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Resource teachers must examine their role conceptions

Role confusion in rural schools

By Katharin A. Kelker

In the past five years rural schools have widely adopted the resource room model for special education, and the resource teacher has become a new breed of teacher on rural faculties. As newcomers on the educational scene, resource teachers themselves and their colleagues in rural schools are still struggling with the definition of the resource teacher's role. Many schools in rural areas have resource teachers, but that is not always because they wanted them. Sometimes school personnel are not even sure why they have resource teachers or what they are for (Harris & Mahar, 1975).

In many cases resource teachers have adopted roles which stray from the original threefold conception of their duties: 1) assessment, 2) prescriptive teaching, and 3) consultation (Wiederholt, Hammill & Brown, 1978). Although the entire responsibility for assessing a child for special education was not intended to rest on the resource teacher, it has been suggested (Wiederholt, et al., 1978) that resource teachers should be able to do both educational and behavioral assessments; that is, resource teachers should use both formal and informal assessment tools to pinpoint a child's academic strengths and weaknesses, and they should observe the target child in various school settings to gather information about that child's behavior.

Secondly, the resource teacher should be engaged in prescriptive teaching which means planning, implementing and evaluating individual educational programs (I.E.P.'s). Prescriptive teaching involves working with children on a one-to-one basis or in small groups, adapting materials and instruction to the children's special needs

and continuously evaluating teaching procedures and the children's progress.

Third, resource teachers are expected to cooperate with other educational specialists and classroom teachers in implementing a child's program. Sometimes the resource teacher may need to consult with regular educators and provide suggestions for remedial activities to be used in the classroom. Resource teachers need to be knowledgeable about curriculum and teaching practices in the regular classroom, and they must possess the necessary tact and skill to suggest effective ways to modify the regular program to suit the needs of exceptional children and their teachers.

In practice these three aspects of the resource teacher's role have become blurred and some common mutations, like the following, have emerged.

The Invisible Woman. This resource teacher sees students in a windowless, converted storeroom. She seldom ventures out of her room because she is booked solid all day with some of the most difficult students the school has to offer. She feels lonely and estranged from the faculty and fears that her classroom is nothing but a glorified study hall or a holding tank for juvenile delinquents.

The Fifth Wheel. This resource teacher is not taken seriously. She is the joke of the teachers' lounge. Teachers and principal alike ignore her comments and she is a silent partner at child study team meetings. Everyone knows that the real test results are presented by the school psychologist.

The New Fellow on the Block. This resource teacher is not taken seriously either, though all the other faculty members are annoyed with him. He gets a higher salary than the regular classroom teachers, sees fewer students and has no lunchroom duty. The regular education teachers regard him as an expensive extra who is of no visible help to them.

The Sweet Young Thing. This resource teacher, a common variety, is just out of graduate school and has limited classroom experience. The old hands in regular education regard her as a real nuisance and speculate that she would not know what to do in a classroom of 30 kids. Needless to say, the regular education teachers are not interested in the "sweet young thing's" advice.

Ms. Wizard. Ms. Wizard is known to be an expert, so staff members refer students to the resource room with the conviction that they will be returned to the classroom transformed kids—well behaved and academically motivated. Once a child is in Ms. Wizard's hands, the classroom teachers feel their responsibility ends; Ms. Wizard will work her magic and cure the child of his school problems.

These five and perhaps more distortions of the resource teacher's role are occurring commonly in rural schools. Of course, not all resource teachers are suffering from an identity crisis—some have the necessary teaching experience and personal qualities to make their jobs work—but many seem to be floundering, suffering from social isolation, lack of authority, lack of experience and lack of clear role definition (Kelker, 1980). In the rush to comply with P.L. 94.142 (which mandates free, appropriate public education for all handicapped children) and provide special education services, often where none had existed previously, many rural school districts hastily adopted the noncategorical resource room model and

hired a broadly trained educational specialist. These educational specialists were often saddled with the total responsibility for developing special education programs, identifying children, working with parents and teachers and providing the on-going teaching services to the children.

Many resource teachers who have found themselves with multiple responsibilities in rural settings have begun to complain of job dissatisfaction. In a seminar on the role of the resource teacher conducted at the Montana Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (Kelker, 1980), 20 recent special education graduates of Eastern Montana College who presently work in resource rooms throughout Montana named the following as serious reservations they have about their jobs: 1) isolation from colleagues in special education, 2) isolation from teaching staffs in their schools, 3) lack of support from the administration, 4) unreasonable expectations from parents, and 5) lack of clear idea of what their roles should be. The degree to which these opinions are representative of special educators in Montana is not known; however, it is interesting to note that Harris and Mahar (1975) have reported similar findings in a study in rural Michigan.

