

Rural and Urban Differences in Educational Placements

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The purpose of this study was to compare available placements for severely handicapped students in rural and urban areas. More specifically, this study investigated the relationship of percentage of urban population to the type of placement. The data for this study were collected by a questionnaire distributed throughout the United States by a telecommunication system for special education, SpecialNet, and by direct mail.

One hundred and ninety school districts from 46 states comprised the sample. As the school district names were recorded, demographic data from the National Bureau of Census were developed. The data were adjusted to identify the "percentage urban" population.

Findings of the study are that severely handicapped rural students are more often placed in resource rooms while their peers from more urban districts are placed in special schools. Educational implications and suggestions for further research are presented.

The education of severely handicapped students in both rural and urban areas has changed dramatically since the advent of P.L. 94-142 in 1975. Under the requirements P.L. 94-142, placements must be identified. Placements for handicapped students have often been described as a continuum of services. Reynolds [11] and Deno [3] described placement alternatives for handicapped students as regular classrooms, resource classrooms, self-contained classrooms, special schools, residential schools, institutions and/or hospitals and home instruction. Turnbull and Turnbull [14] described the requirements for placement in the least restrictive alternative by stating that handicapped children should be educated with nonhandicapped students whenever possible and that the decision for placement was the responsibility of the Individualized Educational Plan [IEP] committee. With the enactment of P.L. 94-142, many studies, including those by Blatt, Bogdan, Biklen, and Taylor [1], suggested that placement for severely handicapped individuals must have a continuum design to ensure that all individuals received the most appropriate placement. Blatt et al. [1] suggested that, instead of special schools for severely handicapped students, there should be a range of educational programs to ensure movement between placements.

Helge [6] noted that the majority of unserved and underserved handicapped children in America were located in rural areas before the enactment of P.L. 94-142. Most severely handicapped students were sent to in-state residential institutions or out-of-state placements. Very few rural school districts attempted to serve low-incidence severely handicapped students in their respective districts. Since the enactment of P.L. 94-142, many states with rural populations have made conscientious efforts to offer free and appropriate educational services

to all handicapped students in the least restrictive environment. This was documented by Helge's [6] 1980 national survey on rural special education. She found that from 1975 to 1980 there had been a 47% increase in services for severely handicapped students in their respective school districts. The survey also indicated that, by 1980, most rural school districts were trying to serve the severely handicapped in their own districts [6], despite the fact that these individuals are often the most difficult students to serve.

Although services were being delivered to severely handicapped students in rural areas, research has not clearly defined educational settings. Services were delivered to severely handicapped students in rural areas without consideration of the educational, physical or environmental structure of the rural placement. Population differences, distances and travel between schools as well as community structures were not taken into account when considering services for severely handicapped students and those services were often based upon plans and programs developed for urban populations and educational settings. The studies compiled by Helge suggested that traditional strategies for the placement of severely handicapped students were not being utilized in rural school systems.

Recent studies have addressed the need for further research on special education for the severely handicapped in the rural United States. Such investigations require comparisons with urban educational processes. Sher [12], Helge [6], Smith-Davis, Burke and Noel [13], Marrs [9], and Kirmer, Lockwood, and Sweeney [8] have all cited possible differences between rural and urban special education programs. Some identified differences were available placements, teacher qualifications, and pre-service and in-service programs. In general "What were the differences?" The purpose of the study reported here

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was to identify the similarities and differences in rural and urban programs for severely handicapped students.

METHOD

The questionnaire for this study was designed to identify current placement alternatives, available related services and teacher qualifications for severely handicapped students in rural and urban settings throughout the United States. Special education placement options available in the school district responding to the questionnaire and the number of placements in each placement were requested.

