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The issues shared by professionals living and working in rural communities in British Columbia

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This presentation is a summary of a study looking at the issues faced by teachers, nurses, social workers and police officers in 8 rurally different communities in British Columbia. A triangulation study, it features a review of the literature to identify issues shared across the disciplines, a Delphi probe to verify the issues, the creation of a rurality index in the selection of research sites, and an analysis of interviews revealing a lack of agreement between the experts' views of the issues and that of the practitioners living and working in rural communities. This dissonance results in an identification of two views of rurality; a rural-as-deficient approach that dominates the literature and an approach that sees rurality as something that is different. Findings include the identification of 20 issues shared by rural professionals in British Columbia and a list of 18 inferences about the relationships between the issues and the professionals, between the professionals and their communities, and between the rurality of the communities and the issues; with implications for rural policy-makers, pro-service teacher-educators, and potential rural teachers.

Cet article résume une étude portant sur les problèmes qu'affrontent les enseignants, les infirmières, les travailleurs sociaux et les agents de police dans huit communautés rurales de Colombie-Britannique présentant des caractéristiques différentes. Effectuée par triangulation, cette étude comprend une étude bibliographique qui cherche à déterminer les problèmes communs aux différentes disciplines, une étude Delphi visant à vérifier les enjeux, la création d'un indice de ruralité afin de choisir les communautés visées par l'étude et l'analyse d'entrevues révélant la divergence entre les points de vue des experts et ceux des praticiens vivant et travaillant dans les communautés rurales. Ce désaccord entraîne l'établissement de deux perceptions de la ruralité : l'une considérant le milieu rural comme déficient, qui prédomine dans la documentation, et l'autre le considérant comme un milieu différent. Les résultats décrivent 20 problèmes communs aux professionnels établis en milieu rural en Colombie-Britannique et une liste de 18 inférences sur la relation entre les problèmes et les professionnels, les

professionnels et leurs communautés, et le niveau de ruralité des communautés et les problèmes. Ces constatations ont toutes des répercussions pour les décideurs, les enseignants et éducateurs en service et les enseignants songeant à s'établir en milieu rural.

Introduction

This is a triangulation study1 collecting different kinds of data to examine community, workplace and social issues faced by professional people living and working in rural communities. This study had its roots in my experiences as a teacher and principal of a K-12 school in a rural community in northern Canada. As a professional person interacting on a regular basis with such other rural professionals as social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, civil servants and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) members it seemed that we shared fundamental concerns with respect to living and working in a small and isolated community. This research is an investigation into those concerns and into the relationships surrounding them.

The fundamental purpose of this research, to investigate and make sense of the issues experienced by professionals living and working in rural communities in British Columbia, was developed into 4 researchable questions and sub-questions addressing:

a) the issues;
b) the relationships between the issues and the rural professionals;
c) the relationships between the rural professionals and the rurality of their communities; and
d) the relationships between rurality and the issues.

The literature

I conducted a review of the literature relevant to the 3 principal foci of this study: rural issues, rural professionals, and rural communities. An investigation into rural communities with a view to comparing different aspects of them readily revealed the necessity to define rurality in a measurable sense. The Griffith Service Access Frame,2 an Australian quantification model, offered the ability to calculate the rurality of a community. It featured an algorithm that combined isolation, community size, and access to services in a transparent and objective manner. This model was additionally attractive with the literature revealing3 that rural teachers in British Columbia generally felt that the main components of rurality were community size, isolation and access to services.

A search in the literature for what is currently known about such rural professionals

as teachers, nurses, social workers and police officers identified 6 themes: age, gender, background, training, why they move into a rural community, and why they stay or leave that community. There was a suggestion4 that rural professionals: a) are younger than their urban counterparts, b) suffer from a gender bias in the workplace, c) have a rural background, d) are not rurally trained, e) move to a rural community for work, and f) leave rural communities because of work-related issues.

An exploration into what is currently known about rural issues in the fields of education, health, human services and law enforcement revealed a set of issues faced by those professionals. These issues were grouped into the 3 broad categories of: a) community and culturally related issues, b) professional and work-related issues, and c) personal and social issues.

A theoretical framework

An adaptation (Fig. 1) of a 3-dimensional rurality model used by Helge5 enabled this study to examine the issues relevant to rural professionals in rurally different communities. One dimension, the rurality of a community, is based on work done by Griffith2 in creating an index of rurality. A second dimension, the nature of a rural professional, is based on work done by Ankrah-Dove6 in describing the various factors affecting rural teachers' attitudes toward living and working in rural communities. The third dimension, the nature of rural issues, is derived from a literature review synthesis looking at the types of issues faced by rural professionals in each of the 4 disciplines.

