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Expanded Competencies: Acknowledging a Context for Rural Teaching Skills

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Teacher trainers cannot afford to ignore the need for a specialized set of competencies in preparing teachers for rural settings.

Expanded Competencies: Acknowledging a Context for Rural Teaching Skills

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Introduction

In any community when a young person commits suicide the reverberations are widespread. In an Eskimo community of 550 along the Yukon River when eight young villagers commit suicide over an eighteen month period everyone is affected—the family, the teachers, the health workers, EVERYONE! In 1988 the *Anchorage Daily News* published a Pulitzer prize-winning series entitled "A People in Peril." The series chronicled the personal tales of pain

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and loss in rural settings as it described the relationship of alcohol to other social and health problems including fetal alcohol syndrome, bootlegging, poverty, suicide, accidental deaths, homicide, cultural disruption and movements toward sobriety. As Managing Editor, Howard Weaver, pointed out in an editorial, "Our series is focused on misery. It is not a balanced account, contrasting reports of damage with the rich cultural heritage of Alaska Natives. It does not deal over much with the happiness of many close-knit Native families, or the enduring grace of their traditions." (*Anchorage Daily News*, 1988, p. A-12). Weaver makes it clear that the newspaper series was not intended as criticism so much as a warning to us all.

Teacher trainers cannot afford to ignore the need for a specialized set of competencies which goes beyond a knowledge base framed in pedagogical terms in preparing teachers for rural settings. Kleinfeld (1988) describes the perspective of Donald Schon (1983) who observes that "professionals often practice in situations which demand more than the application of technical knowledge to concrete problems. Professionals typically work in situations of complexity and ambiguity and disorder where it is not clear what goals are desirable or where desirable goals may conflict. The professional's task is not simply to solve particular problems through the application of technical knowledge. The task is also to figure out just what the problems are. Preparation for professional practice should include preparation in spotting issues and framing problems, in thinking through the consequences and results of different courses of action, and in staying sensitive to the particulars of concrete situations." (p.iii)

The rural and remote situations experienced in Alaska are mere exaggerations of issues that professionals must address in other parts of the country. Increased isolation, distance and cultural diversity perhaps contribute to the higher statistics in Alaska but similar problems exist in many parts of the United States, particularly in regions with large American Indian populations including reservation areas in the West.

The assumptions, content and competencies described in this article are part of a pilot program to train Rural Specialists—a group of professionals who choose to reside in rural, culturally diverse settings and who recognize the need for more information to cope with the everchanging context of their professional practice. These people may be teachers—regular or special education, social workers, nurses, alcohol counselors or others. The program is designed to enable them to feel more successful (competent and confident) so that they can remain in the settings they chose. McDiarmid, Kleinfeld, and Parrett (1988) state, "In every environment the local context—social, economic, political, historical, linguistic and so on—influences teaching and learning." (p. 1) The distance-delivered master's degree program from the University of Alaska Anchorage offers the opportunity to draw from the local context and link together content from various academic disciplines. While a variety of professions are in the program, only the relationship to teacher education is addressed in this article.

Training Program Assumptions

A number of assumptions underline the development of the content and competencies of the Rural Specialist

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program. A wide variety of rural professions were invited into the program and individual degree plans were developed to accommodate preexisting competence. An advanced degree and not additional certificates, endorsements or licenses is the objective. These assumptions are the basis upon which the program was developed:

