DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 453 CG 005 474

AUTHOR Thomas, A. Reese
TITLE Public Relations and the Role of the Rural School Psychologist.
INSTITUTION American Personnel and Guidance Association, Washington, D.C.; Regional Child Services, Price, Utah.
PUB DATE Mar 70
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 22-26, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.60
DESCRIPTORS Human Services, Psychological Services, Public Relations, Pupil Personnel Services, *Pupil Personnel Workers, *Rural Areas, Rural Education, Rural Population, *Rural Schools, *Rural Urban Differences, School Community Relationship, *School Psychologists, School Services

ABSTRACT

Although there is no difference between the training provided for school psychologists who practice in rural communities and those who render service in urban areas, there are definite contrasts in the actual work. An elaboration of these comprises the bulk of this paper. Differences covered are: (1) the inordinate amount of travel time required in the rural setting and its possible encroachment on service rendered; (2) the demand for services usually assigned to school social workers, such as home visits and evaluations and the importance of a multi-faceted academic training program to assist the diversification; (3) barriers to a school psychologist's being readily accepted in a rural community and the quality of personal involvement which can help break them down; (4) the increased difficulty, in a rural area, in developing trust and maintaining confidentiality; and (5) the problem of making referrals to other agencies. The paper concludes with an observation about the difficulty, if not impossibility of keeping separate one's private life and professional life in a small isolated community. (TL)

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE RURAL SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

BY

A. REESE THOMAS, M. Ed.
(Prepared for APGA, 1970)

This presentation is neither intended to be, nor will it be, a research report. I want to share with you some experiences that contrast my work as a school psychologist in urban areas where I previously worked to the sparsely populated rural communities of Southeastern Utah where I am now employed.

As we go through a period of training and internship program to become members of a helping profession, there is no difference in the training provided for those school psychologists who will practice in rural communities and those who will render service in large urban centers, Perhaps this is justifiable because the tools with which we need to equip ourselves are basic assessment tools used with individuals regardless of the setting in which they live. From the academic disciplines of anthropology and sociology, we glean understanding of the differences that exist between the various subcultures which make up the world's environment. My experience suggests that good academic preparation at best is a foundation and a superstructure which later work experience will build into an effective and serviceable professional habitation.

I should like to share with you some of the differences of which I have become aware during the past three years while I have been employed by the RCSS project. Three years ago, this coming July, I moved my family to Monticello, Utah, which is a farming community of about 2,000, located at an elevation of 7,000 feet and situated on the mountains of the Colorado Plateau, about 300 miles southeast of Salt Lake City, and at about the same

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distance north of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and slightly farther away from Denver, Colorado which is located to the east. The schools that I cover are separated by about 150 miles. During the week, I spend an average of six hours in travel time. I'm not certain that this is a unique problem to the rural area, since other professionals in the inner-city travel from one school to another, and even though the distances may not be great, because of the traffic congestion they may spend copious amounts of travel time. But the travel aspect is certainly a working consideration for any individual who is considering employment in a rural area. One of the dilemmas that relates itself to the travel factor, is the question of when the work day begins. Does my work day begin when I leave my home office or does it begin when I reach the school of assignment for a particular day or part of the day? These are administrative decisions which must be made. But when children are only in school six and one-half hours per day and we take an hour or more of that time for travel, then travel seriously cuts into the amount of service that can be rendered. Also, it becomes necessary to schedule family visits and consultations well in advance so that time expended in travel will not become "dead time." The rural school psychologist must be prepared to meet people in order that his skills may be utilized profitably. One further observation on this point seems cogent and that is that if an individual finds highway driving distasteful, perhaps he should not consider employment in a rural setting where the schools are separated by a great distance.

I find in practicing as a school psychologist in a sparsely populated rural area that I am called upon to render many services that are frequently assigned to school social workers in urban areas, such as making home

visits and making evaluations of family situations. Consequently, it is my personal belief that an individual who is preparing himself to practice in a rural setting would be well advised to make his academic program multi-faceted. I believe that the areas of anthropology and sociology, as well as the schools of social work, can teach us skills that would make the work of the rural school psychologist more effective.

