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Preparing Rural Elementary Teachers

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The purpose of this project description is to give an overview of an elementary rural teacher training program which has successfully functioned over the past fourteen years in providing a rural student teaching experience for over 250 prospective teachers. Of particular interest are the program areas which deal with the live-in experience, financial structure, reciprocal benefits and school district-university cooperation in teacher preparation.

Because of administrative and financial conveniences, and due to the large number of teachers hired by urban and suburban school districts, most teacher training institutions are located in or near the population centers of any given state. It follows quite naturally, therefore, that the curriculum designs and content of teacher education departments and colleges have focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the needs of urban and suburban communities. As a result, with the exception of some who come from rural locations, prospective teachers have little reason to consider a teaching career in the rural areas of our country. Seldom is any attention in the university teacher training programs given to the needs of rural children or to the life style of rural teachers.

More important than differences in educational needs is the absence of legitimate collective advertising by rural school agencies. College students are seldom if ever exposed to a visible and credible campaign aimed at generating interest in rural teaching or, for that matter, anything aimed at generating an awareness of life in rural America. Educators are not saying, with sufficient conviction and emphasis, "COME TO THE RURAL COMMUNITY—LIFE IS PLEASANT HERE."

Over past years, millions of federal, state and local dollars have been channeled into programs designed to improve the quality of facilities, materials and personnel of rural schools. It appears that most of these programs have run well during externally funded periods, but then become either totally or partially dysfunctional. Funding, therefore, would appear to be a major reason for discontinuation, even though there are other contributing factors, such as lack of commitment and responsibility.

As rural programs become more widely known, and as additional research is done, it appears that the Brigham Young University Rural Elementary Teacher Training program (RETT) may be among the few, and possibly the only project of its type in the United States to survive beyond the experimental phase. Not only has it continued for more than a decade, and in some ways become more stable, it has, over thirteen years, also funneled over 250 student teachers into rural communities—many of whom now teach there, and made the community their permanent residence (a study is currently under way to determine rate of return, marriages, length of stay, etc.).

A project at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln has a general structure very similar to that at B.Y.U. in terms of duration, live-in, supervision, and teaming between university and school district. Sesow [7] reported its beginning in 1981 and in three semesters nine students had completed their student teaching in rural communities with populations of under 5,000. With the proper financial support and design, this program has great possibilities for expansion and indefinite continuation.

One of the most substantial and far-reaching programs aimed at preparing teachers for rural areas with considerable cultural variety is at the University of Alaska. This system, summarized by Parrett [6], has many dimensions similar to the Utah and Nebraska programs, but has far more preservice and in-service experiences specifically aimed at the needs of that area.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Rural Elementary Teacher Training project currently in operation at Brigham Young University had its beginning in 1973 under a Title III ESEA, Utah Office of Education grant which provided funds to research, develop, implement and disseminate a teacher training program aimed at improving teaching in rural schools. This project included students preparing to teach in elementary and secondary schools, and had as one of its main objectives the exposing of student teachers to schools, communities and people of rural areas. It was also designed to provide an experience which would assist these prospective teachers in comparing their lifestyle and interests with those of rural America [2].

From 1973 to 1977 the Rural Elementary Teacher Training (RETT) project sent approximately 120 students to rural communities for an eight week student teaching assignment (It should be noted at this point that the eight week student teaching assignment is the last of three field experiences that BYU Elementary Education majors are required to fulfill—totalling approximately 460 contact hours in the schools.) Even though the project has been scaled down in numbers since 1977, by 1986 more than

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250 students had participated in the program.

Participation has always been voluntary and the number of students in any one semester or year has varied. In-house advertising of the program is held to a minimum to avoid excessive numbers of applicants, which would require screening and elimination. An effort is made to keep any single group to five or six which makes it possible for a college supervisor to observe and evaluate the entire group in one day. This eliminates some overnight expenses and makes it more convenient for the university person to fit the project in between regular university contractual commitments.

Supervision of student teachers is shared between educational agencies with the university being responsible for approximately 80%. Generally one or two observation-evaluations are done by the principal or a curriculum coordinator. Because of the importance of learning new perspectives, it is felt that this approach is far better than having one individual do all of the evaluating. It doesn't take long for a student to get the best of what one supervisor has to offer—therefore, the preference for more than one point of view. In the event that a student teacher is doing poorly, it is standard procedure to obtain a second, and sometimes a third opinion.

