

2-15-2010

An Examination of Resiliency in Rural Special Educators

Gregory C. Zost
Peru State College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zost, G. C. (2010). An Examination of Resiliency in Rural Special Educators. *The Rural Educator*, 31(2), 10-14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v31i2.938>

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Rural Educator* by an authorized editor of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

An Examination of Resiliency in Rural Special Educators

Gregory C. Zost

Peru State College

Retention of rural special education teachers is a dilemma for many school districts. Districts in rural areas suffer from a lack of qualified special education teachers. Therefore, the problem of having enough qualified special educators is not easily solved. Many rural districts are able to hire teacher candidates, but fail to retain them for various reasons. Building resiliency in new teachers and educators during the first several years of teaching may be part of the answer to addressing the high rate of teacher turnover in rural areas. This paper summarizes highlights from research completed with rural Nebraska teachers on the topics of intrinsic resiliency and building resiliency in rural teachers.

Background of the Study

Attracting and retaining special education teacher candidates is a difficult task at best. Rosenkoetter, Irwin, and Saceda (2004) noted that currently 13% of special education teachers are not completely certified. Other surveys report that within the first five years of teaching roughly forty percent of rural beginning special education teachers leave the field (Beeson & Strange, 2003). According to Beeson and Strange (2003) in some Southern and Midwestern states almost one third of all students attended rural schools, meaning the schools were located in communities that had less than 2,500 people. In twenty states the percentage of rural schools was even higher. In some states, such as Nebraska and South Dakota, the percentage of rural schools was 60% and 77%, respectively. Therefore, the need to attract and retain teachers, specifically special education teachers, to rural areas is critical.

The shortage of rural educators is a multi-faceted problem. From the outset, the teacher candidate pool is more limited than in metropolitan areas (McCreight, 2000). Commonly mentioned reasons for the shortage of special education teachers in rural districts is sub-standard facilities, lower pay, and fewer benefits (McCreight, 2000). Consequently, attracting teachers to these communities is difficult given the restrictions of fewer potential candidates, monetary constraints, and higher attrition of teachers once they were employed within the district. The result is a reduced amount of qualified and certified teachers teaching students from low socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom would benefit from additional services and innovative instructional strategies (McCreight, 2000). Ganes, Menlove, and Adams (2002) explained that it was not the number of candidates per position, but finding the right candidates to fill the positions. Following this line of reasoning, it is essential that the teaching candidates be the

right fit for the position, the school, and the community. Schools may have to use innovative hiring and retention strategies to attract and retain qualified teachers. With this in mind, this study attempted to ascertain why some teachers were attracted to rural schools and why they chose to remain in the school district.

Many schools selected applicants that did not have a long-term commitment to the school or community (Ganes, Menlove, & Adams, 2002). Consequently, they were only employed in the district for a year or two. For that reason, it is not sufficient for the teacher candidate to just have the proper teacher certification. The key to alleviating the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas may be to find the right candidate who prefers the rural lifestyle and can adjust not only to the way things are done in a small school, but also to the expectations of a rural community. If the district could address the shortages with individuals who enjoyed the rural lifestyle, perhaps they would remain there long-term and become active, contributing citizens within the community. Both the school and the community would benefit from this type of candidate.

Rural teachers stayed because they enjoyed the rural lifestyle and the relationships they formed with their students. Information from the Smith-Davis study (2002) contributed to the knowledge base about retention of rural teachers; however, more information is needed in regards to hiring and retaining special education teachers in rural schools. Therefore, this study proposed to extend the knowledge base by investigating the reasons why special education teachers chose to teach in Nebraska's rural districts and subsequently remained there. The special education teacher shortage is an issue facing rural school districts in Nebraska and across the nation. Retention of these teachers is an even greater challenge for rural schools. Once hired, rural school districts must then find ways to retain teachers for an extended number of years. This is

where resiliency comes into the spotlight. Building resiliency in the teachers is a key factor to increasing longevity.

Statement of the Problem

The problems addressed by this study were the shortage of qualified special education teachers and the difficulty in retaining them. The trend has been towards fewer teacher candidates majoring in special education and even fewer staying with it (Jimerson, 2003). Meanwhile, the number of students identified as needing special education continues to increase. If this trend continues--the problem will continue to grow. Rural districts will need to put into practice sound retention strategies to meet the future demand for special education teachers. Thus, dependable information about resiliency among special educators in rural areas is crucial to implementing effective practices and identifying strategies to retain quality teachers in rural schools.

Factors Contributing to Resiliency in Teachers

Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) contended the shortage of teachers not only came from a lack of turning out enough graduates, but also not retaining the graduates once they were teaching. Building resiliency in new teachers is the key to longevity. Obtaining resiliency from within or building resiliency can be accomplished through individual determination and supports from others.