When my family and I moved into the community nearly three years ago, we immediately became aware of an aloof feeling that appeared to exist between the people of the community and us. I involved myself in a number of civic and church activities, and it was not until after we had lived there for about a year that one resident of the community shared with me an observation about the reluctance of the community to accept a school psychologist and his family. She related the story and I have been unable to affix a particular time to this story, but apparently it was about thirty years ago, there was a murder in the county and the defense attorney decided that a good plea would be "innocent by reason of insanity." In order to prove the claim that he would be presenting to the court, he hired a consulting psychiatrist to come into the community to testify on behalf of his client. Now this community, thirty years ago, was a western cattle and mining town and I should like to make one other aside that the last Indian uprising in the county was in 1923; so this is truly a part of the "Old West" and presently has many of the frontier feelings that still exist among the residents. As the psychiatrist came to town to testify, his attire and appearance were so contrary to the existing dress norms of the community that I feel he not only prejudiced the jury but the entire community. At that time, the cowboys wore cowboy boots, western hats, levis, and typical western working attire.

The miners wore their work clothes and, except for the few professional men of the community, most individuals didn't wear suits. The psychiatrist appeared in court wearing what was described to be a white tropical suit, a Hawaiian sports shirt and a wide, very loud tie. His hair was gray and illkempt and the lady described him as being unshaven. Needless to proliferate the description, his very appearance had an adverse effect on the expectations of many members of the community and consequently, he was described as being an "odd ball" and his profession as that which would be practiced by "odd" individuals.

For a period of approximately two years prior to the time I arrived in the area, a community mental health service had provided a psychiatrist, psychologist and social worker one day a month. However, few people in the community knew of this service and consequently I feel that a large measure of the responsibility of introducing psychological services of any type into these rural communities fell upon the RCSS. I feel that through personal involvement in the community I have met with a reasonable amount of success. I should like to share with you some of the problems that presented the greatest personal challenge in establishing myself in the schools and the communities as an effective working professional. It seems rather obvious that a school psychologist who doesn't receive referrals from the schools is not going to be very effective in practicing his professional skills, and so my first concern was to get referrals from teachers and parents. As a result of a need to have teachers become more aware of problems of children in their classroom, our project developed a teacher in-service training program which was offered to all teachers in the five districts.

We arranged to teach these courses for college graduate and undergraduate credit. We met in some schools in the mornings but most sessions were held in the afternoons or evenings with teachers, administrators, and interested parents. The mental health concepts covered in the training session were included in a syllabus which was distributed to the participants. These were used as study guides and included the following topics: School Adjustment, Adjustment With Peers, Home and Family, Self-Concept, School and Community, Motivational Considerations, Learning and Change, Intelligence and Intelligence Testing, School Achievement, Physical Growth and Development, Student Referral Form and Sociometric Questions, Sociometric Data and Sociograms. This program provided a marvelous opportunity for teachers and parents to engage in dialogue regarding some of the basic human values of education.

In addition to the TITP, we developed Family Communications Workshops which were held in most of the communities in the evenings. Some of these were sponsored by the local PTA organizations. Films and lectures were presented on such topics as Family Life, Family Behavior, Family Communication, or any topic that was requested. We also covered drug abuse and sex education. Films usually were shown as springboards to discussion groups that followed. These workshops proved to be an effective tool for breaking down prejudice and for informing parents regarding sound child rearing practices in the community. A significant increase in the number of referrals were received after the Family Communications Workshops. I have just completed the third year of a series of family involvement workshops in one community. Many of the parents brought their children to see the films and to become involved in the discussions. I consider this to be

an extremely healthy sign.

As school psychologists we are constantly aware of the problem of developing trust and maintaining confidentiality. I feel that this problem presents a significantly greater challenge to the professional in a rural community than in an urban community. To illustrate my point, let me share with you an experience that happened to one of our staff members who was working in a rather small, isolated community of about 1,500 people:

He had organized an afternoon parent group comprised only of mothers who wished to discuss family problems. In the first two or three sessions, the psychologist was careful to lay down ground rules for effective group counseling, including an emphasis on maintaining confidentiality within the group, especially regarding personal problems that might be discussed. As the group of women continued their weekly meetings, they became more open with their problems. In a later session, a discussion was centered on how to communicate effectively with husbands when they are tired and uninterested at the end of the working day. One beautiful young mother then confided to the group how she had had this problem and had followed the advice of her therapist when she and her husband lived together in the east. She stated she had been advised to make herself and the atmosphere as sexually attractive as possible. A few nights later, she stated she had things all arranged--all the lights out and dinner by candlelight ready in the dining room. Just before his return home from work, with his engineer's helmet on his head and a lunch pail in his hand, she took off all her clothes and wore only a small apron. He finally came bursting through the door and in an effort to find a light switch, stumbled over