- For some time to come we are going to be faced with the necessity for non-Native/non-indigenous professionals to fill the roles of teachers, nurses, counselors and others in rural and remote settings. In order to work successfully with students/clients, families and communities, contextual information must be a part of training. "Context" here refers to setting variables including language, culture, social and health issues as well as community profiles and priorities.
- The development of qualities of mind and person including such intangibles as sensitivity, curiosity, flexibility, judgment, character and integrity must be coupled with the application of general concepts and knowledge in order to develop successful interventions in rural and remote settings.
- Rural professionals need career ladder and staff development opportunities to help offset the discouragement and isolation that contribute to the high rate of turnover and burnout in rural and remote settings. Distance education models and expanded contextual competencies offer greater opportunities for rural professionals to achieve professional growth.
- Professionals who already reside in rural and remote settings and have a desire to remain there, bring to the graduate program contextual information that can be incorporated and shared in issues seminars and student initiated research and development activities.
- Educators and schools have an ongoing participation in rural and remote settings. While other agencies and professionals may come and go based on factors such as funding or current emphasis, school personnel remain pivotal components in rural community actions.
- Many of the learners in rural and remote settings, particularly those in culturally and linguistically diverse areas, are at-risk of school failure because of the high incidence of poverty, substance abuse and concomitant social and health issues. They frequently experience a lack of vocational opportunities and are caught in rapid cultural change. For these reasons, much of the instructional content and methodology of special education is appropriate for a larger proportion of the population than would normally be assumed.
- Collaborative interactions between human service providers (including teachers) in small communities are the basis for the holistic development of appropriate interventions for special learners and their families as well as for the at-risk population.

Content

Four primary areas comprise the course work in the Rural Specialist program. The content highlights that follow do not necessarily constitute individual academic courses. The forty semester-credit degree can be completed via on-site distance education and summer campus programs.

Special Education

- General Knowledge of Handicapping Conditions
- Classroom Organization and Behavior Management

- Legal Entitlement
- Collaborative Consultation
- Rural Special Education Service Delivery

Counseling

- Individual and Group Counseling Skills
- Working with Families
- Working with Handicapped Children and Youth

Rural Health and Social Issues

- Substance Abuse
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Effect (FAS and FAE)
- Teen Pregnancy
- Physical and Sexual Abuse
- Suicide Prevention
- Health Education
- Career and Vocational Planning
- Cultures in Transition

Research and Development

- Qualitative and Quantitative Research Skills
- Community and School-Based Research
- Action Plans and Products for Rural Settings

Special Education and Rural Competencies

Special education teachers need a variety of competencies to meet today's instructional demands. Professional organizations including the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (1986) and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1987) spent considerable time in recent years developing lists of desirable teacher behaviors. In considering competencies needed for successful teaching in rural and remote schools, the first concern is competency for teaching in any setting.

Hudson (1987, p. 232-34) formulated a list of sixteen major competencies summarized below. With little exception these competencies are desirable for the regular teacher, and certainly for the rural teacher who must cope with many situations and problems that could be referred to other professionals and specialists in an urban or populous setting.

General/Social Knowledge

- Normal Child Development
- How Children Learn

Planning and Evaluation

- Remediation
- Diagnostic and Prescriptive Teaching
- Materials
- Sequence/Task Analysis
- Ongoing Evaluation

Curriculum Content

- Special Programs
- Affective Curricula
- Study Skills

Clinical Strategies

- Learning Styles
- Direct Instruction
- Active Learning
- Problems Solving
- Behavior Management
- Systems to Increase Desired Behaviors
- Systems to Prevent Behavior Problems

Specific rural special education competencies were described by Helge (1983) and the National Information Center for Handicapped Children and Youth (1983). They included a basic understanding of the differences between urban and rural schools, a knowledge base for dealing with a broad range of handicapping conditions with limited as-

sistance (including low incidence areas), and collaborative skills for working with other professional and community resources.

Expanded Competencies for a Rural Context

The realities of the role of the teacher in a small village or community in Alaska require appropriate responses to student needs beyond basic curriculum offerings and instructional techniques.

Special education teachers are comfortable with multi-grade grouping and their assessment and evaluation skills are basic to creating an effective learning environment. Every classroom, at every level, contains a variety of potential problems engendered by bilingual and cultural variances, as well as varied learning styles, ability levels, and learning disabilities. Transiency and fragmented previous evaluation systems contribute greatly to the problem. Consequently, the teacher must have skills to assess each student initially and on an ongoing basis to identify learning styles and the presence or absence of learning disabilities, severe emotional problems and other problems. Related services in evaluation are commonly scarce and fragmented, resulting in greater demands on the teachers' skills.

