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ABSTRACT

A state sponsored pilot project designed to provide special education services to rural South Dakota has attempted to overcome high teacher turnover due to lack of community resources, inappropriate preservice preparation, and poor relationships with administrators and peers. The model emphasizes retraining rural special educators as special education generalists and is built around three components: coursework designed to prepare graduate level students for a rural special education setting; support and supervision services; and administrative functions (such as recruiting districts and trainees and maintaining intraproject communication). Program success indicated the importance of involvement of the state education agency, adequate site preparation, and the requirement of a residency period for trainees on campus.
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How are you going to keep them down on the farm...

The South Dakota Rural Special Education Personnel Preparation Model

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Abstract

Providing special education services to rural South Dakota has, over the years, been a persistent and serious problem. This article describes a state sponsored pilot project designed to address the problem. The major obstacles facing special education in rural schools, the project attempts to overcome those obstacles, and the results of those attempts are outlined in the article.

HOW ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP THEM DOWN ON THE FARM...The South Dakota
Rural Special Education Personnel Preparation Model.

Providing special education services in rural areas has been identified as one of the most difficult and persistent problems facing state education agencies (Helge, 1981). Factors such as distances between schools, resistance to change, lack of adequate funding, parental awareness, and suspicion of outside interference have all been cited as major problems in rural service delivery (Northwest Regional Laboratory, 1973; Blackmore & MacNair, 1971; Ferrara & Parker, 1980). Recruiting and retaining qualified staff are, however, the problems most often reported by state education agencies (SEA's) as a major impediment to providing special education services in rural schools (Helge, 1981).

South Dakota is a largely rural state with 196 school districts of which 83 have fewer than 350 students. The problems of providing services to handicapped children in these rural districts have proven to be serious at both the elementary and secondary levels. During the 1977-78 school year, the South Dakota Section for Special Education of the SEA estimated that 40 percent of the handicapped school-aged population did not receive special education services (Hale, 1979). A major reason for this service deficiency is the lack of personnel who are willing to work in the rural areas of the state. Hale (1979) projected a need for approximately 1000 special educators in South Dakota for the 1980-81 school year. At the beginning of that year, there were only 480 active special educators in the state. Moreover, only 35 of these teachers worked

in school districts with an enrollment of less than 350 children (Ferrara & Parker, 1980). Clearly, there was a need to get special educators into the rural areas of South Dakota.

Major Problems

Three major problem areas need to be dealt with by rural programs if staff for special education programs are going to be recruited and retained. These are: 1) A lack of adequate community resources, 2) inappropriate preservice preparation, and 3) poor relationships with administrators and peers.

Lack of Adequate Community Resources

Rural communities often lack resources which prospective special educators want. Letchworth (1972) described the area surrounding several rural South Dakota schools as:

Rolling hills, occasional patches of conifer (sic) typify the terrain. Relatively barren...utterly useless (p. 35).

While "utterly useless" may be overstating the case, Letchworth's general description has been used by some to describe the territory surrounding schools which have had trouble attracting and retaining qualified staff. Rural schools may be located in remote communities which lack some of the basic services which many individuals have come to expect. Indeed, some schools may be 20 or 30 miles from the nearest grocery store, gas station, ice cream stand or medical service (Letchworth, 1972). While the isolation experienced by teachers working in rural schools is not always as grim as Letchworth describes, there are, nevertheless, a good number of rural school sites where selected elements of his description ring true.

Isolation and lack of social opportunities remain major reasons given by teachers for leaving rural school situations (Helge, 1981). In addition to lack of services and social interaction, many small rural school systems are hampered by their limited tax base.

Inappropriate Preservice Preparation

An additional reason for poor staff retention in rural areas may be the inappropriate preservice training the teachers receive. Special education teachers are often required to serve a population for which they have not been prepared (Letchworth, 1972; Northwest Regional Laboratory, 1973). Many teacher preparation programs provide special educators with training based upon categorical models, that is, in mental retardation, behavior disorders, or learning disabilities with the practicum experiences limited to children with specific problems located in larger communities with more adequate resources. However, training experience often does not meet the needs of the teacher who is going to work in the more remote rural community. A broad base of experiences is needed to facilitate success with the heterogenous population that a rural teacher is likely to serve (McGrady, Meyen, West, & Wood, 1977).

