Journal of Research in Rural Education, 2006, *21*(5)

Rural School Psychology: Re-Opening the Discussion

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Citation: Clopton, K. L., & Knesting, K. (2006, June 15). Rural school psychology: Re-opening the discussion. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 21*(5). Retrieved [date] from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/21-5.pdf

The practice of school psychology in rural areas is a topic that has been fairly absent from the literature since the 1980s. A needs assessment of school psychologists practicing in rural counties in a midwestern state was conducted to explore current issues for rural school psychologists. The response rate for usable surveys was 72% (N = 106). Respondents answered questions regarding travel, supervision, professional development, practice, and the rewards and challenges of working in rural communities. The limited availability of support services in the community, feelings of professional isolation, work space, and travel time were issues of concern to the respondents. Recommendations, including implications for practitioners and trainers, are provided.

Approximately 25% of school psychologists working in schools are doing so in rural school districts (Curtis, Hunley, & Chesno Grier, 2004). Despite this number, there has been a glaring absence of literature concerning practice in rural areas since the 1980s. For example, rural school psychology was covered in the first three editions of *Best Practices in School Psychology* but, curiously, was not included in the fourth edition (Thomas & Grimes, 1985; 1990; 1995; 2002). A number of articles on rural school psychology were published in the mid-1980s, including a miniseries in *School Psychology Review* dedicated to service delivery in rural schools (Rural School Psychology, 1985), yet the coverage of this topic since 1990 has been minimal.

Cummings, McLeskey, and Huebner (1985) suggested that, although there is overlap in the role and function of school psychologists across settings, there are unique issues related to practicing in a rural area. The literature from the 1980s identified issues and needs of school psychologists practicing in rural areas and made recommendations for training and practice. Yet there is an absence of literature regarding the implementation and/or effectiveness of these recommendations. Furthermore, as the role of the school psychologist has changed over the last 2 decades, the needs of rural school psychologists may also have changed. The changes in role have made a number of the previous recommendations no longer applicable. Our study serves to explore the current needs of school psychologists practicing in rural areas in one midwestern state. The results of a needs assessment will be discussed as well as the implications and recommendations based on the findings.

The literature published in the 1980s indicates a number of issues that may affect rural school psychologists. School psychologists practicing in rural areas have less experience than those practicing in nonrural areas (Curtis, Hunley, & Chesno Grier, 2002; Hughes & Clark, 1981; Reschley & Connolly, 1990) and have concerns about local continuing education (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985). Although Hughes and Clark (1981) found no difference in the amount of continuing education received by school psychologists in rural and urban areas, Reschley and Connolly (1990) identified differences in the specific types of continuing education needs. These researchers found that school psychologists in rural areas expressed a greater need for training in neuropsychological assessment, interventions for behavioral problems in regular education, and remedial education programs. Ehly and Reimers (1986) found that urban school psychologists were more satisfied than rural school psychologists with their access to advanced education. Recommendations to address these issues included training programs offering specific coursework pertaining to practice in rural areas (e.g., rural sociology and rural practicum experiences) (Hughes & Clark, 1981), training school psychologists who can function as generalists (Cummings et al., 1985), and using technology (e.g. telecommunications) in the provision of inservice programs (Benson, 1985).

Concerns related to accessing appropriate services for children have also been noted in the literature. The lack of suitable program options in special education and a lack of available related services in the community have been reported as issues for rural school psychologists (Benson,

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1984, cited in Helge, 1985; McLeskey, Huebner, & Cummings, 1986; McLeskey, Waldron, Cummings, & Huebner, 1988). McLeskey and colleagues (1986) suggested that the lack of availability of services in the community might lead school psychologists to expand their role to meet the needs of families and children. This role expansion may contribute to the heavy caseloads reported in rural areas (McLeskey et al., 1986; McLeskey et al., 1988). Further, the effect of heavy caseloads can be exacerbated by the number of schools a school psychologist covers and the related travel distance. Almost half of the rural school psychologists in a National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) study reported being responsible for six or more schools (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985). Past recommendations for dealing with the lack of appropriate services included networking with various community agencies (McLeskey, Huebner, & Cummings, 1984), training school psychologists as generalists (Cummings et al., 1985; Hughes & Clark, 1981), and using technology as a means to increase availability of professionals for consultation (Benson, 1985). Hughes and Clark (1981) stressed the importance of coordination and collaboration among the agencies that serve the needs of children and families. They also suggested a need for research on the provision of some services by paraprofessionals or other professional staff with specific training.

