiveness in preventing pregnancy and STIs/HIV is highlighted. | 10 (13.0%) |
| Abstinence is only option outside of marriage and all discussion of contraception is prohibited. | 1 (1.3%) |

Respondents were also asked to identify the most influential factor impacting the establishment of the current district policy. Nearly half of superintendents who responded to this item indicated state directives were the most important factor (49.1%, n = 26), 28.3% (n = 15) indicated school board action, 9.4% (n = 5) indicated a special school board advisory committee/task force recommendation, 9.4% (n = 5) indicated teachers’ or other school officials’ support for a broader sexuality education, and 3.8% (n = 2) indicated teachers’ or other school officials’ support for a stricter abstinence education. None reported a formal complaint to the school board, litigation challenging the policy, organized community efforts in support of either stricter or broader sexuality education, federal abstinence-only funds, or CDC HIV prevention education funds as the most influential factor on policy change.

Twelve respondents (9.2%) indicated that their curriculum was currently under review due to...
changes needed to comply with new state requirements to provide “research-based and medically accurate information”. One quarter of the respondents (25.2%, n = 33) reported their districts’ most recent policy had been adopted since 2000. However, 6.1% (n = 8) responded that their most recent policy was adopted in the 1990s. Three percent (n = 4) reported that their most recent policy adoption was in the 1980s and nearly a quarter did not know when their most recent sexuality education policy was adopted (23.7%, n = 31).

**Opt-Out Policy**

Of 107 respondents, 84.1% (n = 90) reported giving parents the option of removing their child from a sexuality education course or class; 2.8% (n = 3) reported requiring parents to give specific permission for their child to attend a sexuality course or class, and 10.3% (n = 11) reported not having a policy on this issue. For those students whose parents opt their children out of, or do not opt them into, the offered sexuality education course or class, 7.5% (n = 8) districts reported the students must attend an alternative course/class that is offered by the school that is directly related to sexuality education; 45.6% (n = 41) of districts reported students must complete coursework or a project related to health; 30.8% (n = 33) of districts reported students are not required to complete any health-related coursework or project, and 7.5% (n = 8) of districts reported ‘other’ requirements must be met.

**Curriculum**

Forty-eight (38.4%) school districts reported adopting a standardized curriculum on sexuality education and 77 (61.6%) districts reported not using a standard curriculum. Of those districts who reported adopted a standardized curriculum, 45 reported use of an internally developed curriculum. However, many identified the use of standardized curricula within their internally developed curriculum. The most common standardized curriculums were *Reducing the Risk, Sex Respect, and Postponing Sexual Involvement*. Significantly more large/urban school districts reported the use of a standardized curriculum, ($X^2 = 16.50, p < .0001$).

Respondents were asked a series of questions specific to curriculum delivery including any topics prohibited from inclusion, use of outside experts for delivery, and whether or not students were divided by gender for delivery of curriculum. Respondents were first asked to identify whether or not teachers were prohibited from teaching or discussing certain topics. Most districts did not prohibit either teaching about or the discussion of condoms to prevent STIs/HIV, contraceptives, masturbation, homosexuality, or abortion. Some schools prohibited the teaching of these topics, but allowed the discussion of them, while others prohibited both teaching and discussion (see Table 4). Although there was a significant difference in the use of a standardized curriculum, there were no differences between urban and rural districts regarding inclusion or prohibition of teaching on specific topics. More than half of all districts (55.7%) allowed outside experts/educators to deliver their sexuality education curriculum. Although division of students by gender was more common at lower grade levels, one district still separated students by gender up to 11th grade (5th grade = 24, 6th grade = 14, 7th = 5, 8th = 3, and 11th grade = 1).

### Table 4

*Number of Iowa Districts that Allow/Prohibit Teaching and Discussion of Specific Topics in Sexuality Education*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Allow #</th>
<th>Prohibit #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>K-4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoms to prevent STIs/HIV</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraceptives</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masturbation</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexuality</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Discussing</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abortion</td>
<td>9  11</td>
<td>10  7</td>
<td>10  6  6  5  5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>2  3</td>
<td>2  1</td>
<td>1  1  1  1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 128 responses to this item, 97.7% reported sexuality education was not raised as a major issue during recent school board elections (n = 123) and 2.3% reported they did not know (n = 3) if sexuality education was a major issue during recent elections. No districts reported that sexuality education was raised as a major issue during recent school board elections. Regarding the attitude of the community at large about the districts’ policies, 25% reported the community strongly supports the district’s policy on sexuality education (n = 31), 1.6% reported the community is divided regarding the current policy (n = 2), and 73.4% reported the community is generally silent on this issue (n = 91) (see Figure 1). No districts reported that the community is generally opposed to the current policy.
Discussion

