Research in Rural Education, Volume 3, Number 1, 1985

Importance of Areas of Preparation for Teaching in Rural/Small Schools

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Throughout the literature, reference is made to the unique qualifications for teaching in rural/small schools. At the same time, colleges and universities are criticized for reluctance in designing teacher education programs in rural education. This study investigated the importance of forty-five (45) selected areas of preparation for teaching success in small schools of Kansas. The 162 respondents (subjects) were recent college graduates who were teaching in schools of 600 or fewer students. The areas of preparation, normally addressed in a general teacher education program, were categorized as General Studies/Teaching Specialty, Studies in Foundations of Education, Studies in Curriculum and Instruction, and Studies in Selected Professional Skills. Based on analysis of the respondents' rating of each of the 45 items on a 1-5 scale, all but two areas were judged to be above the mid-point of the scale in importance. As a group, the areas of Oral Communications, Controlling Discipline, Organizing and Managing the Classroom, Teaching Major Specialty and Motivating Students were rated highest. Little difference was observed between the perceptions of teachers in very small schools and larger schools, 1-300 and 301-600 students, respectively.

Throughout the literature, reference is made to the unique role of teachers in rural/small schools. Reavis and Mehaffia (8) have identified this role with respect to what the ideal teacher for the small school should be able to do. Some of these qualities are:

- Be able to teach more than one subject and more than one grade level.
- Be able to teach students of a wide range of abilities in the same classroom during the same time span.
- Be knowledgeable about materials and resources and requisition procedures for these.
- Be able to direct a variety of extracurricular or co-curricular activities.
- Be able to supervise and assist students who take correspondence courses.

They go on to cite some areas where teachers in small schools must exceed the norms of teachers in larger schools. Included in this list are:

- Teach different subjects in alternate years.
- Combine pupils of more than one subject or grade in a single class.
- Represent the "larger world" and act as a bridge to it.

Muse [6], writing in *The Interstate Compact for Education,* identified several factors related to teaching in rural schools:

- Teachers typically have three to five preparations daily in different subjects.
- Teachers often teach a class or two in an area in which they are not adequately trained.
- Teachers often are expected to take extra-curricular assignments.
- Junior and senior high schools often are combined. Teachers may teach junior and senior high school students. Classes such as home economics, physical education, shop, etc. are often made up of students from two or three grade levels.
- Budgets are not as good as in urban areas, and supplies are not always readily available.

Others have been particularly critical of teacher education programs with regard to the manner and/or commitment to preparing teachers for rural schools. Massey and Crosby [3] typify this stance when they say:

> Teacher education programs continue to turn out teachers who have only the vaguest awareness of the unique problems and potentials of small rural schools and communities. Moreover, these teachers have no special training to help them deal with the special characteristics of such schools and communities in educationally effective and personally satisfying ways (p. 266).

Sher [9] chastised school districts and teacher educators when he referred to the lack of effort to recruit the best people to rural schools and even less effort to properly train them.

The response (or lack of) by higher education was described by Muse [5] and Horn [1]. While the samples were somewhat different in these studies, there appeared to be some change in the attention being given by colleges/universities to the preparation of teachers for rural areas over the span of six or seven years, 1977 to 1983. Muse found 15 of 200 colleges of various sizes and located in different geographical regions who indicated that they were involved in rural teacher training, as evidenced by specific college course titles or practical experience in rural

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school settings. Horn identified 33.3% of a sample of 24 institutions in 23 states who indicated they were offering pre-service education programs specifically designed to prepare educational personnel to meet the needs of rural/small schools. However, similiar comments received by both Horn and Muse may best reflect the lack of agreement on the appropriateness of rural-oriented teacher education programs. Some of these comments are listed below.

- I would never develop such a program.
- It is too political.
- It is not economical for us and many schools are too small anyway.
- Why should we prolong their death?
- I personally feel that an effective teacher training program can bridge the gap between urban and rural America.
- We train people for schools. They have a variety of experiences, some rural, some urban.
- There is a definite need for such a program.
- We train students in general skills and competencies, which we hope they can use in any situation.
- There is no apparent need in our geographical area.
- I doubt that we could justify a special program. I also question the need for all the specialization that emerged in recent years.

Massey and Crosby [3] have suggested several ways in which teacher preparation programs can help prospective teachers prepare for the breadth of responsibilities expected in rural schools:

A. Increase the number of content areas in which students are prepared to work.

B. Increase the age ranges with which students are prepared to work.

C. Develop students' skills in integrating the curriculum.

In recognizing the possible uniqueness of a rural teacher's role, they suggest other emphases in teacher education programs that would use the close school/community relationships as a vehicle for facilitating the personalized, caring education that is a hallmark of rural schools and the development of laudable and necessary self-sufficiency skills.