Concerns about travel distances and professional isolation were noted by a number of other researchers in the 1980s (Benson 1984, cited in Helge, 1985; Hughes, 1986; Hughes & Clark, 1981; McLeskey et al., 1988). The 1984 NASP study found that rural school psychologists had a mean travel time of 4.9 hours per week, with an average of 206 miles being covered (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985). McLeskey et al. (1988) suggested that the amount of time that rural school psychologists spend traveling not only reduces their direct service time, but also contributes to feelings of isolation. They suggested that psychologists may not feel a part of a building or may feel they have no real "home." Limited supervision and contact with other psychologists were also noted as concerns (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1986; McLeskey et al., 1988). In fact, limited access to other school psychologists for consultation was the second greatest area of concern indicated in the 1984 NASP survey (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985). On the other hand, Ehly and Reimers' study (1986) of school psychologists in one midwestern state found rural school psychologists to have greater satisfaction with the quality of supervision than those school psychologists practicing in urban areas.

McLeskey and his colleagues (1984) suggested that broadening the role of the school psychologist would decrease some of the issues caused by travel. They suggested that increased involvement in areas besides assessment would allow a school psychologist to spend more time in one building. Other suggestions from these researchers included allocating a specific block of time to one school and traveling with other support team members. Assigning psychologists to schools near their home was an additional approach suggested (McLeskey et al., 1988). One recommendation for decreasing the feelings of isolation involved increasing opportunities for consultation with other professionals, both locally and, with the use of technology, at a greater distance. For example, Benson (1985) described The Dial-A-Consultant program implemented by the West Virginia School Psychologists Association. The Association compiled a list of members who were willing to consult on certain topics and distributed the list to all school districts. Scheduling regular meetings with other school psychologists and trainers was also recommended (Benson, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1988).

The characteristics of rural communities can be both assets and barriers for the rural school psychologist. Although rural communities vary greatly, there are a number of general differences between rural and nonrural communities that have been noted in the literature. Jackson and Cook (1999) suggested that self-determination and independence are values of individuals living in rural areas. They also indicated that a highly developed sense of community, including family, friends, and community members, exists and, further, that this sense of community leads to a feeling of self-sufficiency. Thus, this strength in the community may also lead to a hesitancy to go to outsiders for assistance.

Barriers, including an overall resistance to change and new innovations, as well as a school psychologist's lack of knowledge regarding how "things work" in the community can also make working in a rural setting more difficult (Helge, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1988). Cummings et al. (1985) suggested that school psychologists may have difficulty fitting in if they are not from the community or have a different perspective due to educational experiences and possible class differences. In fact, in a study of turnover rates for school psychologists working in urban and rural areas, Hughes (1986) found the school psychologists that remained in rural schools, as compared to those that left, were more likely to have grown up in a nonurban community. A study of special educators in a rural state concluded that the difference between those that stayed in their positions and those that left was not related to job satisfaction or work conditions, but instead was related to mobility and opportunity or "a matter of roots" (Bornfield, Hall, Hall, & Hoover, 1997, p. 36). Ehly and Reimers (1986) found that school psychologists practicing in urban areas were more satisfied with the location of their assignment than those school psychologists practicing in rural areas. It was also noted by McLeskey et al. (1986) that "a lack of understanding of exceptional children by parents and school staff" was a significant issues for school psychologists practicing in rural schools (p.

22). Past recommendations for overcoming sociocultural barriers included high visibility involvement in school and community functions, increasing the use of volunteers in the schools, and developing a parental advisory council for special education (McLeskey et al., 1984). Benson (1985) reminds the practitioner to work to develop an understanding of the way of life in the community.

Mental health practitioners working in rural areas face a number of ethical dilemmas that may also affect rural school psychologists. Rural practitioners who are active members of the community in which they work face the issue of dual relationships (Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Hargrove, 1986; Schank & Skovholt, 1997). NASP's *Principles for Professional Ethics* (2000) says that dual relationships should be avoided whenever possible as they may "cloud" the psychologist's judgment, but does not offer guidance for assistance when these relationships are inevitable. Confidentiality can also be a great concern for rural mental health professionals. Because the network of providers is smaller, it is likely that professionals will interact more often. Further, a greater pressure to maintain professional relationships exists, increasing pressure to disclose information about mutual clients without an appropriate release of information (Hargrove, 1986; Solomon, Hiesberger, & Winer, 1981).

