

Preparing Teachers for Rural Schools¹

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Evidence continues to mount indicating that rural/small schools face educational challenges not generalizable to their urban counterparts. This article discusses the apparent neglect of rural schools and identifies some of the problems commonly associated with teaching in rural communities. The authors advance the need for preservice/in-service programs for rural teachers and suggest program components that may improve teacher competencies.

The problems facing teachers in our nation's rural schools, for the most part, have been neglected. Politicians and professional educators have focused their attention toward urban education, leaving many to assume that all is well in the schools of rural America. The seeming urgency of such "urban" problems as busing, low achievement test scores, school violence and vandalism, and teacher turnover have repeatedly captured political and professional audiences leaving the dilemmas facing rural educators all but forgotten. Parks and Sher [6] attribute this apparent neglect to the perceived lack of political clout of the rural constituency. They conclude that "political observers have noted that, in order to function with even modest effectiveness, governments must apply the principle of 'selective inattention' to some problems, issues and constituencies" (p. 4). In a personal communication, Dr. Frank Fratone [2] (USDA) stated that "there is enough information to indicate that rural schools seem less favored in offerings, services, and financial resources than schools generally; that there is a rural achievement/attainment problem; and that the rural poor are among the poorest in the nation."

Contrary to what many may believe, the literature continues to provide evidence indicating that teachers in rural schools face circumstances which are both difficult and unique. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of some of these problems and to advance the need for more adequate inservice and/or preservice programs for teachers in small schools.

Status of Rural Schools and Communities

It is not the purpose of this article to provide an analysis of rural America, or to attempt to define rural schools. Virtually every meeting of educators interested in rural schools begins with a lengthy discussion of what is rural. It would appear that the only common denominator of rural schools is size. While there are significant differences between rural schools in Appalachia, Arizona

and Nebraska, there are some obvious similarities both in terms of size and the general characteristics of the communities being served. At this point in our discussion, it may be useful to provide some salient facts concerning rural schools and communities. Sher [7] provides the following information (p. 280-281):

Fifteen million children (ages 5-17) are enrolled in non-metropolitan schools (one third of all students). There are more students in non-metropolitan schools than there are in inner-city schools.

Eleven thousand school districts (two-thirds of U.S. total) are located in non-metropolitan areas.

Thirty-two percent of the nation's school children are in non-metropolitan areas.

Five percent of research dollars, eleven percent of library and materials funds, thirteen percent of basic vocational aid, and thirteen percent of dropout prevention funds go to rural schools.

The average family income in non-metropolitan areas is fifteen percent below that of metropolitan families.

The incidence of poverty is fifty percent higher in non-metropolitan areas than in urban areas.

Of 2,000 U.S. school districts where median family income is less than \$7,000 annually, seventy-five percent are rural.

Of 1,600 U.S. school districts where thirty percent (or more) of the students come from families with incomes below poverty levels, sixty-eight percent are rural. More than 2,000,000 rural adults are functionally illiterate.

Nearly five percent of all rural school-age children are not enrolled in any school – a nonenrollment rate nearly twice that of urban areas.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress indicates that rural children score significantly below the national average in every subject area.

While the above data are by no means comprehensive and do not necessarily justify the need for special programs for teachers who teach in rural areas, the information may raise the following questions: Are there problems unique to teachers in small schools? Does a rural teaching environment necessitate some attention to inservice and/or preservice programs?

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Some Problems of Teaching in Small Schools

It is generally believed by many individuals that education in rural America must, somehow, be inferior to education in suburban and urban schools. The notion that bigger is better is a significant part of American folklore, although many current proposals for the reform of secondary education call for a reduction in the size of schools.

Small size is, of course, a weakness in many ways. In the opinion of the authors, some of the major problems associated with teachers and teaching in rural schools are as follows:

The inherent small size of rural schools restricts the scope of course offerings and related programs.

Rural isolation limits or eliminates various kinds of educational experiences which might foster a more global, multicultural perspective.

Most small rural schools are characterized by limited faculty and administration.

Teachers in rural schools generally receive lower salaries, teach in areas of limited expertise, and are responsible for more class preparation than teachers in large communities.

Teacher turnover and the problem of providing appropriate inservice instruction pose critical problems for developing effective ongoing school programs.

The above list indicates that teachers who practice in rural schools, either by choice or accident, face challenges to their potential effectiveness not generalizable to all teaching situations, and that specific programs are needed to increase the competencies necessary for teaching in these schools. While a totally unique preparation program is not possible for most institutions, there is a growing concern for the need of a more adequate preparation for rural teachers.

