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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the nature and extent of physical education programs for individuals with disabilities in Washington State's small rural public school districts. Questionnaires were sent to 185 superintendents of small rural school districts in the state. Of the 128 responses, 70.3% enrolled individuals with disabilities. Fifty-eight percent of those districts with students with disabilities offered a program in physical education for disabled students. Students were placed in a mainstreamed setting in 78.7% of the districts, while 21.3% provided separate classes in physical education. Motor ability of students with disabilities were assessed in 94% of the school districts. Students were placed in physical education based on grade level in a quarter of school districts, while fewer than a fifth used motor ability as the basis for student placement. The majority (88.9%) of respondents indicated that an individualized education program (IEP) in physical education was developed as part of the special education classroom IEP, and only 11.1% indicated having a separate IEP in physical education. Physical education services were provided by non-specialists in most of the school districts. These services include assessment, development of the IEP, and teaching of physical education. Fewer than a tenth of the districts named the adapted physical education specialist as the person responsible for teaching physical education to students with disabilities. Consistent with previous studies, this study indicates that population sparsity affects the educational program in rural school districts. (KS)

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Physical education for individuals with disabilities  
in Washington State's rural school districts

The inclusion of physical education in the mandates of the federal legislation reflects the importance accorded to physical education in the minds of those designing these national programs. As a result of the enactment of federal legislation, physical education was intended to become an integral part of every disabled individual's educational program. However, although physical education is to be provided for individuals with disabilities receiving special education services, regardless of setting or size of school, to date, not all educational agencies have complied with the legal requirement regarding the inclusion of physical education in special education programming (Churton, 1987).

In addition, various studies have documented that the delivery of special education services in rural school systems is adversely affected by the unique characteristics of the rural setting (Cole & Rankin, 1981; Helge, 1984; O'Neal & Beckner, 1982). These characteristics include but are not limited to geographical location (Kirmer, et. al, 1984; Swanson, 1988), topographical characteristics (Helge, 1984), population sparsity (Carmichael, 1982; Edington & Edington, 1982) and economy (Helge, 1984; Treadway, 1984). Due to diverse characteristics rural communities do not present a single, unified or undifferentiated position on any characteristics (Dillman & Hobes, 1982). The combination of variables unique to each district affects the district's educational programming and implementation. This study was developed to investigate physical education programs for individuals with disabilities in Washington State's rural school districts.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature and extent of physical education programs for individuals with disabilities in Washington State's very small and small rural public school districts. The investigation also focused on specific rural variables and their relationship to physical education programs for individuals with disabilities.

Procedure

Respondents

The subjects in this study were 185 superintendents from Washington State's very small and small rural public school districts. There was no selective process nor random sampling of

subjects because the study involved all of the superintendents in the State's rural public school districts.

### Questionnaire

A survey technique was utilized to collect the data for this study. The questionnaire contained 43 closed and partially close-ended questions which addressed the three major areas of (a) characteristics of rural school districts, (b) nature and extent of physical education for individuals with disabilities and (c) relation among rural variables and physical education programs for individuals with disabilities.

### Analysis of Data

A PC File data-based program was created to enter the data in an A T & T 6300 computer. While the answers to research questions were descriptively summarized, Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if the relationship between specific variables were significant at .05 level. A VAX digital computer was utilized for the Chi-square analyses.

### Results

#### Characteristics of rural school districts

Of 185 subjects, 128 responded resulting in a response rate of 69.2 percent. Of the 128 responses, 70.3 percent ( $n = 90$ ) enrolled individuals with disabilities; 58.0 percent ( $n = 52$ ) of those districts with students with disabilities offered a program in physical education for disabled students. As shown in Table 1, there are 158 very small (85.4%) and 27 small (14.6%) school districts in the State of Washington (Smith, 1987). Of 128 school districts responding to the survey, the largest number of responses,  $n = 49$ , (38.3%) came from districts which enrolled 151-500 students, followed by nearly a quarter,  $n = 31$ , (24.2%) which enrolled 150 or fewer students. Although the original number of school districts listed two under the sub-category of 2000 or more student population, three of the returned survey (2.3%) indicated a population of 2000 or more students.

