

At the Heart of the Community? Small Rural Schools in Northern Ireland

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Montserrat Fargas-Malet, Carl Bagley (*School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, UK*)

There has been virtually no research specifically focused on small rural schools in Northern Ireland. Although these schools are facing similar issues to those in other countries and jurisdictions, particularly in terms of the risk of closure or amalgamation, the Northern Ireland context is remarkably unique, especially when considering the legacy of the conflict. In fact, rural communities have been relatively under-researched here, compared to their urban counterparts. The Small School Rural Community Study has been set to fill this gap. We are exploring the relationship between small rural schools and the communities they serve. This is a two-way relationship, so we want to find out: (1) What is the role of small rural schools in their communities? How do they serve the community they are situated in? and (2) How do rural communities affect small schools' dynamics and shape the schools' circumstances and characteristics? To do that, we have identified all small rural schools based on the number of pupils (105 or fewer) and being in a rural area in NI (n=196). An online survey is currently being conducted completed by the principals of these schools. We plan to conduct four case studies as well. In this paper, we will present some of the preliminary findings from the survey data (as well as administrative data) highlighting the differences and similarities on how these schools are connecting with their communities, and how they are dealing with community division by either reinforcing, managing, ignoring, or celebrating differences.