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Field-Based Specific Learning Disabilities Training Project

Mary Lindquist

A federally supported project in field-based training for learning disabilities specialists is in operation for its second year during 1974-75. Sponsored jointly by the Center for Teaching and Learning and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (DPI), the project has been awarded \$90,000 for each of the two years under Title VI-G, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped.

A distinguishing feature of the project is the cooperation by the university and the state DPI in training special education personnel. Such a cooperative effort is feasible when the state is small and the university program allows such flexibility as CTL provides. The idea of a field-based program grew out of the special needs that North Dakota faces at this time.

When the 1973 legislature passed a mandatory special education law (every handicapped child must be provided an appropriate education by 1980), the demand for specific learning disabilities teacher-consultants throughout the state began to approach the level of the need. Now school administrators in small schools and in counties as well as those in large cities began to request trained personnel. At that time, UND was the only training institution in the state in specific learning disabilities (SLD) and was producing about 7-10 learning disabilities specialists a year. Estimates of the number of children with specific learning disabilities vary, but a conservative statement is that 3% of the children in the schools have specific learning disabilities severe enough to warrant intervention by trained professionals. These children, average or above-average

in general intelligence, have severe difficulty in acquiring one or more of the language skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and mathematics because of a deficit in basic psychological processing, and thus require the use of specialized techniques and materials for success in learning.

It has been especially difficult to secure trained SLD specialists for small school and county programs where the majority of North Dakota's children, and therefore her SLD children, must be educated. If, however, experienced teachers could be recruited from such communities, and trained within such rural settings, it was reasoned that the needs of rural North Dakota would be more readily filled.

The experimental project was designed to test the hypothesis that graduate level SLD specialists could be effectively developed both theoretically and practically in a program which was based largely at the practicum sites. Since the Master's degree SLD program was established three years ago at UND, it has been the growing conviction of the staff that theoretical concepts related to learning disabilities as well as understandings necessary for expert diagnosis and remediation can best be acquired if there are practicum experiences from the very beginning of the program. Both the theoretical and practical bases of the training must be strong and the optimum relationship of the two achieved. Testing of this hypothesis was, therefore, the first goal of the project.

The second goal was to help meet the need for trained personnel for small schools in North Dakota and to expand services to SLD children even while the training program was being carried out. A resource specialist who could serve as consultant to local staff and supervise the trainees' work with children was provided for each of the

practicum sites. Thus services to SLD children in two areas of rural North Dakota could be expanded. The following year, ten new trained specialists would be available for rural districts.

Specifically, it was hypothesized that the trainees, after completing a field-based program, would be at least equal to campus-trained specialists in: 1) competencies considered essential for SLD specialists by state leaders in SLD as measured by an SLD Competency Rating Scale, and 2) theoretical understandings related to SLD, as measured by an objective examination.

For the first year of the project ten trainees were selected who were: a) successful experienced teachers (at least one year), b) able to meet qualifications for graduate school admission, c) committed to working in small schools in North Dakota for at least one year, and d) potentially good SLD specialists, as judged by the state assistant director of special education in charge of SLD programs after several personal contacts.

The first year's training program was as follows: The trainees spent nine weeks on campus, in three-week periods. During these times they were introduced to the program and to SLD and received instruction in such areas as developmental psychology, language development and disorders, and corrective reading. This instruction was provided by university personnel who were not on the staff of the project. Other course work was taught at the field site by members of the project staff. These included the writer who served as project curriculum and in-service director; the project coordinator who also served on the SLD faculty at the university; the two field-site resource specialists; and three lead teachers at the sites.

The field sites chosen for the training project were Burke County, where the state's oldest

and most highly developed County Public School SLD program operates under the direction of a highly competent specialist; and the State Hospital Adolescent Center school and the Crippled Children's School in Jamestown where trainees were given experience with emotionally disturbed children and multiple-handicapped children, respectively. The trainees spent eight weeks at each of the two sites, in groups of five.

While at the practicum sites, the trainees worked with children for half days under the direction and supervision of the field-site resource specialists and the project faculty. Half days were also spent in class and individual study, with specialized materials and resources for study provided by the project and the practicum sites. The on-site course work included methods and materials for SLD, assessment of learning disabilities, education of the emotionally disturbed, and language disorders. Class discussion emphasized both understanding of theoretical principles and techniques and their application to individual children being taught.

The SLD specialist is essentially a problem solver. Each SLD child has a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses in learning ability, achievement levels and classroom situations. An expert teacher-consultant begins with these data and uses whatever other data are available to him--basic learning principles, theories about learning disabilities, techniques, materials--and constructs a plan which will result in effective learning. It is a high-level skill in which the thinking, problem-solving, process is central. The development of such a problem solver requires both a strong theoretical base in which the raw data are acquired and an opportunity to practice the problem-solving process. More important, it requires the optimal relationship between the

two components.

The final eight-week period of the year is spent in an internship in a small North Dakota school which otherwise had no SLD services. Trainees were placed in these schools singly or in pairs. Thus the trainee gained experience in teacher consultation and in-service training of teachers, in screening children, in planning and executing a school program. Such experience seems to be most effectively acquired when the trainee has full responsibility for a program, but consultation is provided by the training staff. During the internship, seminars were held twice a week at which time specific needs and problems were discussed and training in teacher consultation skills was provided.

