

Staff Development Research and Rural Schools: A Critical Appraisal

PAUL F. KLEINE¹, AND FRED H. WOOD²

This review of research related to staff development in rural schools is organized into three major sections. The first provides a brief summary of what we have learned from the research that has been conducted in rural schools. This summary is followed by a commentary on the existing research which points up a problem of conceptual ambiguity in the area of rural staff development. The final section provides a research agenda which offers substantive, methodological and conceptual suggestions for our research colleagues. For purposes of this review, we are defining staff development as the process by which continuing professional education for teachers and administrators is identified, planned, delivered and evaluated.

SECTION I: STAFF DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH FROM RURAL SETTINGS

While the existing literature on staff development specifically devoted to rural settings is sparse, it does exist and it is growing. Without question the field's reach still exceeds its grasp. As an example of the discrepancy between reach and grasp, the recent Resource Review developed by the Clearing House on Teacher Education (AACTE, 1987) listed 197 citations on staff development and only *four* appear to have been conducted in rural settings.

In fact, the number of studies on rural staff development available at the time of this review was so limited and the reports of those studies so lacking in detail, it is difficult to say much about rural staff development with certainty. Nevertheless, there were findings which provided some insights into what might be appropriate practice and expectations when planning and implementing staff development for educators in rural settings. These findings dealt with needs assessment, planning and conducting inservice training, follow-up support after training and teacher attitudes toward inservice training in rural schools.

The results of the studies that were identified suggest the following:

Needs Assessment

- Effective inservice for rural teachers and administrators should be based upon needs assessment data — long- and short-term needs (Kilgore, et al., 1986).
- The inservice needs of rural teachers appear to be in the area of subject matter, special education, classroom management and curriculum development and implementation (Reece, 1984).
- Inservice needs of rural teachers also include how to obtain specialized teaching resources, to use "high

tech" innovations, to integrate rural content into their curriculum; to involve the community, to relate to rural parents, and to use instructional practice for special students (Helge, 1985).

Planning and Conducting Inservice Training

- The development of ownership and participation in inservice training can be developed by involvement of teachers in the selection of improvement goals and programs that serve as the basis for staff development (Thompson, 1982).
- Inservice training in rural schools should be jointly planned by teachers and administrators (Thompson, 1982, Kilgore, et al., 1986).
- Participants should have some choice in what and how they learn during inservice training (Thompson, 1982).
- Guided practice and experiential learning where participants can try out new behaviors and techniques, exchange ideas and obtain feedback, increases the chances of successful training programs (Thompson, 1982).
- Use of peer instructors with expertise as inservice leaders promotes achievement of inservice objectives (Thompson, 1982; Wood and Kleine, 1987). Inservice leaders from non-rural districts have tended not to be effective with rural teachers (O'Connell and Hagans, 1985).
- Principals should participate in inservice programs with their teachers (Thompson, 1982).

Follow-up Assistance After Training

- Follow-up assistance and coaching in the work setting, after training to assist teachers use what they have learned seems to promote transfer of learning and

¹Professor of Education, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

²Professor of Education, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

implementation of desired practices (Kilgore, et al., 1986; Thompson, 1982).

Attitudes Toward Inservice Training

- Rural male secondary school teachers are significantly more negative toward staff development than are elementary teachers, who tend to be female. (Flanagan, 1984).
- Younger, less experienced rural teachers tend to be more positive toward inservice than other teachers. (Trueblood, 1986).

The Thompson study (1982) also provides data which suggests that staff development in rural districts is a five-stage process. These stages include Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation and Maintenance. Thompson's stages are defined by 38 practices which were extrapolated from the RPTIM School Based Staff Development Model presented in the 1981 ASCD yearbook (Wood, Thompson and Russell, 1981).

It should be emphasized, however, that the findings summarized here are based upon one or two isolated studies conducted in a single rural school or school districts. These research efforts were conducted to examine a variety of topics, using different content. Few were designed to identify effective staff development practices for rural settings. All but the Thompson dissertation (1982) failed to provide an adequate description of the treatment, the research design and the rural setting in which the study took place.

