

Partnerships in Rural Education: Identification of Research Themes

MALCOLM THOMAS, PHYLIP BRAKE, ROSEMARY CANN,
ANNA EVANS, GRACE HAGEN, DAFYDD MORGAN,
PETER NEIL, SUE PESTER, MIKE WOODS,
Aberystwyth University

MARTIN JEPHCOTE, CHRIS TAYLOR
Cardiff University

Issue or Problem

The proposed research examines the implementation of partnership working in education in rural Wales, contributing both to advancing critical understanding of the dynamics and experiences of partnership working in rural areas, and to the development of rural education policy and practice. In addition to focusing on the structural dimensions of partnership working and the challenges faced by current partnerships, the study will also explore the effectiveness of partnership working in identifying and responding to local educational needs, and consider the potential for partnerships to extend the reach of current educational initiatives. These issues can be summarised in the following diagram (Figure 1).

Prior to considering the specific research questions drawn up to address the overall aim, a consideration as to the definitions of rural Wales can be sought. The National Statistics classification of settlement type and context, introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) in July 2004 identifies 9 unitary authorities as rural in Wales. The process of identifying these authorities is rather complex but is generally based upon the types of settlement per hectare area (that is, the numbers of towns and villages for example). The rural areas are then defined as the sparsest authorities. In

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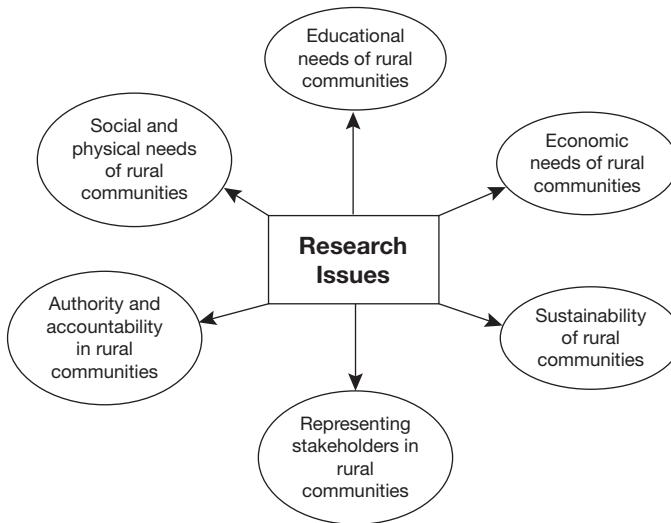


Figure 1

Wales, these include Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy, Denbighshire, Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Monmouthshire.

Based upon this definition and considering the overall aim of examining partnership working in rural Wales, the following research questions can be drawn up:

1. What are the challenges for rural education partnerships?
2. What is the relationship between authority and accountability in partnership working?
3. How are key stakeholders represented in partnership working?
4. How sustainable are such partnerships?
5. What are the educational needs/demands of rural communities?

Significance of the Issue

Partnership working is increasingly emphasised in education policy at all levels from pre-school education to lifelong learning. For rural areas, the

emphasis on partnership working presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, partnership working can help to overcome some of the specific challenges of rural education, such as small school sizes and a dispersed client population. On the other hand, however, models of partnership working are not necessarily transferable to rural contexts, with elements of the rural situation such as travelling times and accessibility presenting particular difficulties for effective partnership working. Previous research on partnerships in rural Wales has highlighted challenges including finding appropriate partners; the consequences of an asymmetrical contribution of resources; consistency of partner representation; the time and resources required by partnership meetings; accountability and the representation of community interests; and the sustainability of partnerships with limited-term funding – as well as identifying examples of good practice in effective partnership working (Derkzen and Bock, forthcoming; Derkzen et al., forthcoming; Edwards et al., 2000, 2001; Wales Rural Observatory, 2006). However, few previous studies have focused on partnerships in rural education and the particular challenges confronted within the sector.

Much of the research that looks at rural partnership explores themes and issues in the context of rural development and regeneration rather than from an education perspective, hence the significance of this project. Where research from the education perspective is considered, most of the more recent literature considering education partnerships in Wales, with particular reference to the education of individuals aged 14 years and older, is published by the Welsh Assembly Government. The majority of this literature is in the form of policy documents, rather than research and evaluation.

A review of the literature suggests that there is a need for more research to assess the benefits and best practice of education partnerships in rural Wales, with particular reference to individuals 14 years and older. There are added challenges to educational partnership working in a rural environment. Namely, spatial challenges, reduced human capital and reduced resources (Osbourne et al., 2004). The literature suggests that offering affordable choice and quality to learners in rural areas is challenging due to the small number of learners (ELWA, 2005; Moseley, 2003). Furthermore, offering equality of access to education services can be an issue in rural areas, particularly when those without their own transport are considered (ELWA, 2005) and equality of access to education services can be an issue in rural areas, as underprivileged groups are often hidden within well-off communities (Hatt et al., 2007). Learners, however, tend to accept the travel implications involved in accessing education in rural areas (White et al., 2007).

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Proposed Methodology

In order to address the research questions, the study would combine a number of types of research methodologies:

- case studies of existing rural education partnerships and examination of the processes of partnership-working in Wales;
- rural locality studies to identify (unknown) rural educational needs and unknown educational partnerships;
- action research following and implementing a known rural educational partnership arrangement (this could be part of the 14–19 Learning Pathways).

Outcomes

There have been two overall outcomes of the project. The first of these relates to research capacity building and the second to more overarching research goals.

Capacity Building Achievements

- collaboration between two universities and three departments within Aberystwyth university;
- opportunity to meet to share knowledge and experiences;
- opportunity for new researchers to work with more experienced people;
- a sub-group of four new researchers collaborated on the poster design and the PowerPoint presentation for the WERN colloquium;
- the bursary group colloquium presentation was delivered by a new researcher;
- one new researcher collaborated with the group leader on the research bid to the Joy Welch Education Charitable Trust;
- an undergraduate student has been involved as a group member from the start;
- the undergraduate student undertook literature reviews on rural education and partnerships;
- the research opportunity has motivated the student to focus her dissertation for her degree on rural partnerships;

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- one new researcher is now considering doing a PhD;
- a partnership seminar was arranged for June 11th 2008 involving 6 key stakeholders with experience of collaborative networking (see *Overarching Research Outcomes*);
- the group leader was invited to attend the Partnership Meeting of Careers Wales West in July

Overarching Research Outcomes

In order to establish overall research outcomes, a seminar with key stakeholders in the field of partnerships was held. These key stakeholders included representatives from Regional Planning, the Health and Wellbeing Community, Educational Services (including both children and adult learners) and Local Education Authorities. Following this seminar, a number of issues were raised in discussions. These issues included details of the organisational strategies needed for partnerships to be effective, along with particular concerns relating to rural partnerships, such as the lack of sustainable funding and the reliance on small clusters of people. Following the seminar a number of key questions arose. These included details of how to ensure a partnership is effective, how to ensure equal representation of all partners and the consideration as to whether voluntary partnerships are more vibrant.

Future Developments

Based upon the seminar discussion, the following proposed overarching outcomes of the research are envisaged:

- to establish the context and significance of partnerships in rural education in Wales;
- to identify key issues in partnership working as perceived by stakeholders and practitioners;
- to develop a database of rural education partnerships in Wales. This will focus on all aspects of education;
- to identify key issues and challenges facing rural education partnerships. This information will enable the researchers to justify what research could be carried out in a large project.

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