School psychologists in rural areas must work within constraints placed on them by a lack of human and financial resources. Rural schools must provide a wide range of services for a smaller number of students, therefore increasing the cost of providing an education per student (American Association of School Administrators, n.d.). Local funds for schools are tied to the local economy and the poverty rate among the nonmetro population has consistently been higher than that of the metro population. Further, the poverty rate is highest in the most rural areas (Economic Research Service, 2004). McLeskey, Huebner, and Cummings (1986) suggested that a school psychologist practicing in a rural area may struggle to meet the "least restrictive environment" portion of the law due to the limited availability of special education placements.

Knowing the problems that rural school psychologists face allows for the generation of possible solutions. Past research began the job of identifying problems, but it is unclear if the identified solutions have been adopted or if they have alleviated the concerns identified by school psychologists practicing in rural areas. It is time to reopen the conversation and move it forward by gaining an understanding of the current needs of school psychologist practicing in rural areas and identifying areas of research that will lead to the development and evaluation of needed change and/or support. Our study explores the current needs of those school psychologists practicing in a rural state, with hopes of re-opening the discussion regarding meeting the needs of these professionals.

Method

Procedure

For the purpose of this research, rural schools were considered to be those schools located in rural counties. We identified rural counties using 2004 data from the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (ERS, n.d.). ERS defines rural counties either as those that do not have one or more urbanized areas or as those that are not economically dependent on nonrural counties. Of the 99 counties in the surveyed state, 78 met this definition of rural. We then identified the school districts in these counties through information provided by the state department of education's web site. School administrators were then contacted for the names of the school psychologists serving the schools in the identified rural districts. All but one regional education agency administrator agreed to share the names of the school psychologists in their agency. Mailing addresses for school psychologists were obtained from the state's department of education.

Cover letters, surveys, and self-addressed stamped envelopes were mailed directly to the school psychologist identified as serving at least one school in a rural district. Two weeks later a second cover letter, survey, and return envelope were sent to those who had not yet responded to the first mailing. All of the school psychologists who returned their survey, completed or not, were entered into a sweepstakes for two $25 gift certificates for the NASP bookstore. Surveys were sent to 157 school psychologists, and 117 (75%) were returned. Ten of these surveys were returned uncompleted because the individual no longer worked in a rural school. Of the remaining 147 surveys, 106 were returned for a response rate for usable surveys of 72%.

Sample

Of the school psychologists completing surveys, 42% were male and 54% female (five people did not answer this question). While 37% of respondents were 51 years of age or older, there were 21% who were 30 years of age or younger. Almost one third (29%) had 5 or less years of experience. Most respondents (94%) held a degree in school psychology, with 90% holding a nondoctoral level degree and 10% holding a doctoral degree (n = 104). Forty-seven percent were NASP members, and 36% belonged to their state school psychologist association. The participants reported working in 323 schools. Thirty percent of these schools had fewer than 200 students, 34% had between 200 and 399 students, 20% had between 400 and 600, and 16% had more than 600 students. Forty-six percent of the school psychologists were directly supervised by either a school psychologist or an administrator with a degree in school psychology.

Instrumentation

We developed a 49-question survey based on a review of the literature regarding the practice of school psychology in rural areas. Ethical issues for mental health practitioners in rural areas were also considered in the development of the instrument. The survey was reviewed for face validity by a school psychology trainer from another midwestern state who is familiar with the practice of school psychology in rural areas.

To keep the survey completion time brief, all but three survey items were posed in a closed-ended question format. The survey included sections on background information, professional affiliations, travel, supervision and professional development, practice experiences, and professional resources.

The survey first asked for general demographic information, including degree earned and number of years working as a school psychologist. Mutually exclusive responses for each question were provided, including ranges for information such as salary and years of experience. Respondents were asked to answer "Yes" or "No" to questions concerning state licensure, membership in state and national professional associations, and participation in listserves provided by NASP. The section on travel asked about distance and time between home and schools and between office and schools. Mutually exclusive ranges were provided for response to these questions. The section on supervision and professional development addressed access to and credentials of supervisors and access to professional development opportunities. Participants were asked to indicate the job title of their direct supervisor from a list of possibilities. The option to answer "Other" and provide specific detail was included. "Yes," "No," and "Don't Know" were response options provided for questions regarding their supervisor's credentials. Questions regarding communication with other school psychologists and financial support for professional development resulted in either a "Yes" or "No" response. Mutually exclusive ranges were provided for response to questions regarding the number of professional development activities attended, distance traveled to professional development activities, and the amount of financial support for professional development provided by the employer. To learn more about practice experiences, respondents were asked about the size of their schools and their ability to work and consult with other professionals, such as school counselors or social workers. A matrix was provided with mutually exclusive ranges of school population and a list of possible support staff. Respondents were asked to provide information for each of their assigned schools. A second matrix was provided to obtain information about the respondents' interactions with various support staff (school counselor, social worker, educational consultant, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and speech and language therapist). For each professional, respondents were asked "Yes/No" questions about overlap in schedules and the availability of the professional for meetings. They were also asked to indicate, from a list of possibilities, the typical method of communication with this professional.

