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The diverse nature of rural America must be recognized

Rural education: Issues in diversity

By Everett Edington and Judi Conrad

Robert lives in a small native village halfway between Fairbanks and Nome in the state of Alaska. He is 12 years old, a sixth grader in the local two-teacher school. In his school, there are 35 students; the school contains grades 1 through 8. Robert comes from a family of nine children. His father does a little prospecting on mine claims as well as some trapping and fishing on the river during the salmon run in the summertime. Robert has his own trap lines in the winter months. He has earned enough from trapping to buy his own snowmobile which he uses to run the trap lines.

The school Robert attends is a two-teacher school. Both teachers are women; one has lived in Alaska her entire life; the other has been there for four years and recently married. In addition to the responsibility of teaching, these teachers share the responsibility of seeing that in the winter the furnace is running, and that the generator is operating properly so that there are lights and electricity. There is a backup generator at the school in case one goes out. Because all supplies are brought in by barge, and only during the summer months when the ice has melted, Robert's teachers operate in extensive isolation.

John is a high school sophomore in Nebraska. His father owns a farm and has 1,800 acres of wheat; John's father also runs 200 cows in a cow/calf operation. Last

year, John was President of his Greenhand Class in the Future Farmers of America; his goal is to receive the state farmer award in that organization. In addition to his activities in FFA, John is active in the school sports program. His school consists of 300 students; John rides a bus 15 miles one way every day to get to school. The school has a fairly broad curriculum for its size, offering three years of foreign language as well as advanced mathematics. The vocational program, in addition to vocational agriculture, offers home economics and business courses. Some people in the town are working to initiate an auto mechanics class to start in the fall.

John's father is well educated, a member of the school board, and a strong advocate of preservation of rural America, the family farm, and the rural values he has known all his life. At dinner time, the family talks farm price controls, impending legislation, market fluctuations, fertilizers, cattle breeding, etc. John likes his school, his community, and his family's way of life. He expects someday to inherit the family farm and he knows that the responsibility makes it incumbent upon him to learn everything he can about the business. He expects to go to college, marry locally, become a major contributor to his community and, like his father, pass the farm on to his sons.

Mary lives in a rural town in southcentral Georgia. Mary is one of nine children. She is eight years old and in the second grade. Her father still farms the small family farm which has been passed down for generations. Her mother works as a maid in a local hotel in town. Her father has an eighth-grade education, and her mother dropped out of school during her first pregnancy when only a sophomore in high school.

At eight years of age, Mary has not learned to read yet; her teachers think she is slightly retarded, that she needs remedial, if not special education. However, in Mary's community there is little support for education, much less special education. Most of the local farmers are too busy putting food on the table to concern themselves with school affairs; moreover, they feel incompetent in the face of formal educators. There is very little encouragement for reading from Mary's parents as both are tired when they get home. With a large family, the major responsibility, as they see it, is keeping the kids clothed and fed. Mary's father resents the fact that school keeps his boys from helping in the fields. In fact, he often keeps them out of school on the pretense of illness.

Marge is a senior in a rural high school in Colorado. Recently, her small community has experienced a drastic change. With the discovery of coal the town has suddenly become a boom town. Marge's parents own a small grocery store and as tradesmen they have welcomed the influx of population and trade. However, Marge has not been pleased with the changes in her school. She has always been an A student and a leader in her school. With the influx of new students, coming from predominantly lower socio-economic backgrounds and urban environments, Marge has found her security threatened. The new kids have teased her unmercifully, called her a teacher's pet, tried to steal away her friends, and called her square when she refused to play around with drugs. One of her best friends has started to run with the new crowd, and Marge is finding herself confused and torn between the excitement of the new kids and the security of her old values. She no longer feels safe walking on the streets at night, and her parents only talk about all the

money they are making. Marge's grades have dropped; her boyfriend of three years is now going with a new girl, and Marge is planning to leave as soon as school is out. She doesn't know where nor does she care. She just wants out!

Because rural people are not a homogeneous group and because rural environments can vary considerably, education in rural America necessitates diversity. Often subject to inequities and generally undergoing dramatic changes, rural education presents inordinate challenges. Nevertheless, the diversity of the American rural education experience is frequently overlooked. As a nation, we tend to think of rural Americans as a singular group. Likewise, rural education is generally defined in terms of its counterpart—urban education. The fact is, rural education is as diverse as the populations it serves, and rural populations are becoming increasingly different, for the rural areas of this country are changing.

In many areas of this country, rural America is experiencing reverse migration; that is, thousands of people are moving out of the cities and into rural areas (Ross & Green, 1979). In other parts of the country, particularly in the Intermountain West, energy boom towns are springing up virtually overnight. In the great sun belt of the Southwest, retirement boom towns are increasing at an alarming rate (Ross & Green, 1979). The rural populations of the Midwest are generally affluent, articulate, and highly sophisticated. However, there are still glaring socio-economic inequities among rural minority populations. The poor black farmer of the South has neither the influence nor the sophistication of the more affluent Iowa farmer. This diversity is of extreme importance to the rural educator and to the provision of rural education in this country, and it must be acknowledged.

