

What Do We Know About Rural Child Care? An Overview of Issues

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Although many contributions of preschool experiences to success in school have been documented, only limited understanding of this linkage exists for rural children. Most child care research has occurred in urban and suburban settings; by the standards developed through such research, rural children appear to face less available, lower quality care. They are also less likely to participate in the formal group programs considered by some observers to be important preparation for public school. This apparent disadvantage for rural children needs careful exploration, especially to (a) clarify the links between child care and public school transition; (b) understand better the patterns of child care choice and utilization among rural families; and (c) examine the ecological relationships among families, child care providers, schools and communities in the rural setting.

Introduction

Most American children now routinely experience child care as part of their development. Nearly 60% of mothers with children under 6 are now working, presumably implying a need for some form of alternate child care (Children's Defense Fund, 1992, p. 16). Nor is the weaving of child care into the preschooler's developmental context an urban phenomenon. Contrary to the nostalgic stereotyping of rural childhood as an idyllic, family-centered experience, children in rural areas are slightly more likely to have employed parents (Children's Defense Fund, 1992, p. 16). Thus, these families have as great a need for child care as families in nonrural settings.

Despite the acknowledged presence of child care in the lives of rural children—who constitute nearly one fourth of all U.S. children—the preponderance of current child care literature focuses on urban and suburban settings. Articles singling out rural families' relationship to child care are rare exceptions. Even landmark national studies (e.g., Divine-Hawkins, 1981) or literature reviews (e.g., Phillips, Voran, Kisker, Howes, & Whitebrook, 1994) have been skewed toward metropolitan subjects, neglecting the perspectives of rural families and providers. For example, a recent major study, cited as "the first in-depth, observational study of family child care and relative care in more than a decade" (Galinsky, Howes, Kontos, & Shinn, 1994, p. 1), focused on three metropolitan settings. Consequently, much of our knowledge about rural child care rests on scattered studies. In a summary review of

child care quality, Phillips (1987) remarked that "our research on child care is an essentially urban literature, with a few examples of suburban studies. Rural child care is an unknown quantity . . ." (p. 123).

The absence of rural participants from most studies is not the only problem in assessing the status of rural child care. Elastic definitions of rurality increase the difficulty of sorting through applicable child care research. Just as studies of rural schools vary in their operationalization of "rural," so do child care studies. Some researchers attempt to convey great precision in their reports (e.g., Atkinson [1994], who considered rural communities to number 2,500 people or fewer), while others report findings more generally (e.g., Kontos [1994], who examined "rural, midwestern family day care" in a "small midwestern city and surrounding rural areas" [pp. 87-88]). Such variation in definitions of rural child care, coupled with the few studies employing rurality as a variable, make drawing conclusions about rural child care all the more difficult. Most frequently, researchers rely on U.S. Census Bureau definitions of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas as proxies for "urban" and "rural" populations. This categorization is not without flaws since nonmetropolitan includes settlements of up to 50,000 people, thus encompassing small towns and scattered farms in the same measure. Nonetheless, the metropolitan/nonmetropolitan distinction is a logical use of readily accessible state and national databases, and is the classification most commonly employed by studies considered below. At present, "nonmetropolitan" provides an imperfect, yet standard, reference for researchers who scrutinize rural child care.

Although the research may be sparse and the definition of rural at times imprecise, the status of rural child care carries a special relevance for public school educa-

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tors. Quality child care appears to contribute to positive experiences in subsequent schooling, predicting "better academic progress and school skills and fewer behavior problems in boys and . . . better school skills as well as fewer behavior problems in girls" (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990, p. 69). Addressing links between preschool and public school, Caldwell (1992) noted

several major policy-oriented research reports [that] had stressed the value for subsequent school achievement of participation in high-quality early childhood programs . . . [and] a number of reports from various governmental, quasi-governmental, and private groups . . . that stressed the importance of early education and care in order to protect the learning careers of children at risk. (p. 188)

The significance of preschool experiences for public school achievement has most recently been crystallized in Goals 2000 which proclaims "By the year 2,000, all children in American will start school ready to learn." In response, education advocates have urged understanding of and support for early childhood experiences to aid in accomplishing this goal (e.g., Southern Regional Education Board's, 1992, 1994).