Poor Relationships with Administrators and Peers

The third major reason cited for teachers leaving rural programs involves problems with local administrators (Letchworth, 1972). Attitudes held by many rural administrators seem to increase the potential for conflict with special educators. According to Helge (1981), state education agencies report problems with administrators' conservative attitudes toward change. The development of special education programs is a major change

for many rural schools. Indeed, changes in existing procedures are frequently viewed as externally imposed attacks upon local control of schools. When a rural school administrator views the special educator as the primary cause of that attack, it is reasonable to expect that the potential for personal conflicts is increased.

In summary, rural training programs must attract individuals who recognize and value the positive aspects of rural life. The training program must identify self-reliant individuals who are willing to do without certain urban services. Teacher preparation programs should provide non-categorical training which emphasizes the similarities in teaching special children rather than emphasizing what may well be irrelevant differences. There is also the need for the training programs to work within the communities in an ecological approach which is concerned with the unusual or non-supportive attitudes which may exist. Teachers, administrators and parents in communities receiving trainees should, to the extent possible, feel that the special education programs initiated by the trainees have not been imposed upon them but are, rather, an attempt to better meet the educational needs of all children.

An Approach

The South Dakota Rural Special Education Personnel Preparation Model emphasized retraining rural special educators as special education generalists. Following training, these teachers returned to their communities to establish or expand special education programs. The project was designed to attack the three major impediments to personnel recruitment and retention already noted. By recruiting trainees from the remote rural districts,

it was assumed that the problems of limited community resources and potential administrative or peer relationship difficulties could be minimized. A trainee who had already worked successfully in a rural school, owned a home locally and had family and friends locally was viewed as a good risk in terms of long-term retention. Project teachers were retrained to provide instruction for exceptional children representing a broad range of age and handicapping conditions.

Philosophically then, this project rejected the notion that rural special education teachers must receive categorical preparation. Finally, this project recognized that there may be a need to do more than educate teachers and drop them into schools that had never had a special education program. The project's staff assumed that the probability of success could be improved if an effort was made to prepare the community and the school as well as the teacher. Consequently, steps were taken to prepare parents, administrators, teachers and students in the schools prior to the initiation of each rural program established by project trainees.

Organization of the Project

The South Dakota model was built around three major components:

- 1) Coursework and field experiences designed to prepare Master's Degree level students for work in rural special education settings;
- 2) Support and supervision services which prepared the rural site to support a special education program and provide on-going services including follow-up during the trainee's first year in the field; and
- 3) Administrative functions designed to implement, monitor and evaluate the project.

Coursework. The coursework required of students in the rural program differed from the Master's Degree coursework required of most special education students at The University of South Dakota in two ways. First of all, similarities between categories of handicapping conditions were emphasized rather than pseudo-discrete differences. Second, there was a substantial amount of rural-specific course and field work. The general special education course work required in the project included the usual "core courses" required of all special education majors as well as coursework in at least three categorical areas. As a result, the rural degree candidates completed more credit hours than their categorically-trained peers.

The rural coursework block was composed of nine semester hours of work. One component of this work was designed to replace the traditional categorical methods courses. The objectives of this work included curriculum design, materials evaluation, rural delivery systems, working with para-professionals, parent involvement, and designing inservice programs for administrators and teachers. In the second component, each student worked to complete objectives designed to bring their school district into compliance with state and federal special education requirements and also to set up their classroom prior to their return to the district. In addition, they completed a five month internship under University supervision in that classroom. Their field activities included:

1. Establishing parent-administrator-teacher working groups to assist in the establishment of their programs;
2. Identifying students including the establishment of child find, screening, and referral procedures;

3. Assuring that comprehensive evaluations for all identified children were completed;
4. Scheduling staffings for children to be served;
5. Contracting for needed adjunctive services; e.g., often the closest occupational therapist was over 150 miles away;
6. Identifying and ordering classroom material; and
7. Planning for service delivery including student scheduling, travel arrangements (for itinerant teachers), reserving rooms and identifying volunteer aides and cross-age tutors.