Federal role

In a report to the National Rural Education Seminar at College Park, Maryland, Tweeten (1979) indicated that many measures illustrate discrepancies between the quality of rural and urban education; however, Tweeten suggested that the deficiencies in rural schools were primarily concentrated in low income areas and among minorities. Tweeten further suggested that rural school quality and quantity could be improved by federal involvement in the development of remedial programs, student retention programs, and supplementary funds (Tweeten, 1979). However, all rural educators are not in agreement on the value of federal involvement in rural education. For example, in 1979 the U.S. Office of Education held a series of 11 regional rural roundtable discussions for 179 non-federal representatives from rural organizations; attendees were asked to react to 28 recommendations generated by the May 1979 National Seminar on Rural Education. Jacobsmeyer (1980) reported that from region to region there was fairly consistent agreement on the role of the federal government. Nonetheless, a minority of the rural constituency consistently questioned the role of the federal government in rural education. As a participant in the rural roundtable discussions, the senior author of this paper can verify that the school board members and school administrators from some states were quite vehement in their belief that the federal government could best serve rural education by allowing local boards to run their own schools and make their own decisions. While this point of view was that of the minority, it should be noted that this minority

was both sizeable and quite vocal. There is, then, diversity of opinion regarding the role of the federal government in rural education, and diversity of opinion should be recognized as an important factor in the development of rural education policies.

Reverse migration

The issue of immigration has occasioned equally diverse reactions. Generally speaking, immigrants differ considerably from the populations in the rural areas to which they migrate. In most cases, the immigrant brings values and expectations that differ from those of the rural community. Often, rural immigrants are from a higher socio-economic level, better educated, younger in average age, and more idealistic than the local rural population (Ross & Green, 1979). This kind of migrant comes to the rural community with preconceived expectations regarding the improvement of his quality of life. As this kind of immigrant begins to matriculate in the rural community, his values become apparent in the kinds of demands he places upon the community in terms of human services, community development, and, of course, education. While initially this immigrant may prove disturbing and even disruptive to the rural community, the potential for positive change is quite good. On the other hand, boom town immigrants may have a more negative than positive impact on the rural community. Dennis Mileti (1979) reports in "Study of Resident Perception of Growth Impact in Western Agriculture Communities" that recent immigrants in western agricultural states are people of lower socio-economic status; that recent immigrants, people of lower socio-economic status, and out-of-town residents perceived fewer problems with all phases of their community than did longer term residents, people of higher socio-economic status, and in-town residents. Mileti suggests that his phenomenon is caused by the fact that immigration brings about changes within the community that are more acceptable to the less tenured and more mobile population than to the more permanent and tenured rural residents.

Rural school finance

It is often stated that rural schools "never" get their fair share of federal funding and that they are "always" underfunded. A study by Bass and Berman (1979) indicates this statement is only partially true. While they did find programs in some rural districts fared poorly, especially where states are awarded fewer and larger sized grants, Bass and Berman also found that funding was equal in some urban and rural areas. It should be noted, however, that equal funding per student does not totally eliminate discrepancies, because when there are fewer students in a school, it may cost more per student to provide an adequate program than when there are larger numbers of students. On the other hand, some states are now developing funding formulas which aid the smaller isolated school via the conversion of funds. These formulas generally take into account the higher cost per student in the smaller school. Both New Mexico and Wyoming have such a funding program (Hobbs, 1979), and the Iowa Association of School Boards recommended such a program be adopted in 1978 (Rural Education Study Committee, 1978). In a report on equity for rural school districts, Steve Wiener (1979) pointed out that this discrepancy in funding needs was a serious problem in

the state of Minnesota and that many rural districts with high evaluation farmlands received no foundation aid at all.

Given the diversity of situations affecting rural school finance, it would seem that generalizations are both inappropriate and inaccurate, that policy makers must look at specific situations, specific problems, and specific solutions.

Community involvement

In his book *Growing Up America: Schooling and Survival of the Community*, Peshkin (1978) reviewed the relationships between high school students and the school, and the school and the community in a small mid-western town. Peshkin's work strengthens the theory that rural schools and their communities are closely related. He suggests that while schools are traditionally perceived as facilities designed for youth, rural schools are in actuality governed by adults, and that adults perceive the school as an integral part of their survival, particularly in the cultural sense. Peshkin maintains that in this rural area, the school and the community are inextricably related, that the school is an integral part of the community and what happens in that community.

