

It's All About the Quality of Advice, Guidance, and Research for Rural Educators: A Rejoinder to Howley, Theobald, and Howley

Louis F. Cicchinelli and Ceri B. Dean
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

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Howley, Theobald, and Howley (2005) appear to focus on two major issues in their reply to the McREL review (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005): (a) the utility of quantitative study of schools in the "rural lifeworld," and (b) the motivation of McREL staff members for reviewing the content and methods of existing rural education research.

First, let's be clear that we at McREL agree with Howley et al. that rural communities and schools are a critical element of this nation's fabric and should be preserved. We also agree that "rural cultures and ways of engaging life" (p. 1) are oftentimes unique and perhaps even elusive. We are less certain if we agree that the "generative meaningfulness of the rural lifeworld is nearly everywhere under persistent attack" or that the "consideration of rural meaningfulness is essential to rural education research" (p. 2). But we'll concede these philosophical arguments for now and simply reiterate the underlying premise of our review of rural research, which is that all children and schools, including those in rural settings, deserve access to the very best information about high-quality and effective schooling. While Howley et al. may choose to see our belief that rigorous research can improve schools as "hubris," we view it as practical wisdom. Since 1966, McREL has been devoting a significant portion of its resources to helping rural schools translate the findings of education research into student success, success measured not just by higher test scores, but by the judgment of people who are in the best position to know if rural students are succeeding: rural educators, parents, and the students themselves.

Recently, constituents from across our Regional Educational Laboratory states asked us to assist them in understanding what guidance is available for rural research, particularly as it relates to meeting the requirements of the

No Child Left Behind legislation. They wanted to know what exists, how good it is, and what directions should be taken in the future. We responded with a targeted review of the rural research literature that identifies the topics addressed and examines the quality of research available to address those issues. We also recommended an agenda for future research. The article, "A Look at the Condition of Rural Education Research: Setting a Direction for Future Research" (Arnold et al., 2005), was prepared by McREL staff to summarize and share our response.

This brings us to the second major issue raised in the Howley et al. reply: the motivation for our review. While we don't believe that "getting personal" generally has a place in scientific journals, as the Director of McREL's Regional Educational Laboratory Program and the Director of its Laboratory Field Services Unit, we think a direct response is warranted since the question was raised.

Our colleagues question the motivation of McREL and our staff in reviewing the rural literature, and in offering the view that the quality of much of that work needs improvement and that rural research might be better focused on uniquely rural issues. They speculate that McREL is simply carrying out the current political party line regarding rigorous research. The authors go on to suggest that McREL found the condition of rural research lacking for no other reason than to align itself with the current direction of the Institute for Education Sciences (IES) in the U.S. Department of Education. We are pretty certain that many in the U.S. Department of Education and across the research community would find this suggestion laughable. Nevertheless, if our longstanding mission to improve education for all students through high-quality research, product development, and service aligns us with the call for rigorous research from IES, then so be it.

We do not apologize for our mission to make a difference in the quality of education for all students through applied research, product development, and service. In large part, this mission has been developed over the years by our

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Louis F. Cicchinelli, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 4601 DTC Boulevard, Suite 500, Denver, CO 80237. (lcicchinelli@mcrel.org)

Board of Directors, many of whom hail from rural communities all across the nation's heartland. It has been honed and implemented by our dedicated staff, many of whom drive more than 100 miles a day from their rural homes to work at McREL. We have presented an objective review and believe that it is in the best interest of rural researchers everywhere. It is no longer adequate, in this day and age of research sophistication, to argue the value and success of rural education based solely on belief in and passion for rural communities. Nor is it adequate to argue that rural education is too unique to be the subject of rigorous research, or that scientific inquiry and sound decision-making are not relevant to rural education and communities. We must move beyond these beliefs and philosophical conjecture toward more rigorous research-based knowledge that gives us the information needed to direct and improve rural educational systems.

In many ways, our passion for rural education and our desire to see rural students succeed aligns us with the Howleys and Theobalds of the rural education research com-

munity. However, we believe that the approach to getting there should be based on rigorous, defensible, and replicable science. We believe that rural educators and rural communities deserve the very best available advice, guidance, and yes, research. So we at McREL will continue to meet the needs of rural educators through an ongoing program of rigorous research on topics that matter to rural schools.

Reference

- Arnold, M. L., Newman, J. H., Gaddy, B. B., & Dean, C. B. (2005). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a direction for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(6). Retrieved from <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/20-6.htm>
- Howley, C. B., Theobald, P., & Howley, A. A. (2005). What rural education research is of most worth? A reply to Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(18). Available at <http://www.umaine.edu/jrre/20-18.pdf>