# Implementation and Diffusion of the Rainbows Program in Rural Communities: Implications for School-Based Prevention Programming

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Published online: 11 Apr 2012.

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# Implementation and Diffusion of the Rainbows Program in Rural Communities: Implications for School-Based Prevention Programming

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Although progress has recently been made in the development of effective prevention programs for children and families, the effective diffusion of programs has received much less attention. Rural communities in particular may face unique barriers in taking advantage of prevention programs. Through a qualitative case study of the implementation of the *Rainbows program*, a prevention program for children experiencing parental separation, divorce, or death, this article explores school, family, and community resources that may affect the adoption and implementation of this program in rural schools. Perspectives on these issues were shared by 21 school personnel from a single educational region in individual or focus group interviews. Based on these perspectives, a number of recommendations are advanced for enhancing program diffusion, for furthering research on diffusion issues, and for helping educational and psychological consultants bring prevention into the educational mainstream.

Recent decades have brought great progress in the development of effective preventive intervention programs for children and families. However, issues involved in the effective implementation and diffusion of programs

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have received much less attention. Just as program content may need to be tailored to meet the diverse needs of different groups of consumers, adjustments in how a given program is delivered may be necessary to ensure that programs are available to all in need (Cowen et al., 1996; Durlak, 1995). This issue becomes critical for program delivery in communities that have few resources. Rural communities that have few socioeconomic and educational resources may be less able to adopt programs and to sustain them over time (Wagenfeld, Murray, Mohatt, & DeBruyn, 1994). Creative approaches are needed to support low-resource communities as they take on new programs. Through a qualitative case study of the implementation of the *Rainbows program*, a prevention program for children who have experienced parental separation, divorce or death, this article explores the school, family, and community resources that may affect the adoption of this program in rural schools.

## PREVENTION PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN EXPERIENCING PARENTAL DIVORCE OR DEATH

There is a pressing need for programs that can help children adjust to the loss of access to a parent through separation or divorce. Over 1 million children experience the divorce of their parents each year in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). According to the U. S. Bureau of the Census (1999), in 1996 approximately 28% of all children lived with just one parent, which is a significant increase from 1970 (Shiono & Quinn, 1994).

As Amato and Keith (1991) demonstrated in their meta-analysis of 95 studies on the effects of divorce, most children undergoing a divorce transition are not beset with serious problems (i.e., suicide, depression, delinquency). However, most children of divorce do experience emotional pain and confusion (Emery, 1994; Emery & Forehand, 1994). Children of divorce may also be affected by experiences related to predivorce family dysfunction, such as repeated exposure to high levels of interparental conflict, experiences that may be even more potent than the effects of parental separation itself (Amato, Loomis, & Booth 1995; Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1996; Emery, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990, 1992; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1991; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988). Thus, it may be most accurate to consider divorce as a series of events that create a number of stressors that children must negotiate to maintain their sense of well-being (Emery, 1994; Emery & Forehand, 1994). Children's need for support increases when their families experience discord, when they lose support from a parent

(e.g., when parents are focused on their own grief), and when their families face additional stressors secondary to loss. Outside resources may be needed to help children obtain the support they need to maintain well- being during the divorce transition (Emery, 1994).

Although the loss of a parent because of death is very different from loss because of marital separation (and occurs much less frequently), this event is also a critical transition that confronts children with a series of emotionally laden demands. Similar to divorce, parental grief may lessen the support children receive from their remaining parent. Sandler et al. (1992) showed that children are most vulnerable to long-term psychological difficulties after parental death if they also experience less parental warmth, greater parental demoralization, more negative life events, and an unstable family environment. Thus, children who experience loss because of parental death may also benefit from outside supportive resources.

Preventive intervention programs offered through schools have the potential to help large numbers of children who have experienced loss of access to a parent through separation, divorce, or death. Durlak (1995) estimated that large-scale, school-based prevention programs could potentially double the number of children who are helped compared to those currently reached through traditional channels of mental health intervention. In addition to increasing the number of children served, school-based prevention programs may offer several advantages. First, because school-based programs usually do not charge families for their services, children from low-income homes are more likely to enroll (Cowen et al., 1996; Grych & Fincham, 1992). Second, parents who are uncomfortable seeking help from a mental health center may agree to a school-based program because the school context is familiar to them (Cowen et al., 1996). Additional advantages of school-based programs include the availability of teachers and counselors who can help children adjust to family changes (Cowen, Hightower, Pedro-Carroll, Work, & Wyman, 1989; Kalter et al., 1988) and can offer the opportunity to practice new coping skills with peers undergoing similar experiences (Teja & Stolberg, 1993). Finally, locating programs in schools may increase the long-term availability of programs if schools incorporate the program and offer it on an ongoing basis (Cowen et al., 1989). Although the advantages of school-based prevention programs are generally viewed as outweighing the disadvantages (Durlak, 1995), it should be noted that, because schools are often required to fulfill a myriad of mandates, they may be less able than other community institutions to provide prevention services.

## PROGRAM DIFFUSION

It is not enough to develop good programs for children; they must be adopted and maintained over time. According to Durlak (1995), the diffusion of a school-based program can be divided into four phases:

1. Dissemination, in which schools are informed about the existence and operation of a new program.
2. Adoption, in which a school decides to try a new program.
3. Implementation, in which the school conducts the program.
4. Maintenance, in which the program is incorporated into the routine operations of the school.

