

An Administrative Perspective on Psychological Services in Rural School Settings¹

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School psychologists practicing in rural settings are faced with unique problems which impede efficient, effective service delivery. These problems relate to traversing geographic distances and hazardous terrain often found in rural areas; overcoming social and cultural barriers; and problems related to the psychologist's professional role. Procedures utilized in addressing these problems are greatly influenced by the psychologist's administrative supervisor. This investigation was undertaken to determine the perspective taken by this administrator regarding these problems in the state of Indiana. The results indicate that heavy caseload and limited special education service delivery options are viewed as the most critical problems. Procedures which may be utilized to circumvent or overcome these problems are discussed.

The delivery of appropriate psychological services in rural areas has long been and remains a difficult task. This problem has recently begun to receive attention in the professional literature as several writers [1; 2; 4; 6] have argued cogently that the characteristics and ecology of rural settings exert a unique influence upon the delivery of psychological services to schools. Recent studies have identified numerous concerns among school psychologists practicing in rural areas. For example, Trenary [6] surveyed rural members of the American Psychological Association's Division 16, and identified the following major concerns: heavy caseloads, little understanding of the school psychologist's role by parents or staff, and professional isolation. Likewise, Benson, Bischoff and Boland [1] conducted a survey of National Association of School Psychologists delegates and school psychology association presidents, who reported the following serious problems: continuing education, professional isolation, inadequate availability of special education program options, and inadequate community resources. In short, school psychologists report a variety of problems which interfere with the efficient delivery of school psychological services in rural areas.

Overcoming the problems faced by school psychologists practicing in rural areas is no easy task. One person who may greatly influence what is done regarding these problems is the school psychologist's administrative supervisor. This study was conducted to determine the perspective taken by this administrative supervisor regarding the problems faced by school psychologists practicing in rural areas within the state of Indiana. Indiana may be primarily characterized as a rural, farming state, although urban areas do exist. Large areas of the state

are sparsely populated, necessitating the development of special education cooperatives responsible for providing services to two or more school districts. These cooperatives are typically administered by a director of special education who, to a large extent, determines the number of school psychologists to be hired, the areas they are to serve, and the services which they provide. This investigation was designed to assess the relative importance of selected problems faced by school psychologists in rural areas of Indiana as judged by directors of special education.

Method

Surveys were sent to 48 directors of special education in the state who served a rural corporation and thirty-six (75%) were returned. It should be noted that several of the director's cooperatives served school districts spanning both urban and rural areas, as total student population for cooperatives sampled varied from 2,211 to 26,000. The directors were asked to address their responses to problems faced by school psychologists who serve rural areas in their cooperatives.

Directors were asked to rank from most to least severe (1 = most severe, 10 = least severe) ten problems faced by school psychologists practicing in rural areas. These problem areas were derived from the professional literature and were frequently reported by school psychologists practicing in rural areas (see Table 1). The respondents were also asked to rate the same problem areas on a five point Likert scale. The Likert ratings were used as a measure of the reliability of responses. Directors were further asked to list staff development topics which might

¹Preparation of this manuscript was supported in part by D.O.E. Grant No. G008200313. The authors wish to express their appreciation to John Hess and Eileen Moscato for their assistance with data collection and reduction.

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Table 1
Rankings of Problems Faced by Rural School Psychologists

	Median Rank	Range
Heavy caseload	1.44	1-10
Limited availability of alternative special education program options	3.56	1-10
Significant travel time	4.67	1-10
Lack of understanding of exceptional children by parents or school staff	4.67	1-10
Resistance to change/suspicion of outside interference by parents or school staff	5.58	2-10
Limited understanding of psychologist's role by staff and/or parents	5.83	1-10
Poor facilities	5.83	1-10
Value differences between parents and school system	6.17	1-10
Limited accessibility to community resources	6.4	1-10
Difficulty attracting or maintaining quality school personnel	7.50	2-10

aid in remediating these problem areas. Finally, they were asked to identify advantages of practicing school psychology in a rural setting.

Results

Responses were received from special education directors in all geographic areas of Indiana. The distance from directors' cooperatives to the nearest urban area ranged from 15 to 60 miles with an average distance of 32.32 miles. The results of survey rankings are presented in Table 1. Item ratings were correlated with rankings and resulted in a coefficient of .88, indicating substantial agreement between ratings and rankings. The results of survey rankings revealed that directors perceive heavy caseload as the greatest problem for school psychologists, with a median ranking of 1.55. Only one other problem, limited availability of special education options, seemed to represent a severe problem, as its ranking was more than one standard deviation ($S.D. = 1.7$) below the mean (mean = 5.5) for all rankings. It should be noted that considerable variability existed across directors in rankings of items. For example, although 53% ranked "heavy caseload" as the most severe problem, 20% ranked it as one of the three least severe problems. Other rankings fell within a range of one standard deviation above or below the mean with the exception of "Difficulty attracting or maintaining quality school personnel," which was not viewed as a problem and was ranked more than one standard deviation above the mean.