I used the theoretical framework organizationally to develop strategies to collect data (in general) about the issues within each profession, about the professionals, and about rural communities. A synthesis of the set of issues identified in a review of the literature in each discipline created a set of 50 issues shared across the professions.7 A modification of the Delphi research technique8 applied to an international panel of experts from each of the disciplines enabled me to check for concurrence across the professions that the list of shared issues was accurate.

An application of a modification of the Griffith Service Access Frame,2 created an index of rurality for rural communities in British Columbia.9 This model used a principal component analysis technique to calculate the weightings needed to combine population, distance, and economic ability statistics into one overall access to services score (rurality index) for each community. A graph of the index of rurality for the communities identified 8 that were "evenly" spread out by the index and contained a school, a hospital, a social service office and an RCMP detachment office. I sought prospective interviewees from each of the 8 communities, based on the criteria of membership in the education, health, humans services or law enforcement professions.

Initial generalized data gathered from a review of the literature guided the development of an interview instrument designed to collect data specific to British Columbia. The interviews explored perceptions of rurality, arrival into a rural community, starting a new job, and living and working in that community for a period of time. Data from the interviews revealed a specific set of shared issues. Merging this set with the one previously identified in the literature enabled an identification of 20 issues specific to rural professionals in British Columbia. Further coding of the data by these issues, by the attributes of the interviewees, and by the levels of rurality of their communities enabled cross-referencing of these variables in a search for the relationships between them.

Results

The Delphi probe with an international panel of 55 "experts" verified that the list of 50 shared issues was appropriate and represented issues faced by rural professionals. Two rounds of Likert-type responses provided this consensus. Surprisingly, when I presented the issues to practitioners as a follow-up to each interview, there was only weak agreement with the experts as to the appropriateness of the issues.

While some interviewees found responding to the issues a straightforward task, most seemed to find the issues confusing (as judged by the blank statements and notes written to me on the survey form). Others did not complete the survey form. Comments from non-returnees shared the sentiment that many of the issues they were asked to respond to were not germane to them and there was no room to indicate satisfaction or pleasure with a topic since "everything was slanted" toward a negative view of the issues. When queried, two non-respondents (13%) assured me that they "would get around to it," and added that the issues didn't really apply to them anyway.

The survey form, intended to provide data on the agreement of the issues between practitioners and experts, instead highlighted a lack of agreement as an area of focus. Although the resistance to completing the survey form remained puzzling, it tied in with some comments received in the first round of the Delphi probe and with my experiences in piloting the interview instrument. It seemed (in my opinion) that those professionals who were happy and comfortable with their jobs and their communities were the ones who were reluctant to complete the survey or who indicated confusion responding to some of the issues. Other interviewees, such as those in the process of leaving their communities, commented that the survey form covered every single concern of theirs. This dissonance between the experts and the practitioners compelled me to return to the literature, as it was the source of the data that was the basis of my interview instrument.

A re-analysis of the literature revealed the pervasiveness of a rural-as-deficient perception compared to a rural-as-different point of view. Whereas authors writing from a deficiency or pathological view described what was wrong or was missing with rural situations; others described the positive aspects of rurality or the rural-urban differences, offering that rurality represented life-style choices. A graph (Fig. 2) of these approaches by 90 authors illustrates a distinct and increasing trend to write about rurality from a deficiency perspective with an almost hidden body of literature written from an opposite position.

As the literature was my initial source of data in identifying the issues faced by rural professionals, it is clear to me how the pathological point of view of rurality had such an influence on the description of those issues, and why the practitioners in the field were so uncomfortable with an instrument derived from that point of view.

This "new insight" made it possible to revisit the data from the interviews, revealing a smaller and seemingly different set of issues. This analysis enabled me to condense the original list of 50 shared issues to a manageable list of 20. The 20 issues represent those issues identified in the interviews and cross-referenced with both the Delphi survey and the partial survey of the interviewees. The issues faced by rural professionals, in this study, are the following.

Community and culturally related issues

- closeness/linkages with the community physical geography (climate, scenery, nature);
- closeness to life-threatening situations (medical, motor vehicle, fatalities, suicides);
- cultural differences and attitudes;
- geographic isolation; and
- anti-social behaviours (crime, drugs, alcohol abuse).

Professional and work-related issues

- professional positives (job satisfaction, autonomy, experiences, people, variety);
- professional frustrations (professional isolation, bureaucracy, never-ending job);
- colleagues (support, teamwork, turnover, competency);
- rural preparation; and
- background inequities (work, community, family).

Personal and social issues

- access to family and friends;
- access to services (work , community , family);
- recreational and social activities;
- space (indoors, outdoors, & personal);
- family happiness (self, spouse, children);
- community size (anonymity, privacy, confidentiality);
- living conditions;
- quality of local schools; and
- compensation (allowances, salaries, cost of living).