A key element in the data from Montana and Michigan appears to be a lack of clarity about the role of the resource teacher. In an effort to gain some idea of the resource's role as it is perceived currently in Montana, a study was undertaken at Eastern Montana College in which three groups, regular educators, special educators and parents of handicapped children, were asked to respond to 15 statements about the role of the resource teacher. Of the 15 statements, eight had to do with the consultative aspects of the resource teacher's role, five with the tutorial function and two with assessment. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statements about the resource teacher's role and then to guess how each of the other two groups would respond. Thus, each respondent gave his own real opinion and predicted the opinions of the other two groups.

In this study there was agreement among Montana teachers, parents and special educators about the tutorial aspects of the resource teacher's role: such things as providing special attention, restoring a child's self-concept, and working with an educational team. However, there was significant disagreement about the consultative and assessment aspects of the role. Apparently, the special educator is viewed largely as a tutor who is intended to deal with slower students in some separate setting. This study appears to show that the roles of the resource teacher as consultant in the regular classroom or as part of the assessment team do not have widespread acceptance in Montana (Dodd and Kelker, 1980).

The resource room model as a system for special education delivery has much merit in rural settings because it multiplies the number of children who can be served in special education, and it holds promise for keeping handicapped children in as normal an environment as possible. However, the simple imposition of the resource model on top of the long-standing regular education model appears to have led to considerable confusion about how the two models fit together. It appears that the resource teacher as the link between regular and special education may be bearing the brunt of criticism which might more properly be leveled at special education delivery in general.

In the past, teachers in their classrooms have been largely autonomous and special education, if available at all, was something quite apart from regular education. If a child was referred to special education and indeed found to have a handicapping condition, it could safely be assumed that that child would receive services "somewhere else" and would not be heard from again. Now with the development of the resource room concept and the requirements of P.L. 94.142, things are different. Children in special education do not go away; they go back and forth to the resource room and sometimes the resource teachers want to come into the regular classrooms to observe and to suggest changes in procedures. Classroom autonomy may be threatened and the resource teacher is (or potentially can be) an intruder. In some cases, then, resource teachers, because they are the link between special and regular education, may have become the recipients of the resentment and misunderstanding that teachers harbor toward the changes that P.L. 94.142 mandates.

Dealing with the resource room is a new way of doing business for most regular education teachers and administrators. The changes taking place are not just in special education delivery, but in the educational model itself. Wiederholt and Hammill (1978) have likened the relationship between special education and regular education which the resource teacher represents to that of the medical practice situation in which a specialist (a resource teacher) is called on to assist in diagnosing a difficult case by the generalist (the classroom teacher). The colleague concept, which is common in medicine, is something new in education. Physicians are accustomed to asking each other for advice, but teachers are not as accustomed to consulting others about problems in their classrooms. In fact, in many schools, teachers are rewarded consistently for not asking for help, for never sending a child to the office, for being firmly in control of their own rooms.

If the resource room model and resource teacher are going to be incorporated successfully into the educational system, then two significant changes need to be made:

1) Administrative Changes. Principals must begin to schedule time in the school day for teachers to confer with the resource teacher and in the process to get to know each other personally. Many resource teachers are so over-scheduled with students, particularly at the junior high and high school levels, that they do not have time to do classroom observations or to talk to teachers. School administrators are really the only persons who can remedy this situation by dictating that consultation time must be built into the resource teacher's schedule.

School administrators also can encourage the linkage between special and regular education by providing for in-service training on the services which resource teachers can provide. If administrators **lend their authority** to special education matters, then teachers are likely to see them as important and may respond appropriately. At the same time, administrators can also back away from leadership in some situations and allow the resource teacher to assume a more prominent role. For example, in child study team meetings it would seem particularly appropriate for the principal to sit in as an advisor and allow the resource teacher to lead the meeting. This simple shift in leadership would immediately establish the authority of the resource teacher in that situation.

2) **Resource Teacher Changes.** Administrative changes and support can be helpful in defining and enhancing the resource teacher's role, but the resource teacher must also do some self-defining. Expectations of resource teachers run high, particularly in the rural setting. Resource teachers are expected to interpret special education to teachers, to assess and teach children, to confer with parents, and to be experts about both regular and special education. Resource teachers can be change agents or at least a visible part of the significant changes which are taking place in special education, if they 1) set goals for themselves, 2) pursue

those goals in a professional manner, and 3) face up to the leadership requirements of their positions. Resource teachers must look carefully at their own conceptions of their role, they must see their obligation to be thoroughly professional in their work, and they must hone their professional and personal skills so that they are indeed "expert" at assessment, prescriptive teaching and consultation. If resource teachers do assume responsibility for developing their professional roles, then potentially they can be change agents for children and for school staffs as well.

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