In order to retain a higher percentage of educators, teachers must have some resiliency characteristics (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). First, resilient teachers must be skillful in their teaching area. Second, teachers needed to feel accepted by the school and the community as a whole. Third, teachers had to become drawn into the school and know they were a crucial part of it. Last, teachers had to have a positive outlook about themselves and their school. They had to view life, in general, confidently. Teachers with resilient characteristics could handle the drawbacks and trials of being an educator. These teachers had to be able to adjust and prevail over the challenges such as lack of peer and administrative support, lack of decision-making opportunities, weak induction programs, and lack of satisfactory college preparation for dealing with real-life teaching situations (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). Resiliency could be enhanced by building on the teacher's strengths and providing support to augment resiliency during the first few years of teaching.

Successful coping skills promoted resiliency. Coping is the ability to triumph over complicated circumstances. These skills proved helpful in reducing teacher stress. Resiliency and coping ability did not assure success, but the traits did permit the individual to handle complicated situations. Development of coping skills assisted teachers in personal improvement.

School districts and communities fortified resiliency in teachers by supplying a mentor and implementing an induction program for beginning teachers. Schools also enhanced resiliency by having workshops and training for new and existing teachers (Collins, 1999). Milstein (n.d.) stated educators who had an interest in networking with other professionals in their discipline had a higher level of resiliency. Having contact with other teachers in their academic area also contributed to resiliency.

New teachers needed the necessary supports during the induction phase and first few years of teaching to build resiliency (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). These supports fostered resiliency and assisted new teachers become more successful. It was also imperative not to place recent graduates in extremely difficult positions or ones that had high turnover rates. Some schools were setting new teachers up for failure by placing them on difficult campuses or in unpredictable classrooms (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001). By not placing incoming teachers in difficult circumstances new educators were provided the chance to grow, get supplementary education, and seek support from other teachers and administrators. This growth process had the effect of developing resiliency in teachers (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001).

Resilient educators showed a higher level of determination and a strong desire not to fail. School districts, communities, and other entities must provide the supports to enhance and build resiliency in new and educators in their first few years of teaching. Teachers had to grow personally, but other parties fostered that growth by providing training and support along the way (Bernshausen & Cunningham, 2001; Milstein, n.d.).

This study investigated how the teachers viewed their situations as rural special educators and what it was about them that led to resiliency and longevity. In examining the data, the researcher tried to understand what led to resiliency and longevity in the participants. Interviews were conducted so the researcher could better understand resiliency among rural special education teachers. The questions were open-ended and supplied further information that was not originally sought. The descriptive nature of the study presented information that could be used to gain a deeper understanding of resilient, long-term, rural special educators. Many of the questions focused on the characteristics which contributed to resiliency and longevity in rural special educators.

Methodology

This study investigated how the teachers viewed their situations as rural special educators and what it was about them and their setting that led to resiliency and longevity. In examining the data, the researcher endeavored to develop a written description of rural special educators who exhibited resiliency and longevity. An in-depth, semi-structured

interview was used to discover categories, themes, and other relevant information about the participants (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The interview process helped the researcher understand and interpret the viewpoints of rural special education teachers. The interviewer acquired information that could not be obtained by observation or through other forms of data collection. This less structured format allowed the participant to tell his or her story in his or her own unique way. The questions were open-ended and provided additional information that was not initially sought by the researcher (Merriam, 2001). The descriptive nature of the study provided information that could be developed into an analysis that could add to current knowledge in the field. It was the goal of the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of resilient, long-term, rural special educators. The interview questions focused on quality of life, description of the community, reasons for taking and staying in the position, and the characteristics which contributed to resiliency and longevity in rural special educators.

Teachers were asked to respond to open-ended questions relating to job satisfaction, reasons for staying in their current position, reasons why they initially took the position, and what makes teaching in a rural district enjoyable and rewarding. Teachers were asked to respond freely, so the researcher could determine if themes or characteristics existed among the participants. The purpose of these interviews was to enable the researcher to suggest approaches and strategies for recruitment and retention of rural special educators.

Participants

The study's participants were composed of teachers residing in central and southeastern Nebraska who had taught special education for five or more years. Fifteen teachers agreed to participate in the interview process. The information reported in this study was collected between October 2006 and January 2007 and focused on commentary from the special education teachers.

Key Findings of the Study

The key findings from the study can be grouped into three categories. The categories include: having a familiarity with the school or rural environment, exhibiting the ability to be flexible and adjust to the daily challenges of being a rural special educator, and having a support system. These findings were prevalent throughout the study and appeared to be important to resiliency and retention of rural special education teachers.