There were 90 out of 128 responding school districts (70.3%) which enrolled students with disabilities. As shown in Table 2, more than a third of the 90 school districts,  $n = 31$  (34.4%) enrolled 151 to 500 students, while fewer than a tenth,  $n = 3$  (7.9%) had a student population of more than 2000 students. Fewer than half of the 90 districts,  $n = 42$  (46.7%) were located in communities with 1000 or less population, while less than a sixth,  $n = 13$  (14.4%) were located in communities with 4000 or more population.

In terms of location, more than half of the 90 districts,  $n = 47$  (52.2%) were 30 or less miles, while only three percent,  $n = 3$  (3.3%) were more than 91 miles from the nearest non-rural school district. Fewer than half of the 90 districts,  $n = 38$  (42.2%) had more than 20 students with disabilities, while more than a third,  $n = 35$  (38.9%) enrolled 10 or fewer students.

Table 1 Number and Percentage of Respondents to the Survey  
( $n = 128$ )

School Districts Per Enrollment Category	No. of Respondents		
	$n$	$n$	%
1 - 150	57	31	24.2
151 - 500	62	49	38.3
501 - 1000	39	26	20.4
1001 - 2000	25	19	14.8
2001 - 2500	2	3	2.3

#### School Districts with a Program in Physical Education for Students with Disabilities

##### Description of School Districts

Of the 90 school districts which enrolled students with disabilities, 52 (58.0%) offered a program in physical education for disabled students. As shown in Table 3, demographically, more than a third,  $n = 17$  (32.7%) of the districts enrolled 10 or more students with disabilities, while less than half,  $n = 25$  (48.1%) enrolled 20 or more. Geographically, more than two-thirds of the districts,  $n = 27$  (52.0%) were closely situated (30 or less miles), and fewer than a tenth,  $n = 2$  (3.8%) were remotely located from the nearest non-rural school district (91 or more miles).

##### Bases of student placement, assessment and IEP

The 52 respondents whose districts offered a program in physical education for students with disabilities were asked how students were placed in physical education classes. Students were placed in a mainstreamed type setting in majority of the districts,  $n = 41$  (78.7%), while fewer than a quarter of the 52 districts,  $n = 11$  (21.3%) provided separate classes in physical education.

Students were placed in physical education classes based on grade level in a quarter of school districts,  $n = 13$  (25.0%). Fewer than a fifth,  $n = 7$  (13.5%) used ability as the basis for student placement.

Table 2. Description of School Districts Which Enrolled Students With Disabilities ( $n = 90$ )

Variables	Number	%
<u>General student population</u>		
150 or Less	19	21.1
151 - 500	31	34.4
501 - 1000	21	23.3
1001 - 1500		10.0
1501 - 2000	7	7.9
2000 or More	3	3.3
<u>Population size of communities where districts were located</u>		
1000 or Less	42	46.7
1001 - 1999	17	18.9
2000 - 2999	13	14.4
3000 - 3999	5	5.6
4000 - 4999	4	4.4
5000 or More	9	10.0
<u>Distance of districts from nearest non-rural school district</u>		
30 or Less miles	47	52.2
31 - 60 miles	30	33.3
61 - 90 miles	7	7.8
91 - 120 miles	-	-
120 or More miles	3	3.5
<u>Population size of disabled students</u>		
10 or Less	35	38.9
11 - 15	16	17.8
16 - 20	1	1.1
20 or More	38	42.2

Nearly all of the 52 school districts,  $n = 49$  (94.0%) assessed the motor ability of students with disabilities. More than half of 30 respondents (53.3%) indicated assessing the motor performance level of the students on a regular basis. The motor performance level of students was assessed by physical therapists in a third of 44 school districts,  $n = 16$  (36.4%), by teachers of physical education in less than a fifth,  $n = 7$  (15.9%) and by adapted physical education specialists in fewer than a tenth,  $n = 5$  (11.3%) of the districts. While the assessment results were interpreted by physical therapists in fewer than half of the districts,  $n = 23$  (52.3%), adapted physical education specialists interpreted the results in less than a fifth of the districts,  $n = 7$  (15.9%). (Refer to Table 4).

