

ELEVATING RURAL VOICES

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Background

The rural context of eastern North Carolina is a distinct environment enriched by its history and culture and distinguished by the determination and resilience of its inhabitants. In this paper, we provide the overview of a project in which an interdisciplinary research team from ECU's Rural Education Institute (REI) centered the voices of the educators, parents, and students as they informed us of the educational affordances that summer programming made available in 2021 and 2022. ECU's REI serves as a collaborator with rural stakeholders to research, innovate, and widely disseminate knowledge to benefit rural schools and communities. Ultimately, we seek to improve educational outcomes for rural students, schools, and communities. The REI interdisciplinary research team consists of faculty with expertise in Birth-Kindergarten, Special Education, Foundations, Elementary Education, Art Education, Foreign Language Education, Counselor Education, and Educational Leadership. The faculty team is connected with rural researchers and scholars across the country while embedded in the rural counties in eastern North Carolina. The team was committed to elevating eastern North Carolina rural voices and perspectives around summer learning programming. Given this orientation, researchers in REI aimed to (a) collaboratively design research to refine the effectiveness of extended learning recently instituted by eastern NC rural school districts, (b) amplify the voices of students, teachers, administrators, and families of our rural schools and communities as DPI explores best practices in learning recovery and acceleration, and (c) provide actionable data for future school extension and learning recovery programming in our rural region. REI collaborated with 3 rural school districts in the design and execution of the multi-case study.

Framing the Rural Context

North Carolina has the second highest number of rural students in the country- 568,161; roughly 40% of the public school students are spread geographically across 78 of the 100 counties (NC Rural Center, 2021). Additionally, North Carolina has a student population that is more apt to live in poverty and more racially diverse than most other rural states (Showalter et al., 2019). In the 2020 Roadmap of Need report, eastern North Carolina is referred to as "the other North Carolina" populated by youth living in communities experiencing "economic decline that have struggling schools, few out-of-school opportunities, and limited options for healthy

activities” (p. 3). While social and economic forces pose challenges for educational spaces everywhere (McLaughlin et al., 2014), rural schools face additional challenges in teacher recruitment, mental health access, and social-emotional support that ensure equitable practices and support for all children (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Greenberg & Ash, 2012; NCDPI, 2022). It is well-documented that factors such as poverty, rurality, isolation, and lack of academic and mental healthcare resources have a major impact on school safety as well as on the overall well-being of students, their families, and the community (Crumb et al., 2019).

Rural students benefit from place-based, culturally responsive education (Baker et al., 2023). Culturally responsive rural education approaches provide educators with the opportunity to engage students respectfully and appreciatively within their natural settings of home, school, and community (Gay, 2006; Young & Chambers, 2020). Relevant principles in culturally responsive rural education include recognition of one’s ethnocentric and urban normative biases, knowledge of student cultural backgrounds, understanding of community political, economic, and social contexts, an ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate communication strategies, and a commitment to caring (Anthony-Stevens, 2018; Weinstein et al., 2004; Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005).

To situate the research, we utilized the concept of rural cultural wealth, a place-based conceptual framework, grounded in the lived experiences of rural residents (Crumb et al., 2022). This framework acknowledges the multiple strengths and assets of rural people. The framework comprises four constructs: rural resourcefulness, rural ingenuity, rural familism, and rural community unity. Rural resourcefulness refers to the capacity of rural residents to overcome socio-contextual adversities that threaten their livelihood and well-being through taking actions to mitigate limitations. Rural ingenuity refers to the inventiveness and adaptive ability of rural residents. Rural familism is characterized by a feeling of belonging among family members and the integration of individual activities and achievements towards attaining a collective goal. Finally, rural community unity is the outcome of rural residents’ understanding of, appreciation for, and social networking around their resources, resulting in unifying and organizing behaviors. By first recognizing and appreciating these constructs, we had a common understanding of the value of rural people and places and an openness to learning ways to improve educational outcomes.

The Study

REI collaborated with three rural school districts in the design and execution of a multi-case qualitative study. This collaborative arrangement was based on the research-practice partnership model (Coburn & Penuel, 2016), a holistic model that is inclusive and participatory in the identification of issues, tracking of data, development of solutions towards transformative practice, and improved outcomes using a participatory action research design. Penuel et al. (2023) shares six attributes as key to successful research-practice partnerships: long-term collaboration, focus on educational improvement or equitable transformation, engagement with research, diverse forms of expertise, shift in power relations, and joint work. Further, REI

embraces the position of Nugent et al. (2017) that "partnerships are critical to conducting, implementing and sustaining meaningful and impactful rural education research" (p. 56). We set out to collaborate with district leaders to develop a targeted research plan to examine student, family, educator, and administrator experiences in extended learning across 2021-22. We began with conversations with superintendents, then at their direction, expanded to district leadership teams, and building administrators. We provided a menu of multi-dimensional qualitative data collection opportunities. We intentionally aimed to partner with rural school districts in high-poverty counties to assess and discern how to provide equitable educational services to students, families, and school personnel in these historically under-resourced rural areas. We incorporated Community Learning Exchanges (Guajardo et al., 2015) to gather input, when possible, in each county. Community Learning Exchanges are assemblies held within the local community in which students, families, school personnel, and stakeholders meet to exchange ideas and strategies that sustain positive school environments and foster progressive community change. Researchers compiled field notes from the CLEs which further enlightened our inductive analyses about specific interpretations of data.