something in the dark. When he looked up she was standing there in her apron and all he could say was, "What the hell's wrong with you? Why don't you go get your clothes on?" Although she expressed being hurt and rejected on that occasion, amid gales of laughter from the group, her real tragedy was still to come. Although this particular group had been instructed again regarding confidentiality and the importance of the mental health of the individuals in the group, it seemed that the members could not wait to get out to tell the incident about the young mother. At the next weekly meeting this was made apparent when several in the group failed to appear, including the young mother. A lady who was not a member of the group talked to the therapist by phone on his next visit and stated that she didn't need to attend the group because she knew what went on there anyway. The effect on this young mother of this juicy story getting out to members of the community at large was devastating. In the weeks that followed, she became more and more withdrawn from any social contact and finally had her phone cut off and drew her blinds. She would receive no visitors at the door except her own immediate family. She seriously considered suicide for several months and was seen in individual therapy for the rest of the year. She broke out in a nervous rash which covered most of her arms and neck. Although she was a seriously disturbed woman to begin with, and although confiding in supposed friends in this small group with this kind of information was inappropriate, the results were something that would not likely have happened in an urban area where the members of the group were not so intimately known to each other outside the group.

I share this with you today because I seriously doubt that this exper-

ience could take place in an urban area. In contrast to this, in Portland, Oregon several members of groups with whom I worked revealed personal experiences in order to get help from the group and were amazed when they found they lived only two or three blocks from each other but had never met. It is likely they would never have had social interaction with each other.

During the past three years, I have worked with people with whom I associate as friends. I frequently have the children of personal friends referred to me. There is little opportunity in a small rural community to maintain a personal life separate from a professional practice. In small communities where the total student population may vary from 50 to 500, the students in the schools all know each other very closely, as well as other family members. Individual status in school and community is almost lock-stepped and the problem of maintaining confidentiality in group work is certainly one which offers the rural practitioner a significant challenge.

I recall an incident that occurred while working with a group in which I felt fairly confident that no one would discuss the situation outside the group. Two days later, as I came home from work my wife asked me what had happened in the group. She had been to the doctor's office that day and was asked about the situation. She said she didn't know anything about it and asked her inquirer to tell what she had heard. I was amazed at the accuracy with which my wife reported the situation to me. In tracing the source of her information, we decided that the story was related by someone in the group to a spouse; then to a local banker; then to his secretary; then to the doctor's office, and to my wife. At this point, I am not certain as to how I feel about the possibilities of maintaining confidential-

ity in rural areas when working with groups. I suggest that the rural school psychologist must take into consideration these problems and determine what kinds of things will be beneficial to reveal to the group, particularly when confidentiality within the group cannot be guaranteed!

Another area of concern is the problem of making referrals to other agencies. In an urban area it is an easy matter to make referrals to various community agencies so that if a child needs family counseling or the services of a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist, these resources are readily available. In the rural area served by our project, the services of a psychiatrist or clinician are available once a month. The professional question then arises: "How can I most effectively assist the family or individuals in meeting their needs?" Occasionally, I am called upon to meet situations for which my training may not have prepared me; consequently, it then becomes apparent that in a rural community there must be a close liaison between the local medical doctors and the school psychologist. It has become my responsibility, partially because of interest as well as commitment to helping people, to work with parents and children on a weekly basis who are also seen periodically by a psychiatrist. Counseling notes and conferences are exchanged so that we discuss the type of counseling procedure that will likely be most effective for an individual. In such cases, I carry out the weekly treatment and meet with the clinician once a month to assess the progress and determine goals that might be suitable for the coming month. I confer with these individuals by telephone as well as by personal consultation so that I can more effectively carry out treatment goals.

One final observation: in my home community I am known both for what I am as a person and for what I am professionally. This offers one additional unique and significant challenge to members of my family and my personal family life. My wife has reported to me on a number of occasions that she would receive phone calls from individuals who felt they needed to talk with me and upon learning that I was not at home would proceed to talk with her. My wife's professional skills have had to become sharpened along with mine in order to meet the needs of those individuals who somehow feel that the training of a professional individual is mystically given to other members of his family. It also becomes difficult for the teachers of my three children to realize that my children follow normal developmental patterns, and despite the fact that they may pick up some of the professional jargon or skills concomitant to living with a school psychologist, they are not professionals and they are not perfect. The congruence, or incongruence, between what I am personally and what I am professionally is much more apparent to others in a small isolated community than in an urban center.

I am not sure that this expectation for personal-professional role congruence is a bad one because it does add incentive to me to be that which I am. My professional life and my personal life are in reality one. And, if I find professional success, it appears that at this point at least I will also find personal success in relating effectively to my family and to my friends and neighbors.

Further information and statistical data concerning this paper may be obtained by contacting the Regional Child Study Services, Drawer AL, Price, Utah 84501. Thank you!