

## Rural Teachers' Perceptions of Their Schools and Communities

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Perceptions of rural secondary teachers about the role of the public school in rural communities were described. Answers were sought for several questions. How do teachers perceive their role in the rural community? What factors help or hinder the teachers in fulfilling their roles? How do the community and school interrelate? What are the expectations of the community for its teachers? Qualitative research methods were used to interview teachers and summarize the results of the interviews. Results indicated that: most teachers preferred the rural school as a place to work, some teachers found it difficult to adapt to the traditional rural community structure, administration was somewhat informal, assistance with extracurricular activities was expected, second jobs were held by many, and many failed to recognize the importance of agriculture in the economy of the rural community.

### *Introduction*

Challenges facing the delivery of rural education in the United States have increased in recent years. Rural student numbers have declined due to a general decline in the number of school age children in the United States as well as the decline in rural populations. Economic resources have become scarcer because of the worsening farm economy and the general decline in revenues in many states. The problem is particularly acute at the secondary education level where there are increasing demands by public and state agencies for expanded curricular options. Rural schools are encountering formidable challenges as they seek to make advanced electives available to their youth and to provide a curriculum that serves all of their children—those who pursue further education and those who enter the work force after leaving high school [9]. These concerns, and others, have led to rural schools being characterized as small in size, sometimes economically depressed, having difficulty in offering broad and varied curricula and unable to maintain balanced staffs.

Limited studies have been done analyzing the problems facing rural schools in recent years. One crucial aspect of rural education, rural teachers and their role in the school and community, is conspicuous by its absence in research studies. There is little definitive data on rural teachers despite the fact that teachers are the key to educational excellence in any community or cultural context [7].

Rural schools function in environments which are quite different from urban and suburban settings. Community and cultural concerns often have greater

impact upon rural schools and teachers because of the microcosmic setting in which they occur. Consequently, a study of perceptions regarding the role of teachers and the school in rural communities was considered justifiable.

Questions were developed to address school and community concerns which exist in rural settings. These were: How do teachers perceive their role in the rural community? What factors help or hinder the teachers in fulfilling their roles? How do the agricultural community and the school interrelate? What are the expectations of such communities for their teachers?

### *Objectives*

Perceptions of rural secondary teachers about the role of the public school in rural communities were obtained by asking them to: (a) describe the expected rural school secondary teachers, (b) identify factors in rural communities that were related to the success of the educational program, (c) identify factors in rural communities that were related to the success of the educational program, (d) identify expectations of teachers in addition to classroom responsibilities, and (e) describe the support of the agricultural community for the school.

### *Related Literature*

Few research studies have examined the interaction between rural teachers and the school and community. In a study of rural Utah teachers [5], it was reported that over one-half of the rural teachers surveyed felt they were more closely observed by community members than their urban counterparts. While few rural teachers

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mentioned poor salary as a disadvantage, most teachers and school administrators felt that teachers actually needed to work another job part-time to make a satisfactory living. Other difficulties in teaching in rural areas that were mentioned included a lack of equipment, facilities and materials, limited curriculums, "community cliques, gossip and small town talk," conservative attitudes, and a lack of conveniences. Principals of smaller schools reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction than did principals of large schools [8].

Conversely, numerous advantages to teaching in rural areas have been reported. Muse, Parsons, and Hoppe [5] found that rural communities were largely supportive of teachers in their schools. Most teachers were socially accepted in the rural communities studied. Students and parents in these areas had a higher regard for the teaching profession than did the educators themselves. Teachers indicated that other major advantages to working in rural settings included parental cooperation, a friendly population, good physical and family environments, and a good rapport between teachers and students. Barker [2] indicated that rural schools support close working relationships between teachers and administrators as well. Barker went on to report that teachers have a sense of control over what and how they teach. This is due, in part, to their ability to change curriculums and the organization of instructional materials.

Dunne [4] found that rural people are proud of their schools and typically refer to a family feeling, attention to individuals, and the commitment of the community resources and people. Schools in rural communities do develop a culture, a way of doing things [3]. Persons who ignore these phenomena are designed to experience a significant struggle if they attempt to import changes which run counter to the established "way." On the other hand, people can impact the school if their ideas reinforce or support the established culture. Barker [1] claimed that many problems such as finances, shortage of teachers, changing social values, and special interest groups were magnified in small high schools, yet, due to smaller size, they offered the best opportunities to create a school climate conducive to the best teaching and learning.