However, program developers and evaluators have devoted little attention to the factors that promote or inhibit the diffusion of programs at each of these stages (Adelman & Taylor, 1997; Durlak, 1995). The failure to attend to program diffusion issues may mean that effective programs are not available to schools, resulting in many children not receiving needed help. A lack of attention to how a program was implemented may also undermine the valid evaluation of its effectiveness.

The failure of schools to adopt and maintain effective programs may have pronounced effects for children in rural contexts, particularly given the relative paucity of traditional mental health providers in rural communities (Ad Hoc Rural Mental Health Provider Work Group, 1997). Even if traditional mental health services are available, the higher levels of poverty and unemployment in rural areas may make it difficult for rural families to afford these services (Miller, 1993; Weiss & Correa, 1996). For these reasons, the consequences of the weak diffusion of school-based programs may be quite serious in rural communities.

## PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Most research attention has focused on the effectiveness of prevention programs, rather than the on factors that affect the success of their implementation. Several programs for children of divorce have been found to provide benefits for children of divorce: the Children of Divorce Developmental Facilitation Group (Kalter, Pickar, & Lesowitz, 1984), the Divorce Adjustment Program (Stolberg & Cullen, 1983; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985), and the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (Cowen et al., 1996; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985). Fewer programs have been developed for

children who have experienced the death of a parent (Lutzke, Ayers, Sandler, & Barr, 1997) and only one—The Family Bereavement Program (Sandler et al., 1992)—is recognized as an empirically supported program. However, by far one of the largest programs serving children of divorce and death is the Rainbows program (Yehl-Marta & Olbrisch, 1997), and it has never been formally evaluated.

## BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT STUDY

This study explores factors that affect the implementation of the Rainbows program, a prevention program designed for children who are either currently experiencing social and psychological difficulties or who are at risk for developing such difficulties after parental, separation, divorce, or death. The 20-session program is most often provided as a pull-out service in elementary and middle schools. Similar to other prevention programs, the developers of the Rainbows program (Yehl-Marta & Olbrisch, 1997) have not formally articulated the theoretical underpinnings of their program. However, through a series of discussions and the review of program materials, we were able to identify the mechanisms by which the Rainbows program administrators and staff believe the program accomplishes its mission of facilitating healing among grieving children. First, through a process of mutual help, children learn empathic listening skills and practice receiving and extending help to one another in the support groups. Second, through a process of identifying and reframing cognitions, emotions, and behaviors, children are encouraged to express their feelings and to move toward acceptance of their current life situation in which loss is reconceptualized as an "ending" that will be followed by a new "beginning" (Yehl-Marta & Olbrisch, 1997).

Although it is unusual for a single program to serve children experiencing divorce as well as parental death, the program developers (Yehl & Laz, 1983) reasoned that both groups of children go through a grieving process and need similar forms of support and assistance to cope with family change. Although the specific events that follow parental divorce and death are quite different, the program developers believed that children in both situations require similar forms of assistance from supportive adults and peers in understanding and expressing their feelings, accepting help, reframing loss, and developing coping skills. Further, through a series of age-appropriate activities, children are helped to apply the concepts taught in the Rainbows program to their unique situation.

The Rainbows program has been adopted in over 7,000 sites in 14 nations and has served over 750,000 children since its development in 1983. Although the Rainbows program is most often implemented in schools, the program has also been offered by churches, agencies, and hospitals. In each of these contexts, sponsoring institutions, rather than families, are asked to cover program costs. Secular and religious versions have been developed, and the program is also available in languages other English.

The program depends on thousands of volunteers to fill various roles in the implementation of the program at the site and regional levels. At the site level, the program is administered to groups of children by program facilitators (typically social workers, and less commonly, counselors and teachers). Site coordinators (ideally experienced program facilitators) supervise the administration of the program in a particular school by recruiting, supervising, and supporting program facilitators; enlisting participants; and acquiring resources, such as space, time, and program materials. Regional directors recruit new sites, train site coordinators and program facilitators, and supervise the administration of the program at a regional level. The RAINBOWS, Inc., headquarters develops program materials and provides ongoing training and support to regional directors. Because program personnel typically have advanced degrees in social work, counseling, or education, the training process is relatively brief: 6 hr of initial training and 10 hr of ongoing supervision and support for program facilitators, 9 hr for site coordinators, and 40 hr for regional directors.

Laurie Kramer and Gary Laumann have been involved in an ongoing evaluation of the outcome of the Rainbows program for fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students who are participating in a school-based, secular version of the program. The purpose of this evaluation is to investigate whether children demonstrate higher levels of personal adjustment, report a greater sense of support, and are more able to articulate their feelings and thoughts about loss and family change as a function of participating in Rainbows program in contrast to a control group.

The process of performing this evaluation research proved to be as interesting as our findings. Early in the project we were struck by the fact that, despite a desire to adopt the Rainbows program, several rural schools were simply unable to do so. For example, with respect to a single educational region in central Illinois, 51 schools were offered the program, and 20 of these accepted. Although it is not unusual for schools to decline to participate in a project involving a substantial research component, we were intrigued by the response of eight of the schools—all rural schools—who initially made concrete plans to implement the Rainbows program (e.g., by sending a representative to a training session), but found

themselves unable to follow through, although program materials and staff training were provided free of charge as part of the evaluation. An interest in exploring the reasons for this phenomenon led to the current investigation of factors that influence the implementation of the Rainbows program in rural communities.