An additional difference between the rural candidates and other graduate students was their accelerated timed table. Since rural students needed to complete a substantial portion of their campus coursework prior to leaving for their schools, they were required to carry academic "overloads" during both their summer and fall terms on campus.

Support and Services and Supervision for the Field Experiences. After completion of the campus coursework in special education, the trainees returned to their home communities to provide full-time services to handicapped children in their internship experiences. This component of the program was designed to provide supervision and support to increase the chances of successful internship situations.

In order to insure appropriate material selection and curriculum planning, the Information Resource Center at the Center for the Developmentally Disabled (a University Affiliated Facility) assisted each local school district in selecting appropriate instructional materials

for the children in their programs. Where no appropriate commercially published materials existed, the Center staff assisted the trainees in the design and production of appropriate student materials.

Since, in most project sites, no special education program existed prior to this project, little or no assessment information was available on children referred. Project staff assisted the trainees in evaluating the children. The staff taught the trainees to administer and evaluate the results of appropriate norm-referenced tests. In addition, the trainees were to prepare to administer appropriate criterion-based tests.

Most of the trainees had no supervision from their local special education program. To fill this void, the project staff provided continuing consultant services to the trainees. Project staff were also available via a Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) line to answer immediate questions.

One of this program's priorities involved inservice training of general educators at each project site. Project staff assisted trainees in conducting needs assessment and providing in-service instruction in their schools.

Project staff visited each trainee at least eight times during the first four months of the internship. During these visits, the staff evaluated the trainees' work, advised them on ways to improve their classroom performance, evaluated the work of the paraprofessionals, and obtained feedback to be used in modifying the on-campus coursework.

Since a thesis is expected from most Master's Degree level students, information was frequently collected during the trainees' internship. The project staff assisted and advised the trainees in their data collection.

Administrative functions. The administrative component of the project had three major functions: 1) to facilitate the implementation of the project, 2) to monitor the progress of the project, and e) to evaluate the functions of the project. The implementation of the project involved recruiting school districts and trainees. Project trainees held Bachelor's degrees in elementary or secondary education, had at least one year of successful teaching experience in the district, and worked for small schools in remote areas where special education services were not available. In order to encourage teachers to participate in the program, the SEA funded mini-grants of \$2,500 each to participating school districts. The local districts then provided trainees with sabbatical contracts with payments of at least \$2,500 for the summer and fall. During the five-month internship, starting in January, trainees received their full salary.

Maintaining communication within the project was another major implementation function. In order to facilitate and encourage communication during the internship experience, a statewide WATS line was installed in the Special Education office at the University of South Dakota. Files were established for each trainee as well as for each staff member. When a trainee called on the WATS line, the secretary asked if they had any messages for anyone associated with the project. These messages were placed in the intended recipient's file. The secretary then checked the

caller's file for messages. As a result, trainees could contact project staff even while they were on the road. Trainees were also able to quickly exchange information of meetings around the state as well as to arrange for trades and loans of materials.

Trainee concerns were addressed by the Project Director who advised the trainees in the areas of coursework, scheduling and financial support. In addition, in order to insure that all concerns were being addressed, the Project Director met with the trainees on a formal basis at least once a month.

Project Impact

The project trainees established or expanded 12 special education programs at 11 sites in rural South Dakota. Special education services were provided to 123 previously unserved children between 6 months and 18 years of age by special educators trained in this program. In addition, project staff and trainees provided inservice training and extension courses to over 100 teachers, aides, and administrators in remote rural areas.

An additional impact is that research related to the rural services project is being done in the following areas: 1) urban-rural differences in learning disabled children, 2) urban-rural differences in teacher perceptions of mainstreaming, and 3) needs assessment in rural areas for developmentally delayed individuals. This research is being conducted primarily by project trainees.

