

Preservice Programs for Rural Environments: Survey and Recommendations¹

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Given the number of rural constituencies in the nation and the unique problems facing rural educators, the preparation of teachers for service in rural areas is vital. This study examined the availability of undergraduate preservice or certification programs which prepare students for rural teaching, examined preservice programs for the availability of specific components which meet rural teacher needs, and suggested ways to improve and expand preservice programs for rural educators. A questionnaire was distributed to 456 public and private post-secondary institutions which offered preservice teacher preparation programs in the 27 states defined as rural. The 208 respondents whose data were analyzed indicated that 21 (10.1%) of the institutions offer specialized programs for teachers planning to work in rural areas, and that about half of the suggested preservice components for rural environments are implemented at over half of the institutions (range 58.1% to 90.3%). It was recommended that program planners develop an awareness of the disparities that exist between what is available and what researchers indicate should be available in preservice education for rural environments.

*Give me a fish, and I can eat for a day.
Teach me to fish, and I can eat for a lifetime.*

Like this maxim of the person and fish, preservice programs which adequately prepare educational personnel for work in a rural environment can be the intervention which leads beginning teachers to successful teaching experiences in a rural area or community. Preservice programs offered by teacher-training institutions have primarily been campus- and urban-based with little thought of the need for specialized training for those educators who might select to work in a rural environment. This reflects what Jonathan Sher [15] called "decades of relative obscurity" for rural education. Recently, however, there has been a rural education renaissance.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the availability of preservice or certification programs for rural teaching in the 27 states defined as rural (See Table 1). A secondary purpose of this research, based on the belief that there are unique competencies necessary for successful teaching in rural schools, was to examine preservice components which meet rural teacher needs. A third purpose of this study was to suggest ways to upgrade existing programs as well as recommend curriculum components for those who might select to implement a new preservice training program for rural environments.

METHOD

Population and Sample

The population for this study was all directors of student teaching and administrators of field experience at 456 public and private institutions in the 27 rural states. The 240 respondents represented the sample for this study. Of the 240 returned questionnaires, 32 were incomplete or had insufficient data. Written comments on some of those instruments indicated that the questionnaire was not applicable to the institution's program offerings or its urban setting. Data from the remaining 208 questionnaires (45.6% of the population) were analyzed. Telephone follow-up of a random sample of nonrespondents validated that the sample was representative of the population. All 27 states defined as rural were represented in the sample.

Procedure

Descriptive survey research was selected as the most appropriate method to collect data. The survey instrument, a detailed 30-item questionnaire, was designed to collect the most current information regarding preservice programs which prepare teachers for a rural environment. On the first 26 items respondents were asked to indicate which suggested preservice components were currently available (1—Never available; 2—Previously available, but not currently; 3—Currently available as an elective;

¹The author wishes to acknowledge the Rural Education Association (REA) for endorsing this survey research project.

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TABLE 1

Persons Per Square Mile and Rank Density
for 27 Rural States

Rank	Density	State	Persons Per Square Mile*
1		Alaska	0.82
2		Wyoming	5.25
3		Montana	5.55
4		Nevada	8.06
5		South Dakota	9.09
6		North Dakota	9.62
7		New Mexico	11.50
8		Idaho	11.84
9		Utah	19.07
10		Nebraska	20.68
11		Arizona	26.01
12		Oregon	27.45
13		Kansas	29.48
14		Colorado	30.11
15		Maine	36.60
16		Arkansas	43.84
17		Oklahoma	47.17
18		Minnesota	49.29
19		Iowa	51.61
20		Mississippi	54.22
21		Vermont	54.64
22		Texas	59.98
23		Washington	63.06
24		Missouri	71.32
25		Alabama	76.71
26		West Virginia	81.26
27		Wisconsin	84.61

*Persons per square mile was calculated by dividing the 1983 estimated state population [2] by the square mile figure from the *Times Atlas of the World*, 1980.

4—Currently required for all students; and 5—currently required only for students preparing to teach in a rural environment), and which components should be available (1—Not essential to 5—Very essential). Frequency distributions, stated as percentages, described how the sample responded for each component (See Table 2). Means and standard deviations were ranked and used to describe what preservice components the respondents indicated *should* be available (See Table 3). Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree (1—Strongly disagree to 5—Strongly agree) with four statements concerning the need for special preservice training for rural teachers (e.g., teaching in a rural and urban environment are characteristically similar). Means and standard deviations were used to describe the results (See Table 4).

