INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2010), 56% of school districts in the United States are rural. Rural education has long been recognized as critical for the academic success of rural students. Recognizing the importance of understanding the context and challenges facing rural education, the 2013 National Conference on Rural Education Research, sponsored by McFarland, an edition of the Rural Education Report, was hosted in Lincoln, Nebraska. The conference provided a platform for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to engage in guided discussion, explore the critical role of research in understanding and improving rural education, and identify strategies to address these challenges.

Conference Purposes
- Engaging national researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders in constructive dialogue about current and future needs in rural education research
- Facilitating communication and collaboration among stakeholders and emerging connections for rural education research
- Exploring methods by which research findings can be translated and transmitted to rural practice and policy
- Discussing the impact of research on rural education and identifying areas where more research is needed

Conference Context
- Presentations were organized around three sources of influence on rural student academic success:
  - Teacher influence: exploring the impact of targeted professional development experiences, along with the differences in professional development experiences among teachers in rural, urban, and suburban areas
  - Community and family influence: exploring the impact that community resources and parent involvement can have on the academic success of rural students
  - School and contextual influences: exploring evidence of effective methods of rural education research
- A descriptive study of differences in academic performance based on location and access to certain resources
- Discussions of methodological considerations that impact rural education research

METHODS

Participants
- Participants included 10 conference attendees representing a variety of backgrounds, including educators, policymakers, and researchers
- The discussions were facilitated by 10 graduate research assistants, who served as note-takers and guided the discussions

Data Collection & Analysis
- Research presentations addressing the three thematic areas identified earlier were reviewed and analyzed
- Graduate research assistants held notes on the discussions outlined in each thematic area
- The research assistants then developed specific codes for the themes
- These codes were refined and clustered into broader categories

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Questions Addressed at Each Roundtable
- What have we learned from research that can inform practice and policy related to (a) teacher, (b) family and community, and (c) school and contextual influences on rural student achievement?
- What is the role of rural education research in informing policy and practice related to (a) teacher, (b) family and community, and (c) school and contextual influences on rural student achievement?
- What are the challenges associated with conducting research related to (a) teacher, (b) family and community, and (c) school and contextual influences on rural student achievement?
- What are the challenges and opportunities related to conducting research on rural education?
- What are the next immediate steps for rural education research, policy, and practice related to community and family influences on rural student success?
- What are the next immediate steps for rural education research, policy, and practice related to school and contextual influences on rural student success?

Questions Dealing with Teacher Influences on Rural Academic Success
- How can rural educators, districts, and universities work to improve educational development opportunities for teachers in rural communities?
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Questions Dealing with Contextual Influences on Rural Academic Success
- How can urban, suburban, and rural education practitioners work to inform family-school partnership approaches in rural communities?
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Questions Dealing with Community and Family Influences on Rural Student Success
- How can urban, suburban, and rural educators work to inform family-school partnership approaches in rural communities?
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Questions Dealing with School and Contextual Influences on Rural Student Success
- How can rural schools, districts, and universities work to inform family-school partnership approaches in rural communities?
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Defining and Accounting for the Rural Context
- Lack of a consistent definition of “rural”
- Need for meaningful, relevant criteria for the rural designation
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Influences on Student Outcomes
- Concerns about the lack of a unified definition of “rural”
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DISCUSSION

Analyzing the results of the conference discussions, a primary theme of interdisciplinary research partnerships. These themes emerged over the course of the roundtable sessions, where experts across a range of disciplines, including researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, engaged in guided discussions. The conference explored the critical role of research in understanding and improving rural education, while also identifying strategies to address these challenges.

One key theme that emerged is the need for interdisciplinary partnerships among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to advance rural education research. The discussions highlighted the importance of collaboration among different disciplines and professions to better understand rural education challenges and develop effective solutions.

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