### *Methods*

The data used in this study were collected in a staff study entitled *The Nature of Public School Instruction in Rural Ohio*. The staff study was conducted by the Department of Agricultural Education at The Ohio State University. The methodology used and reported in this study was limited to that used in completing the case study.

Qualitative research methods were used in this descriptive study. Personal interviews were conducted with faculty members of four rural Ohio high schools during 1985. For the purpose of the study a rural public high school in Ohio was one that met the following criteria: (a) located in a county outside a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, (b) located in a county

with a total population of less than 40,000 people, (c) offered vocational agriculture as a high school course, and (d) had a high school enrollment of 500 or fewer students (average class size under 125). Fifty-two public secondary schools in the state of Ohio were found to meet these requirements. These schools were geographically stratified into four groups to account for the social and economic differences associated with location. One school was randomly selected from each of the four groups. One teacher was randomly selected from those who were not teaching during each school period. This procedure resulted in six interviews being conducted in each school.

An interview schedule was developed. It was checked for content validity by a panel of former teachers. It was then field tested with practicing teachers for clarity and the nature of responses.

Each interview lasted most of the free period of the teacher. Probing questions were used to clarify responses or to obtain the reasons behind responses. Content analysis techniques were used to summarize the results.

### *Results*

Faculty members who were interviewed taught a broad range of subjects. Most had been teaching for several years and were residents of the communities where they taught. They were from faculties that ranged in size from 18 to 24 full-time teachers. The average number of faculty members in each school which was studied was 20.

Those interviewed indicated how they felt as a teacher in the community. The vast majority reported being comfortable with teaching in a rural setting. The principal advantages listed included fewer discipline problems, fewer of the problems found in urban schools, slower pace, lower cost of living, more assistance from the community, people know each other, students know and practice the work ethic, more freedom in teaching, faculty members are respected in the community, and little or no politics in the school system.

Conversely, teachers reported problems they perceived with the community concerning education. The principal concerns listed by the educators were narrow-mindedness among community members, parents not having enough knowledge and experience to properly help students make sound decisions, and the failure of parents to encourage students to be goal oriented.

Responses varied by community regarding support for education in general and for teachers in particular. Some teachers reported a great deal of community support for themselves and the school while others perceived their community as having a low priority for education and a poor image of teachers. The majority of teachers who were interviewed did report positive community attitudes and support.

Teachers were next asked to describe what factors in the school or community helped them to be a good teacher. Community characteristics that were helpful to the respondents were: community support for the school

and school activities, community commitment to education, parental involvement in the school, having the opportunity to know nearly all students, parents and other community members, and, to various degrees, providing resources that were helpful for teaching.

The principal factor in the schools which contributed to better teaching was support by and cooperation between faculty members and administrators. Other desirable characteristics of the schools and students were: smaller class sizes, better disciplined students, student respect for teachers, desirable student attitudes and motivation and close relationships between teachers and students.

Teachers outlined those factors in the school or community that hindered them as teachers. The principal complaint that teachers had about their rural communities was lack of privacy. One teacher summarized similar comments by stating "everybody knows everybody's business." Other hindrances in the communities included conservative attitudes of community members, broken homes, lack of resources for field trips, lack of minorities resulting in students being "culturally deprived," and parents going directly to administrators with problems that the teacher should have had the opportunity to handle.

The factors in the school which most frequently hindered instruction were a lack of resources including funding, equipment, teaching materials and facilities. Other hindrances listed were outdated teaching materials, frequent class interruptions, difficulties in scheduling classes and the fact that students had to be bused long distances to get to school.

After considering school and community factors affecting rural teachers, the respondents were asked to describe their role in curriculum selection and development. The respondents were nearly equally divided concerning whether or not they contributed significantly to curriculum development. Faculty members from two of the schools in the study felt that they played a major role in curriculum development in their schools. Conversely, teachers in the remaining two schools studied reported that they had little influence on the curriculum that they taught.

