

## Research Synthesis: Teacher Preparation for Rural Schools

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A review of the literature on teacher preparation and inservice programs in rural areas encompasses dilemmas facing rural education, what colleges and universities can do, and implications for colleges and universities. Part one describes dilemmas facing rural educators, not only in terms of class load, multiple preparations, extracurricular duties, etc., but also in terms of isolation and community problems such as cliques, gossip, and small town talk. Part two shows how colleges and universities can provide needed interventions for rural schools by assessing rural needs, providing special training programs for rural educators, bringing visibility of universities to rural communities, responding to rural needs, creating off-campus centers to more effectively meet teacher training needs, and building curriculum expertise. "Implications for Higher Education," part three, discusses expansion of the role of colleges and universities to include off-site training opportunities for preservice and inservice, shift in the role of the professors to "resource people for long-term staff development programs," creation of effective rural educator intervention models, and playing a more aggressive role in preparing teachers and administrators for rural areas. The conclusion stresses the need for colleges and universities to work directly with and in rural communities and maintain ongoing relationships with rural educators.

Rural America has been receiving increased attention during the last decade. Small towns are regaining some of their popularity as city dwellers migrate out of highly concentrated urban areas to find more satisfaction in rural styles. Historically, this is a recent trend, however. Since World War II, urbanization has been a principle characteristic of change in the U.S. population, with the result that "the people of rural America, in essence, have become a forgotten minority" [11, p. 10].

Rural America is more likely than other areas to have a higher percentage of poverty, poorer housing standards, fewer cultural attractions, less opportunity for adequate medical care, less opportunity to attract federal and state funding for programs and the lowest levels of education. Rural areas have been deprived of their fair share of America's wealth and public services and have been excluded from the standard of living enjoyed in metropolitan areas of the United States [14].

One should be warned, however, against generalizing about rural communities. Rural areas may be internally more homogeneous than urban communities, but they differ widely from each other. "Rural Americans may well represent the single most diverse and heterogeneous group of individuals and communities in our society. The island village off the coast of Maine, a coal-mining town in West Virginia, a ranching area in Wyoming, a college town in Minnesota, an impoverished community in the Mississippi Delta region, a ski-resort section of Vermont, a migrant-worker settlement in Texas, an Alaskan Native village near the Arctic Circle, and a prosperous grain-farming area in Iowa have little in common, except that they are all classified as rural areas of the United States" [14].

Schools are a key to the "quality of life" issues which face rural communities. Schools traditionally have been perceived as the means for integrating individuals into society, for providing an historical and cultural base, and for providing students with the skills to become productive members of society.

Additional responsibilities are placed upon the rural schools. Rural and small schools must not only prepare their students for life in the local community, but also for the adjustment into more urban communities, so that their students are able to function efficiently in both environments [6].

Further, our rapidly-changing technology demands that schools, and perhaps rural schools in particular, prepare students for an ever-changing society. Rural education is changing at an accelerated pace brought on by technological advances, energy problems, and demographic shifts. Students must be prepared through education to function well in an environment where accelerated change is the only constant.

Rural students also differ from their urban counterparts. Compared to the typical children in a urban area, the rural child still has fewer opportunities to study in a particular area of interest and fewer chances to become for post-high school experiences [12].

Teachers and administrators also face many challenges in a rural area. First, the very values that give some educators satisfaction in rural areas are the cause of grief for others not prepared for the experience [3]. Teachers and administrators must work in isolated communities, often juggling more than one subject, teaching more than one grade with little inservice support, and with limited budgets for the entire educational system [12]. Ad-

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ministrators often wear more than one hat, and are usually overworked as they try to coordinate curriculum, teach when needed, respond to the many forms required by state and federal education departments, and still serve as educational leaders.

Preparing teachers for rural areas is the role of the teacher education departments of colleges and universities. But institutes of higher education serving rural areas are also confronted with many demands. They are trying to comply with a multitude of professional and legal requirements mandated by state legislatures and federal court decisions. Typically, they do not have a separate department or unit to prepare teachers for rural areas; most do not even have specific courses for those interested in teaching in rural schools. Perhaps most discouraging, however, is that many are not aware of the special needs of rural schools. Without this awareness, concerns cannot be adequately assessed, and the resources of colleges or universities cannot be organized to address the issues facing rural educators.

