

The unique characteristics of rural schools and teachers create advantages as well as barriers to the indirect service delivery model of consulting.

Rural Special Education Teachers as Consultants: Roles and Responsibilities

by Linda P. Thurston and Ilene Kimsey
Kansas State University

Most special educators provide consulting services to general educators, administrators, and parents as part of their roles. This is in addition to their roles as direct service providers for children with special needs. West and Brown (1987) reported that 26 of the 35 states who responded to a survey sent to each state Department of Education specified that consulting was part of the special educator's role. Twenty reported the use of an indirect service model, with consultation being provided to the classroom teacher to assist with mainstreaming. States that listed specific competencies in consulting were Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Carolina, and Vermont.

The Consulting Model

The consulting role is described by the triadic service delivery model (Tharp and Wetzel, 1969) and is represented by a set of interactions between a special educator and a peer consultee (teacher, administrator, parent), through which a student indirectly benefits. Their interactions are collaborative, that is, equal levels of expertise are brought into the interaction. In this paper, consultation is defined as a:

"... process based upon an equal relationship characterized by mutual trust and open communication, joint approaches to problem identification, the pooling of personal resources to identify and select strategies that will have some probability of solving the problem that has been identified, and shared responsibility in the implementation and

evaluation of the program or strategy that has been initiated" (Brown, Wyne, Blackburn, and Powell, 1979, p.8).

The consultant model of service delivery to mildly-handicapped students is becoming increasingly popular because of advantages such as: it is cost effective; it provides more services to more children; it facilitates provision of instruction based on needs rather than categories, and; it facilitates appropriate and beneficial liaisons with other community agencies and with parents (Heron and Harris, 1987; Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin, 1986). These issues make the consulting model extremely appropriate for rural areas. Common issues in rural special education such as cost of bussing children, use of multicategorical classrooms, paucity of special education professionals, and importance of community involvement also indicate the consulting model may be an effective approach to serving rural handicapped children. In addition, the consulting role in rural areas may be enhanced by such rural characteristics as informal communication systems and community involvement in schools.

Research on consulting, although far from unequivocal, has preliminarily demonstrated effectiveness in promoting mainstreaming and in providing instruction for exceptional children. Research on consulting also provides guidelines for effective training and practice of consulting skills, and for policy development in the area of service delivery. However, all too often, research and training in education omits reference to rural aspects, and it is vital that the current interest in special education consulting be sensitive to rural issues. A recent perusal of ERIC entries notes 387 entries in the area of consulting. Although one third of all children are educated in rural schools, only ten of these entries seemed to deal directly with rural issues in consulting. Investigation of urban/rural differences in the consulting role and in consulting practice must be prerequisite of reaping the benefits of consulting for rural handicapped students.

The consulting literature defines several factors which facilitate or inhibit the practice of consulting by special educators (Johnson, Pagach, and Hammitte, 1988). Lack of time to consult and insufficient support for consultants to develop consulting skills are two often-listed inhibiting factors. According to Idol-Maestas and Ritter (1985), time is the single most important barrier to consulting. West (1988) reviewed the literature and listed time, administrative support, teacher attitudes and resistance, promoting consultation, and consulting skills as the major barriers to effective consulting. If, as Sylvia Rosenfield (1988) points out, there is a relationship between consultation practice and the culture of the schools, knowledge about the culture or attributes of rural schools seems to indicate that consulting will be different for rural special educators than for their urban and suburban counterparts.

Rural Strengths and Barriers

Certainly rural and metropolitan schools have similarities and shared problems; however, rural schools and teachers have unique characteristics. Nachtigal (1982) suggests a variety of factors which he presents as continua which differentiate between rural and urban educational settings. For example, at the rural end of one continuum is "smaller/less density" while at the urban end is "larger/greater density." Several of Nachtigal's factors directly relate to consulting: "self-sufficiency" for rural as opposed to "leave problem to experts" in urban areas; "who said it" in rural areas compared to "what's said" in urban areas; "verbal, informal communication" in rural as opposed to "written

Linda P. Thurston is an assistant professor of special education at Kansas State University. She is the Director of the Rural Special Education Teacher Training Project. Ilene Kimsey is the former coordinator of the project.

memos" in urban settings; "nonbureaucratic" compared to "bureaucratic"; "generalists" compared to "specialists," and; "personal, tightly linked" communities as compared to the "impersonal, loosely coupled" communities of urban settings.