Certainly, there are rural-oriented teacher education programs. Meier and Edington [4] have included descriptions of several of these in a research synthesis of teacher preparation for rural schools. Those that seem to be the most successful are those that understand the observation made by Nachtigal [7], which emphasizes the need for any program to be developed with, not for, rural communities.

Why have teacher preparation programs been so slow to respond generally to the need for rural teachers? Massey and Crosby [3] may have touched on the problem in the following statements.

> . . . rural communities are politically invisible and impotent. Rural residents are far more likely to suffer in silence than to demand attention from agencies and institutions ostensibly designed to serve them. Another part of the answer lies in the orientation toward subject matter that takes precedence, in most teacher education programs, over an orientation toward constituencies.
>
> Rural education lacks status within the profession, a fact that discourages professors from developing programs and publications devoted to that subspecialty. Moreover, a self-declared worldliness and sophistication among higher education faculty members often leads them to express disclaim for what they perceive as the narrowness, the insularity, and the rigid conservatism or rural communities.

TABLE 1

Description of Respondents

Descriptors	School Size 1-300#	301-600#	All*
1. Teaching Level of Participants			
Number of Respondents	71	40	162
Elementary (%)	18.3	34.9	26.5
Middle School-Jr. High (%)	8.4	9.3	9.9
Senior High (%)	59.2	41.9	50.0
Other/Not Specified (%)	5.6	7.0	13.6
2. Primary Teaching Assigment as Major in College			
Number of Respondents	70	43	160
Yes	85.9	90.7	88.1
No	12.7	9.3	11.9
3. Number of Students in Largest Class Taught			
Number of Respondents	71	43	161
Mean	18.4	20.6	19.7
Median	17.0	18.1	18.0
Standard Deviation	9.4	10.1	10.0
4. Number of Students in Smallest Class Taught			
Number of Respondents	71	43	157
Mean	7.6	9.6	8.8
Median	5.7	8.0	7.0
Standard Deviation	6.5	5.8	6.6
5. Years of Teaching Experience			
Number of Respondents	71	43	161
Mean	5.5	5.7	5.5
Median	3.2	3.6	3.3
Standard Deviation	5.8	6.3	5.7
6. Sex of Respondents			
Number of Respondents	71	43	161
Female (%)	62.0	65.0	63.4
Male (%)	38.0	34.9	36.6
7. Age of Respondents			
Number of Respondents	71	43	158
Mean	28.4	29.1	28.9
Median	25.6	26.0	25.8
Standard Deviation	7.6	8.8	7.9

* All - includes three (3) respondents in schools with enrollment > 600 and excludes missing data, Total N = 162.
# Categories 1-300 and 301-600 include only respondents answering for school size and excludes missing data, Total N for school size 1-300 = 71, Total N for school size 301-600 = 43.

> The bias of universities toward even-greater specialization within disciplines also fails to serve the course of rural education (p. 266).

The call for a much more aggressive approach in preparing teachers for rural educators has been expressed in several quarters [4, 1]. Meier and Edington [4] call for the "need to establish special programs, work directly with and in the rural communities and maintain ongoing relationships with rural educators." Horn [1] asks the question, "Are the differences in qualifications only degrees of emphasis, rather than a completely different set of qualifications needed for successful teaching in rural schools?" Regardless of whether one chooses to develop a special program or develop programs with different emphases, colleges/universities must operate within the established structure of the institution and the standards for certification and accreditation. However, do we know what of the existing teacher education curriculum is important for teachers in rural/small schools?

THE PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to determine how important some forty-five (45) areas of college studies are to success in the current teaching assignment of recent college graduates who were teaching in small schools in Kansas. The areas of preparation are delineated as (1) General Studies/Teaching Specialty, (2) Studies of the Foundations of Education, (3) Studies in Curriculum and Instruction, and (4) Studies in Selected Professional Skills. These categories or groupings were created to better define purposes of the curriculum, as opposed to traditional divisions, i.e. major, professional education, etc. Furthermore, the study was initiated to help teacher educators better understand the relative importance of these areas among teachers in very small schools (1-300 students) and larger schools (301-600 students).