RESULTS

Specific skills, experiences, and competencies for this study were taken from the research recommendations of Bandy [1], Charles [3], Gardener and Edington [6], Horn

TABLE 2

Preservice Components Available Compared with
Importance Rankings by Field Experience Administrators

Rank	Component	% Avail.*	% NA**
1.	Develop curriculum	90.3	8.7
2.	Refer and/or teach exceptional children	89.4	7.2
3.	Educational technology	90.3	8.7
4.	Integrate curriculum	75.0	20.2
5.	General preparation	77.4	15.4
6.	Work with limited resources	63.9	31.3
7.	P.E., art, music	88.0	8.2
8.	Use community resources	65.3	27.4
9.	Field experience—community service	68.3	26.9
10.	Recognize delinquency	71.6	22.6
11.	Field experience—student teaching rural	76.0	20.2
12.	Competency-based preservice program	58.7	28.8
13.	Field experience—rural observation	72.6	25.0
14.	Preparation for extra-curricular activities	46.1	45.7
15.	Field experience—a rural internship	69.7	26.4
16.	Public relations	47.1	46.6
17.	Two or more grade levels in same classroom	39.4	51.0
18.	Gain access to information	43.8	47.6
19.	Vocational guidance	43.8	46.2
20.	Field experience—living in rural area	39.0	55.3
21.	Use teacher training site	14.5	72.6
22.	Rural sociology	43.8	49.5
23.	Use regional service center	21.2	72.1
24.	Preservice rural ed program	10.1	89.9
25.	Rural politics	19.3	75.0
26.	Rural economics	24.1	69.2

* % Avail. includes electives, required for all, and required for rural education.

**% NA = percent never available.

[8], Meier and Edington [10], Oelschlager [12], Oelschlager and Guenther [13], Reed and Seyfarth [14], and Traugh [18]. Suggested experiences and skills included teaching competencies, personal competencies, and administrative competencies. Twenty-one of 208 public and private institutions in 27 rural states responded affirmatively to the statement, "At our institution a rural education preservice program exists." Results were similar to the findings of Muse [11] and Dreier [4] and were markedly different from the 1981 findings of Horn [8], who stated that 33% of the institutions in 23 states reported having a rural education preservice program.

The 26 curriculum components suggested in the survey instrument were ranked by mean scores on the essential scale and were compared to their availability. The major findings showed that 14 of the suggested 26 preservice components (53.8%) were currently available in over half

TABLE 3

Essential Components for Preservice Rural Education Teacher Training as Rated by Field Experience Administrators

Rank	Component	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
1.	Develop curriculum	4.482	0.845
2.	Refer and/or teach exceptional children	4.432	0.895
3.	Educational technology	4.177	0.904
4.	Integrate curriculum	4.026	0.992
5.	General preparation	3.843	1.001
6.	Work with limited resources	3.775	1.069
7.	P.E., art, music	3.737	1.069
8.	Use community resources	3.689	0.989
9.	Field experience—community service	3.651	1.155
10.	Recognize delinquency	3.630	1.016
11.	Field experience—student teaching rural	3.465	1.151
12.	Competency-based preservice program	3.451	1.215
13.	Field experience—rural observation	3.418	1.135
14.	Preparation for extra-curricular activities	3.416	1.008
15.	Field experience—a rural internship	3.381	1.182
16.	Public relations	3.312	1.129
17.	Two or more grade levels in same classroom	3.203	1.021
18.	Gain access to information	3.138	1.199
19.	Vocational guidance	2.984	1.093
20.	Field experience—student teaching rural	2.940	1.190
21.	Use teacher training site	2.917	1.194
22.	Rural sociology	2.911	1.127
23.	Use regional service center	2.894	1.113
24.	Preservice rural ed program	2.823	1.223
25.	Rural politics	2.584	1.094
26.	Rural economics	2.550	1.059

**M* based on scale 1 = Not Essential; 5 = Very Essential.

of the institutions surveyed (range 58.1% to 90.3%), and respondents indicated that those 14 components *should* be available. Eight of the components were available in less than half of the institutions, and respondents indicated that those components were not essential. The largest discrepancies between essential mean and available percentages existed for the following components: preparation for participation in extracurricular activities, coursework in public relations, training for teaching two or more grade levels in the same room, and gaining effective access to information.