## METHOD

### Design, Sampling Strategies, and Participants

A qualitative, case study method was used to investigate the factors that facilitated and impeded implementation of the Rainbows program within the rural areas of one educational region in east central Illinois. The boundaries of the region defined the boundaries of the case, and all schools and administrative offices within the region were considered part of the case.

Within the defined boundaries of the case, a theoretical sampling approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; see also Stake, 1994) was used to select school personnel to participate in individual or focus group interviews. Theoretical sampling involves selecting informants based on the likelihood that they will provide a rich source of information about the phenomenon under study. A focus on decision making in the adoption and implementation of the Rainbows program led us to select individuals who had a role in determining whether and how a particular program will be introduced in a school. In the region under study, a number of individuals were involved in the implementation process:

1. Regional and district administrators who "give their blessing" for individual schools to accept a particular program.
2. School principals who play a "gatekeeping" role in determining whether the program is actually offered in their particular school.
3. School personnel with responsibility for implementing and coordinating prevention programs (e.g., school social workers).

Knowledgeable individuals who worked at each of these levels were referred to us by the regional school superintendent. (Most of these individuals were also known to us through the execution of the outcome evaluation.) With the exception of four social workers who were unable to come to a focus group interview, all invited individuals agreed to be interviewed.

The total number of participants was 21. At the regional level, we interviewed the regional superintendent and the 4 regional administrators in-

volved in making decisions about new school programs ($n = 5$). At the local administrative level, we interviewed local administrators from 2 of the 5 rural districts in which at least one school offered the Rainbows program, and 4 of the 8 rural districts that did not offer the Rainbows program ($n = 6$). With respect to school personnel with responsibility for implementing and coordinating the program, we conducted a focus group interview with 9 of the 11 social workers who, working through a special education cooperative, delivered services in 10 of the 13 rural districts. One additional social worker who was not a part of the regional cooperative, but who worked in one of the remaining rural districts, was also interviewed. (Although 6 staff members from the 2 urban districts in the region were initially invited to participate in a separate focus group to provide a basis for rural–urban comparisons, the participation rate for this group [$n = 2$] was too low to warrant inclusion in this study.) In sum, we were able to talk with everyone with responsibility for prevention programming at the regional administrative level, to local administrators from 6 of the 13 rural districts, and to school staff with program delivery responsibilities in 11 of the 13 rural districts in the region.

## Data Collection

Data were collected by using individual and focus group interviews. Individual interviews were scheduled with regional, district, and individual school-level administrators, and a focus group interview was conducted with school social workers. Because school administrators were expected to make decisions about program implementation after considering the particular needs and resources of their school and the surrounding community, the individual interview format was thought to be most effective for exploring these unique perspectives in depth. On the other hand, a focus group discussion format was felt to be most appropriate for assessing the perspectives of individuals most likely to serve in the role of site coordinators and program facilitators (e.g., school social workers), given that these individuals would share a similar role in implementing programs in their schools.

In both individual and focus group interviews, participants were presented with a small set of open-ended questions. Specifically, participants were asked:

1. Whether it was difficult to implement programs targeted to children experiencing parental separation, divorce, or death, and if so, why?

2. Whether program implementation was more difficult in rural rather than in urban locations, and if so, why?
3. What would help them to implement, or better implement, this type of program in their schools?

Those participants who did not implement the Rainbows program were first asked to reflect on the factors that influenced their decisions regarding the Rainbows program in particular, and then encouraged to reflect more generally on barriers in the implementation of similar prevention programs. A standard set of probes was used to help respondents elaborate on their responses. Field notes and audiotape recordings from these interviews formed the basis for subsequent data analysis.

## Data Analysis

Three general strategies were used to enhance the rigor of the qualitative analysis of the research interviews (Kalafat & Illback, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, as is desirable with qualitative analysis, the researchers were substantially grounded in the phenomenon of interest. Two of us have had extensive involvement with both the Rainbows program and its implementation in this educational region. Laurie Kramer contracted with RAINBOWS, Inc., to design and conduct the outcome evaluation described previously. Gary Laumann had been involved with the implementation of the Rainbows program in numerous school districts in Illinois for 8 years, most recently serving as regional director for east central Illinois. He introduced the Rainbows program to the schools in this region (and others), worked with each participating school to implement the program, and trained the site coordinators and program facilitators. Following procedures recommended by Krueger (1994), Liesette Brunson, a researcher with interests in rural families and prevention, was invited to participate in the data analysis and write-up as an outside source of peer checking. Thus, the research team was substantially grounded in the setting of interest and brought to bear multiple areas of expertise in delivering school-based prevention services to rural families.

Second, data analyses were conducted following Krueger's (1994) model for analyzing focus group interviews and Taylor and Bogdan's (1984) procedures for discovery of themes in qualitative data. Specifically, we used a tape-based analysis (Krueger, 1994) that involved the systematic review of tape-recorded interview material and the construction of a

framework or "story line" with which to integrate the major themes in the data.