Table 3 School Districts With a Program in Physical Education for Students with Disabilities ( $n = 52$ )

Variables	Number	%
<u>Population size of students with disabilities</u>		
10 or Less	17	32.7
11 - 15	7	13.5
16 - 20	3	3.0
20 or More	25	48.1
<u>Distance of districts from nearest non-rural school district</u>		
30 or Less miles	27	52.0
31 - 60 miles	20	38.5
61 - 90 miles	3	5.7
91 - 120 miles	-	-
120 - More miles	2	3.8

Table 4 Professionals Who Assessed the Motor Performance Level of Students with Disabilities ( $n = 44$ )

Professionals	Assess	%	Interpret	%
Teacher in physical education	7	15.9	9	20.5
Adapted physical education	5	11.3	7	15.9
Physical therapist	16	36.4	23	52.3
Occupational therapist	1	2.3	5	11.3
Psychologist	3	6.8		
Combination of professionals	12	27.3	-	-

The majority of 49 respondents,  $n = 44$  (89.9%) indicated developing an individualized education program (IEP) in physical education, while more than a tenth,  $n = 5$  (10.2%) did not (See table 5). The respondents were also asked how they developed the IEP in physical education. Of 27 respondents to the question, three quarters,  $n = 24$  (88.9%) indicated developing the IEP as a part of special education classroom IEP, and a quarter,  $n = 3$  (11.1%) indicated having a separate IEP in physical education.

Among 37 respondents who named the professionals which had the responsibility of developing the IEP in the districts, fewer than a third,  $n = 11$  (29.7%) cited the teachers of physical education. Less than a quarter named the physical therapist,  $n = 8$  (21.6%).

Table 5 Individualized Education Program in Physical Education

<u>Number of districts with IEP (n = 49)</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
With IEP	44	89.8
Without IEP	5	10.2

  

<u>Nature of IEP (n = 27)</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Part of classroom IEP	24	88.9
Separate from classroom IEP	3	11.1

  

<u>Professionals who developed IEP (n = 37)</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Teacher in physical education	11	29.7
Physical therapist	8	21.6
Occupational therapist	4	10.8
Psychologist	8	21.6
Combination of professionals	6	16.3

Personnel responsible for teaching physical education for students with disabilities

Various professionals had the primary responsibility for teaching physical education for disabled students in the districts. As shown in Table 6, 34 out of 49 respondents (69.4%) named the regular physical education teacher for teaching physical education for disabled students in the districts. Fewer than a tenth, n = 4 (8.2%) named the adapted physical education specialist.

The retention years of the teachers was addressed in the survey to which 40 subjects responded. Of 40 responses, more than half, n = 22 (55.0%) indicated having the teachers of physical education for disabled students for more than six years, while a tenth, n = 4 (10.0%) indicated having the teachers in their districts for less than a year.

Physical education facilities and funding

In terms of adequacy of facilities, nearly all, n = 42 (94.0%) of 50 respondents indicated having adequate facilities in physical education. More than half of the facilities in 48 school districts, n = 27 (56.3%) were school based, while more than a third, n = 19 (39.5%) were a combined school and community based facilities.

Of 40 responses to modification of physical education facilities and equipment, more than half indicated having modified their facilities and equipment, n = 25 (51.0%) for accessibility to students with disabilities. The largest number of responses named state fund for physical education, n = 18 (46.2%) and state fund for special education, n = 15 (38.5%) as sources of funding for physical education for students with disabilities. (Shown in Table 7).

Table 6 Personnel Responsible in Teaching Physical Education for Students with Disabilities

Teachers (n = 49)	n	%
Special education teacher	18	36.7
Regular physical education teacher	34	69.4
Adapted physical education teacher	4	8.2
Physical therapist	12	24.5
Occupational therapist	9	18.4
Speech and audiologist	3	6.1
Counselor	3	6.1
Teacher aide	5	10.1

  

Retention Years of Teachers (n = 40)	n	%
Less than a year	4	10.0
1 - 3 years	7	17.5
4 - 6 years	7	17.5
More than 6 years	22	55.0

Table 7 Source and Percentage of Funding in Physical Education (n = 39)

Variables	n	%
<u>Funding Agencies</u>		
State fund for physical education	18	46.1
State fund for special education	15	38.5
State's fund for education	8	20.5
Local fund	8	20.5
<u>Percentage of Fund Districts Received</u>		
24 percent	5	12.8
50 percent	-	-
75 percent	5	12.8
100 percent	29	74.4

#### Statistical Analyses

Chi square analyses were utilized to determine the relationship of physical education for individuals with disabilities and funding, student and community populations and geographical location at .05 significance level. Two significant relationships among variables were found: (a) the retention rate of teachers of physical education were significantly higher in school districts which were closer to the nearest non-rural school districts than those which were remotely located and (b) school districts which had a program in regular physical

education were significantly likely to offer a program in physical education for disabled students than those which did not have regular physical education.