Given these limitations, it is clear that the research literature on staff development in rural settings provides educators with very little direct assistance about how to design professional growth experiences for rural school personnel. The one promising sign is that the findings reported in the studies that were available are supported by the more extensive research on staff development conducted in non-rural settings (Wood and Kleine, 1987).

Before proposing specific research needs for rural staff development that address the need for extensive systematic studies conducted to determine effective rural staff development practice, we need to pause for a second and reflect upon a major issue related to rural schools. Throughout the rural staff development literature, authors frequently make the case for the unique needs of rural schools. However, this uniqueness was not consistently supported in the research. Thus, prior to discussing the research needs related to rural staff development, the conditions or contradictions about conditions in rural schools will be examined.

SECTION II: CONCEPTUAL CRITIQUE

Those writing about rural staff development share an emotional commitment to the preservation and enhancement of rural schools which strikes a responsive chord in the authors and probably in those who read these words. Unfortunately, the writing tends to be more prescriptive than empirical and more hortatory than analytical. The prescriptions and exhortations appear

to be rather consistent and pervasive and will be examined to determine the degree to which they are substantiated in the research literature. With an eye toward sharpening our focus in future research, several contradictions which appear in the literature will be shared as problems to be clarified in future investigations.

Contradictions

One example of conceptual ambiguity might be termed "You can't have it both ways." There were statements in the literature which described rural schools simultaneously as poor, deprived, disadvantaged and also as idyllic havens of bucolic serenity. For example, Meier (1982) stated: "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." (p. 7). On the same page the following quote was found: "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."

Another contradiction which appears to ripple through the literature is one simultaneous concern that rural teachers do not understand the norms and values of rural students and the indication that rural teachers are predominantly drawn from the same areas in which they are now teaching.

As yet another example of contradictory expressions, consider the following two quotations: Fratoe (1978) concluded: "Rural students not only attend school with fewer support staff and services, less revenue and less per pupil funding, but they are also more likely to enroll in school later, progress through school more slowly, complete fewer school years, and score lower on national tests than students attending metro area schools." This bleak portrayal contrasts sharply with the data reported by Barker and Muse (1983) who found schools with enrollments under 300 pupils recorded more National Merit Exam Finalists, a higher percentage of graduating seniors (1981-1987) scoring 25+ on the ACT and a slightly higher percentage of graduating seniors attending college than did their counterparts in larger schools.

Additionally, the case for a "separate" set of needs for rural teachers rests on rather shaky conceptual and empirical grounds. Sher (1977) argued that teachers are needed who are "... specially trained to be generalists." Sher also asserted the best rural teachers are the ones who are able to cope with sparsity, utilize community resources, invent curricular materials, and, above all else, are oriented toward teaching children rather than subject. The emphasis upon general training appears to conflict sharply with Gjelton's (1978) plea for a strong tradition in the teaching of basic skills and essential facts.

While diversity of opinion exists in all areas and it could be argued that this contributes to the richness of the research base, there are other possible reasons for the wide ranging views regarding staff development in rural schools. In spite of our best efforts to intellectually accept the notion of how unique and diverse rural schools are,

there is still a tendency to assume that we are talking about the same set of phenomena when, in fact, we are not. Rural schools vary so widely that any attempts to generalize run great risks. Sher (1978) provides us with a summary reminder of the amazing diversity which eludes our best efforts to reduce rural schools to a conceptually clean set of categories.

“Rural America may very well represent the single most diverse and heterogenous 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.” (p. 31).

In addition to the diversity which Sher identified, one need only glance at the reference to the prosperous grain-farming area in Iowa to realize how rapidly that diversity can become even more diverse. The implication for engaging in research in such a volatile and diverse field suggests that we must keep our generalizations simple and direct and that we must describe our samples rigorously and precisely to enable our readers to examine the contexts of our research fully. While this advice is sound for all researchers, it appears doubly sound for those of us attempting to make sense of education in rural America.