Those teachers who did influence curriculums reported that they were able to develop new courses of study or modify those being used by obtaining approval of administrators. This approval was granted provided the changes were justified. These teachers reported having carte blanche in determining course content.

Those teachers who reported having little input into curriculum development taught in districts adopting prescribed course curriculums. These curriculums were developed and their use mandated by local school administrators. In these instances, teacher input into curriculum development was limited to participation in curriculum committee meetings, discussing concerns with administrators and serving on textbook selection and similar committees.

Faculty members provided information outlining their extracurricular activities. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they were involved with some type of extracurricular activity that involved students.

The greatest number of teachers either served as coaches or were otherwise involved in school athletics. Several of the respondents were class sponsors. Other extracurricular activities listed were: directing plays, serving as club sponsors, directing school yearbook or newspaper staffs, directing the school band, and conducting college tours for upperclass students (eleventh and twelfth-graders).

Teachers were asked whether they held any jobs outside of the school during the school year. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that they did hold additional jobs during the school year. Nearly all of these jobs provided a second income for the teachers.

A larger percentage of the teachers who were questioned reported working during the summer months as well. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents held jobs during the summer. Principal reasons given by the teachers for working during the summer were to supplement their income or to keep themselves occupied. Again, the majority of these jobs provided additional income.

Considering the criteria utilized to select the schools included in the sample, it was expected that each of the communities would have some agricultural influence. Those teachers who were interviewed were asked to report how important agriculture was in the school district. The majority considered agriculture to be "very important." Principal reasons cited were the provision of jobs for the community, agricultural background of most students and area residents. Minor mention was also given to the fact that agriculture had an effect on the school curriculum.

Approximately 40% of the faculty members responding perceived agriculture to be of "some importance," citing reasons similar to those just mentioned. Only 10% of the teachers studied described agriculture in the district as being of minor importance. Justifications for these responses included the fact that the agricultural economy was depressed and, therefore, agriculture made a smaller financial contribution to the tax base, and there was a relatively small number of full-time farmers in the communities.

### *Implications*

Several implications were identified as a result of this study.

Most teachers preferred the rural school over the other alternatives as a place to work. However, problems were of a much different type and magnitude than one might find in urban areas. At many universities, undergraduates wishing to be certified to teach are required to have experience in urban schools. These students should also be required to experience rural school situations if a uniform undergraduate program is to be maintained and students are to be suitably prepared for teaching.

Some teachers found it difficult to adapt to the traditional rural community structure. Teachers with rural backgrounds may have more realistic expectations concerning what it is like to live and work in rural areas. Teachers should not be surprised that their teaching ability is continually being informally evaluated and reported

throughout the community.

There seemed to be more informality in the rural schools included in the study than one would expect to find in larger schools and/or more urban schools. Classes were interrupted frequently. Interpersonal communications are normally used in place of written memos. Teachers in these situations must be tolerant of class interruptions and of other activities which may require plans to be changed on the spur of the moment.

In these small schools, teachers were expected to assist with extracurricular activities. These responsibilities were generally assigned to new teachers. These facts dictate that teacher preparation programs should provide students the opportunity to develop abilities needed to supervise organizations and groups.

Many of the teachers reported that they "moonlight" by holding down one or more jobs in addition to their teaching position. However, income of teachers was high compared to others in the community. The extra jobs may have been for extra income, for a diversion, or for using available time wisely, particularly during the summer months.

Financial support for the rural school is dependent upon an agricultural tax base. Erosion of that tax base has resulted in rural teachers beginning to question the continued support for education in rural communities. Support for schools should not primarily depend upon the real estate tax base within school district boundaries.

A small percentage of teachers felt that agriculture was only of minor importance in the rural community. Evidently, these teachers failed to recognize the extent to which agriculture provided support for the local economy. Current and future teachers should understand that rural communities could not continue to exist without the contribution made by agriculture to the economies of rural districts.

The contributions made by rural schools and teachers in these schools were vital. While rural teachers faced special problems, most were satisfied with their work and the areas in which they lived. These teachers were actively involved in the school and community as exhibited by their participation in various activities. Rural teachers were also cognizant of the vital role played by the school and agriculture in rural communities.

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