Further, public school educators recognize that the line distinguishing early childhood from early elementary programs is an increasingly imprecise division. The National Association for the Education of Young Children places children ages birth through 8 in its purview, strongly advocating developmentally appropriate practices which erase some of the traditional distinctions among preschool, kindergarten, and early elementary classrooms (Bredenkamp, 1987). For example, the Southern Regional Education Board, in addressing school readiness issues, argues that schools need to get ready for children by adopting practices most familiarly associated with preschool settings, such as child-initiated learning, developmentally-appropriate assessment, multi-aged grouping, integrated curriculum, and teacher-training rooted in child development principles (Southern Regional Education Board, 1994). Thus, as theory and practice merge, early elementary educators and early childhood educators may share more common dialogue, perhaps facilitating the transition between preschool and kindergarten more smoothly.

Finally, elementary educators are aware that they teach children who both come from and continue in child care. Children attending traditional part-day kindergartens are likely also to be in part-day alternate child care, such as family day care; young children in first, second, and third grades may be latchkey youngsters but they may also be enrolled in before-and-after school programs, or family day care. Thus, educators should be aware of the context

outside of school that continues to affect their pupils' development. It is also important that public school educators understand the complexity of U.S. child care.

[It] is not a monolithic service system. It includes an array of professional providers and program types, such as child care centers, family day care and group homes, public and private nursery schools, prekindergartens and kindergartens, Head Start programs, and before-and-after school programs, as well as informal arrangements such as relative care, in-home babysitting, and nanny care. (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990, p. 8)

Such diversity is subsumed under the category of "child care," challenging the public school educator to consider how these experiences affect the child in the grade school classroom.

The Ecology of Rural Families and Child Care

Rural Families and Children

Although ecological studies of family life have increasingly gained appeal, few researchers have investigated how rural residence affects the relationship between families and child care. Nostalgic myths about rural life persist in the collective American image, a place characterized as "peaceful and free of much of the stress, strain and bustle of urban settings . . . [A] healthy environment in which to raise children, a place where family ties and friendships are valued" (Hansen, 1987, p. 148). In such an idyllic setting, one might suppose that cherished children growing up in intact, extended families live a protected childhood, free of the stresses affecting many American children. In such a perception, rural residence plainly is a significant ecological variable that positively influences children's development. This "rural mystique" has "widespread acceptance . . . among persons in the general populations . . . [including] the extensive research on residential preference which has long shown that many more people have a preference for rural living than are found to be there" (Willits, Bealer, & Timber, 1990, p. 575).

Starkly, demographic data paint a contrasting image. Rural children live in poverty at rates equal to children in central cities (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992). They are subject to the same family dislocations, including increasing rates of single parenthood (Lichter & Eggebeen, 1992). Both Black and White children living in mother-only families are more likely to be poor if they live in rural areas than if they live in metropolitan settings ("Nonmetro and Metro Children," 1992, p. 27). Rural children in intact families are more likely to have chronically underem-

ployed or seasonally unemployed wage earners in the home (thus in need of child care) but are less likely to have available to them quality, accessible care (Sherman, 1992). For minority families, rural residence appears especially linked to economic disadvantage (Jensen & Tienda, 1989).

This latter perspective offers a troubling counterbalance to the popular image of rurality and reinforces the importance of considering rural residence as a variable in the study of families. With respect particularly to child care, such findings present numerous questions: How do family and child care settings interact in the rural community context? Do rural families choose different child care options, and if so, why? Is rural child care distinctive from metropolitan child care? What does the quality of rural child care imply for school transition and readiness? Scattered about in the literature are pieces of evidence that describe rural families' possibly distinctive relationship to child care. Compared with research on urban and suburban families, such evidence is meager.

Availability and Quality

Rural families, apparently, are faced with a different array of child care choices than their metropolitan counterparts. For example, center-based care is far less available in rural than in urban/suburban areas (Kisker, Hofferth, Phillips, & Farquhar, 1991). Only one in four rural children is in any form of group care, such as nursery school, preschool, or day-care center, compared with one in three metropolitan children ("Nonmetro and Metro Children," 1992, p. 27). Further, when compared to metropolitan data, those fewer centers are disproportionately sponsored by Head Start and public schools, underscoring an orientation toward subsidized care for low-income families and leaving many working poor families without a choice.