Helge (1983) lists issues which differentially affect rural and urban schools as they deliver services to handicapped children. Again, many of these are directly related to consulting. She suggests that in rural areas, cooperation is inherent as compared to "turfdom" problems in urban areas. There is also a personalized environment in rural areas compared to a depersonalized environment in urban areas, and community spirit is part of rural communities. Communication is person to person in rural areas compared to written communication in larger, more dense areas.

Each of these factors suggests the compatibility of consulting as a service delivery model for exceptional children in rural areas. In addition, these characteristics of rural communities suggest specific consulting skills, roles, and responsibilities for rural special education teachers which may be different from those of their urban counterparts.

According to DeYoung (1987), rural teachers differ from their urban and suburban peers in a number of ways, including their perceptions of their teaching situations and the types of occupational incentives that keep them on the job. Teachers in rural areas are highly visible and thus may be more vulnerable to community pressure and criticism. Rural teachers are left much to themselves to look for solutions to problems and for ways of acquiring skills and training (Kilian and Byrd, 1988), and personal and professional isolation is the most frequently cited disadvantage of rural schools (Massey and Crosby, 1983).

These unique characteristics of rural schools and teachers create advantages and barriers to the indirect service delivery model of consulting. Judging from the characteristics described by Nachtigal (1982), Helge (1983), and others, it might be assumed that advantages for special education consultants in rural areas would be: readily developed cohesion and identity; small staffs which facilitate setting common goals and reaching consensus; less hierarchical systems; increased teachers' awareness of community needs and resources, as well as teachers' demonstrations of self-reliance and ingenuity. Barriers to successful consulting might be: less professional interaction because of population sparsity and geographical distance; long travel distance and poor roads; more lesson preparations and extracurricular duties; and lack of acceptance of the handicapped.

In order to investigate the perceptions and experiences of rural special educators regarding their roles and responsibilities as consultants, 172 special education teachers in Kansas were involved in reporting their consulting activities and perceptions. Both urban and rural teachers were involved. For purposes of this study, the definition for rural of the National Rural Project (Helge, 1984) was used: less than 150 people per square mile or counties with less than 60 percent or more of the population living in communities no larger than 5,000. The standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA) for urban as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau was the definition for urban.

Survey of Urban/Rural Consulting Roles and Responsibilities

Eighty-three special educators in Kansas recorded their consulting activities on formatted log sheets. Each teacher recorded at least one consulting episode per week for three months. Seventeen percent of these teachers were classified as urban and 42 percent as rural. In total, 600 con-

sulting episodes were analyzed to assess rural/urban differences in: (1) focus of the request for help; (2) problem or issue discussed; (3) intervention planned or action of the consultant; and (4) the skills the consultants thought would have helped them be more effective consultants in each interaction. Table 1 lists the differences found in the logs. Similarities were noted in the locus of the request, or who requested the consulting, although the rural teachers had more requests from other teachers (consultee), principals, and others (mostly parents). The most common problems/issues discussed by rural consultants were child behavior, other (e.g., parents, resources, questions about special education), and mainstreaming. For urban teachers, the most common problems were child behavior, other, and Individual Education Plans (IEP's). The most prevalent interventions for rural teachers were developing a behavioral plan, exchanging information about the child/program, mutual problem solving, and listening to the consultee. The most common interventions in the urban logs were information exchange, behavioral plans, problem solving, and placement. Most of the rural teachers felt they needed no other consulting skills for the interactions they logged or they wanted better communication skills. Urban teachers rated communication skills first, and no skills second, with problem solving skills as third.