To explore the occurrence of ethical dilemmas that have been identified in the rural mental health literature, as well as dilemmas related to a lack of resources, respondents were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale (*Rarely, Seldom, Sometimes, Frequently*) the frequency with which they encounter various situations (e.g., "working with the child of a colleague or friend" and "lacking appropriate referral options in the area"). Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they found each of the situations stressful. To learn more about access to resources, respondents rated the ease of accessing numerous resources such as computers and assessment materials on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Very Difficult*, 5 = *Very Easy*). Respondents were then asked to identify the three resources to which they most needed increased access. The survey concluded with two open-ended questions, asking for the "biggest challenges" and "biggest rewards" of working in a rural community.

Analysis

As this is an exploratory study focusing on the reported needs of rural school psychologists, we analyzed the data using descriptive statistics. Responses to two open-ended questions were sorted into common themes, and the number of responses per theme were tabulated. Not all items were answered by all respondents. In the cases where data is missing, the number of respondents who did answer an item will be reported. Where no number of participants is reported, the $N = 106$.

Results

Travel

On a typical work day, 32% of respondents spend less than 30 minutes in their car, and 36% spend between 31 and 60 minutes. Thirty-one percent are in their car more than an hour each day ($n = 105$). For 34%, the average commute to their schools is less than 20 miles a day, while 35% drive between 20 miles and 40 miles ($n = 105$). A daily commute of 41-60 miles was reported by 12% of respondents, and 18% commute more than 60 miles each day ($n = 105$). The distance between the school psychologists' offices and their schools also was great. Thirty-five percent had a school that is 30 or more miles from their office($n = 103$). Twelve percent had two or more schools more than 30 miles from their office ($n = 103$).

Accessibility of Resources

Respondents indicated that work space, literature on current intervention strategies, and current assessment materials were the three resources to which they most needed increased access. Thirty percent indicated that is was difficult or very difficult to access work space, 13% indicated that it was difficult or very difficult to access current intervention strategies, and 21% indicated that it was difficult or very difficult to access current assessment materials (n = 104). Between 15 and 20% of respondents indicated that clerical assistance (n = 104), a private telephone (n = 103), professional books (n = 104) and professional journals (n = 103) were difficult or very difficult to access.

Accessibility of Other School Professionals

Respondents were asked to indicate the other support services personnel in their schools on a regular basis. The respondents identified school counselors as being present on a regular basis in 74% of the schools, and nurses were present on a regular basis in 71% of the schools. A smaller percentage of the schools had social workers (59%) and educational consultants (64%) on site on a regular basis.

Respondents were asked to indicate their accessibility to other school professionals (school counselor, educational consultant, social worker, occupational therapist, and physical therapist) in their specific buildings (see Table 1). Although most indicated that they were able to arrange a meeting with the various professionals when needed, some school psychologists were unable to do so (5-25%). Most school psychologists indicated that they are in the building at the same time as school counselors (88%) and speech/language therapists (83%). Overlapping schedules are less frequent with educational consultants, social workers, occupational therapists, and physical therapists (64%, 63%, 14%, and 7%, respectively).

Respondents were also asked to indicate the typical method of communication with these professionals. Most school psychologists indicated that face-to-face communication was the most common form of communication with school counselors, educational consultants, social workers, and speech and language therapists (see Table 2).

Practice Issues

Eighty-two percent of respondents reported believing they receive a level of supervision appropriate to their level of expertise, and 92% indicated they are able to access additional supervision when needed. Seventy-five percent indicated that they are able to access an appropriate professional when they need to consult about a case, and 51% indicated that at least one time per month they are in a situation where they need to consult but cannot find an appropriate professional (n = 105). Eighty-six percent indicated that they are able to access professional support from colleagues when needed, and 88% indicated they have opportunities to communicate with other school psychologists about issues of mutual professional interest (n = 104).