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURES

A survey instrument was developed, and two copies were sent to the superintendent of each of the 158 public school districts in Kansas with a total enrollment (K-12) of 600 or fewer students. This represents 52% of all Kansas public school districts. The superintendents were asked to give the questionnaires to two of their teachers who were recent college graduates. A total of 162 or 51% completed and returned usable forms. Table 1 contains data that generally describe the respondents of this study. This sample is not random nor was it intended to be an assessment of an individual institution of higher education. However, since all of these teachers have graduated

TABLE 2

The Importance of *General Studies/Teaching Specialty* for Success in Teaching as Perceived by Teachers in Two Categories of Small School Enrollments

General Studies/Teaching Specialty	Ratings* School Size**						
Area of Preparation	1-300		301-600		All***		Rank (Based on Mean for All)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
a. Written Communications	4.33	(0.63)	4.37	(0.49)	4.31	(0.58)	3
N=	70		43		160		
b. Oral Communications	4.65	(0.72)	4.65	(0.53)	4.67	(0.60)	1
N=	71		43		161		
c. Mathematics	3.70	(1.12)	3.61	(1.03)	3.66	(1.04)	6
N=	70		43		159		
d. Biological Science	3.09	(1.15)	3.05	(1.13)	3.09	(1.11)	8
N=	70		43		160		
e. Physical Science	3.14	(1.07)	3.12	(1.12)	3.12	(1.07)	7
N=	70		43		160		
f. Social Sciences	3.65	(1.20)	3.86	(1.10)	3.74	(1.07)	5
N=	71		42		160		
g. Teaching Major Specialty	4.52	(0.53)	4.63	(0.54)	4.58	(0.54)	2
N=	64		38		144		
h. Second (Minor) Teaching Specialty	4.26	(0.69)	4.21	(0.91)	4.20	(0.85)	4
N=	51		34		118		

*Ratings: 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Unsure, 2 = Unimportant, and 1 = Very Unimportant
**Categories 1-300 and 301-600 includes response from those who identified a school size *and* a rating of each area.
***The "All" category includes data from all respondents, whether or not they indicated school size.

TABLE 3

The Importance of *Studies in Foundations of Education* for Success in Teaching as Perceived by Teachers in Two Categories of Small School Enrollments

Foundations of Education	Ratings* School Size**						
Area of Preparation	1-300		301-600		All***		Rank (Based on
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean for All)
a. Educational Psychology (learning)	3.84	(0.97)	3.88	(0.91)	3.91	(0.92)	1
N=	70		43		160		
b. Educational Psychology (development)	3.81	(0.95)	3.77	(0.90)	3.85	(0.92)	2
N=	70		43		160		
c. Measurement of Learning	3.81	(0.71)	3.81	(0.77)	3.80	(0.74)	3
N=	70		42		159		
d. History and Philosophy of American Education	2.61	(1.13)	2.63	(1.18)	2.64	(1.18)	6
N=	70		43		159		
e. Multicultural Education	2.80	(1.11)	2.67	(1.20)	2.81	(1.14)	5
N=	70		43		159		
f. Educational Sociology	3.17	(0.96)	3.17	(0.89)	3.19	(0.92)	4
N=	70		41		156		

*Ratings: 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Unsure, 2 = Unimportant, and 1 = Very Unimportant
**Categories 1-300 and 301-600 includes response from those who identified a school size *and* a rating of each area.
***The "All" category includes data from all respondents, whether or not they indicated school size.

from approved programs and are certified to teach on similar standards by the Kansas State Department of Education, one presumes there was a good deal of similarity in their educational background.

RESULTS

The results of the study are summarized in Tables 2-6. In the broad category of General Studies/Teaching Specialty (Table 2), which typically may include 70-80% of an entire teacher preparation program, Oral Communications and Teaching Major Specialty were perceived to be the two most important areas for success in teaching. The two areas considered to be the least important in this category were Biological and Physical Sciences. However, it should be noted that none of the eight areas were rated below the mid-point of the five-point rating continuum. No noticeable differences were found between the responses of teachers in the smallest schools and those in the larger schools.

Table 3 contains the summarized responses for the areas of study described as Studies in Foundations of Education. The areas of Educational Psychology (learning and development) and Measurement of Learning were rated the highest, with means of 3.80 to 3.91. Two areas, History and Philosophy of American Education and Multicultural Education, were rated below the midpoint of the continuum, or closer to "Unimportant" than to "Important." Again, there is consistency among ratings between the two school district sizes.

Because there are various parts and curricular figurations of Studies in Curriculum, a finer breakdown of skills or areas of study was presented to the respondents. The results of the ratings in this category are found in Table 4. Only one of the seventeen areas (Computer Aided Instruction) had a mean rating of less than 3.0, the mid-point of the continuum, and three (Organizing and Managing the Classroom, Controlling Discipline and Motivating Students) received mean ratings of 4.5 or higher on the five point scale. In addition, several other areas related to curriculum planning and development, instructional planning and analyzing learning problems were rated at ≥ 4.0, the numerical value corresponding to the response of "Important." Overall, there were some differences between respondents from different size schools, but the magnitude of these differences was far less than one standard deviation, more often <25% of one standard deviation.