Conclusions

Based upon the experiences with this program, there appear to be four

critical aspects for the success of the program. However; these conclusions are based on limited empirical data and are simply reasoned inferences based on project related experiences. These notions, while tentative, should give some direction to those planning programs as well as to researchers exploring critical elements within successful rural personnel preparation programs in special education.

The State Education Agency.

Including SEA staff in the development and implementation of the project was critical. The project was developed as a response to perceived needs of the SEA. Thus, SEA personnel assisted in developing curriculum and inservice projects for the schools as well as supervising trainees during their field placement. The SEA staff served as problem solvers, worked with local administrators, assisted with certification and also worked with parents. Probably, the SEA is in the best position to smooth the path for such a project.

Site Preparation.

When the trainees returned to their schools to complete their internship, three of the twelve sites had not been adequately developed. In one case a teacher was transferred at the last minute from the high school to the upper elementary section of the special education program. In a second case, administrative problems caused the trainee's site to be changed to a different school. In the third case, the trainee did not complete the site preparation. In one case of three then, the necessary activities in the site preparation were never completed. In the other two cases, the activities were completed for a school other than the final site location of the internship and class.

Interestingly, all three of the trainees whose sites were not adequately prepared had difficulty during their internships. While a casual relationship cannot be implied, there was a strong correlation between adequate site preparation and the success of the trainee.

Residency Period

All trainees in the project were full-time, on-campus students for at least one summer and the following fall semester. During the fall term, six of the trainees had teaching or research assistantships in special education or at the Center for the Developmentally Disabled. This opportunity appeared to be an enriching experience for the trainees. Further, during the residency period, the trainees developed the esprit de corps which is uniquely associated with the mutual suffering endured by graduate students in the same program.

The faculty and professional contacts developed during the on-campus period improved the internship experience for the trainees. The trainees did not hesitate to contact faculty for help after they left campus. Experiences as a teaching assistant with undergraduate students helped when the trainees were required to provide in-service experiences for their peers. Finally, the trainees did not hesitate to contact other program participants when they felt the need. Thesis samples, materials, and professional information were obtained from other trainees. The feeling among supervisors was that there was a clear relationship between admission into the program as a full-time student and internship success.

Literature-based Considerations

Literature-based considerations influenced both trainee selection and course content. In most areas the problems reported in the literature

associated with community isolation and personnel conflicts were avoided by retraining local personnel. One note of caution, however, is needed. Project recruiters reported a tendency on the part of some administrators to try to rid themselves of problem teachers by sending them into the retraining program. Those involved in screening personnel for such a program should be alert to this potential problem.

The multi-categorical nature of the training program presented no major problems for the trainees. It was noted that no trainee reported that he/she was faced with students for whom programming was a problem. There are no empirical data to suggest that the South Dakota program eliminated all of the personnel and professional problems typically associated with rural programs as reported in the literature. However, during the project period, these problems were relatively rare and, in fact, non-existent in many of the rural districts cooperating in this program.

Final Comments

While second year attrition in this project is well and below normal for rural special educators, two factors suggest that more in the area of rural training needs to be done than this program was designed to accomplish. First, this project will, by its nature, speak to a limited population. There are simply not that many successful teachers who are prepared to leave their family and friends for six months for a \$2,500 stipend. Second, most of these people, during the course of their training, developed career objectives which, if pursued, will take them from the classroom within a few years. One solution would be to have rural personnel training program administrators look seriously at the possibility of placing

undergraduate student teachers into rural settings where the Master Degree graduates are teaching. These undergraduates may then opt for a position in a rural community when they seek employment. There is some evidence to suggest that this approach is effective (University of Tennessee, 1972). The Master's Degree rural preparation program would then provide training sites for undergraduate student teachers. As undergraduates establish their own programs, the number of rural special education training sites (and, theoretically, trainees) would expand geometrically. Finally, it should be noted that this project was limited in scope and little empirical evidence is available to support its efficacy. The project did, however, seem to address and successfully deal with the problem of providing special educators for some of South Dakota's rural schools. The problems attacked by this program can be found in many rural settings. Hopefully, others can build upon the experiences of the University of South Dakota program to improve training for teachers and, thereby, improve services to handicapped children in rural schools.

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