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ABSTRACT

The retention rate for rural teachers has historically been low, often with loss of two or more teachers per school year in some areas. Recently, a surplus of teachers has relieved this problem, but a predicted shortage will aggravate the situation. A survey of rural teachers was conducted in 1980 in British Columbia to try to find a reason for poor retention. The results of this and other studies were used to develop a training program for rural teachers at a rural campus in British Columbia. Students were required to live within the rural community while gathering data for the early field experience (EFE) course, which were then used to familiarize them with the issues and expectations faced by teachers employed in a rural community, including demographics, power structure dynamics, resources, and sociological factors. Experience of the program's graduates indicates a high level of success in both obtaining employment and realizing job satisfaction. Due to fiscal cutbacks, the program is no longer operating in British Columbia, though there is hope that it may be reconsidered for future funding. Through the description of the research and the EFE program, it is hoped others may benefit from what has been learned about rural teacher retention and one experiment to reverse the historical trend. (Author/JMM)

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EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE
A RECIPE FOR RURAL TEACHER RETENTION

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EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE
A RECIPE FOR RURAL TEACHER RETENTION

Abstract

The retention rate for rural teachers has historically been low, often two or more teachers per school each year in some areas. The recent surplus of teachers has relieved this problem somewhat, but the predicted shortage of teachers will certainly aggravate this problem.

In an attempt to gain insight into the reasons for poor retention of rural teachers, a survey of rural teachers was conducted in 1980 in the province of British Columbia. The results of this and other studies were used to develop a program for training rural teachers at a rural campus in the interior of the province.

The program included an early field experience (EFE) in which students became familiar with the demographics, power structure dynamics, resources and sociological factors which affect the rural teacher within the community. Students were required to live within the rural community while gathering data for the EFE course. The data were used in the course to help students become familiar with the issues and expectations faced by teachers when employed in a rural community.

Experience of graduates of the program indicate a high level of success in both obtaining employment and in realizing job satisfaction with the EFE and its effect on their teaching.

Due to restraint, the program is no longer operating in B.C., though there is hope that it may be reconsidered for funding in the future. Through the description of the research and EFE program, it is hoped others may benefit from what has been learned about rural teacher retention and one experiment to reverse historical trends.

Early Field Experience

A Recipe for Rural Teacher Retention

Prologue

Any recipe or prescription is preceded by an examination of ingredients or by a diagnosis. The entrenchment of an Early Field Experience within the two years of explicit training for rural teachers conducted by the University of Victoria was based on considerable research into the skills and characteristics needed by country school teachers. The Early Field Experience was designed to initiate the socialization of the teacher-in-training into rural living, but this socialization was to be by design, not chance. The design imposed a regime of observation, analysis, preparation and action that was carefully monitored by university staff to ensure academic credibility. The focuses of the Early Field Experience were rooted in the base study completed in 1980 which considered literature from a wide range of countries as well as within Canada, it considered the few University programs dealing with the preparation of rural teachers, and it compiled data from questionnaires sent to rural teachers, administrators, and trustees within B.C. Perhaps most importantly, the study established a definition of "Rural" applicable to the Canadian educational scene.

RURAL ELEMENTARY - an elementary school in B.C. which has 5 or fewer classrooms and 100 or fewer pupils. It is located at least 30 miles from any community of 15,000 or more people.

RURAL SECONDARY - a B.C. secondary school with 200 or fewer pupils and located at least 30 miles from any community of 15,000 or more people.

Of great use in making the decision for the inclusion of an Early Field Experience and in selecting the various focal points for that experience was data gathered from rural teachers and principals.

EFE
Early Field Experience -
A Recipe for Rural Teacher Retention
DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

The recent surplus of teachers in some regions of Canada has been of some advantage for rural schools. With teacher mobility reduced, rural communities have been more successful in retaining teachers. This retention has helped increase the general continuity of the rural school educational program, and helped to rebuild community confidence in schools. Because teachers at present expect to remain in the rural setting for a period of time, roots are established and teachers have time to become acclimated to the community and physical resources of the rural region. These factors are generally a positive influence on the rural school and community.

But "better" times are upon us. Experts predict and statistical trends support the impending teacher shortage which is likely to return the rural school system to its more familiar situation; a situation wherein staffing consists of new teachers or unsuccessful teachers who await openings in the larger centres or who last only until "cabin fever" strikes. The teacher often simply rejects the rural charge and leaves behind a classroom of bewildered children and a community sense of betrayal, distrust for education and for the profession of teaching.

Recent data from Alaska (Grubis, 1982) confirm that in that state, the problem has never abated, and that rural communities often expect two or three different teachers each year to succumb to the pressures of rural teaching and living. In a survey of rural teachers in British Columbia, Bandy and Gleadow (1980) found the reasons that most teachers

left rural teaching positions was not because of the teaching situation, but usually because of sociological reasons. In reviewing these data, it became apparent that, if rural teachers were going to be retained over time, they would either need to be screened carefully or educated to the nature of rural living and teaching.

One of the results of the British Columbia study was that persons with extensive rural living experience were more at home in rural teaching. This is not surprising, but the participation rate of rural students in post-secondary schooling is less than one third of the urban participation rate, and the potential success in recruiting rural students to teaching was not seen to be a viable solution to the problem. Many rural students in Canada come from ethnic or religious minority groups who do not yet have commitment to the value of higher education. Some attempts are being made to change this situation through special rural student entrance scholarships and bursaries, but the needs in the rural schools are much greater than these programs can meet.