Data for the fourth category, Studies in Selected Professional Skills, are summarized in Table 5. As a group, these appear to be quite important to teachers in small schools. All received mean ratings above 3.0, and five of the fourteen have mean ratings greater than 4.0. The three perceived to be the most important were Working with Other Teachers, Self-Assessment of Teaching, and Working with Administrators. The two identified as least important were Serving on Curriculum Committees and Providing Leadership in Local Professional Education Associations, both of which may exist in a very small way in small schools. Participating in Community Activities

TABLE 4

The Importance of *Studies in Curriculum and Instruction* for Success in Teaching as Perceived by Teachers in Two Categories of Small School Enrollments

Curriculum and Instruction Area of Preparation	Ratings* School Size** 1-300 Mean	S.D.	301-600 Mean	S.D.	All*** Mean	S.D.	Rank (Based on Mean for All)
a. Teaching Exceptional Children	3.54	(0.91)	3.64	(0.93)	3.60	(0.95)	15
N=	70		42		159		
b. Instructional Media	3.90	(0.84)	3.86	(0.95)	3.88	(0.86)	12
N=	70		42		152		
c. Microcomputers and other Technology	3.23	(1.35)	2.93	(1.18)	3.03	(1.26)	16
N=	69		42		157		
d. Computer Aided Instruction	3.22	(1.29)	2.81	(1.08)	2.97	(1.21)	17
N=	68		41		155		
e. Teaching Methodology	3.83	(1.05)	3.91	(0.92)	3.89	(0.98)	11
N=	70		43		160		
f. Teaching Reading	3.80	(1.12)	4.02	(1.19)	3.87	(1.17)	13
N=	70		41		159		
g. Planning and Organizing Instruction	4.34	(0.70)	4.49	(0.67)	4.46	(0.65)	4
N=	71		43		162		
h. Organizing and Managing the Classroom	4.59	(0.52)	4.61	(0.66)	4.63	(0.56)	2
N=	71		43		162		
i. Controlling Discipline	4.61	(0.52)	4.58	(0.66)	4.65	(0.55)	1
N=	70		43		161		
j. Motivating Students	4.50	(0.61)	4.56	(0.77)	4.58	(0.63)	3
N=	70		43		161		
k. Teaching Multiple Groups in the Same Classroom	3.80	(0.97)	4.00	(1.01)	3.90	(0.97)	10
N=	70		42		160		
l. Teaching Multiple Subject Areas During the Same Period of the Day	3.57	(0.98)	3.65	(1.17)	3.61	(1.08)	14
N=	69		43		160		
m. Individualizing Instruction	4.00	(0.78)	4.42	(0.70)	4.16	(0.74)	5.5
N=	71		43		162		
n. Preparing Instructional Aids/Laboratory Materials	4.01	(0.71)	4.19	(0.70)	4.05	(0.69)	8.5
N=	71		43		162		
o. Analyzing Learning Problems	3.99	(0.67)	4.28	(0.73)	4.13	(0.72)	7
N=	71		43		162		
p. Developing Curriculum Materials	4.04	(0.65)	4.05	(0.72)	4.05	(0.63)	8.5
N=	71		43		162		
q. Selecting Curriculum Materials	4.11	(0.57)	4.21	(0.71)	4.16	(0.60)	5.5
N=	71		43		162		

*Ratings: 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Unsure, 2 = Unimportant, and 1 = Very Unimportant
**Categories 1-300 and 301-600 includes response from those who identified a school size *and* a rating of each area.
***The "All" category includes data from all respondents, whether or not they indicated school size.

TABLE 5

The Importance of *Studies in Selected Professional Skills* for Success in Teaching as Perceived by Teachers in Two Categories of Small School Enrollments