Sherman (1992) describes the relative disadvantage for rural children due to the lack of center-based care, which he equates with educationally-oriented care:

While parents of younger preschoolers sometimes prefer informal child care settings, many parents of three and 4-year-old children prefer more formal settings because they believe such programs will better prepare their children for school. Yet rural children are considerably less likely than their metro peers to be in more formal early childhood programs. (p. 96)

The belief that center-based care is inherently more "educational" underlies increasing parental preference on the national level for such formal arrangements—"a shift related, at least in part, to parents' desire to encourage and enhance their children's learning experiences" (Hayes,

Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990, p. 33). Although there is no empirical confirmation that center-based care ensures this outcome for all children, such comments reflect many observers' beliefs that rural children with less available center-based care may be disadvantaged in preparing for formal learning opportunities in the public school.

Further, common indices of quality in center-based care suggest that existing rural centers may be inferior to urban ones. Initial child care research has consistently identified key characteristics crucial to program quality: group size, caregiver/child ratio, and caregiver qualifications (Phillips, 1987). Briefly, well-trained teachers working with smaller groups of children foster constructive interaction and positive developmental outcomes for children. Unfortunately, rural teachers have fewer years of schooling than urban teachers as well as notably lower wages, the latter being an "important predictor of quality care" (Kisker et al., 1991, p. 110). Finally, fees in rural centers are far lower than those in metropolitan centers, and "fees and quality indicators [e.g., group size, caregiver-child ratio and caregiver qualifications] vary together; the higher the quality, the higher the average fee" (Kisker et al., 1991, p. 202).

Further findings show that, in some age groups, rural centers have higher staff-child ratios than is desirable, and that rural states are less likely to regulate child care stringently (Sherman, 1992). Collectively, such evidence suggests that rural children encounter less available, lower-quality centers at a time when the links between high quality early childhood programming and readiness for school have been widely acknowledged (Southern Regional Education Board, 1992, 1994).

Given such apparently constricted choices of center-based care, where do rural parents place their children? Without question, home-based day care is the preferred rural model. Studies employing rural/urban distinctions underscore rural families' greater utilization of home-based programs (Kisker et al., 1991, p. 5) and a disinclination to use out-of-home group care ("Nonmetro and Metro Children," 1992). For some families, less available center-based care means home-based care may be the only option. Again, national data suggest that this choice may disadvantage rural children at a time when quality care and education are instrumental: rural family day care providers are less educated, less likely to have specialized training, more likely to have higher child-staff ratios, and charge much lower fees (Kisker et al., 1991). Further, rural states are far less likely either to regulate family day care or to employ stringent quality standards in licensing. Consequently, rural children may be disproportionately disadvantaged and/or jeopardized by less than optimal settings.

In summary, limited national survey data portray a bleak child care opportunity for rural children.

Problems in Studying Rural Child Care

Such findings, while informative, are incomplete. Data on program quality, generated primarily in metropolitan settings, certainly cast rural care in an inferior light. However, it is important to review such an apparent deficit model within the ecology of rural families. First, few national surveys have even included rural/urban distinctions. Most researchers have focused on urban/suburban contexts of child care, only infrequently considering rurality as a variable. Such studies often presume a center-based or regulated home-based model for child care, thus overlooking perhaps an even more vast clientele employing non-regulated care. This latter clientele may be principally located in rural areas, as indicated by demographic data. Thus far, we have little qualitative or descriptive analyses of rural care settings upon which to draw. It may be premature to assume that rural care is inferior because it is not center-based.

Second, child care research has recently entered what some analysts describe as a "third wave" (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990, pp. 72-76). Rather than focusing on isolated program quality characteristics, researchers are increasingly attending to linkages between family and child care environments. Recognizing that these settings for human development reciprocally influence one another, these researchers are examining the interplay of family and care variables, noting more carefully, for example, how choice and quality of day care programs might be affected by family factors. Consonant with this approach would be closer attention to rural families engagement with child care, thus perhaps enlarging and enhancing our present understanding of the context of rural child care and its subsequent quality.