Third, we employed two levels of participant checks. First, we asked participants to respond to key points during the interview situation, with the interviewer presenting a summary of themes that emerged during the interview and requesting feedback, qualification, and elaboration from participants. Second, we mailed a preliminary report of discovered themes to all of the research participants and asked them to comment. These comments, which ranged from a few scribbled lines in the margins of the report to a two-page memo, were incorporated into the results.

## RESULTS

This section presents the characteristics of schools, families, and communities reported by the participants in this study as influencing whether the Rainbows program was adopted and maintained in the rural schools of this educational region. Before presenting these results, it is important to consider the following caveats.

First, the results represent the viewpoints of the participants and should not be interpreted as objective facts. Second, because the participants were selected for their involvement in different levels of roles in relation to program adoption and implementation, their comments were considered as analogous to puzzle pieces in which each participant group provided input about unique facets of the problem. In piecing together this puzzle, we did not place greater weight on the comments made by administrators over those made by social workers, or vice versa. We did attempt to assess whether a particular viewpoint was expressed by several participants in diverse roles, by several participants in a particular role, or by only one or two participants, and we indicate this finding in the text. Third, although strong and consistent themes emerged across the participants' reports, it is important to consider that there are individual differences among schools and communities, particularly in their demographic characteristics and resources (Prater, Bermudez, & Owens, 1997), that limit the degree to which any specific theme can be said to apply to a particular school or community. For example, rural communities vary significantly in terms of the residential stability of their population, their financial assets, and their proximity to suburban and urban centers. Each of these factors (as well as many others) may have substantial impact on the resources and constraints existing in a school or district.

## FACTORS AFFECTING PROGRAM ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Participants discussed a wide range of factors that may have influenced whether the Rainbows program was adopted and was sustained in rural schools. One consistent theme related to the types of resources (personnel, time, space, and attitudes) needed to make program adoption successful. These resources were based in the contexts of schools, families, and communities.

### School Resources

*Personnel.*    One important school-based resource that was uniformly reported by informants to influence implementation of the Rainbows program was the availability of key personnel to coordinate and conduct the program. Social workers were the school personnel who most often took responsibility for administering the Rainbows program in their schools, although this type of program delivery was not part of their "official" job description. Social workers reported that they took on this additional responsibility because they recognized a great need for it. However, this commitment came at a cost because they were already overloaded with responsibilities, such as case study reports, crisis intervention, and counseling. Furthermore, their time in a particular school was constrained by the structure of social work services in rural schools in the region. Unlike the urban schools in the region that had a half- or full-time social worker on staff, all but one rural school purchased part-time (typically 1 day per week) social work services from a county Special Education Cooperative. This arrangement, which resulted in an individual social worker working in four or five schools during a single week, was viewed as significantly impeding program coordination. One social worker described the practical implications of this arrangement: "With me in the school only 1 day a week, it could take until Thanksgiving to give out and get back the consent forms for the program." Some social workers viewed this arrangement as impeding their ability to become integrated into the fabric of the school and its surrounding community, which in turn limited their effectiveness in implementing the Rainbows program.

A second, staff-related constraint discussed was the difficulty identifying school personnel other than social workers who could implement the Rainbows program. In general, rural schools in the region were (accurately) reported to have a smaller staff than were urban schools. School ad-

ministrators pointed out that small staff size yields fewer degrees of freedom for adopting innovations, especially those intended to meet special needs. Virtually all participants noted that rural schools in the region faced challenges in maintaining a full complement of staff. In fact, positions for counselors, psychologists, librarians, and special education teachers in these rural schools often remained vacant for several years, leaving existing school staff to pull "double duty" to cover some of these functions. Teachers were rarely thought to be in the position to take on programming responsibilities because of inflexibility in their classroom teaching schedules. School administrators pointed out that because of new retirement incentives in the state, a rural school's faculty may be largely composed of novice teachers. Although generally enthusiastic, these teachers were viewed as offering less support to program delivery efforts because their energy was invested in learning how to be teachers. Furthermore, many young teachers left rural schools—before becoming experienced enough to contribute to programs such as the Rainbows program—for better paying positions in urban and suburban communities.

A final factor thought to affect the recruitment of individuals to deliver the Rainbows program was the availability of professional development activities that promote the value of prevention to school staff. Social workers and school administrators both felt that opportunities for professional development were less available to personnel in the region's rural schools. This was viewed as a serious limitation, especially if staff members had not received prior training on how schools could contribute to prevention efforts. Although the Rainbows program includes staff training, participants felt that individuals who took advantage of the Rainbows program training were those who already believed in the value of prevention.

*Time and space.*    In addition to staffing limitations, restricted resources in terms of time and space were viewed by participants as critical factors that inhibited the implementation of the Rainbows program in their rural schools. Finding an appropriate space that allowed for confidentiality to conduct the program was reported to be challenging. Similarly, problems were reported in finding a time to offer the program. Transportation arrangements made it difficult to schedule sessions before or after school because children could not miss their buses. Furthermore, administrators and social workers reported that teachers were understandably reluctant to have children miss class (or even recess) to participate. Integrating the program into classroom activities was not seen as a potential solution because teachers felt that the prescribed curriculum was too difficult to cover in the

time they had. Most Rainbows program facilitators in the region resolved this problem by giving up their lunch time to offer the program.