The purpose of this document is to review the literature of teacher preparation and inservice for rural areas. The discussion will be organized into three parts: dilemmas facing rural education, what colleges and universities can do, and implications for colleges and universities.

### Dilemmas Facing Rural Education

Colleges and universities interested in providing inservice and preservice programs for rural educators must first thoroughly understand the problems for rural educators must first thoroughly understand the problems facing rural youth and rural schools. Although "rural education" like "rural America" encompasses a great variety of settings, making it difficult if not impossible to generalize, rural schools have historically shared several common problems. Sher [15] cites several general problems which have troubled rural schools:

. . . reducing students enrollment and absenteeism, recruiting highly competent teachers and administrators, providing special education and other specialized services, securing needed capital and operating funds, and compensating for the inherent isolation and population sparsity of rural areas, are all problems which have persistently plagued rural schools and which remain largely unsolved even today [p. 11].

Many things contribute to this list of difficulties. One overall theme found throughout the literature is financial in nature: financial constraints severely limit rural schools' ability to provide adequately for staff and students. A 1980 Rand Corporation study states, "If there was a single dominant theme that rural administrators sought time and time again to convey, it was that allocation of funds on a per pupil basis places rural districts at a disadvantage" [1, p. 25].

Frato [5], in a report examining educational services and aid to rural schools, shows that federal aid to metro-central schools in 1972-73 was \$133.33 per student, but only \$91.10 per non-metro student. His study demonstrates that during that year rural public schools spent less per pupil than metro-central or suburban public

schools in all categories except student transportation. "Such an adverse allocation of federal funds to rural schools would be understandable if the problems of rural schools are proportionately less severe than those of urban schools. But just the opposite is clearly the case" [p. 11].

In talking with teachers, researchers have found a multitude of problems. Perhaps the biggest is the very fact that the community is rural and therefore isolated. Rural teachers still tend to come from the communities in which they teach, and practical considerations of distance and housing availability generally compel them to live near their schools. The close ties between school and teacher that inevitably develop are commendable, but can put pressures on teachers as well as children [14]. A survey by Muse, Hoppe and Parson [11] in 1975 reports that teachers find "community cliques, gossip and small town talk" among the chief drawbacks to country teaching.

Muse [12] identifies several other difficulties—economic and professional that influence teachers in rural areas.

1. They have 3-5 preparations daily.
2. They must teach a class or two in which they're not adequately trained.
3. Teachers are expected to take on extracurricular duties.
4. Junior and senior high schools are combined. Subjects like home economics and physical education are often made up of students from 2 or 3 grade levels.
5. Budgets are very low and supplies are not readily available.
6. Teachers' salaries are low.
7. Teachers are less apt to receive inservice training and must travel far to receive advanced degrees.

These are some of the conditions which shape teaching behavior in rural schools and can serve to deter professionals from devoting more time to the task of teaching itself. These conditions may also help explain a common criticism about rural teaching: the lack of "creative and innovative teaching." Sher [14] calls this the most frequent and serious problem cited in the literature.

The task of organizing the curriculum is usually left up to the teacher. Because of the diversity of subject areas and the range of grades, teachers face an enormous curricular challenge. Further, textbook companies and other curriculum development producers have ignored the needs of rural schools because the numbers involved are so small as to limit profitability. The widely accepted assumption is that, since education is a generic endeavor, rural schools are just smaller versions of large schools and the curriculum should therefore be the same [13]. Add to this the fact curriculum material available is often limited or outdated or both, and one begins to understand why it may be difficult for rural teachers to be creative and innovative.

In a study by Warner and Kale [17] the authors state that higher education has not responded to the needs of rural America. They also charge that teacher training institutes have been the victims of the lure of federal money that is tied to meeting urban needs.