Data were provided by 190 school districts throughout the United States (127 predominantly rural and 63 predominantly urban districts). The populations of the districts ranged from 634 to 3,600,885. According to Helge [4], 67% of the U.S. school districts are classified as rural. Of the school districts participating in this study, 127 (66.8%) were classified as rural with populations from 634 to 14,867 and the remaining 63 school districts (33.2%) were classified as urban (populations from 4,457 to 3,600,885). Demographic information was derived from the Bureau of Census Population and Housing Summary Tape File 3 series (S.T.F. 3F). The population and housing data contained in these tapes were collected as part of the 1980 census.

The percentage of urban population within each district was computed as were percentage of severely handicapped students in each type of placement (*i.e.*, 4 of the districts' 10 severely handicapped students placed in a "regular classroom" equaled 40%). This clearly identified the percentage of severely handicapped students in each placement category.

A multiple regression analysis was used to ascertain whether the percentage of urban population biased the placement of severely handicapped students. A forced entry method was used with the multiple enter subcommands specifying that all variables be entered regardless of tolerance.

The variables utilized were percentage of severely handicapped students in a) regular classrooms, b) resource classrooms, c) self-contained classrooms, d) special schools, e) residential schools, f) institutional and/or hospital placements, g) home instruction programs, and, h) percentage of urban population in each district.

RESULTS

Results of multiple regression analyses suggested that rural severely handicapped students are most often placed in resource classrooms, and urban severely handicapped students into special schools. When asked about available placement options, most school districts sampled identified regular classrooms, resource classrooms, self-contained classrooms, special schools, institutions or hospitals, and home instruction as options for severely handicapped students. However, actual placements of severely handicapped students in smaller regular and resource classrooms, whereas larger population school districts

most often made placements to special self-contained classrooms and special schools (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
Variation of Severely Handicapped Students
in Relationship to Placements

Variables	\bar{X}	SD	r	P
Proportion			Correlation	
Within				
Settings				
Regular	.049	.149	-.098	.247
Resource	.077	.163	-.245	.003*
Self-contained	.423	.364	.011	.987
Special School	.298	.345	.228	.003*
Residential	.060	.102	-.050	.552
Institution	.055	.155	-.095	.261
Home Instruction	.037	.116	-.113	.180

* = $p \leq .05$ level

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results indicate that severely handicapped students in urban school districts were more often homogeneously grouped into self-contained classrooms and special schools than their rural peers. This supports Brown, Nietupki and Hamre-Nietupki's [2] findings that placements for urban severely handicapped students are usually to self-contained schools or self-contained classrooms. The data further support Helge's [6] statement that the continuum of services for severely handicapped students in rural districts, as described by Reynolds [11] and Deno [3], appears to be different than that of urban school districts. Differences in the alternatives available for placements greatly affect placement opportunities for severely handicapped rural students. Helge [5] further suggested that rural communities often "make do" with placements available within the community. The relatively common placement of severely handicapped students from rural areas in regular classrooms supports the above statement.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The suggestions that follow are based on the findings of this study which suggest that placements for severely handicapped students are different in rural and urban populations.

Educators need to identify and design instructional programs specific to placements for severely handicapped students in rural settings. Placements are often dictated by the numbers of severely handicapped students within a specific setting. Given the number of severely handicapped students and placements available, design educational programs that meet the specific needs of the severely handicapped student. Educational requirements, educational needs, and services available must be identified

and developed into a plan that will support a specified placement. As an example, a resource room with a severely handicapped student in a small rural area requires different planning than a self-contained classroom of severely handicapped students in a rural cooperative. By identifying and developing educational plans by placement requirements, duplication and replication of exemplary instructional strategies can be carried out with a greater degree of success.

Inservice programs for rural school districts need to be developed that support present placements of severely handicapped students. If small numbers of severely handicapped students reside within rural school districts, inservice training must take into account the specific placement of these students.

Utilizing the resources of colleges and universities by developing opportunities for pre-service teachers to have practicum experiences may serve rural or remote districts very well. Those colleges and universities surrounded by rural school districts should encourage student experiences related to such placements as their students are likely to seek employment in such settings.

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