Research in Rural Education, Volume 5, Number 2, 1988

Preparing Regular/Special Education Teachers for Rural Schools: Perceptions of Interest and Capability

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This paper focuses on data collected as part of an evaluation of an ongoing rural special education personnel preparation grant being carried out at Oklahoma State University. Participants in the program work toward dual certification in elementary and special education in response to the needs of rural schools.

Participants were recruited as college juniors and included those who expressed a strong desire to teach in rural schools in Oklahoma. Data were collected to evaluate change in participant attitudes and perceptions during the first year of participation in the program. Data which are reported come from two instruments which were designed locally. The Rural School Inventory (RSI) focuses on the prospective teacher's attitudes toward working in a rural school and in a rural community. The Educational Practice Inventory (EPI) was derived from Reynolds, Birch, Grohs, Howsom, and Morsink [12] ten Clusters of Capability. It measures the prospective teacher's perceptions of the importance of various teacher competencies, as well as perceptions of one's own capabilities with respect to nine of the ten Clusters.

Data were collected upon entry into the program and at the beginning of the second year in the program (Fall, 1986). Results indicate that students in the program are very positive in their attitudes about working in rural schools, but may hold unrealistically high evaluations of their own competence in meeting the diverse needs of children.

Special educators in rural schools have faced a number of unique and serious problems for years. Yet only recently have these problems come to national attention. Compared with urban and suburban areas, rural communities are poorer; Dale [5], for example, has described the inequity of school financing which especially affects small rural school districts. Also, rural communities serve a greater percentage of handicapped children than do other communities [7]. Thus greater poverty and special education needs combine to make the rural school system unique. Compounding this is the problem of topography: many rural school systems serve small populations spread out over large geographic areas. This creates great difficulties for the delivery of special services to remote schools, difficulties not faced by urban areas [7].

As the farm population of America shrinks, as rural communities continue to suffer from a depressed economy, rural school systems face still another problem: the difficulty of recruiting and retaining qualified school personnel [7] [9]. Statistics show that some rural school districts regularly face a 50% turnover in staff each year [7]; this is especially true among special educators.

Some writers [7] have hypothesized that one of the reasons that teacher turnover is high in rural settings is that many beginning teachers have not been previously exposed to rural life. Because of this lack of exposure they face culture shock during their first years in rural schools. Another reason for early contract termination may be the heterogeneous nature of the student population, which includes special education students or unlabeled students with learning difficulties who are mainstreamed into the regular classroom.

To attack the twin problems of recruitment and retention, as well as to better prepare new teachers for the realities of rural living, a few universities have developed special teacher training programs focusing on rural

Research reported herein was sponsored in part by a grant from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, U.S. Department of Education (Grant No. G008535114).

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium Conference, Bellingham, WA, October, 1986.

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teaching. Among these are programs at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln [13], the University of Alaska [11], Brigham Young University [3], and Oklahoma State University (OSU) [2]. These programs focus on a variety of strategies for integrating the beginning teacher into the rural school environment.

Traditionally at OSU there have been two separate undergraduate teacher education programs which focus on elementary school teaching: an elementary education program and a special education program. The latter program leads to certification in mental retardation (N-12).

During the 1985-86 academic year, a third program was initiated. This new program allows students to pursue coursework in both special education and elementary education. The new program is supported by a grant from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services. During their junior and senior years, students in this program take coursework from both the elementary education program and from the special education program. They also participate in observation/participation experiences in rural schools. These experiences take place both in regular education settings and in special education settings. At the end of their undergraduate program the students complete a student teaching semester which is divided into two segments: a six week experience in an elementary classroom and a six week experience in a classroom for the retarded. Again, all of these experiences are in rural schools.

At the end of their senior year in college (after completing about 126 undergraduate hours) the students receive bachelor's degrees in elementary education. However, they are not yet eligible for standard certification in any area. Upon completion of a "fifth" year of graduate coursework (which includes about 29 hours of coursework in curriculum and instruction, mental retardation, and learning disabilities), students become eligible for standard certificates in these areas: Elementary Education (K-8), Mental Retardation (N-12), and Learning Disabilities (N-12).

In addition to combining coursework in special and elementary education, the grant-sponsored program differs from traditional teacher education programs at OSU in that an integrative seminar experience is included in each semester's program. The seminars meet every other week during the two semesters of the junior year, and during the first semester of the senior year. The seminars are designed to provide students in the grant-sponsored program with an opportunity to integrate concepts from their coursework and their field experiences. Seminar discussions focus on such issues as the nature of teaching in rural schools and the relationship between regular and special education. A more complete description of the seminars is provided by Yellin & Warner [17].

As part of new elementary/special education program at OSU, an ongoing evaluation of the project is being conducted. Included in the evaluation process has been the collection of data on the perceptions and attitudes of preservice teachers (including program participants) toward rural schools and toward their emerging capabilities as teachers. A description of this part of the evaluation process will now be provided.