A little over half (52.8%) of the respondents reported that they are able to access professional literature in a timely manner, and 22.6% reported that they have time to read current literature relevant to the field. Seventy percent reported participating in professional development activities 5 or more times per year (n = 102), and 41% indicated driving 60 or more miles for professional development (n = 104). Twenty percent reported driving 90 or more miles for professional development opportunities (n = 104).

Twenty-nine percent of respondents reported that they sometimes or frequently work with a child they know outside of school (n = 104), and 32% reported they sometimes or frequently work with the child of a colleague or friend (n = 104). Forty-six percent of the respondents reported that they sometimes or frequently attend social and/or community events with students or parents with whom they work professionally (n = 104). Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they found these events stressful. Of those that either responded sometimes or frequently to working with students they know outside of school, 20% indicated that they found it stressful. Forty-four percent of those that indicated they sometimes or frequently work with the child of a friend or colleague indicated they found it stressful. Of those that responded sometimes or frequently to a statement about attending social and/or community events with students or parents with whom they work, 12.5% indicated that they found this to be stressful.

Forty-seven percent of respondents reported that they sometimes or frequently have difficulty meeting a student's needs because of district constraints (n = 103). Eighty-five percent of these individuals indicated they find this to be stressful. Fifty-seven percent indicated that they sometimes or frequently lack appropriate referral options (e.g. child psychiatrist, counseling services) in the area (n = 104). Of those that responded sometimes or frequently to this question, 86.4% indicated that this situation is stressful.

Challenges Working in Rural Schools

Respondents were asked an open-ended question regarding the greatest challenges of working in a rural school. Eighty-three respondents (78.3%) provided a total of 161 responses to this question. The most frequently cited challenges to being a school psychologist in rural schools were the limited availability of support services outside of the school system (i.e., mental health services), large amount of travel time, limited time for service delivery, lack of access to assessment tools, and lack of special education program options (21%, 11%, 10%, 10%, and 9%, respectively, of

Table 1
Accessibility of Other School Professionals (Percent)

Professional		Professional is in building at same time	Meet with professional on weekly basis	Can arrange meeting with professional when needed
School counselor	(*n*s = 95, 96, 94)	88.42	76.04	94.68
Educational consultant	(*n*s = 88, 85, 85)	63.64	80.00	92.94
Social worker	(*n*s = 86, 84, 86)	62.79	67.86	87.21
Speech/Language therapist	(*n*s = 99, 98, 95)	82.83	83.67	100.00
Occupational therapist	(*n*s = 93, 90, 85)	13.98	22.22	77.42
Physical therapist	(*n*s = 92, 88, 91)	6.52	11.36	74.73

the total number of responses). Sixty-five percent of the responses concerned the limited availability of a resource (i.e., professionals, funding, professional development, time, assessment tools, information) as their most significant challenge.

Rewards Working in Rural Schools

Respondents were also asked an open-ended question regarding the greatest rewards associated with working in rural schools. Eighty-seven respondents (82%) provided 141 responses to this question. The most frequently cited rewards to being a school psychologist in rural schools were having good relationships with students, teachers, other school service providers, and families; being part of the school community; and being part of the larger community (23%, 16%, and 10%, respectively, of the total number of responses). The long-term involvement with students and the connection to people outside of school were noted as being benefits.

Discussion

The challenges and benefits to practicing school psychology in rural areas today are very similar to those reported two decades ago. Although this study focused on rural school psychologists in one state, it is likely that school psychologists practicing in other rural areas are having similar experiences. Because the sample was based on practice in a rural county, as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, it is likely that the issues identified in this assessment also exist in other counties that meet the same definition. Moreover, issues such as the shortage of mental health practitioners and the identified ethical dilemmas are not unique to the state in which this sample was obtained, but are discussed as being related to the characteristics of rural communities (see Campbell & Gordon, 2003; New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999).

Given the similarity of the needs identified in this assessment and those identified in the literature in the 1980s, one may assume that if past recommendations were implemented, they did not adequately address the concerns of rural school psychologists. Possible reasons for the lack of implementation or success of these recommendations will be discussed in light of the implications of the current identified needs.

The limited availability of support services outside the school system was a frequently cited challenge in this study and has been identified as an issue in the past (e.g. Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1986; McLeskey et al., 1988). A majority of the respondents indicated that the lack of referral sources was stressful. This lack of availability of other services may lead school psychologists in rural areas to take on additional responsibilities that they otherwise would not take on due to time and level of expertise. As limited time for service delivery was also noted as a challenge, the taking on of additional responsibilities may not be possible or may cause stress for the rural school psychologist.