Table 1
Analysis of Urban and Rural Consulting Episodes
(N = 600)

Locus of request	Rural	Urban
1. Teachers	69%	60%
2. Self	15%	17%
3. Other	7%	4%
4. Principal	5%	1%
Problem/Issue		
1. Child Behavior	44%	50%
2. Other	21%	18%
3. Mainstreaming	20%	IEP-12%
Intervention/Action		
1. Behavior Plan	30%	Info Exchange - 28%
2. Info Exchange	27%	Behavior Plan - 24%
3. Problem Solving	10%	Problem Solving - 7%
4. Listening	6%	Placement - 7%
Skills Needed		
1. None	31%	Communication - 28%
2. Communication	29%	None - 19%
3. Working w/parent	5%	Problem Solving - 12%
4. Assertiveness	4%	

Note: Percentages do not represent 100% because they represent the most prevalent responses in each area.

These data are based on self-report and also on self-selection of the consulting episodes to be logged, so they may be considered the best and most successful examples of consulting by both rural and urban special educators. These teachers showed similarity in locus of request, intervention planned, and skills needed, with some differences in problem addressed.

In addition to the analysis of the consulting logs, 98 Kansas special educators were surveyed about their consulting roles and responsibilities and an additional 90 were asked about the major barriers they faced as special education consultants. Of the 40 responses to 98 surveys which were mailed to teachers who had been part of a con-

sulting training program at Kansas State University or the University of Kansas, 21 were rural, 12 were urban, and 7 were "small city." Data from the last category of respondents are not reported here.

Of the rural teachers, 76 percent were employed by a cooperative and 24 percent by a school district. Ten percent of the urban teachers worked for a cooperative and 90 percent for a school district. Only 44 percent of the rural teachers indicated their role as consultant was officially recognized by administration while 83 percent of the urban teachers reported their consultant role was formally recognized.

To discover who was receiving consulting services, the teachers were asked to describe a typical week of consulting. Both categories of teachers served individual teachers most frequently. The urban teachers also consulted frequently with support staff and the rural teachers had more student interaction and more consulting with principals about specific students than did the urban teachers.

When asked to list successful consulting practices, the activities they listed, according to frequency, were:

Rural	Urban
Active listening	Problem solving
Utilizing teachers as resources to one another	Team teacher meetings
Informal teacher meetings	Follow-up after consulting
Working as partner with general educator	Working as partner with general educator
Follow-up after consulting	Parent communication
Parent communication	Pre-assessment meetings
	Modification of IEP's

These teachers were also asked to list barriers to being a successful consultant and both urban and rural teachers ranked "too many other responsibilities" as the number one barrier. Table 2 lists the teachers' responses to the questions of barriers. Another group of 80 rural special educators responded to a questionnaire about persistent barriers to effective consultation. They also listed "too many other responsibilities" and "lack of time." The other three most frequent responses were "parents' and teachers' attitudes," "inadequate facilities," and the "lack of understanding of others about the special education role."

Table 2
Barriers to Effective Consulting

Rural	
Too many other responsibilities	60%
No time	35%
Lack of administration support	35%
Travel hardships	30%
Too much paperwork	25%
Urban	
Too many other responsibilities	82%
Too much paperwork	64%
Parents not interested	27%

When asked to indicate the advantages and disadvantages of serving as a special education consultant in their setting, all of the teachers noted the same advantage, "great/caring staff" and all noted the same disadvantage, "lack of time." Rural teachers added "open communication," "consulting skills; "being seen as a resource," and "teachers as resources to one another" as advantages of their role in rural settings. Urban teachers listed "seeing the gains students make," "supportive parents," and "good resources and resource materials" as their advantages. Rural disad-

vantages were travel time, scheduling problems, small town grapevine and working with so many teachers and administrators (because teachers served as itinerates). Urban teachers listed these disadvantages: teacher attitudes, scheduling problems, being a public relations person, and uninvolved parents. Thus the teachers listed one common advantage and two common disadvantages in their roles as consultants.

Finally, the teachers were asked to respond to a self-assessment instrument which listed 29 consulting competencies adapted from consulting studies (e.g., Friend, 1984; Idol and West, 1987). Of these 29 skills, the urban teachers rated themselves high on 14 of the skills and low on four skills, whereas, rural teachers rated themselves high on four of the skills and low on five skills. The urban teachers seemed to have more confidence in their skills and abilities than did the rural teachers.