However, different communities approach community involvement in different fashions. The nature of community involvement invariably depends upon the nature of the community, and since each community is unique, the community school relationship assumes a unique manifestation. For example, in 1960, due to a large increase in Navajo enrollment in San Juan County, Utah, the public schools were faced with the dilemma of trying to preserve local control in the face of a change in American Indian self-determination policy (Garman, 1979). The San Juan public schools chose to employ the help of the Northwest Educational Laboratory to implement the Rural Futures Delivery (RFD) strategy, a method of achieving significant education innovation with broad community support and preservation of local control. It has been reported that by 1979, when 50 percent of the district's students were Navajo, the RFD strategy had resulted in passage of a \$7,000,000 bond issue, construction of one high school, planning of another, and increased communication between educators and the community (Garman, 1979).

Another example of the diversity of approach to rural community involvement is illustrated in a comparative study of two communities experiencing rapid population growth (Ross & Green, 1979). In one of these communities the schism between newcomers and tenured residents was such that education suffered immeasurably. In the other community, the school and the community worked together to solve their communal problems; they secured more facilities and teachers and stronger school programs.

Once again, it is apparent that diverse needs produce diverse responses. School size, for example, means different things to different people. A rural school in New York is quite different from a rural school in western North Dakota, the former being far less isolated than the latter. In Millard's (1979) review of the literature, he found that recommendations for minimum size school districts range from 400 to 10,000 students and that recommendations for optimum size school districts vary from less than 750 to 50,000 students. Millard suggests the an-

swer to questions regarding size of school district should include careful analysis of educational programs and the delivery of same. If, for example, a district is small, alternatives for improving educational opportunities should be analyzed. Small districts need to thoroughly analyze their options, plan well in advance, and then determine if the most efficient and effective means of educating their students will mean maintaining the district or consolidating it. The final answer inevitably must be incumbent upon the district and the school or schools involved. In this era of change in rural America, there can be no standard answer.

Academic achievement

Historically, rural students have achieved at a much lower academic level than their urban counterparts (Cosby, 1979). Recently, however, the majority of research on rural students indicates that they are achieving as well or sometimes even better than their urban counterparts (Southwest Regional Lab, 1979; Clark, 1978; Martin, 1979). A recent study comparing rural and urban students in the Canadian Province of Alberta (Clarke & others, 1978), indicates that Alberta's non-urban students are performing better than its urban students. Specifically, students living outside Edmonton are scoring better than students living in the urban area of Edmonton. Further comparisons indicate the Edmonton students are on a par with other urban areas in the nation.

A study of particular significance is that of the Southwest Regional Laboratory (1979) wherein, non-urban elementary schools in 20 western states were provided with materials and technical assistance to improve remedial instruction in reading and mathematics over a three-year time span. Results indicate that 83 percent of the participating schools maintained or increased the level of learning in their programs.

Proliferation of rural interest

It is, perhaps, the diverse nature of the rural constituency and its equally diverse problems that has led to a recent proliferation of rurally oriented programs, projects, services, and publications.

The fact that in 1979, the U.S. Office of Education conducted a National Seminar on Rural Education and subsequently sponsored 11 regional rural roundtable discussions is indicative of a renewed interest in rural America. Additionally, it should be noted that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has a number of people now working in the area of improvement of rural education. The U.S. Department of Education has specifically designated rural contact people; among these are Norman Hearn in the Bureau of Elementary and Secondary Education; Tom Schultz in the National Institute of Education; Don Jacobsmeier in the Kansas City Regional Office; and Carol Johnson in the Assistant Secretary's Office for Adult and Vocational Education. There are also regional laboratories working in rural education. They include the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Southwest Education Development Laboratory at Austin, the Midwest Continent Regional Educational Laboratory and the Appalachian Laboratory, all of which have rural education projects in operation. A number of universities are starting rural education centers or institutes. Among these are Brigham Young University, Colorado State University, Cornell, Kansas State, Montana State, New Mexico State, Southern Illinois, Southwest Minnesota State, Texas Tech, South

Dakota State, University of North Dakota, University of Northern Iowa, Auburn University, and Western Montana College.

There is an increased interest in research in rural education. The newly formed special interest group on rural education within the American Educational Research Association is indicative of increased interest in research on rural education. At present there are over 65 members of this special interest group. There are also several professional organizations concerned with rural education. People United for Rural Education (headquartered in Iowa) and the Rural Regional Education Association are growing both in numbers and in activity. Texas, Oregon, Utah and Kansas have established rural

education associations and other states are looking at the value of rural education associations.

Two new journals in rural education are now being produced by Colorado State University through its Office of Rural Education. One is "The Small School Forum" and the other, "The Rural Educator."

While this proliferation of rurally oriented services suggests that the problems inherent in educating rural America will receive attention, it is extremely important that the diverse nature of rural America be both recognized and accepted. If "rural" solutions are allowed to become standardized and entrenched, minorities within minorities will be generated and the needs of Robert and John and Mary and Marge will not have been equally or properly served.

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