Networking with other professionals in the community and using technology to increase access to professional development and consultation were recommendations made to alleviate issues related to the lack of available services in the community. NASP's Professional Conduct Manual notes the importance of cooperating and coordinating with

Table 2
Communication With Other School Professionals (Percent)

Professional		Face-to-face	Email	Telephone	Written communication
School counselor	(n = 90)	95.56	2.22	1.11	1.11
Educational consultant	(n = 80)	75.00	12.50	11.25	1.25
Social worker	(n = 75)	77.33	14.67	6.67	1.33
Speech/Language therapist	(n = 88)	90.00	6.00	3.00	0.00
Occupational therapist	(n = 83)	21.69	44.58	24.10	9.64
Physical therapist	(n = 73)	20.27	39.73	28.77	12.33

other professionals to best meet the needs of children (NASP, 2000). A school psychologist's best efforts to work with other professionals will not solve the shortage of mental health professionals that exists in a significant proportion of the rural communities in the United States (Bird, Dempsey, & Hartley, 2001). The President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003) indicated support for the use of technology to provide services at a distance. The Commission recommended federal agencies provide funding through demonstration grants to provide these services and evaluate their effectiveness (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003). School psychologists in rural areas need to work with the available mental health professionals to develop a network of services and to develop strategies to recruit and retain needed personnel. Because of the shortage of mental health professionals in rural areas, it is recommended that area school psychologists share information regarding the available resources in the surrounding areas.

The amount of time for service delivery is affected by the amount of travel time required of the school psychologist. Other authors have also noted this issue (Benson, 1984, cited in Helge, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1988) and McLeskey and his colleagues suggested that travel time may lead to feelings of isolation. Over half of the respondents spend over 30 minutes in their car each day, with 21% spending more than an hour. An hour a day in the car amounts to spending at least 12% of the work week in a vehicle.

Past recommendations for dealing with issues associated with travel included broadening the role of the school psychologist, allocating blocks of time to individual schools, and assigning school psychologists to schools near where they live. Although the changing role of the school psychologist has lead to a decrease in special education evaluations (initial and reevaluations), an increase in the provision of other services has not occurred (Curtis, Chesno Grier, Abshier, Sutton, & Hunley, 2002). One might hypothesize that the lack of change in role, despite a decrease in responsibilities in assessment, is due to high workload. The actual broadening of the role in rural areas may have been limited by the amount of experience of these professionals. Prior research suggests that rural school psychologists have less experience than those practicing in nonrural areas (Curtis Hunley, et al., 2002; Hughes & Clark, 1981; Reschley & Connolly, 1990). Research also suggests that school psychologists with more experience spend less time providing services related to special education than do their less experienced counterparts. Curtis, Chesno Grier, et al. (2002) suggested that higher levels of training and experience allow school psychologists to be more efficient in the less desirable tasks, in turn allowing them to engage in tasks they find more desirable. In terms of allocating time to individual schools and assigning psychologists to schools near where they live, it could be that these possibilities are limited by the needs of the districts or educational agencies.

For many rural school psychologists, travel time may be a fact of life. Although adhering to blocks of time for individual schools and scheduling tasks accordingly is good time management, difficulty scheduling meetings and unexpected building needs may greatly affect a psychologist's ability to maintain a set schedule. Research regarding the use of teleconferencing for difficult-to-schedule meetings or meeting unexpected building needs should be conducted.

In addition to the feelings of isolation that may come from travel and serving multiple schools that are a distance from each other and one's main office, there were other indications of practitioners feeling isolated from other professionals and the resources that benefit practice. The need for workspace is not a new issue (Helge, 1985; McLeskey, et al., 1986), but one that can lead a practitioner to feeling isolated and frustrated. If a regular workspace at a school is

not available to a practitioner, they may find it easier to work at their main office away from their school and it may also be difficult for school personnel to locate them while they are in the school building. In either case, the circumstance does not help the psychologist become a part of the building. Although most participants were able to access professional development multiple times per year, less than a quarter indicated being able to read current literature relevant to the field. When psychologists are feeling isolated from other professionals, it is important that they are able to stay connected to the field through professional development and current literature. Again, the use of technology to connect with other school psychologists should be explored. Providing school psychologists access to the Internet to locate current literature should be a priority for administrators. Administrative agencies should explore cost-effective means of providing access to electronic journals.