Counseling. All teachers are "counselors" in their roles as teachers from time to time. However, at present and for the near future the teacher in rural Alaska is called on continuously to be a counselor among students who are living in a time and place of uncertainty and confusion. The teacher needs the skills to know when s/he is in fact counseling, to know the limits and depths of counseling that can be implemented effectively, and to be facile in a variety of counseling techniques so as to have options in selecting a counseling format suited to a student (or group) and the demonstrated need. In a time and place of turmoil, having enough skill to know the limits of the competency and the point at which the services of the professional counselor must be acquired is reason enough to have basic counseling competencies!

Career guidance is a complicated responsibility at this time of great confusion and controversy regarding the future of young Alaska Natives. Issues of land rights, cultural integration, and economy play into the dilemma of career choices, as teenager youngsters and their families struggle with education and training issues in preparation for adult life. A sensitive and well equipped career counselor/teacher is highly challenged in this area. School dropout relates closely to this topic—an additional challenge to teachers and communities.

Health and Social Problems. Health problems and/or related social concerns abound in rural Alaska; local access to medical information and treatment is limited to the skills and responsibility of the village health aide (a paraprofessional position). The teacher is frequently the key person who hears health complaints (excuses for absence) and observes visible health problems, as well as those manifested through behavior change. The knowledge needed to read "red flags" and to know where to make referrals or seek assistance is basic. Additionally the teacher may be the logical person to assist in follow up treatment and routine after illness and/or medical intervention. Hopefully the teacher will be supported by basic visits and assistance from an itinerant Public Health Nurse. Not only can the teacher assist, given basic training, knowledge and information, but the teacher generally enjoys a trust level and predictable daily involvement with the students, and hopefully, the trust and confidence of the parents.

Consultation and Collaboration. The rural teacher must have extensive competency in collaborative consultation. The teacher must perceive him/herself as a facilitator—a consumer of many and varied services needed by the students, but available only on schedule or request. As a facilitator the teacher will respond to the need for current and accurate files of human resources and educational services available to the students and families, including contact persons, demographic data, and personal familiarity with key sources. This role as facilitator applies to educational needs, and to areas of concern such as attempted suicide, unplanned pregnancies, mental and emotional disturbance and illness, and physical and sexual abuse. The rural teacher must be able to "team" with others, pooling resources, and joining together with other disciplines to further the welfare of the students.

Health Education. The rural teacher at either elementary or secondary level needs to be able to assume responsibility for health education, that is, to provide accurate information (on an age appropriate basis) to students regarding preventive and holistic health care and maintenance. As a well trained professional this teacher can provide health education in the context of the social environment involving decision making and student awareness of choices and options.

Community Involvement. Information and knowledge are the basis of advocacy. The effective rural teacher is an advocate not only for the students, but for the community. The rural teacher must be well informed about the culture of the community, and have good listening and information gathering skills. It is a true competency to be able to subjugate one's own cultural background and understand that the teacher's role is not to teach people new cultural ways, but to be the educator in the cultural environment of the community. Serious study and course work is usually required of a teacher to begin to master the cultural mores, philosophy and natural ways of a culture with which a teacher has had no experience.

Conclusions

Sixty percent of the school districts in the United States are rural as defined by community size and delivery model. A considerable percentage of teachers in training will eventually end up in small schools in rural and remote areas teaching children in multigrade groups, assuming wide curricular responsibilities and "mainstreaming" handicapped children because that is the only alternative available (Johnson, M.K., Amundsen, C., and Parrett, W., 1983). These teachers will be rewarded by the advantages of rural teaching including smaller class size, the opportunity to know children and families very well, living far away from hectic urban life and being close to the countryside and natural surroundings (Baker, 1986). Depending upon the size and location of the communities, the teachers may be challenged additionally by working in a cultural and social context very different from their own background, in communities where poverty, substance abuse and related health and social issues affect most of the children and will most definitely affect the teacher as well!

Professionals make a positive choice when they go to rural and remote villages in Alaska, reservations settlements in Arizona or ranching communities in Montana. They hope to be competent teachers, nurses, counselors or other practitioners and to perceive themselves as effective. Feeling capable, confident and competent will help prevent burnout and positively affect the high turnover rate. Expanding competencies to address primary issues of coping and survival in rural America will begin to make a difference.

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