Parental Choices

Equally important as the limited array of care options may be an understanding of how and why rural families choose child care. First, earlier research describes a long-standing hesitancy among rural parents to use center-based care, with a distinct preference for informal (principally relatives) care (Shoffner, 1986). More recent research buttresses this finding: Stegelin (1990) found that rural Kentucky families utilized informal child care resources (friends, neighbors, relatives) at a far higher rate than urban Kentucky families: 35% of rural families used informal care compared to 19% of urban families. Atkinson's (1994) study of Iowa families found far greater utilization of relative care among rural families and far less group child care for children of any age than their urban Iowa counterparts. Such a pattern of noncenter, informal care may simply reflect the lack of care alternatives, but it could also indicate a value preference. For example,

Squibb's (1992) study of multiple arrangements among rural Maine families disclosed that clear strategies and preferences underlay their packaging of various forms of care for different children in their families.

This possibility of differential values affecting child care choices receives tentative support from a study of parenting values in rural and urban families (Coleman, Ganong, Clark, & Madsen, 1989), which found distinct differences based on residence. Finding that urban parents more highly valued social development for their children, the researchers concluded that perhaps

urban populations tend to be more mobile, and fewer close kin are readily available. For children to have friends they must learn the social skills necessary to assimilate into new groups and maintain social interaction. (1989, p. 332)

Thus, urban parents might prefer center-based programs for the social mix and stimulation they can provide their relatively more isolated children.

Such explorations of potential parenting values based on rural residence, while intriguing, are scarce. Nor is the link between values and actual choices always apparent. For example, both Stegelin's (1990) and Atkinson's (1994) research with rural families found greater use of relative/friend child care among rural families. Was this due to preference, lack of alternatives, or ease of connection? In a smaller community, personalized knowledge may make informal arrangement feasible and mutually beneficial. Again, Atkinson (1994) found that rural families were significantly more likely "to report that care-givers offered their services when child care was needed for employment" (p. 19). Such volunteering of child care provision may be complemented by a more stable relationship: Atkinson also found that rural mothers had utilized their care-givers for significantly longer periods of time than urban mothers. Such stability is emerging as an indicator of quality in care and may also positively influence early school adjustment (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990).

Such findings of personal connection present hints that merit further exploration around the personal and community context in which rural child care occurs. Until we have researched the chains of how providers and families connect with one another in rural settings, we really cannot determine if the pattern of choice and utilization is different from urban areas—or if it is, why. My own preliminary work with rural providers suggests that they often enter into close personal relationships with their families, frequently serving as a source of genuine social capital. Further, many providers report sustained relationships with parents even after children have outgrown the need for child care (Beach, 1995). Such networking may also occur in urban areas, but certainly may be more easily

facilitated in rural settings. This personal connectedness may contribute to the volunteering of child care services and overall stability noted by Atkinson (1994) in rural areas. The existence and implications of networking of this kind deserve closer examination for what they may tell us about the ecology of child care in rural communities.

Values, then, may underlie some of the differential use of child care among rural families. Pragmatic concerns, solidly rooted in their socioeconomic context, may also create a distinctive child care pattern for rural families. Chronic underemployment, unemployment, and low wages in rural areas affect the resources that parents can bring to selecting child care (Scanzoni & Arnett, 1987). Thus, "working poor" families may need to strategize about child care, inventing a variety of options to meet their needs. Again, hints of such a pattern emerge in the research. Sherman (1992) reports that despite a greater likelihood of having two working adults in the home, rural children were "less likely than their metro counterparts . . . to have regular child care from someone other than their parents. Rural children also were slightly more likely to [be] cared for by their fathers or by their mothers at work" (p. 95). This finding implies that rural families may consciously choose to maximize their smaller incomes, either by providing care through split-shift scheduling (Presser, 1988) or through work at home arrangements that allow them to earn income while simultaneously caring for their children (Beach, 1989). Whether such choices are dictated by harsh economic reality, lack of alternatives, value preferences, or a combination of these factors is open to further study.

Parental care strategies such as these also suggest that informal or family day care arrangements with their more fluid hours are a more useful supplement than day care centers, which are typically more inflexible in their daily schedules. Thus, for times when other parent care breaks down or needs a transition, informal care arrangements can most fruitfully be of assistance. At present, we have little research on how such packaging of child care may support rural working families. It would be helpful to have a body of qualitative or case study research that examines working class rural families' child care arrangements in depth and over time.