Although school psychologists in rural areas may feel a sense of isolation, most of the respondents indicated that they are getting supervision appropriate to their level of expertise and most indicated that they could access additional supervision when needed. Supervision may be an avenue to provide psychologists with the additional support and professional development that they need. Almost half of the sample did report that at least one time per month they cannot find an appropriate professional for needed consultation. A greater network of supervisors may also decrease the feelings of isolation. It also seems that, for the most part, this sample feels they are getting the support they need from colleagues as well as having opportunities to communicate with other school psychologists about issues of mutual professional interest. This may be an area that can compensate for the sense of isolation that rural school psychologists may feel. It may be prudent for supervisors to increase opportunities for school psychologists to meet and discuss pertinent issues to practice in rural areas.

Rural school psychologists also face issues regarding boundaries with clients. A number of respondents reported that they sometimes or frequently work with a child of a colleague or friend or a child they know from outside of school. Almost half of those that indicated working with the child of a colleague or friend found this to be stressful. A school psychologist who lives and works in a rural area is going to be confronted with these types of overlapping relationships that NASP indicates should be avoided. This situation is going to be stressful for some. If there is no possible alternative to this overlap in relationships, additional supervision is recommended to try and minimize the possible "blurring" of judgment. Recommendations from the rural mental health literature for dealing with these situations include being clear with expectations and boundaries whenever possible, ongoing consultation and/or supervision with other professionals, giving additional focus to maintaining confidentiality, and terminating a dual relationship as quickly as possible, while considering the best interest of the client (Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999; Schank & Skovholt, 1997).

Some of the stressors associated with working in a rural area may also be seen as benefits by many. Respondents cited close relationships with students, families, and school personnel as being a benefit. It is possible that these relationships will increase the level of trust individuals place in their school psychologist and may serve to overcome some of the resistance families may feel regarding accessing support services. Past recommendations for overcoming sociocultural barriers included becoming knowledgeable about the community's culture, involvement in the community, and recruiting community volunteers to meet the needs in the schools (Benson, 1985; McLeskey et al., 1984)

Implications for Practitioners

The results of this needs assessment suggest that although there are some difficulties with practicing in rural areas, there are also benefits. When considering taking a position as a school psychologist in a rural area, it is important for practitioners to consider the match between their strengths and needs and the characteristics of this type of position. If concerns about isolation exist, it may behoove a practitioner to work with their supervisor to increase the opportunities for meetings with other school psychologists. Although these types of meetings take away from time spent on service delivery, these opportunities should increase the quality of overall practice and job satisfaction (Harvey & Struzziero, 2000). The use of technology was recommended in the earlier literature as a tool to increase access to experts for consultation and decrease feelings of professional isolation in rural school psychologists. The implementation of these recommendations at that time may have been limited by the availability of funds, psychologists' level of competency in using technology, and the amount of time needed to engage in these tasks. It is likely that innovations in technology over the past 2 decades have increased the affordability and accessibility of these resources. The utility of videoconferencing for consultation, supervision, and professional development should be further explored. The evaluation of one demonstration project that provided interdisciplinary mental health training (psychologists, psychiatrist, family physicians) and support to professionals involved in mental health care in a rural area, suggested a number of positive outcomes. The project included the development of a web site, a self-help print and video library, and 12 presentations via video conferencing. Along with increased knowledge and skills related to mental health issues, reported positive outcomes included cohesion and support among the professionals, increased understanding of the roles of a variety of professionals, and development of professional contacts across disciplines (Cornish et al., 2003). In addition to vid-

eoconferencing, the benefits of participation in a professional listserve should be explored.

It is also important for practitioners to be aware of their supervision needs and to plan accordingly. When face-to face supervision is not available to rural school psychologists, videoconferencing or other telecommunication methods may be beneficial. Research on the effectiveness of this method of supervision should be conducted. Increased awareness about possible ethical dilemmas that occur due to working in a rural area is also important and is a good inservice topic for support services personnel. The use of technology to increase opportunities for supervision and consultation may prove beneficial when these ethical dilemmas occur.

