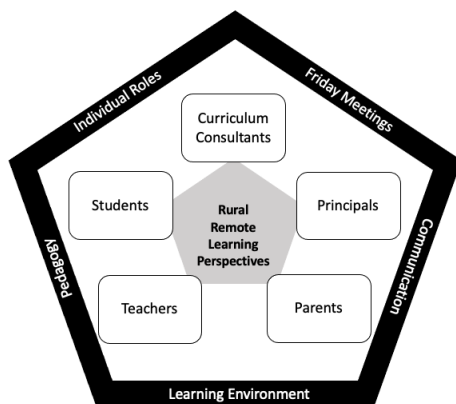**BRANDON UNIVERSITY**

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Rural and remote learning in Westman

By Cathryn Smith, PhD, & Gustavo Moura

Phase Two Interview Topics

Why this research is important

Our shared educational experiences during the pandemic have demonstrated that education needs to be responsive and innovative, despite challenging and ever-changing circumstances. Lessons learned from this research can be helpful for online learners and their parents, remote learning teachers, program administrators, and researchers. The study detected issues in program design, communication, digital access, and pedagogy and identified enabling strategies for teachers, parents, students, and mental health.

How this research was conducted

Distinct questionnaires for eight participant groups were developed, and potential volunteers emailed an invitation to participate with a link to the appropriate questionnaire. A total of 88 questionnaires were completed, providing

What you need to know

During the 2020–2021 school year, seven western Manitoba school divisions pooled resources to deliver a remote learning program for 170 Kindergarten to Grade 8 medically fragile students that are unable to attend school in person. This research study included the English and French Immersion streams and captured the experiences and perspectives of students, teachers, parents, principals, and curriculum consultants through questionnaires and interviews. The research question we sought to answer was, "What beliefs, practices, and strategies are critical to rural remote learning?"

input from students from kindergarten to Grade 4 and Grades 5 to 8 (in English and French streams), parents, teachers, curriculum consultants, and home school principals. Ten individual interviews were conducted with representatives of the different participant groups. Questionnaire and interview data were analyzed thematically and synthesized into four overarching themes.

What the researchers found

The first theme, *Context for Innovation: Program Demand and Design*, consolidates findings related to the initial reason for the program's creation and elements of program design that resonated with participants, such as following a regular school day cycle and classroom structure.

The second theme, *Beliefs, Perspectives and Tensions in Communication*, addresses the complex challenges of maintaining effective communication in such a complex and ever-changing system, including submitting and marking assignments, encouraging and documenting attendance, completing report cards, and requesting additional supports.

The third theme, *Technology, Learning, and Pedagogical Practices*, explores the ways in which technological access and skills were influencing how remote learning was being facilitated and experienced, and the impact of those decisions on student learning. While many students missed their classmates and routines such as gym, music, and recess, they also reported increased independence, improved time management skills, and feelings of security and independence while learning from home.

The fourth theme, *Enabling Strategies: Supports for Teachers, Parents, Students, and Mental Health*, synthesizes what participants said supported them to be effective in their role within the Westman Consortia Program. For the remote learning teachers, meeting weekly as a group with the curriculum consultants provided time to discuss digital pedagogy and to offer and receive collegial support. While most parents reported positive experiences supervising their children during home learning, multi-tasking was a persistent challenge for those with concurrent supervisory, employment, and parenting responsibilities. Strategies that supported students' interaction and social connection were highly valued by parents and teachers. Students observed that their mental health had improved with the absence of peer pressure, increased control over their learning environment, and fewer interruptions.

How this research can be used

New teachers must be prepared to provide high-quality learning experiences for remote learners in rural environments. Administrators of remote learning programs must attend to issues of communication, structure, supervision, and access, to ensure all learners can thrive when doing online learning. Further research is needed on rural remote learning at the K-12 levels, and issues of equity and sustainability. Gaps can be addressed through funding teacher innovation, offering state-of-the-art professional learning opportunities, fostering strong relationships with rural school divisions, and developing resources for teaching languages online.

About the researchers

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Keywords

remote learning, rural, pandemic, online pedagogy

Publications based on this research

Smith, C., & Moura, G. (2021). *Westman Consortia Rural and Remote Learning: Final Report*. BU CARES Research Centre. 57.
https://www.bucares.ca/publications/westman-consortia-rural-amp-remote-learning-final-report

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