Numerous staff development topics were mentioned as potential procedures for remediating problems. The most frequently mentioned area, noted by 22% of the respondents, was consultation with the regular education

staff in assisting them in adapting for the needs of exceptional children. Other frequently reported areas were programs to help improve communication between the rural parent and school staff (12%) and the use of early screening techniques particularly adapted for use with rural children (9%). Other responses were highly diverse or related to problems which are chronic in all education settings such as identification of learned disabled children, listed by 19% of the directors.

Directors were also asked to indicate advantages of practicing school psychology in a rural area. Personal contact with the school staff was mentioned by 59% of the directors. They reported that schools in rural areas are often small, and staff members are frequently quite cooperative. Contact with, and information regarding, families was also noted as an advantage by 59% of the directors. They indicated that parents are generally cooperative, involved, and thankful for any services their children receive. An implicit trust was reported to exist between parents and the schools. Likewise, it was stated that teachers were usually able to provide detailed background information regarding the family. Another advantage noted by 50% of the directors related to the professional role fulfilled by the school psychologist. It was stated that, in some rural settings, the caseload of the psychologist was not too large, more flexibility in role definition was possible, and the pace of the schools and community was slower. Finally, 41% of the respondents specified advantages related to the characteristics of the community. For example, respondents reported that the population in many rural communities tends to be stable and homogeneous, and consequently there are fewer social problems similar to those characteristic of urban areas.

Discussion

It is noteworthy that the two most severe problems reported by directors are significantly influenced by the funding level of programs as well as the rural setting in which they occur. Heavy caseload, the highest ranked problem, has been a particularly problematic area in Indiana. A recent survey [5] indicates a psychologist-student ratio of 1 to 3,530 in rural areas of Indiana. This ratio is far from the 1 to 1,500 ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists, and reported ratios of some states such as Iowa (1 to 1,940) and California (1 to 1,930). To meet recommended service levels, the number of psychologists in Indiana would at a minimum have to be doubled. The high psychologist student ratio is exacerbated by distances between schools and the limited professional role (i.e. a role limited to essentially test administration) which the psychologist often fulfills in rural areas in Indiana. The other severe problem faced in rural schools in Indiana was limited availability of alternative special education program options, again a problem significantly influenced by funding. School psychologists working under such circumstances experience considerable difficulty meeting the demands of P.L. 94-142, i.e. to provide handicapped children with the most appropriate educational program in the least restrictive environment.

Both of these problems could also be influenced by broadening the role of the school psychologist, as well as by increasing funding levels. It might prove cost-effective to allow the school psychologist to serve a broader role, addressing such functions as consultation with teachers and principals, curriculum development, individual and group counseling, and program evaluation. This circumstance already exists in some rural areas, but seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Needed staff development topics as indicated by directors further point out the utility of a broadly defined role for the rural school psychologist. The majority of these topics relate to non-test activities such as consultation, in which school psychologists typically have considerable expertise.

The most direct approach to broadening the role of the school psychologist would be to hire more psychologists, thereby reducing the necessary caseload and testing responsibilities and allowing more time for related services such as consultation and counseling. The cost of this approach is no doubt prohibitive at this time in Indiana. However, a second approach to broadening the role of the psychologist has been used in some school cooperatives in other states. In these instances, school psychologists have initially developed a support base in the schools and community by working closely with building principals and administrative coordinators. By developing systematic change strategies, psychologists have then been in positions to begin slowly altering their role to include non-testing services which they are trained to offer and are able to document as effective and efficient. It is important that this role change be uniquely tailored to the needs of a particular rural community. McLeskey, Huebner and Cummings [4] recommend pro-

cedures for instituting such change, including a reduction in individual assessment responsibilities. This can be achieved by training indigenous school personnel (i.e. teachers, aides) to perform some evaluation activities (e.g. achievement testing, parent interview); developing more effective referral and screening methods; utilization of efficient time management; and implementation of efficient evaluation procedures such as Tucker's [7] non-discriminatory evaluation model, which recommends individual intelligence testing as the final step in a multifactor data collection process.

Although the respondents in the present survey were from Indiana, limited generalizations are warranted from these findings. For instance, when the psychologist to student ratio in a school district or combined service area exceeds 1 to 3,000, the required number of assessments will often permit only a narrowly defined testing role limited primarily to test administration. Consultative services to regular education teachers with mainstreamed children in their classes, as well as other functions, such as individual and group counseling, will thus be limited. The generalizability of the problems associated with limited placement options for handicapped children has been documented by Helge [3]. In sparsely populated rural areas, finding enough children in a given geographic area to fill relatively low incidence classes is difficult if not impossible. Hence, the limited availability of alternative special education program options is a problem found in many rural areas.

In spite of the many problems facing school psychologists in Indiana, directors of special education continue to find and retain qualified personnel. Nonetheless, this survey indicates that directors are aware that the school psychologists they employ are faced by severe problems in delivering appropriate services as they fulfill a less than ideal role. It seems merited that, as funds become available for increases in staff in special education cooperatives in Indiana, school psychologists should be given the high priority which this survey indicates they deserve, allowing them to serve a broader professional role and more efficiently facilitate implementation of P.L. 94-142. Until additional funds are available however, school psychologists and directors of special education must work together within the constraints of a given setting to ensure that the role of the psychologist is broadened to allow more efficient, effective service delivery.

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