*Finances.*    An additional constrained resource that was viewed as hampering the adoption of the Rainbows program was money. This topic was more often discussed by regional district administrators than by school-level personnel. Although the administrators recognized that urban schools in the region also faced financial challenges, they felt that because rural schools generally operate from a smaller tax base than do urban schools, there was often less money to purchase prevention programs and to cover some of the "hidden" costs associated with their implementation, such as funds for hiring substitute teachers and paying stipends to allow teachers to attend training sessions. As one program administrator pointed out, "there is not a line item in the budget for prevention. No money is expressly set aside for buying and maintaining prevention programs." Despite these financial concerns, several administrators made it clear that they were quite willing to bear these costs if a program was thought to be important enough and if staff members were committed to implementing the program.

*Receptivity toward innovations.*    A final school-based resource that was viewed as affecting the adoption of the Rainbows program was the "culture" of the school and its attitude toward innovations. Participants consistently described their rural schools, in comparison to urban schools, as representing a more closed culture in that the influx of new ideas and practices were more limited. One regional administrator described the difference as follows: "Just the number and diversity of individuals walking through the school's doors every day differs in rural and urban schools."

The issue of schools' receptivity towards innovations was perceived to be related to an underlying question of what the mission of modern schools should be. Participants indicated that schools in the region face contradictory imperatives from their communities. On the one hand, there is a strong pressure to improve student achievement. The school, the community, or both may adopt a "no frills" attitude that the mission of the school should be strictly focused on academics and not social services. There may also be a corresponding belief that only families have the responsibility to address children's personal and social needs and that this arena is not the school's responsibility. On the other hand, there is a demand to actively promote children's social and emotional well-being. Su-

perintendents and principals reported that schools are being called on to do more and more to support children; for example, they now must provide drug, delinquency, and violence prevention programs. However, new mandates are not necessarily accompanied by greater resources, causing schools in the region to greet new mandates with hesitation.

*Family Resources.*    Participants also indicated that a family-based resource—family support for the program—was particularly important for the adoption of the Rainbows program. School social workers were most vocal about the factors that affected families' ability to support prevention programs such as the Rainbows program. According to social workers, many of the rural families in their schools who needed prevention services were not clamoring for them. From their perspective, it was more common for rural families to draw upon their endogenous support systems for help rather than to turn to "outsiders" or the Rainbows program. These attitudes were thought to follow from concerns about privacy and confidentiality, as well as from the belief that meeting children's needs is a family rather than a school responsibility. Social workers felt that families' concerns about privacy were often exacerbated by school personnel's role of mandated reporter; social workers emphasized that low income and minority families often equate school social workers with state child protection agents and so may mistrust school-based programs for fear of being accused of child abuse or neglect.

Many participants also mentioned that families' support of the Rainbows program may be limited by a fear of stigmatization. School social workers raised the issue that many parents perceive that the role of a social worker is to assist children who have mental health problems. Thus, parents with this view may be fearful that their child's participation in the Rainbows program would be interpreted by the school and the community as indicating that the child had emotional problems or that the family was dysfunctional. Children were thought to have similar fears; social workers felt that children sometimes worried that their peers would assume they were experiencing psychological difficulties if they left their classroom with a social worker. Social workers also felt that some families were reluctant to acknowledge any adjustment difficulties that their children did experience. They suggested that because some families had fled to rural communities to get away from what they perceived as urban problems (e.g., substance abuse, violence in the community, or racial or other disharmony), they may resist acknowledging any problems, even if their

child was grieving, reasoning that, "we came to this town to get away from these problems," or that, "my child doesn't need this type of service."

Participants also felt that family stress often had the paradoxical effect of distancing children from school-based programs. Regional administrators and several school social workers believed that parents facing multiple difficulties may be less willing to enroll their child in the Rainbows program because they are unaware of the program (because they were uninvolved in the school), too overwhelmed to help their child access the program, or mistrustful of school programs in general. Social workers and superintendents reported that some communities in the region were experiencing an influx of low income families who had moved from urban areas because housing costs are lower. Some of these families were perceived to bring problems, such as poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and peer violence with them. Participants felt that the irony of this situation was that these families were moving from urban communities, which were thought to have more resources, to communities that had markedly fewer resources. School-based support was thought to be critical because of this lack of alternative, community-based services.

## Community Resources

*Community receptivity: Will it play in Peoria—or rather Peotone?* Several respondents, particularly those at the administrative level, considered the explicit support of the community, or at least its key leaders, as a necessary resource for successful program adoption. The words of one of regional administrator aptly captured a view generally held by participants, that fostering the acceptance of a new program is analogous to marketing a new product:

> When you bring a new product on line you need to be sure that all your sales reps are on board and on line to sell. You need to align your resources with the needs of the district. It's difficult to stay on top of this since you have to be sensitive to the changing political events of the community.

Participants felt that community acceptance was enhanced when key community players were recruited to help market the program. Principals and superintendents, especially those new to a district, were described as being unwilling to introduce the Rainbows program if they were not confident about community receptivity.