Summary

Most of this review has necessarily centered on issues of child care availability, quality, and choice among rural families, the principal areas about which there is research. Although we have some data about forms of child care used by rural families, we have very little understanding of the context of such use. For example, if rural families face "a smaller supply of regulated child care, clashing with a

slightly greater proportion of mothers in the labor force and a higher rate of child poverty [compounded by] transportation problems and greater distances in rural areas" (Sherman, 1992, pp. 93-94), then what do they do about child care and why? Are their child care arrangements inferior to metropolitan standards or merely different? Does the more constricted supply and, possibly, quality of available care put rural children increasingly at a disadvantage compared to their urban counterparts? Are there compensating mechanisms in the rural community for such an apparent disadvantage? For example, Lichter, Cornwell, and Eggebeen (1993) found that rural youth may be able to draw upon social capital more readily than urban youth as a mediator in dropout behavior. Are related forms of social capital available to rural parents of young children? Can the rural child care providers be a member of such a network?

Our understanding of rural child care would also be greatly enhanced by studies that include the voices of the providers. Qualitative presentations exploring the rural provider's perspective are virtually absent, despite the fact that she is a significant member of the ecology of rural child care. How she connects with families, and how she mediates the role of businessperson/social support provider would tell us a great deal about how rural families "make do" in a climate of chronic under-employment. Again, my preliminary interviews with rural providers suggest that they demonstrate considerable flexibility in providing child care through times of lay-off, seasonal work, or irregular work hours (Beach, 1995). Such flexibility is rarely the focus of studies and merits closer attention to how it fits into the rural ecology. Other questions deserve attention too. Among them: Are informal arrangements indicators of desperation or of constructive social responses? Are children necessarily poorly served in such settings or are there compensating factors? How does the provider herself visualize her role?

Additionally, it would be useful to have some information about connections and transitions from child care to public school in rural areas. Repeatedly, an accumulating number of reports have advocated closer ties between child care and public school educators for the purposes of injecting developmentally appropriate practices into the primary curriculum (Bredenkamp, 1987), re-organizing and allying public schools with the child care community in order to support families (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988, 1991), and, most recently, collaborating to ensure school readiness (National Governors Association, 1990; Southern Regional Education Board, 1992, 1994). Despite these exhortations, significant impediments to such cooperation remain (Tobin, 1992), including fundamental disagreements on definitions of "readiness" (Caldwell, 1992). Research on school transition found that only 10% of kindergarten teachers regu-

larly initiated discussion with preschool teachers about children they had in common (Maxwell & Eller, 1994). Thus, the issues of transition and readiness are complicated for *all* educators, not simply rural ones.

Nonetheless, such challenges may be more daunting if one chooses to accept the indications of poorer quality among rural child care facilities, implying that rural children may start school with a greater gap than metropolitan children. Is this true? What types of rural child care-public school linkage exist? Do existing rural child care curricula enhance or retard the kindergarten curriculum available in public schools? Which variables are most crucial in such transitions? Do we have adequate measures for such variables, or do we need to think more carefully about *how* we measure this link in small rural settings?

Answers to questions such as these will enhance our limited understanding of the connections between child care and public education, especially for rural children. Further, addressing these questions will help to assess the actual quality of rural child care. Just as researchers concerned with rural education have explored apparent disadvantages of public education to uncover corresponding advantages (the arguments over school size come to mind here), increased scrutiny of rural child care could provide a more balanced perspective.

Finally, rural education researchers may want to consider adding child care to their purview for the comparative insight it can add to their work. Particularly for researchers interested in how rural communities support education, examining both preschool and public school contexts may highlight useful distinctions. A rare study that took this approach utilized multiple methods to find that a rural, Southern African-American community embraced its Head Start program warmly and felt alienated from its public schools (Philipsen & Agnew, 1995). The researchers detected a "collective orientation" and a "sense of cultural congruence" in the community's relationship with the preschool program and, by contrast, "a lack [of] a sense of belonging to the school" (Philipsen & Agnew, 1995, pp. 52-53). Although such a division undoubtedly does not pertain to all rural communities, a comparative study of the mechanisms by which communities embrace and reject different classroom settings for their children can be a fruitful area of study. Educational researchers who undertake such approaches will expand our limited knowledge of rural child care and help us to understand more fully the niche that child care fills in the ecology of rural families. Research bridging the gap between child care and public school will also help to clarify transition and readiness issues which may be especially pertinent to rural children, families, and educational settings.

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