They (institutes of higher education) continue to produce teachers who are far better prepared to work in more populated areas

than in sparsely populated communities. Perhaps even worse, these institutions are not focusing their research and development efforts on the problems of rural education. Even universities located in rural areas are neglecting this important area of research . . . . Professional educators and teaching institutions must begin to recognize the need to prepare teachers for the less than adequately supplied classroom, the student reared in a less than cosmopolitan environment and the central office support staff which serve in more than a single capacity.

Sher also found that teacher training programs in the United States have paid little attention to the needs of teachers in small rural schools. "Although the literature is full of moaning about the poor quality of rural teachers, little systematic effort has been made to recruit the best people for rural schools, and even less effort has made to train them properly" [14, p. 28].

"Properly," according to Warner and Kale [17], includes more flexibility and responsiveness. "Currently, dual certification in many instances means an additional two years in course studies and internships. A teacher certified in one area forces specialization at a time when rural schools need good generalists." They conclude, "if higher education does not provide local educational agencies with the personnel, skills, talents, basics, they will ignore the university as a 'tomb' of philosophical rhetoric . . ." [p. 12].

Sher [14] points out that although rural schools could obviously benefit from better teachers, how "better" is defined makes all the difference.

In fact, a very persuasive case can be made that higher academic credentials, in and of themselves, have minimal validity as a measure of actual teaching competence; that rural schools require competent generalists far more than a variety of specialists; and that teachers trained to understand and work with the unique strengths and weaknesses of rural schools are much more desirable than urban-trained and urban-oriented teachers from even the most prestigious universities [p. 30].

### What Colleges and Universities Can Do

Colleges and universities are in a position to provide the needed interventions for rural schools. According to Ivey [9] they are the logical entity to assume a large share of the responsibility for studying many aspects of rural education, including preparation of educators and delivery of service. However, for this to occur, it appears that new directions and priorities must be established. In this document, the discussion will focus on institutes of higher education and what they can do to contribute to solutions for rural schools. This is not to minimize the role of other institutions, state or federal governments, or individuals within the rural communities, but will provide a focus for consideration by institutes of higher education. Although at this time there is not a well-developed comprehensive effort among institutions of higher education, it should be noted that in the recent "rediscovery" of rural education, institutes of higher education are in many cases part of the ground swell [9].

The literature is replete with general recommendations for colleges and universities, and there seems to be overall agreement about several points. First, the need to assess rural concerns. Paul Nachtigal [13] makes the point more

generally that the general lack of responsiveness of service delivery systems to rural education problems is due, at least in part, to the lack of good information about the nature of rural communities and rural schools. Warner and Kale [17] recommend that much more study and attention be given to understanding rural communities. They suggest specifically that institutes of higher education periodically study the status of rural education, analyze and synthesize successful rural classroom practices, including staff characteristics of rural "master teachers," and better understand community dynamics in school relations, including comparison of student aspirations and attitudes. Jacobsmeyer [10] agrees, noting that the role of higher education should include assessing rural needs, collecting data on small rural districts, and conducting research in rural schools.

Using this knowledge as a foundation, the second point that seems to have unanimous support is the need for colleges and universities to provide special training programs for rural schools. This general notion is given different emphasis by different researchers, but all are in agreement on the need to provide a specific rural approach. Jacobsmeyer [10] simply recommends that universities and colleges provide resources for establishing specialized rural preservice and inservice training programs. Jonathon Sher [14] elaborates on this point in two recommendations to legislators.

1. Require state-supported colleges and graduate schools of education across the country to create special training programs which will explicitly prepare teachers for service in rural schools.
2. Expand inservice training (and other professional development activities) for rural teachers and administrators [p. 30].

In addition, Sher asks legislators to establish a program of appropriate technical assistance to small rural schools and school districts. Ivan Muse [12] refines this point by suggesting that some university faculty be asked to specialize in rural education.

A third point made by several authors is the need to collaborate with rural schools. Whitefield [18] cites the need "for collaboration on the part of all parties involved." He defines collaboration, not as "just good will," but an agreed-upon "distribution of power, status, and authority." He advocates university visibility in the rural community, which would develop the feeling of accessibility from the community's perspective [p. 3]. Muse [11] also emphasizes the need for cooperative relationships: "... Schools must learn to utilize in positive and productive ways, the public school system, state educational agencies, regional educational service centers, teacher groups and all others in the larger community of which they are a part. Rural teacher training, to be effective, calls for new school roles and parity relationships through a consortium of concerned groups working together in a viable partnership" [p. 42].

