

Training Needs of Rural Special Educators in Louisiana

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Special education personnel who plan to teach in rural areas are in need of specialized preservice training programs which address unique issues of the rural environment. This paper describes a project at Southeastern Louisiana University designed to identify training needs of special education teachers throughout the state of Louisiana. Although the literature in rural special education indicates a consensus in regard to a number of needs germane to all rural settings, teaching in Louisiana presents the educator with problems specifically associated with the cultures, ethnicities, topography, and religion of this state. To investigate the training needs for special education teachers in Louisiana, a needs assessment was conducted with 117 special educators. Results indicated that Louisiana teachers share concerns with rural special educators nationwide. Additionally, the respondents identified several areas of need which may reflect concerns singular to this unique state.

Preservice training programs in special education provide specialized training for teachers enabling them to meet the needs of exceptional children. Most programs do not differentiate between urban and rural issues in terms of personnel preparation [2]. Massey and Crosby [8] postulated that rural communities are politically invisible, largely because of misimpressions of the size and significance of the rural education sector. In reality, approximately 67% of U.S. schools are in communities classified as rural [3].

Awareness has increased about the unique needs of rural communities. In response, a growing number of special education preservice training programs have recognized that the education of exceptional children in rural environments requires additional specialized instruction. The advent of groups such as the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) and the National Rural Development Institute and concomitant journals and publications attests to the growing recognition of unique and pressing issues intrinsic to rural special education.

Marrs [7] noted that teacher preparation programs across the country have not prepared sufficient numbers of qualified personnel for rural special education programs. Because instruction is often insufficient, difficulties with staff recruitment and retention abound. Attrition rates of 30 to 50 percent are the norm for rural special educators [4]. When Matthes and Carlson [9] investigated recruitment and retention problems, they discovered that rural teachers noted several positive aspects of rural life, including the slower pace of living, the lower cost of living, and the smaller size of the schools. Researchers have suggested that training programs emphasize these positive aspects of teaching in rural communities [12, 13]. Most programs,

however, have not trained or encouraged special education teachers to cope with life in isolated, remote and culturally distinct areas [14].

The majority of unserved handicapped children reside in rural areas. Consequently, rural areas have the greatest need for qualified special educators. When preservice training programs do not address realistic role expectations for the rural special educator, job dissatisfaction, stress, and attrition are more likely to occur [11, 12]. Helge [6] has pointed out that many national studies concluded that the most significant obstacle to serving handicapped children in rural areas is the shortage of personnel. In many cases, the response to this problem has been to lower hiring standards. These types of practices tend to result in the use of inexperienced or underqualified personnel in rural special education.

It is not surprising that rural preservice training in special education has been deemed a high priority need by professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children, CASE Research Division Committee and the National Education Association. In order to prepare a corps of teachers for the unique challenges of rural schools, Helge [2] recommended that rural preparation programs offer data-based and field-tested curricula which (a) train personnel to work with a wide variety of handicapping conditions, (b) stress the importance of using available university and community resources, (c) incorporate local community value systems, and (d) provide ample opportunities for in-vivo training in the rural classroom. Helge [2] contended that this type of training program is more likely to produce teachers who understand the differences between rural and urban special education and are aware of the state-of-the-art of rural special education including service delivery and

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alternate resources. Furthermore, an awareness of local community values will aid teachers in working with peers, parents, citizens, and agencies.

The literature in rural special education has consistently reported several needs or issues unique to the rural environment. Perhaps the most dramatic difference between rural and urban special education revolves around the delivery of services. Services for exceptional children in rural areas are less available, more sporadic, and less differentiated [4, 7]. Low-incidence disabilities receive particularly inadequate services in many rural systems [5]. Due to a lack of funding and qualified support personnel, the special education teacher may be the only service available for students with wide varieties of handicapping conditions.

The perceptions of rural special education personnel confirm the inadequacy of current programs. Helge's [4] survey of 200 rural special education directors and teachers in all 50 states underscores many basic deficiencies in current teacher training programs. Although almost all the respondents had ostensibly been trained for work with rural handicapped students, 97% of the respondents felt that they were not adequately trained and that most of their rural training took place "on the job." Consequently, 59% deemed experiential training as an essential (but often non-existent) aspect of preservice training. In general, most of the respondents felt that they needed more direct contact with all aspects of the rural educational environment. More than half of the respondents also indicated specific types of coursework necessary for effective teaching in rural special education. Such coursework included (a) service delivery strategies for low-incidence rural populations, (b) generic approaches to teaching rural handicapped children, (c) customs, mores, and cultures of rural areas, and (d) status of rural education service delivery systems.