RURALITY OF PROJECT AND SCHOOLS

It is very difficult to arrive at a clear and consistent definition of "rural community" because of overlapping variables. The most important criterion used for the RETT project was the ratio of agricultural and agricultural-related businesses compared to non-agricultural pursuits. In all but one school district the numbers of farms exceed by two to five times the numbers of wholesale, retail and industrial businesses. The smallest difference is found in the Summit School District with a ratio of 130 to 304 and the largest in Millard with a 112 to 625 ratio [8]. It is safe to say, therefore, that in each school district, agriculture and agriculturally related businesses such as dairying, beef cattle, rowcrops and turkey farming predominate. One exception is Uintah in which the ratios are about equally divided—influenced industrially by oil related businesses.

There is a substantial difference in community sizes but not in individual school enrollments. The largest project community has a population of about 8000 and the smallest approximately 1300; however, the school enrollments range from 100 to 500. There are no schools in the project districts similar in size to those reported by Baker [1] in his 1984 study on status of rural school districts. In his study he reports some districts with combined secondary and elementary enrollments of 198 or less. This implies that some of those elementary schools would have student enrollments of under 50 and faculties consisting of one and two teachers. No schools in the RETT program approach enrollments or faculties that small.

RECIPROCAL INCENTIVES AND BENEFITS

The benefits of a rural program are much the same as any teacher training project in which the school district and university cooperate, as pointed out in a study by De Bloois in 1975 [4]. The following, however, are worthy of mention.

1. One of the required objectives is that all rural student teachers be interviewed by a district administrator (principal, superintendent or curriculum coordinator). This requirement grew out of superintendents' requests. They wanted to know the prospective teachers personally rather than just on paper. This objective *provided a cadre of student teachers from which many positions were filled,* as is pointed out in the survey data.
2. Principals are encouraged to *use the student teachers as substitutes,* but only after the student has been in the classroom three or more weeks and only on a limited basis such as one day at a time and only two or three times in eight weeks. With careful supervision by a principal or neighboring teacher, this broadens the student teachers' background of experiences and exposes them to a wider range of assignments.
3. Even though some schools have volunteer *classroom aides* from the local community, many pay for these services. A good student teacher (as most are) is generally a far better aide because: (a) the incentive to do well is very high since the cooperating teacher responds to an evaluation at the end of the assignment and the potential for employment is real; (b) they are there for a full day rather than half, and if one translates this into dollars and cents, it would amount to approximately $868.00 per block ($3.50 × 6 hrs. per day for eight weeks). If considered over two semesters (eight months), this amounts to $3,472.00 of teacher aides services for which the district pays nothing. It becomes more enticing if the district is able to keep ten students in the district throughout eight months, amounting to $34,720.00. These figures have generated considerable interest among rural administrators.
4. It is generally agreed that when a student teacher is assigned to a classroom the *teacher organizes, prepares and teaches better.* They feel a greater responsibility to put their best foot forward and be a good role model.
5. Most student teachers do well and this results, after three or four weeks, in *released time* for the cooperating teacher amounting to something between seventy to one hundred hours.
6. When there is legitimate teaming between the *university and the school district, rapport between the two is much healthier.* Both agencies feed ideas and practices into teacher training, which is identified by Goodlad as being one of the primary processes in improving teacher training [5].
7. In the BYU RETT project, many *inservice courses and teacher education courses have been delivered*

to the rural communities by the college supervisor. These are generally taught at the end of the school day on which the student supervision-evaluations are done. Therefore, travel costs for inservice classes are reduced or eliminated.

8. Supervising student teachers is a genuine *benefit to any college professor.* It keeps that individual in the atmosphere of the real public school world.

Even though the following position may meet with some opposition, it is this author's opinion that university supervisors at most institutions will not, over any length of time, continue to travel long distances to supervise and hold seminars unless there is an additional (apart from the regular university load) honorarium incentive. Some projects with which this author is personally acquainted have been discontinued for this reason alone. No one, even though his intentions in the beginning are altruistic, is apt to continue traveling one to two hundred miles once a week as part of a regular university assignment. The *additional incentive is critical to a successful rural program.*

FINANCIAL STRUCTURE

As pointed out in the Introduction, instability in continuing financing seems to be a primary cause of discontinuation. The RETT project, having survived a few tenuous years, is as financially stable in 1986 as it was during the federally funded period of the mid-seventies.

After the developmental period of the project had expired (1977), and funds used, the participating school districts and university came to the inevitable point of deciding if the project warranted an extension. All agreed that some meaningful inroads had been made and continuation was appropriate, but financing was the major hurdle.