Results from a majority (59.1%) of respondents indicated that no time was devoted specifically to rural preservice preparation, yet the mean ($M = 3.302$) indicated that respondents agreed that there was a need for special preservice training for rural teachers. Written comments on the survey instrument by 21% of the respondents indicated that several of the components were integrated

TABLE 4

Agreement/Disagreement with the Need for Special Preservice Preparation for Rural Teachers

Statement	<i>M*</i>	<i>SD</i>
27. Teaching in rural and urban environments are characteristically similar.	2.480	1.116
28. There is need for special training for teaching in a rural environment.	3.302	1.125
29. The skills/competencies for teaching in a rural environment are similar to urban.	3.438	1.062
30. College/university faculty members should receive special training to prepare preservice teachers for a rural environment.	3.086	1.129

**M* based on scale 1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree.

into existing coursework, although no specific rural preservice program existed.

The four components available at most institutions (range 88.0% to 90.3%) included the following: coursework in developing curriculum, training to recognize and appropriately teach and/or refer exceptional children, coursework in educational technology including computer literacy, and training for teaching physical education, music, art, and/or community recreation. These components were available as an elective, required for all students, required for students preparing to teach in a rural environment, and/or integrated into existing campus courses.

The majority (66.7%) of preservice training programs for rural educators were found in public institutions. Most of these institutions were located in the Great Plains and the Great Basin areas. Respondents at 49 public and private institutions indicated moderate or great impact on the institution's preservice program by the regional service center and/or the teacher training site in the state even though all of them did not have a program to specifically train rural educators.

The following colleges and universities indicated that students were prepared specifically for teaching in a rural environment:

- Iowa—the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls;
- Kansas—Fort Hays State University, Hays and Kansas Wesleyan, Salina;
- Maine—University of Maine, Machias and Orono;
- Missouri—Hannibal La Grange College, Hannibal;
- Minnesota—Southwest State University; Marshall and the University of Minnesota, Morris;
- Nebraska—Kearney State College, Kearney;
- New Mexico—Eastern New Mexico University, Portales;
- North Dakota—North Dakota State University, Fargo;
- Oklahoma—Oklahoma State University, Stillwater and Southeastern Oklahoma State University, Durant;

Oregon—Eastern Oregon State College, La Grande and the University of Portland, Portland;
 Texas—Southwest Adventist College, Keene;
 Utah—Brigham Young University, Provo and the University of Utah, Salt Lake City;
 Washington—Heritage College, Toppenish;
 West Virginia—West Virginian Wesleyan College, Buckhannon;
 Wisconsin—the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Six respondents indicated that a rural education preservice program was being developed or considered at their institutions. These institutions included: Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, AK; Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS; St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN; Concordia Teachers College, Seward, NE; Washington State University, Pullman, WA; and Whitman College, Walla, Walla, WA.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIRECTORS OF STUDENT TEACHING, ADMINISTRATORS OF FIELD EXPERIENCE, AND OTHER PRESERVICE PROGRAM PLANNERS

Although specialized preservice programs were considered nonessential by the majority of directors of student teaching and administrators of field experience, the need for special preservice training for teaching in a rural environment was acknowledged. Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are provided for field experience administrators and planners of programs who might select to implement a new preservice training program for rural environments or for those who might want to upgrade an existing program.

1. The following general curriculum components should continue to be offered or integrated into an existing preservice program for teachers selecting to teach in a rural environment:

- a. coursework in developing curriculum;
- b. training to recognize and/or refer exceptional children;
- c. coursework in educational technology, including computer literacy;
- d. coursework which prepares teachers to integrate the curriculum;
- e. general coursework preparation rather than specialization;
- f. training for teaching physical, music, art, or community recreation;
- g. training for the recognition of possible delinquency problems;
- h. field experience—student teaching in a rural environment;
- i. provide a competency-based preservice program;
- j. field experience—rural observation;
- k. field experience—an internship in a rural area;
1. training for teaching two or more grade levels in the same room.

2. Because each area of the United States is unique in its cultural heritage, those planning to teach in a rural

environment must be aware of the cultural, social, and economic factors, and the close relationship that exists between a rural community and its school [7; 9; 16; 19]. Attention to these aspects of the culture in preservice planning depends upon the region being served (i.e., Great Plains, Mississippi Delta, Corn Belt, etc.).