Other needs assessments have revealed similar findings. Anderson [1] used Helge's survey questions with teachers and administrators in Alaska and found a high level of agreement with Helge's [4] findings. Differences that did exist were largely attributed to unique features of rural Alaskan life. Mills, Vadasy, and Fewell [10] used information from a needs assessment conducted by the National Rural Development Institute to help develop 19 issues of importance in training rural professionals. Suggested competencies included (a) effective communication skills, (b) working with a broad range of handicapping conditions, (c) coordinating resources for families as well as seeking out resources and support for professional and personal growth, (d) team diagnostic and teaching skills, (e) knowledge of curriculum models and handicapping conditions, (f) skills in program and service delivery, and (g) use of the most current technological tools available to the field.

In general, several themes emerged from these surveys. There was considerable concern for the lack of services and the concomitant need for diversity in training competencies. Communication, organizational, and managerial skills as related to the rural setting were consistently referred to as critical training needs. The

importance of realistically understanding the culture of the specific rural environment and the overriding significance of experiential training in rural settings were also predominant responses. Hence, the single greatest weakness of training programs seemed to be the lack of realistic experiences in a rural community. Clearly, a successful training program must immerse students directly in the communities it intends to serve.

The state of Louisiana is largely rural. Undoubtedly, many preservice programs in the state are replete with the shortcomings indentified by Helge's [4] study. In addition, Louisiana has particular problems which are currently exacerbating the difficulty in training personnel for the handicapped population. Because of the decline in the oil industry, the economic situation is grave. Louisiana is currently leading the nation in unemployment. According to the United States Department of Labor statistics for July 1988, 10.2 percent of Louisiana's labor force is out of work. Universities and colleges have been forced to raise their tuition to offset financial problems. Additionally, the state's Professional Improvement Plan (PIP), which previously extended tuition waivers to teachers, was completely eliminated in the fall of 1985. Consequently, many teachers who would be working on teacher education plans have been forced to discontinue their training because of financial problems. As Louisiana has an oil dependent economy and the forecast for the industry is pessimistic, it is assumed that teacher training efforts will continue to be adversely affected for some time to come.

Approximately 64 percent of Louisiana's residents live outside of urbanized areas of the state and almost half of these residents live in communities with populations of fewer than 2,500. These rural areas are somewhat unique in several characteristics.

First, numerous ethnic groups such as Yugoslavs, Hungarians, Creoles, Cajuns, Blacks, Vietnamese, etc. are present in integrated and segregated rural communities. Louisiana is recognized as a "melting pot" because the backgrounds of its residents are so diverse. Contrary to this perception, most of these ethnic groups have not "melted" into the mainstream but rather have retained lifestyles consistent with their backgrounds.

Second, the watery topography of Louisiana, including the Mississippi River, the Gulf of Mexico, and a multitude of bayous, has had considerable influence on living patterns of the state's inhabitants. These expanses of water have created numerous remote areas in which rural communities are separated from neighboring rural communities and families are isolated from neighbors. In some remote areas of the state, school boats are still used to transport children from the bayous to their schools. These bodies of water also support occupations which are unique in the general culture. Hunting, trapping, crabbing, and shrimping are examples of these economic endeavors. As these are seasonal occupations, they significantly affect school attendance. It is not unusual for all family members to participate in the work.

Finally, religious influence is a dominant characteristic of almost all communities in Louisiana. Its considerable

significance is exemplified by the fact that public funds are used to provide services for parochial schools (*e.g.*, transportation and special education). The separation of church and state in Louisiana has not been established with the clarity demonstrated in the rest of the country.

This research was designed to identify necessary training competencies for rural special education teachers in Louisiana. In order to develop teacher training programs which effectively address issues pertinent to teaching in the rural environment, it is imperative to identify concerns of professionals currently in the field. Needs assessments historically have provided this type of information. A needs assessment tool modeled after Helge's [4] was developed by Southeastern Louisiana University's Project Rural Return, a federally funded project designed to recruit and retain special educators for rural areas by providing them with financial assistance and a specialized training program. The needs assessment questionnaire addressed crucial issues focusing on the curriculum offered by the program as well as the personal and professional characteristics necessary for success in the rural classroom.

METHOD

Questionnaires were mailed to the special education directors of all parishes (*i.e.*, counties) in Louisiana with

predominantly rural communities ($n = 130$). Rural communities are defined as having less than 150 inhabitants per square mile; rural counties have more than 60% of the population living in communities of less than 5,000 [5]. A cover letter requested responses from both an administrator and a special education teacher. The first mailing was followed by a second mailing to parishes which had not responded within 60 days. By the end of the second mailing, 41 parishes (31%) had responded and completed the survey. The two mailings resulted in a total of 117 questionnaires used for analysis in this study. Responses from special education administrators accounted for 52 questionnaires (44%); responses from special education teachers accounted for 65 (56%).