SECTION III: RESEARCH NEEDS

In the previous section, we alluded to the diverse and unique qualities of rural education settings and the implications which this diversity carries for staff development needs. It is clear that research in rural staff development encounters a series of difficulties. First and foremost, the great challenge presented by the diversity described here will continue to haunt us. Scattered forays by doctoral students conducting small studies with insufficient sample sizes will not provide us with the data base needed to provide an underpinning for the development of a comprehensive staff development program.

Let's examine the major flaws in the existing research base and then identify some ideas about **research content**, **research methodology**, and add a few thoughts about the development of a **national research agenda**.

Research Critique

1. The existing studies do not provide a detailed description of settings and populations studied. As we have argued, rural schools differ markedly from one another and careful description is particularly

necessary to help practitioners and fellow researchers determine the extent to which the results of a particular study are appropriate for their districts, their schools and their faculty.

2. With few exceptions, the descriptions of treatments have tended to be vague or non-existent. The lack of details regarding inservice practices and activities prevents us from identifying the specific practices that have an impact on effectiveness of inservice programs for rural schools. Perhaps more importantly, the lack of careful description prevents replication of research findings which is the essential building block of cumulative research.
3. Limited sample size and single district or school workshop descriptions continue to be the norm rather than the exception in rural staff development research. If we are to be able to generalize about appropriate practice for rural schools or different kinds of rural schools, more comprehensive samples are required.
4. Few experimental studies have been undertaken and the few which exist lack tight controls; the implications here are obvious.
5. Studies tend to focus too quickly on changes in pupil behavior before having established that changes have been effected in the behavior of teachers in the classroom. There are parallels here with the early research on micro-teaching in which researchers attempted to jump from the lab sessions with teachers to measure changes in pupil achievement before they had demonstrated that the teachers had acquired the desired behaviors.
6. Finally, a common methodological flaw which exists in most applied research was also noted in the staff development literature, particularly in those studies conducted in rural settings. Results are often cited without attention to issues of internal validity of the research. At times, conclusions are drawn which appear to demonstrate that certain practices have failed when a more careful appraisal would indicate that the treatment had only been partially implemented. Outcomes should be measured against the degree of success in establishing the practice.

Research Content

We would suggest that a large scale needs assessment for staff development in rural schools should be undertaken with an adequate sample base and with a standardized form which provides information in ways which can be more adequately used by universities and state departments of education. The continuation of small, inconsistent and scattered forays into the needs assessment area should be discouraged in favor of carefully stratified assessments done in each state. The results could be widely shared with colleges, universities and state departments to aid them in their staffing and planning. Standardizing the

form in which the needs assessments are done would enable research to be conducted regarding regional, ethnic and social class differences which exist in the complex concept called the rural school.

An additional area deserving attention is the careful description of the context in which needs assessment is being done. Given our myriad backgrounds it is essential to provide planners of staff development with much more information than is customary about the settings in which the needs assessments are being undertaken. This same plea is offered in connection with all research done in small, rural settings in that generalizability of results will continue to be a problem in educational engineering and particularly in our diverse rural schools. We can increase the usability of our research if we carefully document the origins of our research findings.

A third area which appears important is an examination and comparison of delivery systems which are most useful to rural settings. Obviously, the technology which is now available needs to be exploited for rural staff development purposes but other systems and ideas need to be examined as well. The frequent cries of rural isolation which are heard argue for developing ways to bring the teacher out of the rural setting as well as bringing skills, knowledge and information to the teacher.

A final suggestion about research content is that effective practices should be tested individually for their applicability in rural settings. The few studies which have attempted to test applicability have tried to do too much. Given the small sample sizes it is unreasonable to test eight or more effective practices in a single study. We would all gain collectively if we applied our "small is beautiful" maxim to our own research and engaged in small, well crafted studies which attempted to do a few things well rather than try to make up for a century of lost time in one study.

In addition to the above general suggestions, we would offer more specific suggestions for studies which appear to be needed to enhance our understanding of rural staff development.

