

“Canning” Social Capital: Rural Literacy, Community Resilience, and Solving the Rural Schools Problem

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Executive Summary

Problem of Practice

Over the last fifty years, populations in the rural counties of New Hampshire have decreased. This decrease is frequently attributed to socioeconomic changes such as closure of traditional employment sectors. In particular, the 18-24 age band has decreased most significantly, with literature describing this as a “rural brain drain”. This population loss exacerbates challenges in rural communities already trying to bounce back and build from socioeconomic conditions.

Overview:

In the Summer and Fall of 2023, public high school superintendents in the rural counties of New Hampshire (Coos, Carroll, Grafton, Sullivan, and Cheshire) were invited to participate in research related to school curriculum and community resilience. A total of 15 school curriculum leaders completed surveys, three additionally participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss their school’s relationship to the community, community partners, and curriculum. Additionally, data from the U.S. Census was used to calculate the social capital of each of the 26 school schools in the area under study, compiled from each of the towns in the SAU or for the high school.

The study found that while all schools engaged in student-centered learning, and described strong support for student growth and betterment, communities had different levels of social capital—an interpersonal and community attribute that helps support community cohesion and resilience. Communities with higher social capital generally had schools that engaged the community as sites of learning—in their mission / vision, as part of ELOs, and used school-developed place-based education with students. Communities with lower social capital generally had schools that described their communities as sources of funding, had a focus on students leaving the community after graduation, and used curriculum that was purchased through a third-party vendor.

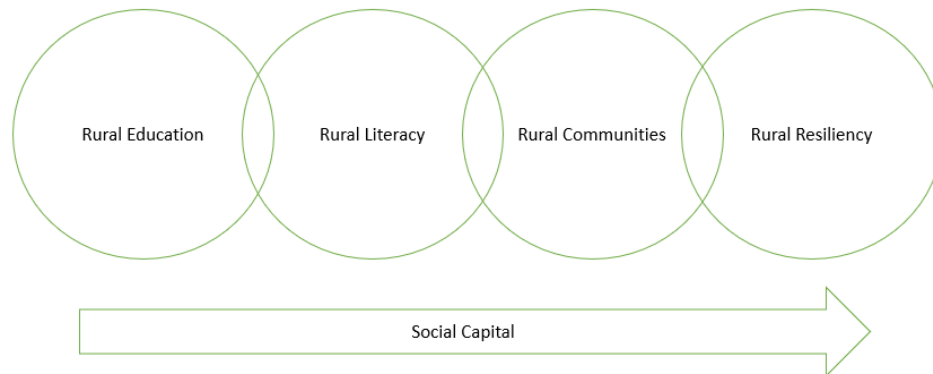
Possible Implications

- Towns and schools can further develop their partnerships. Communities that seek to develop social capital and resilience can support local high schools. In turn, schools can engage in curriculum that actively engages students in learning in their community.
- Schools could partner together to develop local curriculum that uses resources through multiple communities. This could include core curriculum, and include area non-profits and other agencies.
- Centering frequently fraught conversations related to school funding through a lens of social capital and community resilience, as well as local learning could provide common ground on which to build understanding.

Key Terms:

- **Community Resilience:** A community's ability to endure socioeconomic and/or natural disaster.
- **Social Capital:** An intangible community attribute which connects members of a community to each other, to similar communities, and to unlike communities and governmental structures.
- **Rural Literacy:** A person's ability to navigate the rhetorical positionality of a rural identity.
- **Rural Education:** Educational practices related to rural communities.
- **Out Migration:** Population leaving one place to another.
- **Rural Schools Problem:** A phrase coined by Ellwood Cubberly in describing a series of problems related to the effectiveness of rural schools.

Theoretical Framework:



Recommended Reading:

Rural Literacies by Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen Schell

Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery by Daniel Aldrich

Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America by Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas.

“Constructing and Reconstructing the ‘Rural Schools Problem’” by Catharine Biddle and Amy Azano