



National Center for Research on  
Rural Education (R<sup>2</sup>Ed)

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## Rural Education Research Digest

Dalla, R. L., Lopez, W., Jones, V., & Xia, Y. (2006). Individual and familial stressors among rural Nebraskan, bilingual paraprofessional educators. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 5, 127-141.

The Career Ladder project was created to help meet the growing need for certified ESL teachers in rural areas. The goal of the Career Ladder project was to increase the number of certified bilingual ESL elementary school teachers in rural communities. Participants took distance education courses through a partnership of regional schools while working full time as paraprofessional educators in rural elementary schools. The project had a 70% retention rate after 2 years, and this study evaluated the individual and family factors associated with persistence in the program, with the long-term intent of identifying strategies to increase persistence to graduation.

The study included 26 individuals who had been (n=6) or were currently (n=20) involved in the Career Ladder program. Participants were from various rural communities throughout Nebraska and 20 of the participants were first or second generation immigrants. Participants completed a survey assessing acculturative stress, personal resources, depression, language skills, learning styles, and demographic information, and also participated in an interview. Results showed that there were two distinct groups in terms of depressive symptoms and that these groups differed in average scores on social support and language use. Those who persisted in the program reported having fewer children and more longevity at their current residence than those who did not persist. Overall, all participants showed a greater preference for sensing and visual learning styles. Themes identified through the qualitative interviews revealed the strengths and indirect benefits of the program, as well as the challenges of (a) working full time while in school, (b) completing program requirements in the required time-frame, (c) taking care of family responsibilities while in the program, (d) the support or lack of support from partners, and (e) the financial stress of leaving better paying employment to work as a paraprofessional.

The researchers suggested several interventions that could increase persistence in the program. Because number of children was related to differences in persistence and non-persistence decisions, they suggested that the child care needs for participants be considered. They also suggested that since depression was a prevalent concern (identified in 53% of participants) and mental health care services are often limited in rural communities, providing mental health resources for participants may increase retention. The final suggestion given by the researchers was that the program could help students understand their unique learning styles and how they can be adapted to distance programs for improved learning. Participants suggested providing more opportunity for social gatherings and home projects that would involve family members. The researchers concluded with a final challenge that rural communities continue to address the educational needs resulting from increased diversity in rural areas.