This leads to the fourth theme—the need for responsiveness to rural needs by colleges and universities. Whitefield [18] notes that institutions of higher education need

“environments for functioning in field-responsive modes.” Teacher education will shift from providing credit and credentialing to entering into long-term agreements with local school districts as resource people for long-term staff inservice development programs.”

The fifth point made by several writers, often in tandem with the need to be more field-responsive, is the need to create off-campus centers which could more effectively meet teacher-training needs. Whitfield foresees a shift from the university campus to the field. Muse also suggests that any inservice or renewal opportunity, if truly responsive, would be held at least part of the time in the school districts.

Finally several authors discuss the need to build curriculum expertise. A recent paper by Gardener and Edington [6] details the need for help in organizing curriculum for rural schools. The paper cites Sher's [15] reasons for the scarcity of curricular offerings in rural areas: (1) there is no profit for commercial publishers to produce books specifically for rural or small schools; (2) neither the government nor philanthropic organizations have subsidized the development of curricula or curricular material; and (3) rural areas lack the funds, expertise and the time to develop their own curricular materials.

The need for curriculum expertise was substantiated by Dr. Benedict Surwill [16] who found in a survey completed in 1980 that administrators felt prospective teachers should be required to demonstrate effective curriculum planning for small schools. Gardener and Edington [6] and others [15; 11; 9] also cite the need to prepare teachers for teaching and managing multiple grade level classes or teaching subjects in which they have inadequate background. For high school teachers, experience in one minor and one major were suggested [16]. Finally, Gardener and Edington [6] quote a number of researchers to make the point that generalists rather than specialists are needed.

These general themes form a framework for institutes of higher education to use in building the curriculum for rural educators. If colleges and universities will *assess rural needs, provide special training* or programs, *collaborate with rural communities* and other institutions, *insure institutional responsiveness* to rural concerns, and *create off-campus centers* or train at least part of the time on school sites, they will have built the foundation for successful rural teacher preparation.

Once the framework is established, however, how should the curriculum be designed for training rural educators? At least part of the answer to this question lies in some of the assumptions which form the framework. That is, if institutions of higher education are accurately assessing rural needs and if they are truly responsive, they will build their curriculum around the present and emerging needs of rural schools.

Specific curriculum components can also be derived by examining the qualities possessed by successful rural educators. Tom Gjelton [7] describes fundamental elements of rural schools, stating that rural schools should incorporate:

1. A strong foundation in the teaching of basic

skills and essential facts.

2. An emphasis on practical skills and learning by doing.
3. Training in self-directed study and the development of initiative.
4. A focus on the local rural community.
5. A commitment to familiarize students with the outside world.
6. An emphasis on the options available to rural youths both within and beyond the local community.

If these elements are defined behaviorally for educational students, they could easily become curriculum objectives for institutes of higher education.

Glendor Castro, director of a multi-state outreach project based in Utah, has defined several criteria to determine employee satisfaction and success in a rural school [3]. He tries to assess a prospective employee's strengths and needs in terms of the following criteria:

1. Experience in a rural environment.
2. Appreciation of rural cultures.
3. Professional independence.
4. Personal support system.
5. Rural recreational interests.

Without these attributes, Castro [3] suggests that teachers may not be appropriately matched with rural areas. This list is based on real problems faced by teachers in rural areas and could very well serve as a foundation for rural education programs, in institutions of higher education.

Retaining teachers has been another problem in rural areas. Again, Castro [3] identifies several criteria, grouping his points into two categories: job-related influences and local environmental influences. Under job-related influences, Castro lists the following variables: satisfaction with defined duties, physical environment in which work is conducted, salary and fringe benefits, relationships with supervisor and co-workers, reinforcement from students or clients, availability of support services, and finally, inservice training opportunities.

Under influences related to the local environment, Castro [3] describes the importance of cultural and recreational opportunities, acceptance by members of rural communities and acceptance of local geography and climate. Again, these factors could be most helpful to colleges and universities in building inservice programs relevant to rural needs. Specific sessions could be designed around topics to build the potential for teacher and administrator longevity in a particular location.