Could non-rural students be educated and trained to meet the needs of the rural communities? What knowledge, background, skills and attitudes might be necessary for successful rural teaching and even more important, for successful rural living? Could rural teacher education take the city out of the prospective teacher? Should it? These and other questions formed the background of the planning to provide special training for rural teachers. This special program was to be located in a small town near to a number of rural schools. The campus, though small, was well equipped and staffed by a group of faculty dedicated to rural

education. A key element in the program was Early Field Experience (EFE).

Entry into the rural education program was limited to students with at least two years of relevant coursework or a degree with appropriate prerequisites. The program is two years in duration beyond these basics with the EFE in the first or pre-professional year. An additional year is needed for degree completion.

In planning the early field experience program (EFE), consideration was given to the unique programs and challenges faced by teachers in rural settings. For Canada, these are:

1. A sense of loneliness and isolation.
2. The necessity to interact with minority cultures.
3. Developing a close liaison between school and community.
4. Adjustment to inclement weather conditions and related problems such as transportation.
5. Developing versatility and resourcefulness across the entire curriculum.
6. Lack of regular peer contact.
7. Inadequate or slow resource services.
8. Lack of support in dealing with special needs children.
9. A need for counselling skills (at adult level as well as child counselling).
10. Inappropriate curricular materials.
11. Lack of personal privacy.
12. Multi-grade teaching strategies.
13. A total supervision load without relief.
14. Uncertainty of assignment due to possible school closures under severe restraint.

Despite what may seem to be extraordinary obstacles, there is a quality of life experienced by rural people and rural teachers that cannot be found in an urban or suburban setting. This fact is seen most strongly in the Bandy and Gleadow study (1980) where the response "Rural Living and Community Involvement" was seen as both the highest positive and highest negative reason for either satisfaction or dissatisfaction with rural teaching.

Table 1 shows the factors which teachers give for leaving British Columbia rural schools. Note that the main reasons, getting another offer, does not really probe the real reason teachers sought the new position in the first place.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

In searching for the characteristics which mark a successful rural teacher in British Columbia, teachers in the Bandy and Gleadow survey indicated the traits that are indicated in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

School Board members ranked the following traits in order of importance in their search for rural teachers. (Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Using these and other data from Australia and the United States, the Faculty at the Rural Education Campus designed and implemented the early field experience in an attempt to build a "Rural Readiness" into the teacher.

Epilogue

The program, after 3 successful years is currently in abeyance awaiting a new site and renewed funding. While underway the program had undergone careful scrutiny. A symposium held in June of 1983 produced a summary report that from practice was able to confirm many of the original concerns about a rural teacher's needs and at the same time confirm many of the intents of the Early Field Experience as essential to the appropriate training of a rural teacher. From the summary of discussions held at the symposium the following was reported:

"The program should provide actual 'external' experiences. Student teachers should have experience with the climate as it affects rural communities. Winter conditions or rain forest conditions have impact upon busing schedules, the actual delivery of curriculum, free play times for students and even the overall educational climate of the school.

Remoteness of the school effects the ease of communication with the community, the school district and the world at large. Telephones are often radio telephones. The open air channels provide a lack of privacy during conversations. Postal service is not scheduled daily.

and the community is often spread out over hundreds of square miles. Thus teachers may have difficulty contacting parents of students or even support personnel in the school district system. Communication with the outside world is also sporadic. Postal service, radio stations and television networks are stretched to their limits because of the vast distances involved. Thus news and entertainment features are often reduced to a minimum.

Scarcity of resources is another factor of the external category. Student teachers should experience this in order to understand that to obtain lesson aids or other classroom resources one must order well in advance, and this requires planning. As well, they must experience the impact of being on their own, for few support personnel are available. Community resources are precious, because there are so few, and even then, they are often far away. Manufacturing or service companies are scarce, more so than resource companies. Thus a social studies unit, for example, might be developed around the availability of community resources.

The internal category includes three issues. The first, personal privacy, is one that student teachers should experience. The lack of personal privacy results most often because of the high profile the community grants the rural teacher. The community often sees the teacher, which not a true member of the community, as a resource for the community to use. Thus many implications may arise because of this fact.

The second category, 'no relief in sight', is frequently not considered. Rural teachers are often alone. Thus school operations depend upon the rural teacher and supervision of students begin the moment the first child arrives and ends when the last child leaves. Student teachers should experience what it means when there is no relief in extra duties.

The third and last, job security, is another issue. The Rural Studies Program should provide student teachers with the experience of how vulnerable a small rural school is to closure during budget time. Rural teachers are aware of enrolment

TABLE 1

Reasons Which Contributed to Rural Teachers Leaving Rural Schools

Rank	Reason
1.	Received another teaching offer
2.	Isolation
3.	Lack of access to urban amenities
4.	Not enough community support

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Successful Rural Teachers as perceived by Rural Teachers

Rank	Characteristics
1.	Adaptable, sense of humour
2.	Tact, diplomacy
3.	Community involvement
4.	Rural orientation
5.	Resourcefulness

TABLE 3

Characteristics of Successful Rural Teachers as perceived by Rural School Boards

Rank	Characteristics
1.	Flexibility, Adaptable
(2.	Rural orientation
(2.	Interpersonal skills
4.	Emotional maturity, confidence
5.	Community involvement

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