*Volunteerism.*     Given the difficulties in staffing rural schools, the volunteer base of rural communities was perceived to be a potential resource for bolstering programs such as the Rainbows program. However, the volunteer base of rural communities was described by school administrators as diminished in comparison to past decades. They attributed this, in part, to the reduced role of farming in rural communities, a factor that has prompted young adults to move away from rural communities and forced parents of school-aged children to take work in suburban or urban areas, leaving less time for volunteerism. Furthermore, local administrators pointed out that, even when volunteers were available, liability and security issues made them reluctant, and sometimes unwilling, to accept their help. This was especially true of volunteers not personally known to the administration and those unable to make a long-term commitment to the school. Administrators reported that background checks, which can take a substantial period of time, were now routinely required of all volunteers.

*Community structures and supports.*     Participants felt that a third important, but underused, community-based resource for supporting the Rainbows program was assistance from community social service agencies. According to school administrators and social workers, there were limited opportunities for schools in rural communities to collaborate with external agencies in ways that would support programming, for example, through consultation or staff training services. Instead, school social workers reported that the main existing connection between rural schools and external agencies took the form of referrals for individual children. They attributed this limited collaboration to three factors:

1. Relevant agencies tended to be based in distant urban areas.
2. Schools may mistrust external agencies because of bad experiences. (e.g., Some agencies have not been forthcoming with information or have left schools in vulnerable positions.)
3. There were no school personnel with explicit responsibility for maintaining relationships with external agencies.

In response to a probe about whether university-based resources might fill some of the gaps in community-based support, regional school administrators reported that schools were often reluctant to enter into relationships with university personnel because historically such help was offered in a "top down," rather than in a collaborative, way. In the words of one regional administrator,

> The university … would come in and try to do something, and they weren't there for the long haul; they wanted to do research on kids; they wanted to utilize kids.… They weren't interested in the kids—they were interested in the project—to get research.

Despite these barriers, several regional administrators viewed the situation as having recently improved, at least with regard to collaborating with this specific university, and were optimistic that university-based interns and research services could benefit their schools and support the implementation of the Rainbows program.

### Implementors Versus Nonimplementors

The viewpoints of decision makers who had expressed an interest in the Rainbows program but were not able to implement the program were given particular attention in our analyses. Although the topics raised by these individuals did not differ significantly from those who worked in schools where the Rainbows program was successfully implemented, some issues were emphasized more strongly. Staff time was consistently mentioned by nonimplementors as the most expensive resource inhibiting program implementation in their schools. As one administrator described the situation, even when staff were excited about the program, crucial questions remained: "When are you [the staff members] going to meet with the students, and what are you *not* going to do instead?"

Additional factors mentioned by nonimplementors included the need for the Rainbows program to fit into a coordinated, long-term plan for the school as a whole, and competition of the Rainbows program with a large number of other programs that also promised to meet key needs. With respect to the latter issue, one administrator mentioned that the opportunity to offer the Rainbows program competed with programs he felt had lesser value, but that there was little information available to help sort the worthwhile from less useful programs.

### FACTORS AFFECTING PROGRAM MAINTENANCE

Despite a direct question addressing program maintenance, it was interesting that the majority of responses from participants related to program adoption. However, some participants addressed the resources they perceived as most critical for supporting the ongoing provision of the Rainbows program. One school administrator described the problem of pro-

gram maintenance as one in which the school must incorporate the program into its system:

> In a smaller [school] system, human resources are spread thin and pulled in different directions. It is hard to develop a new initiative under these conditions. It takes time to have it be incorporated. They [the staff] have to grow into it, internalize it, make it their own. The program needs to have meaning to the staff before it's accepted.

The most common factor noted by school social workers and principals as inhibiting program maintenance was related to staff fatigue and burnout. Because, in this region, the Rainbows program is often administered and implemented by a single individual, the program could collapse if this individual left the school or experienced significant life stress. Participants felt that it was essential to eventually bring in additional people who could share responsibility for the program.

Family support was also viewed as important for program maintenance. Sustained participation and positive feedback from families was thought to be needed to confirm to the school that children were getting something out of the program. An enthusiastic response from families was also viewed as important for preventing staff burnout.

Finally, many of the participants mentioned that continued community support may be important to ensure that resources exist for recurring program needs. However, few specific suggestions as to how specific community resources could directly contribute to their school's ongoing programming efforts were offered.

## PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM ADOPTION AND MAINTENANCE

Participants made several recommendations about how resources could be better used or developed to support the adoption and maintenance of the Rainbows program. Most of these recommendations addressed two key issues: (a) how to build and maintain support for programs, and (b) how to support school staff who deliver programs.

### How to Build and Maintain Support for the Rainbows Program

*1. Demonstrate program effectiveness.*    Social workers and administrators felt that demonstrations of program effectiveness were needed to

maintain support for the program. Evaluations performed at the local level were viewed as critical because the school (and the community) wants to see that the Rainbows program is working with *their* children in *their* schools. Evaluations that tie program gains to academic achievement, or to the reduced likelihood of substance abuse or violence, were viewed as having the most positive impact. Evaluation data were also thought to be useful for providing administrators with critical data for distinguishing between programs of varying quality.

*2. Identify a champion.*     Principals can sometimes be convinced to adopt the Rainbows program if a key staff member is enthusiastic about the program and is willing to serve as its "champion," for example, by promoting the program to school staff, children, and families and by assuming responsibility for program coordination. However, participants stressed that even with an identified champion, a program will not survive if the principal is not supportive.