The Need for Preservice and/or Inservice Programs

For at least seventy-five years educators have recognized the need to prepare teachers for rural classrooms. In 1917, Woofter [10] wrote,

For the changed conditions of rural life a new order of school is needed, and a new type of teacher is necessary for the new order. Too often the teacher of the rural school is a young person with city ideals and interests and not in touch with the rural needs, and again too often not qualified to introduce what rural life demands (p. 24).

More recently, Dunathan [1] stated,

Small schools cannot allow themselves to be the dumping ground for the unfit, the inept, and outrageous. They must collectively insist that the excess capacity of teacher education programs, particularly in universities, be put to use in training teachers for small schools. They must demand equity in the study of urban and rural school problems in teacher training curricula. They must press for funds to support the installation of small school education courses in teacher training programs and the retraining of present faculty to teach them (p. 206).

Muse and Stonehucker [4] offer the following observations:

The preparation of teachers for service in rural areas is vital. All too often teacher training and inservice training is geared to urban settings and is superimposed with whatever misfitting occurs onto the rural scene with the result of teachers not being adequately prepared to function successfully in a rural school and community setting (p. 5).

While many recognize the need for special programs for rural teachers, few institutions appear to be responding to this need. Results of a survey reported by Muse [3] indicated that "no more than six universities in the nation offered courses that might be of prospective value for rural teachers" (p. 5). In addition, Sher [8] stated "there are no more than a handful of teacher training programs in the entire nation which directly assist students in rural education careers" (p. 287). The authors of this article wrote letters to twenty-five colleges and universities identified in the literature as having some form of special preparation program for rural teachers. The results of the survey were dismal. Of the few who responded, all but one school indicated that they didn't really have a program or that they had a program but it has been discontinued. Evidence suggests that the current response to the problem of preparing teachers for small schools is more depressing than expected.

There are indications, however, that the topic of rural education is beginning to receive increased attention. During a meeting of the Department of Education-sponsored National Seminar on Rural Education [9] it was noted:

Currently only a handful of agencies and institutions offer training programs designed to prepare educational personnel for rural service. The special characteristics of rural communities and rural education have been identified, documented, and ignored. There is now a necessity to develop more focused training of teachers that will allow them to deal effectively and efficiently with uniquely rural problems, while taking advantage of the unique opportunities of rural schooling (p. 18).

Competences for Teaching in Rural Schools

This growing awareness of small school problems has stimulated organizations such as the Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools (CRESS) and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Committee on Rural Social Studies Education to make greater efforts to disseminate research findings and reports concerning innovative programs which may impact rural education. The increased activity of special interest groups and the expanding data base concerning small schools tends to reinforce the belief that there are unique competencies necessary for teaching in rural schools. A study by Oelschlager [5] indicated that in a random sample of small high school principals, 66.7 percent believed there was a need for special training programs for rural teachers. Specifically, at a minimum, teachers in rural schools should have experiences which would enable them to:

— Individualize instruction to capitalize on the small size of schools and expand the course offerings.

- Understand the dynamics of life in rural communities.
- Effectively utilize the community as a laboratory for out-of-school learning.
- Utilize resource people to enrich regular school programs.
- Develop and adapt curriculum to fit the needs of students in rural communities.
- Incorporate global and multicultural components into the social studies curriculum.
- Develop self-directed professional development practices. Utilize a variety of resources and technology to facilitate the elimination of the barriers of isolation.
- Function as a counselor particularly in the areas of career guidance.
- Function effectively in community service areas other than teaching, e.g., local historian, paralegal advisor, etc.

To achieve these competencies, several components of a preservice and/or inservice program may be necessary which might include the following [5]:

- Preparation in a broader-than-usual range of general and professional education coursework.
- Coursework/in-service in global and multicultural education.
- Coursework/in-service in rural culture and sociology.
- Coursework/in-service in practical rural living.
- Coursework/in-service in community service and utilizing community resources.
- Coursework/in-service in rural economics.
- Coursework/in-service in educational technology, including computer literacy.
- Early field experiences, student teaching and an internship in rural schools (preservice teachers).
- Experiences in career counseling.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to advance the need for specific preparation and training of teacher for rural

schools. While the evidence supporting this need continues to mount, present economic and political factors leave little room for optimism. Dwindling financial resources for education and research make it difficult to expand teacher education and inservice programs. Help from federal sources is also unlikely in light of massive cutbacks and the existing philosophy of decentralization. To alleviate the obvious neglect of rural schools, it will take creative ideas, alternatives, and the collective actions of those individuals and special interest groups concerned about this injustice.

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