While rural states may be characterized as more conservative than their urban counterparts, compared to the most recent national data, this rural state is equally or less conservative regarding sexuality education (see Table 1). For example, compared to national data, Iowa school districts were more likely to have policies that portray contraception as effective in preventing pregnancy and STIs. Approximately 85% of districts reported presenting contraception in this context, compared to 65% nationally. Additionally, fewer Iowa schools seem to be highlighting contraception’s ineffectiveness (14% compared to 35% nationally) (Landry et al., 1999). Additionally, within our rural state, while the population centers are often characterized as having more liberal views; we found no statistical difference in the policies, curriculum, or opposition encountered by the districts based on metropolitan status. The
districts toward the adoption of standardized or nationally-recognized curriculum. Most schools reported internally developed curriculum which may or may not reach this standard. However, the use of curriculum known to meet the standard would allow for easy identification and evaluation by the state Department of Education. In addition to standardized curriculum, it is possible that the new law may affect the current censorship on some topics. A medically accurate education would likely include discussion of contraception, condoms to prevent HIV and other STIs, masturbation, homosexuality, and abortion. While all of these topics must be approached in an age-appropriate manner, it is difficult to imagine a research-based medically accurate curriculum without the discussion of contraception or use of condoms to prevent HIV and other STIs.

In the near future, the new law may also alter districts’ approaches to how curriculum is chosen. In almost half of all cases (48.8%), the policy regarding sexuality education is made at school or teacher levels, rather than at district level. This is lower than national data which estimates two-thirds of districts have district-wide policies (Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999). This discrepancy may be due to the long history in Iowa of local control, even to the point of school-specific policy as opposed to a district-wide policy. However, state directives do seem to be important in the district decisions, as they were found to be the most influential factor in the district policies. Time will reveal if movement toward research-based means more decisions at the district-level and fewer at the school and teacher level. Additionally, as these data were collected soon after the passage of the law, they form a baseline for future comparison of how school districts may alter their policies in reaction to the law.

While this law is certainly a step in the right direction, an additional legal step that is needed is comment on the depth of coverage of specific health topics. There is currently no language within the Iowa Code identifying how this information should be covered, for how many minutes, or how many times. In fact, the law can be read to indicate that as long as human growth and development is addressed in one lesson plan, one time, between first and fifth grades, the state requirement is met. The authors also wonder, given the strong case against the effectiveness of abstinence-only education, how much longer it will be allowed to be delivered in a state requiring research-based sexuality education. A decade ago, the Consensus Panel on AIDS of the National Institutes of Health stated that the abstinence-only approach “places policy in direct conflict with science because it ignores overwhelming evidences that other programs are...
effective” (National Institutes of Health, 2008, p. 15) in delaying initiation of intercourse among adolescents, in reducing the number of partners, and in increasing the use of condoms among those already sexually active. Perhaps clarification on how abstinence-only sexuality education fits within the research-based framework and recommendations for time allotted to sexuality education will be included in future legislation. However, the refusal of federal funding for abstinence-only education by Iowa’s Governor in 2008, soon after the adoption of the research-based and medically accurate sexuality education law (Waddington, 2008), is perhaps a signal of the State’s recognition of the incompatibility of abstinence-only education with the requirement that sexuality education be research-based and medically accurate. Furthermore, the appropriation of federal funding for abstinence-based education under President Obama’s Administration (Boonstra, 2010a) may lead to further movement away from abstinence-only education in states previously accepting Title V funds.

Conclusion

While the data reveal the status of sexuality education in Iowa schools, some limitations should be noted. First, the response rate was typical, but low enough to generate possible concerns about non-response bias. While the sample was representative geographically and by district size, results may not reflect the population as well as a larger sample may have. Second, as this study was a replication of a previous national survey, few changes were made to allow comparison to the original survey. This restricted the ability of the research team to ask more specific questions about classroom practice. Also, these data reflect sexuality education policies as reported by the district superintendent (or designee), rather than what classroom teachers responsible for sexuality education report happening in the classroom. Thus these results pertain to district policy on sexuality education delivery rather than to actual classroom practice.

The status of sexuality education policies in Iowa is positive overall. It is encouraging that, compared to national data, school districts in this rural state are more likely to have policies that portray contraception as effective in preventing pregnancy and the role of condoms in helping protect against STIs. The lack of community opposition to sexuality education is also a cause for optimism. The new law continues to move Iowa in the right direction, protecting our youth and improving their opportunities for a healthy future. However, future legislation addressing time allotted, content, and depth of coverage would greatly improve the status of this state’s and all states’ sexuality education status. In the meantime, it is important for school leaders and those involved in sexuality education to recognize that the need for sexuality education is no less dire in rural areas than it is in urban areas and the curriculum and policy related to sexuality education need not be more conservative in rural areas than in urban counterparts.

References


http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5704a1.htm


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