*3. Nurture a culture of prevention.*     As new school staff are hired, they need to be trained and mentored to appreciate the value of prevention and the school's expanded role. This could occur through in-service activities (offered perhaps by community social service agencies, university partners, or the Rainbows program registered directors) and mentoring relationships with staff experienced in delivering prevention programs. The development of mechanisms for retaining teachers who are interested in prevention should receive greater attention.

*4. Build and highlight family support.*     Families could be encouraged to request the Rainbows program from the school. Parents could be informed about the Rainbows program through various venues, such as mandatory divorce education classes for divorcing parents, pediatricians, hospice, or community mental health centers. Superintendents' and principals' concerns about accepting the program may be lessened if they receive proactive messages from the community about the program's desirability.

*5. Increase communication with parents.*     Personal     communication with parents about how the program could help their children could be increased. Social workers suggested that they may be more effective in reach-

ing potential program participants if they and classroom teachers approach families in a sensitive manner to describe how their child might benefit from the Rainbows program. In addition to the existing practice of inviting parents to an informational presentation about the Rainbows program, participants thought that communication with parents could also be enhanced through newsletters and handouts that include practical suggestions for promoting targeted skills at home. Participants felt that program developers should create these supportive materials.

*6. Build school–family–community collaboration.*    Collaboration among all stakeholders is important to integrating the Rainbows program into the school structure. One recommendation made by school administrators was to assess and build the base of existing and potential support in the community before introducing the Rainbows program. Furthermore, one regional administrator advised that collaborations among program developers, implementers, and community stakeholders should be thought of as critical interpersonal relationships that need to be nurtured.

*7. Keep the program available.*    Sustained program availability is important: The community needs to be able to count on the program to be there and to be available for referrals. Social workers recommended that school personnel recognize this issue at the outset so that their commitment could carry them through some of the difficult times. For example, even if only one child participated in the Rainbows program in a given year, staff could remind themselves of the importance of keeping the program going, so it would be available to those who need it in future years.

*8. Keep the program visible.*    Familiarity breeds acceptance. Better advertising and promotion could be used to enhance program awareness and acceptance. Social workers advised that program developers should "keep the program in front of us—we accept what is commercially promoted."

### How to Support School Staff who Deliver the Program

*1. Develop more than one program advocate.*    To avoid burnout, it is imperative that programming duties not persistently rest on the shoulders of a single individual.

*2. Provide ongoing support.*    Although the Rainbows program model does include ongoing support of program facilitators by site coordinators, additional training and consultation could be provided by individuals associated with the program developers (e.g., registered directors of the Rainbows program), by outside consultants (e.g., partners from community service organizations or university), or by school personnel who are employed to promote programming efforts. To acknowledge that these are valued professional development activities, staff should receive a stipend for participating in training. Training needs to occur at times and locations that are convenient to staff.

*3. Use volunteers or interns as appropriate.*    Staff overload can also be relieved by community volunteers and interns. Even if it is not possible or advisable for volunteers to run the Rainbows program group because of confidentiality and liability issues, they could still help by taking over a social worker's lunchroom or bus duty so that she or he could run the program. Because of the limited availability of volunteers in rural communities, interns from a nearby college or university, who could make an extended commitment to the school, could be trained to run the program. Social workers felt that "interns would be seen as credible to parents," and furthermore, that their unfamiliarity with the families in the community may help promote the sense that confidentiality will be maintained.

*4. Provide recognition and incentives.*    Concrete incentives (preferably money or relief from other duties) should be offered to staff members for coordinating or implementing the program. This would give a direct message to staff that their investment in the program is valued.

## DISCUSSION

Decision makers and program deliverers described a number of factors that they believed were important for the successful implementation of the Rainbows program in the rural schools in which they worked. Participants appeared to have well-developed mental maps about the school, family, and community resources that affected the implementation of the Rainbows program in their rural schools.

Concrete resources, such as personnel, child referrals, time, relief from other duties, recognition, and reward, were thought to flow more easily if the base of support within a school was well established. In schools where the Rainbows program had been successfully implemented, participants described a base of support that rested firmly on the shoulders of a program champion, an individual who sees meeting the needs of children experiencing family stress as a school priority, believes in the Rainbows program as a key mechanism for addressing that need, and has the charisma needed to convince parents and other school staff of the value of the program. Despite the personal strengths of program champions and their many successes, these individuals—the base of support for the Rainbows program in rural schools—are on shaky ground. For example, the structure of service delivery in most rural schools in the region, which ensures that schools receive needed social work services despite staff shortages, has the paradoxical effect of constraining the amount of time a social worker can spend in a given school. In addition, competing work demands and a difficulty in identifying other staff members with whom to share program responsibilities threatens the long-term sustainability of the program in these schools.

The school's ability to implement the Rainbows program was also seen to depend on family and community support. Participants felt that family support was often intrinsically limited by the difficulties families were experiencing that led their children to need additional services in the first place. Community supports were seen to be missing or underused because of a history of noncollaborative relations, mistrust, or a failure to appreciate the strengths of rural schools and communities.