The 49 item questionnaire (reproduced in Table 1) asked respondents to respond on a Likert-scale where needs were ranked from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important). The questions covered areas such as quality of the respondent's preservice training, necessary competencies for effective teaching, and other factors for success in the rural environment. The mean score from each response served to rank order needs for rural special educators in Louisiana. In this way, the priority of needs in the present study could be established and compared to Helge's [4]. Thus, an increased understanding of needs unique to Louisiana as well as needs shared by Louisiana with rural communities at large was developed.

TABLE 1
Needs assessment Results for 117 Louisiana Special Educators by Percent of Response.

Code:	4 = Very Important	2 = Occasionally Important			Mean
	3 = Moderately Important	4	3	2	
<i>I. Quality of Preservice</i>					
1. Communication disorders in culturally diverse populations	32.4	36.8	24.8	6.0	2.96
2. Rural special education service delivery	42.7	47.0	8.5	1.5	3.31
3. Strategies for identifying services and scarce resources	48.7	39.3	12.0	0.0	3.37
4. Rural special education administration	39.7	36.2	20.7	3.4	3.12
5. Methods coursework	64.7	26.6	6.9	1.7	3.54
* 6. Generic/noncategorical approaches to teaching rural exceptional children	70.9	23.9	5.1	0.0	3.66
* 7. Effective strategies for adapting curriculum	66.7	31.6	1.7	0.0	3.65
** 8. Customs, mores, and cultures of rural areas	21.6	42.2	27.6	8.6	2.77
9. Testing and appraisal	47.4	41.4	8.6	2.6	3.34
10. Categorical coursework	46.8	40.5	9.9	2.7	3.32
11. Practicum in rural settings	51.7	32.8	13.8	1.7	3.36
12. Observation opportunities	52.6	39.7	6.9	.9	3.44
13. Simulations of problem solving	37.9	47.4	12.9	2.6	3.21
14. Team Management	38.3	47.8	11.3	2.6	3.22
15. General experiences in rural community	28.4	49.1	16.4	6.0	3.00
** 16. Knowledge of transportation	22.4	40.5	26.7	10.3	2.75

* Items given highest priority.
** Items given lowest priority.

TABLE 1—Continued

Code:	4 = Very Important 3 = Moderately Important		2 = Occasionally Important 1 = Not Important		Mean
	4	3	2	1	
17. Exposure to rural independent living skills	29.3	46.6	19.8	4.3	3.01
** 18. Experience with rural technology	18.1	52.6	20.7	8.6	2.80
19. Interpersonal communication skills	54.3	32.8	11.2	1.7	3.40
<i>II. Competencies</i>					
20. Coping with remoteness to services and resources	44.8	37.9	17.2	0.0	3.28
21. Strategies for locating resources	46.1	43.5	9.6	0.0	3.35
22. Ability to cope with low incidence populations	51.7	37.1	9.5	.9	3.39
23. Pluralistic cultural awareness	24.1	50.9	17.2	7.8	2.91
24. Professional consulting skills	41.7	49.6	7.0	1.7	3.31
25. Working with peers	46.4	40.9	10.9	1.8	3.32
* 26. Working with families	67.6	27.9	3.6	.9	3.62
27. Working with community	39.6	45.9	9.9	4.5	3.21
28. Working with itinerant service delivery personnel	49.5	39.6	8.1	2.7	3.36
** 29. Coping with remoteness to	24.3	46.8	19.8	9.0	2.87
30. Knowledge of familiarity with	31.5	52.3	13.5	2.7	3.13
31. Dealing with transient	29.1	47.3	16.4	7.3	2.98
32. Strategies for recruitment and retention	36.4	46.4	13.6	3.6	3.16
33. Interpersonal skills	46.8	43.2	7.2	2.7	3.34
34. Understanding the context of a rural school and its environment	45.0	41.4	11.7	1.8	3.30
35. Understanding differences in rural and urban special education	33.3	45.9	15.3	5.4	3.07
36. Knowledge of effective service delivery models	41.8	44.5	10.0	3.6	3.25
* 37. Knowledge of current legislation (<i>i.e.</i> , PL94-142, LA 1508)	71.2	19.8	8.1	.9	3.61
38. Diagnosing and treating communication in culturally diverse students	45.9	41.4	11.7	.9	3.32
39. Nondiscriminatory assessments	47.7	36.9	14.4	.9	3.32
40. Respect of minority cultures	47.7	41.4	9.9	.9	3.36
41. Simplifying forms for parents from different cultures	60.4	29.7	8.1	1.8	3.49
42. Creativity and decision-making strategies	57.4	33.0	6.1	3.5	3.44
* 43. Working with wide diversity of handicapping conditions	65.0	29.9	5.1	0.0	3.60
<i>III. Other factors for success in the rural environment</i>					
44. Personal attractions of rural environment (recreational opportunities, slower pace, etc.)	25.4	47.4	21.9	5.3	2.93
45. Increased contact with students	44.4	43.6	12.0	0.0	3.25
46. Increased contact with parents	43.1	46.6	10.3	0.0	3.33
47. Increased community involvement	30.8	53.8	15.4	0.0	3.15
48. Availability of employment	45.3	43.6	11.1	0.0	3.34
** 49. Being raised in the same community	16.2	49.6	26.5	7.7	2.74

* Items given highest priority.