METHOD

Subjects

Three groups of students filled out questionnaires in this study. With few exceptions, the students were junior and senior education majors at OSU. The first group consisted of 110 elementary education majors, 5 males and 105 females. The second group consisted of ten (10) female special education majors. Data from these two groups were collected during the fall semester of 1985. The third group, consisting of two males and ten females, were all recruited into the combined elementary/special education program. The elementary/special education majors filled out the evaluation instruments twice: once upon entry into the program (as juniors) in early fall, 1985, and a second time after one year of participation in the grant sponsored program (early fall, 1986).

Instrumentation

Of the several instruments which were developed and used in the program, two are discussed in this article: The Rural Schools Inventory (RSI) and The Educational Practice Inventory (EPI). The RSI is a 15-item, 4-point Likert-like scale. The original item pool was intuitively generated and was limited in number to reduce data collection time. Data were collected from all three groups described above and pooled. A factor analysis (principal components with a varimax rotation) (SPSS-X, 1983) was performed and four factors were generated. These factors were labeled:

Factor 1 — "Dislike Rural." Example Item: "I do not like the idea of working in a rural school."

Factor 2 — "Understanding Rural." Example Item: "I understand the kinds of material and resources that will be available to me in a rural school setting."

Factor 3 — "Desire for Unfettered Social Relationships." Example Item: "I would like to be able to date without interference by the school that I work for."

Factor 4 — "Challenge in Rural Settings." Example Item: "Working in a rural school will provide a positive challenge for me."

These factor labels were generated by inspecting the items and choosing descriptors which were representative of the item sets.

The EPI was used to measure student perceptions regarding teacher competencies derived from Reynolds' et al. [12] ten clusters of capability. The EPI was previously developed by Bull and Land [1]. They generated sets of 10-15 items each which represent the Reynolds, et al. clusters. The clusters dealt with competencies in individualizing curriculum and assessment, classroom management, counseling, dealing with exceptional

learners, referral processes, affective education, basic literacy and life skills, etc.

In the present evaluation study, items from all the clusters were combined into a single large set. Students responded to each competency statement twice, once under the heading, "Teachers should be able to," and once under the heading "I am able to." Each competency statement was rated twice on a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In this way, two scales were constructed, each based on all the items in the EPI: an IDEAL scale and a SELF scale. Each scale represented an aggregation of clusters to define competency as a teacher. In the present study, reliability (coefficient alpha) for the IDEAL scale was r=.96 and for the SELF scale was r=.97.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data described herein were obtained as part of a formative evaluation of the elementary/special education program at OSU. The inferences drawn from the data must be seen as tentative and in need of considerable further verification.

In Table 1, descriptive statistics for four groups are presented: elementary education majors, special education majors, elementary/special education majors at pretest, and elementary/special education.

In Table 1, means and standard errors of means for the four rural factors and for the two EPI scales are presented.

With regard to the means associated with rural factor 1, a fairly clear pattern emerged. While the means for elementary and special education majors were close to the hypothetical midpoint of the scale (2.5) the pre- and posttest means for the scholarship group were both clearly in a direction indicating a positive attraction to working in a rural setting. This finding is encouraging because it suggests that the grant goal of initial recruitment of "rural oriented" students was met. New programs in teacher education designed to prepare teachers for rural schools should consider the backgrounds of their student recruits carefully. Preliminary findings from our research suggest that students already familiar with rural life are more likely to be realistic about their expectations and respond more positively to first assignments in small rural schools.

Means associated with the second rural factor tended

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Comparative Evaluation Data

Variable	Group	N	SEM	X	Sx	Range
RURAL FACTOR 1	$ Pre*	12	.145	3.411	.502	1.500
	$ Post**	12	.117	3.417	.405	1.167
	SPED	10	.207	2.487	.654	2.100
	Elem	106	.054	2.742	.552	3.000
RURAL FACTOR 2	$ Pre	12	.115	2.500	.399	1.250
	$ Post	12	.175	2.146	.607	2.000
	SPED	10	.107	2.600	.337	1.000
	Elem	106	.045	2.361	.468	2.500
RURAL FACTOR 3	$ Pre	12	.154	2.264	.534	1.833
	$ Post	12	.141	2.056	.489	1.667
	SPED	10	.109	2.067	.344	1.333
	Elem	104	.047	2.048	.475	2.333
RURAL FACTOR 4	$ Pre	12	.120	3.417	.417	1.000
	$ Post	12	.125	3.375	.433	1.000
	SPED	9	.083	3.000	.250	1.000
	Elem	102	.046	3.103	.469	2.000
EPI IDEAL	$ Pre	12	.125	1.880	.433	1.532
	$ Post	12	.113	1.711	.392	1.128
	SPED	9	.116	1.840	.349	.957
	Elem	105	.040	1.780	.411	2.149
EPI SELF	$Pre	12	.135	2.615	.467	1.397
	$ Post	12	.069	2.449	.239	.823
	SPED	9	.082	2.319	.246	.766
	Elem	101	.044	2.142	.445	3.553

* $ Pre are elementary/special education scholarship students at pretest.