Professional Skills	Ratings* School Size**						
Area of Preparation	1-300		301-600		All***		Rank (Based on Mean for All)
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
a. Working with Administrators	4.00	(0.81)	4.16	(0.72)	4.11	(0.77)	3
N=	71		43		162		
b. Working with other Teachers	4.17	(0.81)	4.21	(0.64)	4.22	(0.74)	1
N=	71		43		162		
c. Conducting Parent-Teacher Conferences	3.96	(0.76)	4.26	(0.73)	4.10	(0.81)	4
N=	71		43		162		
d. Supervising Extra-Curricular Activities	3.96	(0.81)	3.79	(0.99)	3.88	(0.99)	8
N=	70		43		161		
e. Serving on Curriculum Committees	3.28	(0.88)	3.44	(0.88)	3.44	(0.89)	13
N=	71		43		162		
f. Supervising In-School Activities	3.69	(0.92)	3.70	(0.96)	3.75	(0.92)	9.5
N=	71		43		162		
g. Participating in Community Activities	3.48	(0.95)	3.49	(0.83)	3.52	(0.91)	12
N=	71		43		162		
h. Providing Leadership in Local Professional Education Associations	3.13	(1.04)	3.33	(1.13)	3.23	(1.05)	14
N=	71		43		162		
i. Adapting to the Community	3.68	(0.92)	3.74	(0.88)	3.75	(0.91)	9.5
N=	71		43		162		
j. Self-Assessment of Teaching	4.04	(0.69)	4.26	(0.73)	4.14	(0.69)	2
N=	71		43		162		
k. Developing Your Own Professional Development Plan	3.97	(0.93)	4.19	(0.98)	4.06	(0.91)	5
N=	71		43		162		
l. Reading and Applying Research Findings	3.57	(0.99)	3.70	(0.89)	3.59	(0.98)	11
N=	70		43		161		
m. Counseling Students on Educational Matters	3.93	(0.78)	4.02	(0.90)	3.92	(0.85)	6
N=	71		42		161		
n. Counseling Students on Personal Matters	3.80	(0.88)	4.14	(0.95)	3.91	(0.96)	7
N=	70		42		160		

*Ratings: 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Unsure, 2 = Unimportant, and 1 = Very Unimportant
**Categories 1-300 and 301-600 includes response from those who identified a school size *and* a rating of each area.
***The "All" category includes data from all respondents, whether or not they indicated school size.

was also rated relatively low.

In Table 6, all areas with an overall mean of ≥%4.0, which would be rated "Important" to "Very Important," are rank ordered, regardless of category of studies in college.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, there appear to be very few areas of study in a typical teacher education program that are perceived as unimportant for success in teaching in small schools. Also, little difference in perception was noted between teachers in very small schools (1-300 students) and their counterparts in somewhat larger schools (301-600 students). However, it is clear that several areas of study are very important and should be emphasized in an effective teacher education program. Among these are Oral Communications, Controlling Discipline, Organizing and Managing the Classroom, Teaching Major Specialty and Motivating Students. While this study did not attempt to address this issue, one would likely find these to be important for teachers in all schools. However, some with

TABLE 6

Areas of Preparation Perceived to be Important
or Very Important for Success in Teaching in Small Schools

Rank (Based on Mean)	Area of Preparation	Mean	SD
1	Oral Communications	4.67	0.60
2	Controlling Discipline	4.65	0.55
3	Organizing and Managing the Classroom	4.63	0.56
4.5	Teaching Major Specialty	4.58	0.54
4.5	Motivating Students	4.58	0.63
6	Planning and Organizing Instruction	4.46	0.65
7	Written Communications	4.31	0.58
8	Working with Teachers	4.22	0.74
9	Second (Minor) Teaching Specialty	4.20	0.85
10.5	Individualizing Instruction	4.16	0.74
10.5	Selecting Curriculum Materials	4.16	0.60
12	Self-Assessment of Teaching	4.14	0.69
13	Working with Administrators	4.11	0.77
14	Conducting Parent-Teacher Conferences	4.10	0.81
15	Developing Your Own Professional Development Plan	4.06	0.91
16.5	Preparing Instructional Aids/Laboratory Materials	4.05	0.69
16.5	Developing Curriculum Materials	4.05	0.63

*Ratings: 5 = Very Important, 4 = Important, 3 = Unsure, 2 = Unimportant, and 1 = Very Unimportant.

slightly lower ratings should be emphasized in a program designed to prepare teachers for smaller schools. Among these are Second (Minor) Teaching Specialty, Selecting Curriculum Materials, Self-Assessment of Teaching, Preparing Instructional Aids/Laboratory Materials, and Developing Your Own Professional Development Plan.

The results of this study provide little justification for eliminating elements of current teacher education programs. Yet, critics continually lament the lack of attention colleges/universities pay to the needs of small schools. Then what do we need, and what do we do? The answers are not evident, which may even more clearly point out the diversity among small schools and a general lack of understanding of their characteristics, their potential, and their uniqueness. We recommend two parallel and energetic actions—indepth research to discover the potential for effective and efficient rural/small schools and development of model teacher education programs that capitalize on the characteristics of students, schools and communities in rural areas.

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