** Items given lowest priority.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results of the 49 item needs assessment tool. Although all items were rated by some educators as important, relative differences provide insight as to how these educators prioritized needs. Thus, both the five highest ranked items and the five lowest will be discussed. Items were ranked according to mean scores.

Louisiana educators regarded items #6 "Generic/non-categorical approaches to teaching rural exceptional children" (mean = 3.66) and #43 "Working with a wide diversity of handicapping conditions" (mean = 3.60) as essential requisites for successful teaching in rural special education. These are similar to Helge's [4] results where, "Service delivery strategies for low-incidence rural populations" and "Generic approaches to teaching rural handicapped children" were deemed as the two most important types of coursework in preservice training. These results reiterate Helge's [2] recommendation that personnel need to be trained in a wide variety of handicapping conditions. Particularly in rural areas, the special education teacher is often the only service available to the community. Consequently, the special education teacher in a rural setting must frequently deal with children with low-incidence handicaps, regardless of the teacher's area of certification or expertise.

Helge [4] further suggested that many professionals believed that #7 "Effective strategies for adapting curriculum" were necessary for quality preservice training. Louisiana special educators also ranked this concern in their top five (mean = 3.65). In rural Louisiana, a wide range of curricula is often unavailable. Current economic woes continue to plague curriculum development and expansion. As a result, special education teachers are often forced to be resourceful through adapting existing curricula to meet the needs of exceptional students.

Louisiana educators ranked #26 "Working with families" (mean = 3.62) as one of the top five items. This concern reflects the importance of an ecological approach to special education where informed parents contribute to the education of the student. In Helge's [4] survey, 98% of the respondents indicated the most effective strategy for successful parental involvement was the IEP meeting. In rural areas, family involvement might extend to volunteer services to schools, an issue Marrs [5] contended was extremely appropriate to the rural environment. Likewise, Helge's [4] survey identified the need for innovative approaches with caregivers, especially in utilizing parents as volunteers in rural special education programs.

Another concern shared by Helge's [4] respondents and Louisiana education professionals is the importance of #37 "Knowledge of current legislation" (mean = 3.61). Such a background may be particularly useful in Louisiana where the pupil appraisal handbook, Bulletin 1508, contains eligibility criteria unique to the state. Consequently, preservice training must supplement nationally used texts by providing information about existing state legislation and practices.

In order to provide an empirical basis for distinguishing the top five items from the five lowest items, a t-test between item #43 (lowest mean of five items given top priority) and item #29 (highest mean of five items given lowest priority) revealed a significant difference ($p < .001$) between these two most closely associated items from the different groups. Thus, items with greater differences in mean scores (*i.e.*, all other possible pairings) would also be significantly different. Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that even the lowest mean score (2.74) indicates a tendency toward importance on the Likert scale.

Item #49 "Being raised in the same community" (mean = 2.74) seemed to raise the least concern, perhaps because staying in the same community for a lifetime is simply becoming uncommon in American society at large. It is perhaps surprising that the Louisiana educators also ranked #8 "Customs, mores, and cultures of rural areas" (mean = 2.77) less important than most other items. Although being from a different community may not automatically impair teaching effectiveness, acceptance by community members tends to be facilitated through a willingness to understand the local value system [5].

Item #16 "Knowledge of transportation services" (mean = 2.75) and #18 "Experience with rural technology" (mean = 2.80) did not receive strong support. Helge [5] identified both of these factors as variables that must be controlled by the rural service delivery planner. The results of the present survey suggest that special educators in Louisiana may need to be more cognizant of the implications of these factors for effective programming. Finally, the respondents did not feel that #29 "Coping with remoteness to personal life" (mean = 2.87) was an overwhelming problem. As many of these educators have lived most of their lives in rural Louisiana, they perhaps have acculturated to such a degree that remoteness is not a concern.

DISCUSSION

Programs that focus on rural special education need to reflect an awareness of the distinct educational environments and the unique strengths and weaknesses inherent to rural education. Competencies needed for successful rural teaching may be quite distinct from competencies needed for the urban environment. Effective in-service programs must identify and teach specific skills to deal with rural special education delivery of services and administration and prepare the teacher to cope with the effects of cultural pluralism. Such programs are more likely to produce competent teachers who will remain in the rural special education system.

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