The perspectives advanced by participants in this research, in many cases, parallel themes in the existing literature that point to the unique needs of rural communities with respect to prevention efforts. These perspectives echo the factors identified by Helge (1981) as hindering the adoption of special education programming in rural areas; specifically (a) teacher retention and recruitment problems; (b) rural attitudinal problems, such as resistance to change; and (c) problems based on rural geography. Results from this study are also consistent with previous research in highlighting the fact that program diffusions do not occur automatically. Instead, diffusion efforts must be carefully planned and implemented with significant effort from multiple individuals in complementary roles working in collaboration (Adelman & Taylor, 1997, 1998; Durlak, 1995).

The results of the present study extend beyond previous research in offering a set of recommendations advanced by experienced program implementors for facilitating the implementation of the Rainbows program in rural schools. Many of these recommendations focused on ways to remediate the problems that stemmed from limited personnel in rural schools. For example, participants felt that, ideally, program implementation would be enhanced if prevention activities were expressly included in school budgets and if one or more staff members could be hired to select and coordinate programs, train staff to implement programs, and work to support the evaluation of programs. However, at present, this does not appear to be a growing trend. A recommendation that may have a greater likelihood of being enacted in some rural schools to counter personnel limitations is the development of linkages with university-based resources (e.g., interns, research services). Recommendations such as these reflect many of the suggestions made by Reaves and Larmer (1996) on how the unique problems associated with professional development training in rural schools can be remedied through collaboration with university partners.

Educational consultants may be in a critical position to help support school-based prevention efforts. Educational consultants can help achieve the vision of bringing prevention into the educational mainstream in several ways by:

1. Contributing to professional development efforts in school districts.
2. Providing guest lectures in college and university training programs for teachers, social workers, and administrators on the value of prevention.
3. Preparing articles on prevention in educational contexts for regional and statewide professional newsletters.
4. Networking with, and enhancing connections between, professionals who have common interests in prevention in the hope that there is strength in numbers.
5. Becoming an active voice in local school affairs.
6. Leading or participating in evaluations that demonstrate local effectiveness (Small, 1996).
7. Providing school decision makers with information that will help them to distinguish between prevention programs of varying quality.

All of these efforts can provide a forum for changing the overall climate of accepting and prioritizing prevention programs in the schools.

It is important to be aware of the limitations of the present research. One limitation is that no information is provided about how accurate participants' mental models of the factors affecting program implementation were. We can note that the themes we discerned in participants' responses seldom contradicted each other; often corroborated each other; and where not matching, appeared to contribute different facets to a full picture. However, these data do not provide any basis for determining accuracy. The consistency among reports could well reflect a shared understanding built over time, rather than correspondence with reality. A potential area for future research is to use the factors that appear in the mental maps of participants to generate hypotheses about the factors that influence program adoption. For example, it remains to be seen whether rural schools are more resistant to change—more so than in urban schools—in ways that reduce the likelihood that prevention programs would be adopted. Similarly, the respondents consistently pointed out that support from families and communities are important for the successful implementation of programs such as the Rainbows program, yet representatives from those groups were not interviewed to check the veracity of these statements. Hypotheses such as these should be investigated in future research.

Although retaining some skepticism for how participants' views may or may not be accurate, we still recognize that their views influence how they act within the systems in which they are embedded. Thus, a second area for further research is to investigate the process decision makers engage in as they assess support for innovation and as they determine what tools and strategies can be used to enhance this process. For example, it is interesting to note that participants seemed to have the least well-developed mental maps about the factors that influence family and community support for the Rainbows program. An investigation of families' perspectives on how school-based prevention programs do and do not meet their and their children's needs, and what influences their support of such programs, seems particularly needed and useful. Providing service providers with an enhanced understanding of service recipients' experiences should help to enhance communication between schools and families. Similarly, the investigation of how community organizations perceive school efforts toward prevention could help build linkages that may, in the long run, result in new mechanisms for helping children in need.

A second important limitation of these findings is the questionable validity of some of the specific comparisons participants drew between rural and urban schools. Although respondents felt that rural schools in the region were often at a greater disadvantage for accepting and maintaining prevention programs, this conclusion is in fact an empirical question not

addressed by this research. Similarly, whether this conclusion is applicable to all rural schools is also an empirical question not addressed by this research. Prior research indicates that a great deal of diversity exists among rural schools (Knight, Knight, & Quickenton, 1996), suggesting that some rural schools and communities may be well positioned to accept prevention programs, whereas others may be poorly positioned. Adelman and Taylor (1998) also point out that many of the restrictions in rural schools' resources described by participants also characterize some urban and suburban schools. We suspect that many of these resource constraints, rather than being *unique* to rural schools, are simply *common* in many rural schools and may also be common in other schools with resources that are constrained by factors such as poverty and discrimination. Similarly, the degree to which the current results are generalizable to other school-based prevention programs is not known. Future research could also examine how limited resources affect the implementation of different prevention programs, in both rural and urban contexts, and whether certain strategies are effective in addressing resource restrictions.

In conclusion, RAINBOWS, Inc., has been tremendously successful in having their program implemented worldwide. We hope that some of the strategies identified in this research will facilitate the program's implementation in rural schools in particular, and in schools with fewer resources in general. It is important to acknowledge that in addition to serving children in need, RAINBOWS, Inc., as well as other organizations with similar successful programs, offer researchers important opportunities to study the factors involved in implementation and diffusion. We encourage researchers to take greater advantage of opportunities such as these.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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