** $ Post are the same group at posttest.

to cluster around the hypothetical midpoint of 2.5. Encouragingly, the scholarship group, measured after one year in the grant-sponsored program, had a mean rating (2.146) indicating a perception of the greatest amount of understanding (of all the groups) of the expectations and demands of rural teaching. All of the scholarship students had participated in observation experiences in rural schools during their first year in the program. Early observation experiences (prior to student teaching) should be an important component of rural teacher training programs. In some cases this may be easier said than done since many universities are located in urban/suburban areas and thus finding suitable rural observation sites is difficult.

For rural factor 3, the means of all the groups were very similar. In general the means hovered around a value of 2, indicating agreement with a desire for unfettered social relationships. This suggests that as our teacher education graduates enter rural settings and find the social environment overly stifling, these same students may become disenchanted, thus leading to higher teacher turnover. A serious personal factor affecting recruitment and retention in remote rural areas may be the social one. Social opportunities in small communities tend to be more limited than many students are used too. In a situation where everyone knows everyone else's business, casual relationships are discouraged. Teacher training programs can no longer ignore these issues. They must address these social considerations in their courses as well as emphasizing the positive aspects of life in rural America. Our students, having been exposed to rural environments, still want freedom to explore relationships without interference. This does not bode well for recruitment of young female teachers, such as some in our sample, for rural schools.

Rural factor 4 was concerned with the degree to which working in a rural school was seen as positively challenging. The means for the scholarship group were higher than for the other two groups, indicating a tendency to perceive rural settings as more challenging.

Results from the Educational Practice Inventory IDEAL were as follows: Means for all four groups were very similar. The means for the four groups ranged from 1.71 to 1.88 on a five point scale. In general, respondents agreed strongly with statements regarding various competencies that teachers should have.

The results for the EPI scale, SELF, were more surprising. All groups indicated agreement that they were currently able to do most of the behaviors stated. For example, on the SELF scale, the item mean for the elementary education majors was 2.14, indicating a self-perception of competence. Thus students thought that they were able to do such things as:

> "Use behavior modification techniques to encourage scholastic achievement"
>
> "Use individual assessment to determine skill levels of students" and,
>
> "Use counseling techniques with students who have personal problems."

An inspection of the means leads us to believe that all the groups surveyed may hold *unrealistically* high estimates of their own capabilities. This might be due to inadequate understanding of the nature of the skills referred to in The Educational Practices Inventory and/or lack of experience as public school teachers. Another conjecture is that these may be the same students who are so quick to leave rural areas. They go out into rural areas with confidence and then meet reality head-on. The implications of this are important and deserve further investigation.

RESULTS SUMMARY

The results of the present study can be summarized as follows:

1. Students in the grant group indicated the most favorable attraction to working in rural settings, compared to students in the other groups.
2. Students in the grant group, after one year in the program, expressed the greatest amount of understanding (of all the groups) of the expectations and demands of working in rural schools.
3. All of the groups studied indicated a desire for unfettered social relationships in the communities in which they would live.
4. Students in the grant group tended to view teaching in rural settings as more challenging than did students in the other groups.
5. The groups were similar in indicating strong agreement that teachers should possess the types of competencies stated in the EPI scale, IDEAL.
6. All of the groups indicated agreement that they were currently able to do most of the behaviors listed in the competency statements in the EPI scale, SELF.

CONCLUSION

Students in the grant group are not adverse to working in rural areas. Furthermore, they feel that they understand what it is like to be in rural areas. This is understandable as many come from rural areas and have observational experiences in rural areas. Given this, however, they still want to have opportunities to meet and interact socially without the usual constraints of small town living. If this is true for the preservice teachers with rural exposure, it is probably also true for more urban oriented females (the majority of our sample of elementary education majors). This leads us to believe that one possible solution to the retention problem is not more rural exposure but recruitment of teachers with ties in rural communities.

Secondly, most of our sample, specifically a majority of those in elementary education, seem to overestimate their abilities to deal with special needs students and the adaptation of materials and curricula. This may indicate that the sample was tested too early in this study, or it may mean that students need to have more experiences

where they actually try out some of the techniques and procedures. This is advocated by Reynolds, et al. [12] as part of preservice training. For whatever the reason, our students seem to be too confident early in their careers.

If further studies bear out the tentative inferences drawn here, rural teacher training programs should primarily focus their recruiting efforts on students who will return to a specific rural community because they have ties there (preferably by marriage). Finally, all students may need more practice actually implementing methods and techniques from the Reynolds clusters as part of their preservice training.

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