The rationale for continuation, as agreed upon by both educational agencies, are found under "reciprocal benefits" mentioned earlier in this paper. The shared responsibilities which became the transitional framework were as follows:

1. Teachers unanimously agreed to forfeit their honoraria paid by the university and make those funds available to the project. They considered the influence and contributions of the student teachers to be substantial, not only in the schools but also in the community. Surveys of student teacher attitudes, as reported by De Bloois [4], were very positive relative to living and teaching in rural areas. As one student stated, "Working with most rural cooperating teachers is like a breath of fresh air. Student teachers in their classrooms are more than 'just another one'."
2. The College of Education made arrangements for the student teaching office to pay supervisory transportation and lodging costs.
3. The Department of Elementary Education and the participating rural school districts agreed to make the necessary auxiliary services such as seminar space, telephones, secretarial services, materials, etc., available to the college supervisor when needed.
4. Principals of the public schools to which student teachers were assigned agreed to share the observation-evaluation responsibility with the college supervisor—thus reducing the number of times the university person would need to travel. This cut back on costs considerably, and also generated a more professional teaming relationship in teacher training.

Under the above agreements the project functioned on a skeleton budget for five years, but a significant financial improvement came when provisions were made to operate through the B.Y.U. off-campus education department (Division of Continuing Education). Even though their administrative contribution is relatively insignificant, it does make a substantial amount of money available to the program. The present arrangements which generate much greater stability are as follows:

1. Students now pay tuition for rural student teaching through the educational extension of the university —58% of which is available to pay supervisory honoraria and other minor costs.
2. Teachers in the participating rural schools continue to forfeit their honoraria and these funds are used to pay for supervisory travel expenses. This may seem like a sacrifice at first glance, but not when one considers that *each teacher gave up less than $100.00 in honorarium in return for approximately $1,000.00 in generally superior teacher aide services.* To take this one step further, if forty teachers in a district collectively forfeit $4,000.00 honoraria, they get in return approximately $40,000.00 in teacher aide services *and approximately 100 hours each of released time* over the school year. Such teacher aid services are generally considerably superior inasmuch as student teachers are much better prepared, have few limitations in how they can be used, and also carry with and in them that significant incentive to do the job well—consequently producing a good evaluation of student teaching performance.

It is important to note that under the preceding arrangement more than enough money is generated for honoraria and travel. Several hundred dollars (depending on distances to student teaching location and number of participants) are left in both accounts each year. The excess is carried over to support the project in those semesters when distances are greater and participants fewer. Under this system, the RETT project can operate indefinitely. A more complete review of the financial structure is reported by Campbell [9].

THE LIVE-IN EXPERIENCE

Over the years, a characteristic of RETT that has generated great interest is the live-in experience. All stu-

dent participants are required to live with a rural family for the duration of student teaching—in this case, eight weeks. There are several assumed advantages in this requirement, agreed upon by both university and public school personnel. The major ones are as follows:

1. The student teachers have an opportunity to get acquainted with the lifestyle of the rural family and community. They are encouraged to participate in all family activities such as domestic, religious, cultural and recreational. They, in essence, become a family member and in many cases the parting, after eight weeks, is quite emotional.
2. In smaller communities the student teacher gets much better acquainted with the backgrounds of the students, enabling a more effective counseling and advising relationship.
3. Administrative personnel get a much broader picture of the total student teacher (prospective employee) since the adminstrators are also residents of the community or a near-by location.
4. Rural administrators, when seeking teachers, are not restricted to a placement file. They will have had close contact and also know employees in the school, community or district who have known the student teachers personally—and thus, after a time, will have a pool or potential teachers with rural experience from which they can draw in filling vacancies.
5. It is well known in the several project communities that some student teachers make a substantial contribution to the happiness of many rural people. In this program, we feel we have been fortunate to get many mature and responsible students.
6. If the prospective teacher has student taught in a rural area, and is considering employment in the outlying communities, he need not use his first year as an exploration experience because he goes back to an environment of which he already has some knowledge. School administrators believe this will extend the number of years a teacher will stay in rural areas.

As we consider students for rural student teaching, we find that our best advertising comes from students who have been participants. It is entirely common to hear students investigating the program say that they heard about it from a friend or friend of a friend who thought it was great.

SUMMARY

This report does not attempt to cover all areas common to rural student teaching programs. The primary purposes are to provide insight into the following areas:

1. Influences that not only acquaint the prospective rural teacher with the rural setting, but also to generate an interest in teaching in such communities;
2. Experiences which generate positive and reciprocal relationships and benefits between the teacher training institutions and the public schools;
3. Financial structures which can likely be implemented anywhere in the country, and also a system which can serve the financial needs of rural preservice training, and do it over an indefinite period of time.

As mentioned earlier in this report, the BYU-RETT program has sent over 250 elementary education students to rural schools for training—nearly all of whom enthusiastically extol the qualities of rural living and teaching. Here is one group which is saying, "CONSIDER THE RURAL COMMUNITY—LIFE IS PLEASANT THERE."

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