Discussion

In summarizing these responses to questions about their roles and responsibilities as consultants, both urban and rural teachers conducted similar consulting activities, although rural teachers have less formal recognition of their consulting role. Although major barriers, advantages, and disadvantages were similar, rural teachers listed more and different barriers and disadvantages in their rural setting than those perceived by urban teachers. All these teachers' perceptions to some extent matched the barriers discussed in the consulting literature, and rural teachers' perceptions are congruent with the rural education literature discussed earlier. Finally, rural teachers seemed less confident in their skills as consultants than did their urban counterparts.

Much more investigation is needed to delineate urban/rural differences in consulting in special education settings. The teacher perceptions reported here seem to indicate that there are some aspects in which the consulting role of the special educator is different in rural settings as compared to urban settings. There seem to be some specific challenges rural teachers face as they consult with their peers, such as confidence in their own skills, acquisition of new skills, travel time, administrative support, attitudes of colleagues and parents, and promotion of the consulting role.

Although a thorough understanding of what works for consultants in rural schools is limited, we have a body of knowledge derived from the literature on rural schools, rural special education, and consulting which suggest that the consulting model is appropriate for providing services for handicapped children in rural areas. The literature also suggests that rural teachers, although they face a variety of challenges in this role, have many advantages in carrying out the consulting role. Rural teachers are autonomous and powerful agents in school change (Killian and Byrd, 1988). They seem to be creative and innovative problem solvers and they make the most of the "make do" mentality of rural schools (DeYoung, 1987). To maximize the effect of special education consulting in rural areas, the strengths of rural schools and rural teachers must be recognized and extended.

References

- Brown, D.; Wyne, M.D.; Blackburn, J.E.; and Powell, W.C. (1979). *Consultation: Strategy for improving education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- DeYoung, A.J. (1987). The status of American rural education research: An integrated review and commentary. *Review of Educational Research*, 57 (2)1, 123-148.

- Friend, M. (1984). Consultation skills for resource teachers. **Learning Disability Quarterly**, 2, 70-78.
- Helge, D.I. (1983). Increasing preservice curriculum accountability to rural handicapped populations. **Teacher Education and Special Education**, 6, 137-142.
- Helge, D.I. (1984). The state of the art of rural special education. **Exceptional Children**, 50, 294-305.
- Heron, T.E. and Harris, K.C. (1987). **The educational consultant: Helping professionals, parents, and mainstreamed students**. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Idol, L.; Paolucci-Whitcomb, P.; and Nevin, A. (1986). **Collaborative consultation**. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Idol, L. and West, J.F. (1987). Consultation in special education (Part II): Training and practice. **Journal of Learning Disabilities**, 20, 474-493.
- Idol-Maestas, L. and Ritter, S. (1985). A follow-up study of resource/consulting teachers; Factors that facilitate and inhibit teacher consultation. **Teacher Education and Special Education**, 8, 121-131.
- Johnson, L.J.; Pagach, M.C.; and Hammitte, D.H. (1988). Barriers to effective special education consulting. **Remedial and Special Education**, 9, 41-47.
- Killian, J.E. and Byrd, D.M. (1988). A cooperative staff development model that taps the strengths of rural schools. **Journal of Staff Development**, 9 (4), 34-39.
- Massey, S. and Crosby, J. (1983). Special problems, special opportunities: Preparing teachers for rural schools. **Phi Delta Kappan**, 65, 265-269.
- Nachtigal, P. (Ed.). (1982). **Rural education: In search of a better way**. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rosenfield, S. (1988). Implementing consultation in the schools: The creation of supportive cultural norms for practice. In J.F. West (Ed.), **School consultation: Interdisciplinary perspectives on theory, research, training, and practice** pp. 157-169. Austin, TX: Association of Educational and Psychological Consultants.
- Tharp, R.G. and Wetzel, R.J. (1969). **Behavior modification in the natural environment**. New York: Academic Press.
- West, J.F. (1988). The practice of consultation in special education. In J.F. West (Ed.), **School consultation: Interdisciplinary perspectives on theory, research, training, and practice** (pp. 183-200). Austin, TX: Association of Educational and Psychological Consultants.
- West, J.F. and Brown, P. (1987). State departments' of education policies on consultation in special education: The state of the states. **Remedial and Special Education**, 8 (3), 45-51.