There is a disparity between the recommendations of the research literature and the general education preservice components currently offered at over half of the institutions of higher education. For example, teachers in the small rural school remain accountable to the community in ways virtually unimaginable in the cities and suburbs where they tend to be viewed as specialists whose personal lives are separate from those of their students' families [15]. Rural teachers need preparation different from that of urban teachers. Teachers in rural schools should have experiences and skills which would enable them to achieve professional and personal competencies [1; 3; 6; 8; 10; 12; 13; 14; 18]. Rural education has an effect on the rural tradition, life style, and economic development [16].

However, institutions apparently provide a minimum of preparation for rural community life and community expectations. For example, half of all institutions had no coursework in rural culture, sociology, and/or anthropology, and the mean ($M=2.911$) indicated that respondents thought it was not essential. A vast majority (75%) of the institutions had no coursework in rural politics, and the mean ($M=2.584$) indicated that respondents thought it was not essential. The majority (69.2%) indicated that coursework in rural economics was never available, and the mean ($M=2.550$) indicated that respondents thought it was not essential. In contrast, approximately two-thirds (65.3%) of the institutions offered preparation for the effective use of community resources, and the mean ($M=3.689$) indicated that respondents agreed it was essential. Nearly half (47.1%) of the institutions had no preparation in public relations, yet the mean ($m=3.312$) indicated that respondents thought it was essential.

Thus, before any appropriate program changes can occur, program planners need to develop an awareness of the rural education literature which stresses the essential need to create programs which prepare teachers for the unique professional and personal characteristics of rural teaching. Program planners, therefore, should consider implementing or integrating the following curriculum components:

- a. preparation for the effective use of community resources (human and financial);
- b. field experience—providing community service;
- c. preparation for participation in extracurricular activities;
- d. coursework in public relations;
- e. coursework in rural sociology, culture, or anthropology, rural politics, and rural economics.

3. Respondents indicated that minimal preparation was provided for the realities of living and teaching in an isolated rural area. Program planners should consider im-

plementing or integrating the following curriculum components:

- a. training to teach with limited instructional resources and
- b. training in gaining effective access to information (e.g., literature available on the results of rural education research).

An optional component of field experience, living in a rural setting as preparation for the social isolation common in a rural environment, might be considered in states with substantial sparsely populated areas (e.g., western states).

4. Program planners should seek information concerning the availability of a regional service center and/or the teacher training site in some states. Creating off-campus centers and fostering cooperative relationships with neighboring rural schools and with state education agencies will provide the unique experiences and supplemental preservice training components needed for students selecting to teach in a rural environment.

5. Research suggests a shift in the role of the campus professor. Drummond et al. [5] suggested new roles including serving as linkers, reference sources, resource retrievers, instructional managers, and diagnosers. Results from this research indicated that faculty members are still generalists in preservice preparation. Specialization including field experience, research, and attendance at rural education conferences should be considered by program planners.

6. Apparent discrepancies exist between recommendations from past research and the program practices at institutions of higher education found in this research. Although only 10.1% of public and private institutions provide a preservice program for rural teaching in the 27 rural states and respondents indicated that such a program was not essential, respondents indicated a need for special preservice training for teaching in a rural environment. To alleviate any confusion, program planners need to review the research literature and continue to develop an awareness of the special characteristics and needs of rural teachers, rural communities, and rural schools. Organizations such as the Rural Education Association (REA), the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), and the ERIC Clearinghouse for Rural Education and Small Schools (CRESS) disseminate information and focus on rural education.

SUMMARY

In summary, specific training opportunities which prepare educators for rural environments are not abundant. Only 21 (10.1%) of the 208 public and private institutions in the sample offer a preservice program for teaching in a rural environment. Program planners and administrators need to understand the unique skills and competencies necessary for teaching in a rural environment, the unique circumstances of a rural community, the professional and social isolation experienced by teachers in some rural areas, and the supplemental sup-

port services provided in some states. It is recommended, therefore, that planners seek additional information concerning the program needs of preservice students and the availability of support services. It is further recommended that some special training be offered for students preparing to teach in a rural area. Whether components are integrated into existing coursework or offered as a separate specialized preservice program depends on the cultural, social, and economic factors present in the rural region of the United States being served and an assessment of the teaching needs of those rural environments.

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