Our participating three counties were Lenoir, Tyrrell, and Bertie Counties. Our school district partners varied in size and focus for the case study, as these three rural North Carolina school districts represent rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote locales in Eastern North Carolina (SBE Districts 1-2). The problems of practice (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017) developed in our research-practice partnerships had these two foci: the Lenoir County school district research would focus on their elementary summer programming, while the Tyrrell and Bertie Counties school districts research would focus on the entirety of their K-12 offerings. We used a cross-case analysis approach (Yin, 2018) to explore perspectives on the implementation and impact of school extension programs on student re-engagement and learning recovery across each school district. The following research question guided the study: To what extent does school extension programming in a rural context impact student learning, and school engagement?

- A) From the students' perspective?
- B) From the families' perspective?
- C) From the educators' perspective?
- D) From the administrators' perspective?

Overall, the biggest barrier in the research process was scheduling time for data collection. Beyond typical calendar conflicts with university and school district schedules, we experienced disruptions in data collection due to weather events and national school shootings. As is often the case in established research-practice partnerships, university and school district faculty approached the extended data collection with respect and humility as we navigated the joint work. Additionally, because we were collecting data post the 2021-2022 school year, it was sometimes difficult for younger student participants to recall information related to the summer programming. The benefit of working with the three districts was the long-term collaboration we

have with each district via REI and ECU's Latham Clinical Schools Network, a partnership with 43 public schools in eastern NC.

What We Learned

We identified five themes in the data gathered from rural students, families, educators, and administrators:

1. **Collaborative Planning.** The importance of timely and collaborative planning and structuring of summer extension programs were a common finding across each rural district.
2. **Intentional Engagement and Flexibility.** Educator, family, and student respondents noted value in the "engagement" and "flexibility" of summer extension programs. Educators shared that the smaller class sizes allowed them to identify students' needs that may be overlooked in the full year, such as when a child is not learning on grade level.
3. **Educator, Parent, and Student Enthusiasm for Learning.** All three districts each had one central site (within each district) for summer extension programs. That meant for two of the districts, students, and staff commuted to a central school location to engage in the programs. Additionally, respondents shared that summer learning and extension programs seemed more relaxed and less rigid, prompting less anxiety for all educators, students, and families. This was shared across districts.
4. **Academic and Non-Academic Student Outcomes.** Respondents reported an array of both academic and non-academic student outcomes regarding the summer extension programs in rural contexts.
5. **Areas for Improvement.** Key areas reported were logistical challenges related to orchestrating programs (e.g., insufficient planning time); staff shortages; less resources for learning material; fluctuating student attendance; and less engaging curricula for middle and high school level students.

In rural areas that experience persistent poverty, it is ideal to work collaboratively with school staff, families, and communities to design and deliver efficient summer extension programs. We offer these key considerations for summer programming in rural districts.

- **Keep learning fun and engaging.** It was recommended to incorporate the following: project-based learning, small groups, socio-emotional learning, recess, field trips, art, and music. Offering open enrollment, including exceptional children was suggested.

- **Center community engagement/connectiveness.** Summer extension programs serve multiple purposes in rural, high-poverty areas that have fewer supplemental educational resources. Rural schools are often deemed as places of trust in which youth can receive services while the school is a hub for community-engaged support of students and families. We propose that approaches that include community members and professionals such as research practice partnerships or other partnerships with schools and community organizations are ways to leverage useful resources and information with the unified goal to advance rural students.
- **Increase financial support for positions, salaries, and resource development.** Many participants noted that county financial and human resources were stretched which impacted their ability to provide the optimal summer learning experience for their students. Staff shortages in rural areas are an ongoing concern and even more poignant during summer periods.
- **Coordinate cross-county collaboration for small counties.** County-wide collaborations can benefit the professional development of teachers in various ways via exposure to varied teaching methods which could include culturally responsive practices, securing additional classroom/learning material and resources, as well as adding to the human capital in historically under-resourced districts with the unified goal to improve rural students' educational outcomes. This finding stood out as a transformative approach to unifying education professionals in rural spaces with the shared goal of improving summer learning.
- **Provide opportunities for educator input in curriculum development and instructional decisions.** Teachers who were given the flexibility to alter summer learning program curricula believed that autonomy improved their summer learning program effectiveness.
- **Protect planning time and shortened day.** While students overwhelmingly preferred the shorter days in the summer learning program (i.e., this past summer versus the year prior), many students reported that not going on field trips (due to the shortened day) as the aspect of the summer learning program missing from this past summer.
- **Offer continual opportunities for input sessions from students and families.** A recommendation is to hold community learning exchanges that provide students, families, and school personnel the opportunity to share input on summer programs based on a place-based education approach that connects classrooms and communities and centers the rural learner.

Conclusion

The findings from this study indicated that summer extension programs in rural districts have significant academic and nonacademic outcomes. These findings can inform policy and the

allocation of fiscal resources to rural districts to continuously improve summer extension programs. The findings signify that attention should be given to the overall summer program structure within rural contexts, including student and staff recruitment, engaged curricula across PK-12 levels, and involvement of community stakeholders and organizations for supplemental learning experiences (e.g., field trips). The final report was shared with district leaders and REI looks forward to opportunities for further engagement with each district, following the model of the research-practice partnerships that aim for continuous education improvement. These opportunities may include connecting with state and local entities for fiscal support, galvanizing local organizations for summer programming support, or rural advocacy in general at the micro and macro levels. As we strive for equitable education outcomes in rural districts, collaborative and intentional planning is necessary to prevent burnout of rural school staff who are already stretched for time and resources during the full academic year. The constructs of rural resourcefulness, ingenuity, and community unity (Crumb et al., 2022) were apparent in the participants' reports of the varied strategies they used as collaborative approaches to design and deliver summer learning programs in rural, economically disadvantaged communities.

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