#### Discussion and Recommendation

Rural school districts are generally described in the literature as diverse and distinct from each other (Hobbs, et. al., 1980; Tillman, 1983). Such description did not apply to rural school districts in the State of Washington. The majority of 128 school districts in the study showed similar geographical and demographic characteristics. As a result, their educational needs did not seem to vary in the area of physical education for students with disabilities.

The State of Washington has nine Educational Service Districts (ESDs) whose main responsibilities include administrative and instructional support services to 296 public school districts and all state approved private schools. Under the ESD's special service cooperatives, the services of special education specialists are available through contractual agreement. Adapted physical education was not in the list of special education services provided by the ESDs. If the services of adapted physical education specialists are made available to the districts through the ESDs even on a contractual basis, there is a probability that school districts which do not have physical education for disabled students may offer such program in the near future.

Another state-wide core service of the ESDs is in-service education. If adapted physical education specialists are hired by the ESDs to conduct in-service training among school administrators and regular classroom teachers from districts which did not have a program in physical education for disabled students, there is a possibility that these districts may include physical education in their special education services in the future. If the problem was a lack of financial resources to support a physical education specialist position in the district, professionals who received an in-service training in physical education could fill in the responsibility for adapted physical education specialists in the districts.

The provision of both regular physical education and physical education for students with disabilities are under the responsibility of the school districts. Although the findings show that more than half of the 90 districts which enrolled students with disabilities offered a program in physical education for these students, to date, more than a third still do not have a program. Nearly half of 29 respondents whose districts did not offer a program in physical education for disabled students indicated not having physical education due to the small population of disabled students in the districts. This finding partly supported previous studies which indicated that population sparsity affects the educational program in rural school districts.

Students were placed in physical education based on grade and class levels. This finding seemed to indicate that an assessment of the motor performance level of disabled students was being conducted only to comply with the legal requirement. The purpose of assessment, that is, to determine appropriate placement and educational program for the individual, is not being realized. In effect, regardless of the student's ability, the student is mainstreamed in regular physical education based on grade or class levels.

Physical education services were provided by non-specialists in most of the school districts. These services include assessment, development of the IEP and teaching of physical education. The concern of educators regarding the preparation of non-specialists to take over the responsibility for special education specialists in rural school districts is also a concern in this study. Although the non-specialists who provided physical education for students with disabilities specialized in physical education and other related fields, the nature and extent of specialization of the non-specialists still varied from that of an adapted physical education specialist. Adapted physical education specialists have been professionally trained and therefore have the competencies to meet appropriate placement, activities and instructional approaches for individuals with disabilities.

Although physical physical or occupational therapists are knowledgeable on motor ability of individuals, the therapist's orientation leans heavily on the medical field. The therapists may lack the competency to provide adequate behavioral and instructional approaches for effective programming in the least restrictive environment.

Both the Educational Service District and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction hold an essential role in the development of educational programs in Washington's public school system. These agencies are in a key position to influence the educational programs that are offered in the State's public school districts. These agencies are therefore encouraged to join collaborative efforts to develop an awareness among the school's administrators regarding a need for physical education services for rural students with disabilities. A provision of physical education program for rural students with disabilities in the State will not only enhance the student's motor development but their successful integration in the mainstream of society as well.

Similar to previous studies on rural special education, it was also found in this study that geographical location was significantly related to teacher employment and retention in rural districts. One of the reasons for difficulty of teacher retention in rural areas is the lack of rural orientation during the teacher preparation years. Most preservice curricula are focused on the needs of the urban teacher and of the urban system. The uniqueness of rural needs and condition demand a differential approach and management to the educational process.

Higher institutions of education should redefine their focus to include preparation of teacher for various employment opportunities including rural school system.

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