Data from over 70 hours of tape-recorded interviews with 36 rural professionals over a 7-month time span were transcribed and sorted into categories. Responses in these categories were collected into naturally occurring clusters.10 Frequency counts enabled a measure of prominence to be placed on each cluster. Some of the stronger inferences suggested by the data in these clusters are that, in this study:

1. most rural professionals are married;
2. there is a gender bias in rural policing, nursing, and teaching;
3. rural professionals typically grow up rurally and do not feel professionally prepared for their rural work;
4. the main reason for moving to a rural community is because of work;
5. the ages of rural professionals and their longevity in a community are indirectly related to the rurality of a community; and
6. rural professionals in the middle levels of rurality tend to have more children than professionals at higher and lower levels.

The emergence from the data of these inferences were a verification of findings previously described in the literature within specific disciplines. Viewing these findings across the disciplines of rural education, health, human services and law enforcement is new. The following inferences, without previous mention in the literature, appear to offer new insights into the lives of rural professionals as the data also suggest that, in this study:

1. short-term rural professionals are more likely to be males, whereas longer-term professionals are more likely to be female;
2. longevity in a community is indirectly related to family size;
3. longevity in a rural community is directly related to a professional's age;
4. middle-aged professionals have more children than younger and older professionals;
5. rural teachers, as a group, are younger than rural police officers, who are younger than rural nurses, who are younger than rural social workers;
6. rural police officers and rural teachers do not, in general, tend to stay for extended periods of time in their rural communities, whereas rural nurses and rural human services workers do;

7. rural teachers, as a group, have more children than other professional groups;
8. rural professionals agree on the same set of issues, regardless of profession, gender, age, ethnicity, longevity in a particular community, and number of dependents;
9. concerns with professional satisfaction, community size, and rural preparation are universal to all levels of rurality;
10. concerns with colleagues, family happiness, and anti-social behaviours are generally indirectly related to rurality;
11. concerns with access to family and friends, professional frustrations, access to services, recreational activities, access to space, closeness to life-threatening situations, cultural differences and attitudes, living conditions, rural-urban inequities, financial compensation and quality of local schools are generally directly related to rurality; and
12. there is a positive correlation between concerns with rural issues generally and the rurality of rural communities (correlation coefficient 0.553).

Discussion

In addition to the identification of a set of issues shared by rural professionals in 8 rurally different communities in British Columbia, and the development of a set of inferences about the relationships between the professionals and their issues, between the professionals and their rurality, and between rurality and the issues, some general conclusions to this research are possible. These conclusions include a recognition that: a) there is a positive correlation between levels of rurality and rural issues, b) indexing of rurality works, c) rural professionals are a homogenous group, and d) rurality is something that is valued in this group.

Rural issues are directly correlated to rurality. A correlation between the frequency of concerns with rural issues at each of the 8 levels of rurality was compared to the 8 levels of rurality. With a calculated average correlation coefficient of 0.553 as support, it is reasonable to conclude that concerns with rural issues share a positive correlation with levels of rurality.

Indexing of rurality works. The "match" in the preceding paragraph also indicated a second conclusion: that indexing rurality makes sense in that there was such a strong resemblance to the end of this research with its beginnings. The frequency of concerns with rural issues closely matched the levels of rurality index of rurality developed to determine those concerns.

Rural professionals are a homogenous group. Every possible avenue was explored to determine if the 4 professions differed in their responses to the shared issues. Part of the literature review featured a comparison of researchers' views on retention issues and concluded that the professions agreed. The Delphi probe

revealed strong agreement from an international cross-disciplinary panel looking at identified shared issues, and each profession in the sample indicated strong agreement on the shared issues.

Although there were demographic differences involving ages, dependents and longevity in communities, the professions shared similar sentiments in every discussion of rural preparation, recruiting, retention, and living and working in a rural community. These similarities were evident in the data reduction technique of forming naturally occurring clusters from interview data. At no point did any one profession stand apart from the others in these clusters.

Rurality is valued. My first hint at the value placed on rural living and working came from my experiences piloting the interview instrument. The 7 professionals each stated at the beginning of the interview that their experiences weren't interesting, but each claimed by the end of the interview that telling their stories was fun, enjoyable and worthwhile. Similar sentiments were voiced with the 36 interviewees. Listening to their stories was an exhilarating experience for me personally, and telling their stories was an enjoyable experience for them. Comments about keeping transcripts of their interviews, and some keeping a copy of the tape recordings were routine.

Some of the happiest people I have ever met were in the group interviewed. The first person I interviewed, a nurse, told me that she had "the best job in the world." Later, another nurse advised me that "for the right person, there is no finer job." A Mountie in a very rural community felt that he should be paying the government for the privilege of doing his job, he was enjoying it so much. Typical post-interview comments invariably included references to how much fun people have in rural communities, and how much they have laughed when they look back on their rural lives.

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