Findings Relating to Familiarity

The first key finding focuses on the concept of familiarity with the school and rural environment. Cahape-Hammer,

Hughes, McClure, Reeves, and Salgado (2005) concluded teacher candidates were more successful if they had some knowledge of the school and community. In the current study, all teachers, with the exception of one, had either grown up in their current community, a neighboring community, or had attended a small school. As the current study also pointed out, teachers enjoyed the rural setting, the peacefulness, the extended family characteristic of the communities, and the unique cultures of the communities. Cates and Smiley (2000) found it was important for teacher education programs to train candidates in the customs and lifestyles of rural America. Carr (1995) contended teachers needed more preparation for teaching in a rural setting. Carr (1995) cited a survey from Louisiana that found teachers needed more training on dealing with the aspects of teaching in a rural environment. Some colleges are now focusing on rural studies. Two examples are Southwest Minnesota State and the University of Missouri. Southwest Minnesota State offers a minor in Rural and Regional Studies (SMSU, 2007). University of Missouri at Columbia offers a minor in Rural Sociology (UM-C, 2007). This suggests a trend in education to not only address the subject areas, but also the lifestyle of working and living in a rural setting.

Findings Relating to Flexibility

The next key finding focuses on the need for flexibility and the ability to adjust to the challenges of being a rural special educator. Coleman (2001) found special education teachers had to plan and teach many lessons on a weekly basis. They also had to direct paraprofessionals, complete paperwork, and collaborate with regular education teachers. This study found that rural teachers had to be flexible to the needs of the students. Some taught grades K-6, some taught 7-12, while others taught a combination of grades and disabilities. Collins (1999) found it was common for rural teachers to sponsor activities or perform other assigned duties. This study's participants concurred with the Collins' findings. Some respondents taught regular education or sponsored extra-curricular activities. Special education teachers in small rural schools performed their special education duties and other tasks as assigned. It is important for future candidates teaching in rural schools to realize that they need to be prepared to perform many duties and be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the students and the requirements of the school.

Findings Relating to Support

The final key finding focused on the importance of support in retaining rural special education teachers. Bernshausen and Cunningham (2001) reported school districts which supported new teachers had more success retaining them. Teachers needed support from school personnel and administration. Collins (1999) suggested that resiliency could be strengthened by providing support

through mentoring and additional training for both new and current teachers. It was also concluded that some type of mentoring and support could come from colleges and universities. It could be a partnership of colleges, schools, and communities. This study agreed with the previous conclusions in that teacher candidates needed a support system both in and out of the school. One teacher said her co-workers supported her. She was able to talk about issues and solve problems as a team. Another teacher stated her administrator acted as a mentor and was part of her support system. In conclusion, teaching special education in rural schools can be challenging, but having a support network may lead to higher retention and success rates.

Interpretation

The current study found many of the conclusions to be in line with previous studies relating to attracting and retaining rural special education teachers. However, some findings were dissimilar from previous studies. The first variation involved the issue of excessive paperwork. Coleman (2001) found paperwork to be a major issue for special education teachers. Even though the teachers in this study cited excessive paperwork, they were resigned to the fact. They accepted it as a necessary duty of the position which had to be completed. A second variation involved the issue of low salaries. Cahape-Hammer, Hughes, McClure, et al. (2005) found this issue caused teachers to leave rural districts. Again, this was not a major issue in the current study. Perhaps this issue is not a factor due to the lower cost of living in rural central and southeastern Nebraska. The last variation involved the issue of isolation. Collins (1999) found many teachers left their positions because of cultural and geographical isolation. Yet, this was not an issue in this study. One teacher stated he did not miss the congestion, the rude people, or the closeness of the houses of the big city. Another teacher said she enjoyed the peacefulness of being in the country. Those respondents enjoyed the solitude of their setting. Many respondents enjoyed the isolation and did not miss the problems often associated with living and working in a larger community.

The previous contradictions may arise due to the traits of the participants or their teaching situations. It could, however, suggest the importance of matching the right candidate with the position and the community.

Implications for Practice

It is important to realize that colleges, communities, and rural schools are crucial to solving the problem of retaining qualified special education teachers. A combined effort by all entities can be an effective approach to solving the issue.

With this in mind, rural special education teachers can be prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural district through the effective implementation of programs by colleges and universities. Unique strategies can be

implemented to recruit, train, and support future teacher candidates. Colleges can educate their students not only in teaching practices, but also in meeting the challenges of working in a rural setting. For instance, it may be necessary to develop specific courses to help teacher candidates better understand the distinctive nature of the rural lifestyle and the unique aspects of rural schools. One course from Southwest Minnesota State involves the study of specific regional cultures, religions, and history (2007). Another course involves the characteristics of the human populations. Colleges can also provide assistance to first- and second-year teachers. New teachers need to have continued support from their institution. College mentors and an available support network at the university level can be utilized, along with workshops and trainings implemented by the school district. Thus, providing support for future and current special educators is another key to success and resiliency.