So far, a generic framework has been presented, along with two different methods of setting specific goals for rural educators. The final question is how to implement these ideas to bring about teacher improvement in rural areas. Paul Nachtigal [13] states that:

Central to any school improvement program is leadership development—creating within those involved the new perspectives, new skills, and understandings that will allow a program to move forward . . . Critical to such a strategy is a little money to buy the participants' time to develop their capabilities, coupled

with sensitive program leadership to help participants think about the problems they wish to address and point them in the direction of other individuals and programs that can be helpful.

A companion strategy to freeing people from day-to-day routines for personal and/or program development is to bring new ideas and assistance to small rural schools on a regular basis. We have noted earlier that *how* these ideas and assistance are brought is as important as the substance of the ideas and assistance. Timing is very important; help is needed when it is needed, not before or after. The establishment of a basic level of trust between those bringing the assistance and those receiving the assistance is also essential.

Care must be taken in whatever strategies are implemented, to be sure that they contribute to local capacity-building, and *not* to dependency on central education agencies, for it is at the local school level that more suitable education programs for rural communities need to emerge [p. 36].

This care and attention to the *process* of intervention and assistance is often overlooked in the excitement of building a rural center or sharing the latest technology. And yet, this understanding of *how* to effectively work with rural educators is perhaps the key for institutes of higher education. Warner and Kale [17] refer to this briefly when they urge universities to engage in more research to adequately understand the needs of rural educators, to determine how these needs can be met, and "equally important, *to coordinate the dissemination and diffusion in the development of strategies* which would bring about proper change for the improvement of rural America" [p. 8].

### Implications for Colleges and Universities

If enacted, many of the suggestions and recommendations from the literature will require specific and concrete changes for colleges and universities. First, the role of the university will expand, with more emphasis being given to finding off-site training opportunities for preservice and inservice rural education. Muse [11] makes this point most strongly when he advocates partial training on campus and partial training in the school districts. Whitfield [18] agrees, predicting a major shift from the university campus to the field, along with a move from credentialing to providing noncredit staff development assistance.

The second major implication for higher education is a shift in the role of professor. Whitfield [18] explains that professors will become resource people for long-term staff development programs. This theme is echoed by Drummond [4] when he ventures that new roles would be in order for university professors. He foresees that faculty will move toward being "linkers, reference sources, resource retrievers, instructional managers, diagnoser and prescriber, designer of programs and materials for nontraditional students." Also, the educational professor will be called upon to serve as "organizational consultant, communications expert, outside observer, participant observer, situation describer, and school anthropologist." All of these roles, Drummond [4] feels, have to do with governance, funding, management, delivering instructional and technical services, and assessing and evaluating and disseminating data. He adds

that shifts in perceptions and functions have already resulted in the formation of instructional teams, consisting of teachers, administrators, and university personnel.

The third major implication for higher education is that universities will pursue field-based models and begin to examine how to intervene effectively from the outside and to work *with* rural educators. Recent work in teacher centers has developed some relevant models. Teacher center "field agents" are persons who work with an organization in an attempt to facilitate change, but who are not part of the organization. According to Boston and Kingsford [2], many teachers agree with Gene Hall that change is made first by individuals, then by groups, then by institutions, and that failure to recognize this personal aspect of change is the major reason why so many change efforts have failed in our public schools. They believe the more field agents can communicate and work with their clientele on a face-to-face basis, the more they can build a sense of empathy and mutual trust, factors which greatly enhance the probability of the successful implementation and institutionalization of any change [1].

Paul Nachtigal [13] reinforced these concepts giving much of the responsibility for moving ahead to those working in rural education and those who live in the rural community.

In conclusion, it is clear that in order to improve rural education, institutions of higher education need to be much more aggressive about their role in preparing teachers and administrators for rural settings. They need to establish special programs, work directly with and in the rural communities and maintain ongoing relationships with rural educators. Only by identifying and pursuing the needs of the rural educational community will nearby colleges and universities become integral to rural education.

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