1. A survey of current practices employed in rural schools is needed which might replicate the studies done by Wood, McQuarrie and Thompson (1982) to determine the extent to which the 38 RPTIM staff development practices are used in rural schools.
2. Studies are needed to determine the effect of the nine practices which Wood and Kleine (1987) argued to be the most appropriate for rural school staff development.

Stated briefly, those practices include:

- Inservice training should focus on school-based improvements in professional practice;
- The development of participant ownership through involving teachers in the selection of the goals and program changes that serve as the basis for staff development;
- Teachers and administrators should work together to plan staff development programs;

- Staff development planning and training should be based on a careful, systematic needs assessment;
- Guide practice and experiential learning where participants in inservice education can try our new behaviors and techniques, exchange ideas, and obtain helpful feedback increase the chances of success in the Training Stage;
- Use of peer instructors with expertise as an inservice leader promotes the achievement of inservice objectives;
- Follow-up assistance as inservice participants begin to implement what they have learned during training once they have returned to their work setting seems to promote implementation and transfer of learning;
- Participants should have some opportunity to control part of what or how they learn; and
- Principals should participate in inservice programs with their teachers.

Particularly, these practices should be examined as to their impact on:

- a. positive attitudes toward new programs, practices and/or participation in inservice programs.
 - b. commitment, ownership and participation in staff development activities.
 - c. change in participant behavior.
 - d. changes in on-the-job practices.
3. Studies should be undertaken to determine whether school-based or district-wide staff development is more appropriate for rural schools—for what kinds of inservice, for what kinds of goals, and for what size rural districts.
 4. It would be useful to determine the appropriateness of the concerns stages identified in the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin & Hall, 1987) for rural teachers.
 5. Studies are needed which define the current status of staff development for first-year entry teachers and administrators.

METHODOLOGY

There are two methodological suggestions which appear pertinent to the rural school staff development setting. First, we would urge an increase in well designed and in-depth qualitative studies which increase our understanding of how and why certain staff development practices function as they do. With a concern for rich detail and providing what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls "thick description" we may be able to better understand the complex and subtle aspects of our rural setting. For example, one of the often stated beliefs is that small rural schools provide a total experience for children which goes beyond viewing the child as a composite of academic and social skills. Because the small school is staffed by

someone from the community who understands the family background of the child and who also know the values and culture of the community, it is frequently argued that this teacher is better equipped to individually respond to that child as a total and complete person. Try fitting that problem statement into a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ factorial design!

Secondly, we would suggest that more staff development researchers utilize single subject or N of 1 experimental designs to take advantage of a methodology which is more suitable for the rural setting. As Borg and Gall (1983) stated: "It has been suggested that exploration of new educational techniques should begin with single-subject designs. This strategy enables the researcher to make intensive observations over a reasonably long period of time, to 'play with' treatment variations, and to formulate hypotheses. Insights derived from single-subject data then can be tested for generalizability in a multi-subject design." (p. 719).

A National Research Agenda

Finally, there appears to be a need to establish a national research agenda for rural education. The creation of a research panel could be the first step toward the development of a matrix of needed research topics. By designing a series of studies which could be executed at the national level, sufficient cooperation could be achieved to have research done of sufficient scope to be defensible. By mapping out the major research domains, a national register of critical research studies needed could be maintained and researchers seeking either topics or access to data sources could be aided in their research efforts. We can no longer afford to allow the research agenda to drift without a strong central organization providing structure and guidance.

A Closing Thought

Clearly, the examination of effective practice in rural staff development is in its infancy. The limited number of studies and the lack of attention to detail in designing and reporting the result of those studies that have been conducted leaves practitioners with little to guide the design of professional development of programs for rural teachers and administrators. Research on rural staff development is a major void that needs the attention of rural educators and scholars interested in the identification of effective practices and programs for rural schools. It is hoped that this paper will serve as an initial guide to future researchers as they address the crucial issue of how best to design effective staff development in rural schools.

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