Rural communities play an integral part in the recruitment of special educators. They can create a welcoming environment to candidates by meeting the needs of the citizens, maintaining a safe community, and supporting the school. It is important to remember that many rural communities revolve around the school. Therefore, it is essential for the community to help maintain and support both the school and the teachers. Indeed, many of the teachers in the study said their communities were safe and welcoming. New teachers need to experience that feeling when they arrive in the community. The communities can promote themselves to show what their area has to offer. Likewise, many teachers said family and related concerns were very important. If communities can project the image of a safe community with a focus on family, new and current teachers may be more likely to remain and contribute to the school and community as a whole.

Still, schools have the greatest burden of providing support for incoming and current special education teachers. New teachers need strong mentors. For this reason, it is important to focus on cooperation and collaboration within the school system. This partnership is essential to long-term success of teachers. An atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration will help new and current special education teachers survive the first few years of teaching. For these reasons, the administration, teachers, and other school personnel need to work together to create a supportive atmosphere.

An idea often overlooked by school districts is recruiting within their ranks to find promising future candidates. These could be paraprofessionals, current students, or members of the community such as substitute teachers or parents who consistently volunteer in the school system. These individuals are familiar with the school system, know the local culture, are interested in education, and generally have a stake in the community.

It is important to realize the value of continued training and staff development of teachers to long-term successful

employment. Colleges, as stated previously, can prepare the candidates in the ways of rural school districts and the rural lifestyle. School districts, in conjunction with teaching institutions, can provide ongoing training in areas such as discipline, special education law, paperwork, and best teaching practices. This ongoing training would insure that both incoming teachers and current teachers have the best available information. The guidance should be ongoing because the field of special education is not static. It is constantly changing. The teachers need the most up-to-date information and knowledge of the field.

References

- Beeson, E., & Strange, M. (2003). *Why Rural Matters, 2003: The continuing need for every state to take action on rural education*. Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust, Communications Department. (ERIC Document Reproduction Number ED473551).
- Bernshausen, D., & Cunningham, C. (2001, March 1-4). *The role of resiliency in teacher preparation and retention* (Rep. No. SP039874). Paper presented at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education 53rd Annual Meeting, Dallas, TX.
- Cahape-Hammer, P., Hughes, G., McClure, C., Reeves, C., & Salgado, D. (2005). *Rural teacher recruitment and retention Practices: A review of the research literature, National Survey of Rural Superintendents, and case studies of programs in Virginia*. Charleston, WV: Edvantia.
- Carr, S. C. (1995). *A preservice model for preparing special educators in rural areas: Specialized competencies* (Rep. No. RC020022). Hammond: Southeastern Louisiana University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED381301).
- Cates, D., & Smiley, F. M. (2000). *"I do it all": The ballad of the rural special education teacher*. (Rep. No. RC022354) Department of Education Lawton, OK: (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED439882)
- Coleman, M. R. (2001). *Conditions of teaching children with exceptional learning needs: The bright futures report*. Arlington, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED455660).
- Collins, T. (1999). *Attracting and retaining teachers in rural areas*. Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED438152).
- Garnes, L., Menlove, R., & Adams, E. (2002). *A qualified special educator for every student: Why this isn't happening and what can be done about it?* (Rep. No. RC023423). American Council on Rural Special Education 2002 Conference Proceedings, No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 463121).
- Jimerson, L. (2003, March). *The competitive disadvantage: Teacher compensation in rural America* (Rep. No. RC023949). Washington, DC: Rural School and Community Trust. For full text: http://www.ruraledu.org/docs/Teacher_Pay.pdf (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED474248).
- McCreight, C. (2000). *Teacher attrition, shortage, and strategies of teacher retention* (Rep. No. SP039447). Texas A&M University, Department of Professional Programs. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED444986).
- Merriam, S. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Milstein, M. M. (n.d.). *An exploration of the relationship of school district restructuring to educator plateauing and resiliency* (Rep. No. EA025424). University of New Mexico. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED363947).
- Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda (2004). Addressing personnel needs for rural areas. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 27(3), 83-98.
- SMSU (2007). Rural and regional studies. Retrieved July 6, 2007 from Southwest Minnesota State University Web site <http://www.southwest.msus.edu>
- Smith-Davis, M. (2002). *An investigation of factors related to teacher retention in small rural school districts in Montana* (Rep. No. RC023858). (Doctoral dissertation, Montana State University, 2002). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED472264).
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1984). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: The search for meanings*. (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- UM-C (2007). Rural sociology community studies. Retrieved July 6, 2007 from University of Missouri-Columbia Web site at <http://www.ssu.missouri.edu/ruralsoc/undergrad/community-minor.php>