Fagan and Hughes (1985) suggest that the differences in practicing in rural areas should not be seen as obstacles, but instead should be viewed as "differences requiring unique responses" (p. 445). For example, practitioners could build on their relationships within the community to help meet student needs with tutoring, after school homework programs, mentoring programs, and the like. Time spent in travel could be used as time to prepare for the day ahead or to process and relax on the way home. Many continuing education providers have workshops or professional books available in audio format, allowing the professional to use travel time to keep up with innovations in the field. As access to technology continues to expand, rural school psychologists can build community with other rural school psychologists through such avenues as Internet listserves or chatrooms. Videoconferencing with other rural school districts can also provide increased professional development opportunities through the sharing of expertise across districts or the sharing of speaker expenses. Research on the effectiveness of these strategies is recommended.

Implications for Trainers

Our results suggest a number of training issues that would not only benefit students who intend to practice in rural areas, but also practitioners. First, adequate training in current technology is crucial. NASP's training standards indicate the importance of students having knowledge of technology and information sources relevant to their work. Students need to be aware of how to access current literature from their various work locations. In addition, students should be made aware of the use of technology as a communication tool with other professionals and the security limitations of these methods. Students should also become accustomed to staying in touch with other professionals through listserves and other professional development opportunities.

Students should be made aware of some of the ethical dilemmas that may occur when working in rural areas. In addition to learning NASP's Principles for Professional Ethics, students should learn a problem-solving method by which to approach ethical dilemmas. Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (1998) suggest a 9-step model (adapted from the work of Tymchuk and Haas & Malouf). This model guides the practitioner through reflection, information-seeking, and consultation and includes specific points to take into consideration. The importance of knowing how and when to use supervision effectively will also be important in training and ongoing professional development.

Trainers should consider their role in decreasing the feelings of professional isolation experienced by rural school psychologists. Facilitating listserves, providing professional development opportunities, and serving as a consultant are possible roles that trainers could fill. Regular meetings with other school psychologists and trainers were suggested in one study as a means of decreasing isolation. Including graduate students in this type of meeting would allow them an opportunity to learn more about the field and the issues related to practicing in rural areas.

Future Research

The results of this needs assessment suggest a number of areas for further research. Many of these areas have been previously discussed as they were connected to recommendations for practice. The use of technology to increase a practitioner's effectiveness and to maintain a sense of connectedness should be explored. It is also important for practitioners to gain an understanding of the effect of close relationships on practice and how to avoid the "blurring" of relationships. An exploration of current strategies used by rural school psychologists to appropriately handle these situations and relationships would be helpful for the field. A future discussion of strategies that supervising psychologists have found to be effective in keeping their psychologists connected to other professionals would also be beneficial.

Limitations of Study

A number of limitations to this study should be acknowledged. The survey focused on school psychologists practicing in rural areas of one state. Although this is not a representative sample of rural school psychologists, it is likely, as we noted above, that many of the identified issues also exist for other school psychologists working in rural counties in the United States. We did not complete a needs assessment of school psychologists that practice in nonrural areas; therefore, discussion of how the needs of rural school psychologists may differ from others was limited. A number of differences in the issues for rural and nonrural school psychologists are suggested in the literature. For example, the shortage of mental health professionals in the United States is disproportionately higher in rural areas. According to Bird et al. (2001), "As of September 1999, 87 percent of the Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas in the United States were

located in non-metropolitan counties. These areas are home to over half of the country's non-metropolitan population" (Bird et al., p. i.). Based on the disproportionate shortage of mental health professionals in rural areas, it is likely that the availability of services is a much more significant issue for rural school psychologists. The issue of dual relationships is likely less of a concern for nonrural school psychologists because they have greater options for living outside of the community in which they work. Nonrural school psychologists are more likely to be able to have a colleague cover cases when a dual relationship exists because of the higher numbers of school psychologists. Finally, one would suspect that it is easier for school psychologists in nonrural areas to access professional resources, including other professionals. Accessing public or university libraries is likely to be easier in nonrural areas. The ratios of psychiatrists, social workers, and psychologists are lower in rural and frontier counties as compared to more densely populated counties (Bird et al.) suggesting easier access to other psychologists or mental health professionals. The differences in the needs of rural school psychologists should be considered in the training of practitioners, development of service delivery models, and planning of professional development opportunities.

Despite the limitations associated with the sample, it is believed that this exploratory study has great significance for the field. The identification of specific needs of rural school psychologists allows for the development and evaluation of strategies to address these needs. The similarity of the needs identified in this study to those identified over the past two decades suggests that prior recommendations were either not implemented or were ineffective. It is hoped that this realization will re-open the discussion of the practice of school psychology in rural areas and lead to ways to further address concerns and build strengths.

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