A competency rating scale was designed by the writer in consultation with five of the state leaders in learning disabilities. Nineteen competencies were measured on a scale of 1-5 with each point defined objectively by stated criteria. The nineteen competencies included skill in informal and formal assessment, use of SLD training techniques and effectiveness in teacher consultation. Two of the items from the scale are as follows:

6. Task Analysis

1. Has child doing tasks inappropriate to level of development.
2. General level appropriate but has difficulty in ordering tasks in proper sequence.
3. Analyzes a task into steps, has difficulty placing a child on the sequence.
4. Analyzes tasks and places child, but unable to make steps smaller or to structure when he has had trouble.

8. Helps Teachers Diagnose
 1. Teachers not involved in diagnosis other than original referral.
 2. Teachers complete check lists or rating scales which are then evaluated.
 3. Teaches, or aids teachers to complete check lists so that they look at children more analytically.
 4. Helps teachers use check lists and other techniques to analyze children's learning and to integrate results of the analysis.
 5. In consultation with him, teachers analyze children's problems and the curriculum and adapt curriculum to the SLD child.

Each of the trainees rated himself at four times during the year, before and after the first practicum, after the second practicum, and at the close of the final internship. Each trainee was also rated independently by three supervisor-raters at the same times, with the exception of the initial before-practicum rating.

Since raters varied widely in the extent to which they rated trainees high or low, adjusted scores were obtained as follows: For each rater a mean rating was derived using the scale totals of his ratings for all trainees on all three ratings. Then each trainee's total for the final rating was adjusted by subtracting the rater's mean rating and then adding a constant. Finally, a mean final rating for each trainee was derived by computing the average of the adjusted final scores assigned him by the three raters.

Secondly, a 100-item multiple-choice examination was constructed by the project faculty, covering the content of the two semesters of course work. The examination was administered to the group during the last weeks of the

academic year.

Since it had been hypothesized that the trainees, after two semesters of field-based training, would be at least equal to campus-trained graduate students in the competencies considered essential for SLD specialists and in theoretical understandings, the scores on the two measures were compared with those of a group of ten graduate students who were enrolled in the on-campus SLD program during the same period as the project trainees were in the field-based program.

The on-campus training program differed from the field-based program in the following respects: there had been no special selection of these students other than that ordinarily exercised with applicants to graduate programs in CTL. Moreover, they had made no commitment to serve rural North Dakota schools, although all but one of them were North Dakota residents. Four of the ten had no teaching experience other than student teaching.

The students in the on-campus program received their entire training while on campus. However, they were enrolled in the same basic course work as the project trainees and taught by the same faculty, except for the courses in the education of emotionally disturbed children. The latter were taught on campus by another faculty member. Their class schedule was more constant from week to week, and they had continual access to university library facilities and other resources. The campus environment also seemed more conducive to regular reading and study. The campus students also had opportunity to participate in other campus educational activities, as their schedules allowed. No control was possible over such additional activities nor was it considered necessary, since the aim of the project was to compare the effects of the distinct advantages of each approach.

The practicum experiences of the on-campus students were all gained in the public schools of Grand Forks, where the students worked under the direction of expert SLD professionals. Their regular school experiences were, therefore, comparable to those of the field-based trainees, but they lacked the opportunity for experience at the schools for emotionally disturbed and multiply-handicapped children. They had an equal absolute number of weeks of practicum experience, but their last weeks were not in an internship experience where they assumed major responsibility for the program.

The on-campus students were evaluated on the Competency Rating Scale at the same times as the project trainees by their SLD professional supervisors and the two project faculty who rated the project trainees. They also, of course, made self-ratings. They wrote the objective examination during the same week as the field trainees.

Scores on the two instruments were compared for the two groups in an analysis of variance. Since random assignment to groups had not been possible, some measure of control was obtained by using Miller Analogies Test (MAT) scores in analyses of covariance.

Results

The scores for the two groups on the objective examination and the average of the adjusted final scores assigned by the three raters may be seen in Table 1. On the objective examination the campus group was superior to the field group, but on the mean adjusted competency ratings the field group was superior.

The results of the analysis of variance for differences between the two groups is found in Table 2. The difference on the objective

test mean score was significant ($p < .05$), but difference in competency rating was not.

TABLE 1

Mean Scores for the Field-Based and Campus Groups in Objective Examination and Average Competency Rating

	Objective Examination	Average of Competency Ratings
Field Group	61.5	61.8
Campus Group	67.9	59.7

TABLE 2

Analysis of Variance for Comparison of Field and Campus Groups on Objective Test Scores and Adjusted Competency Ratings

	Mean Square	df	F
Objective Test	1933.40	1 and 17	4.97*
Adjusted Competency Rating	20.25	1 and 17	.49

* $p < .05$

The results of the analysis of covariance, using MAT scores as covariate, are found in Table 3. The difference was significant for the

objective test, but not for the adjusted competency ratings.

TABLE 3

Analysis of Covariance for Differences Between Field and Campus Groups on Objective Test and Adjusted Competency Ratings, Using MAT Scores as Covariate

	Mean Square	df	F
Objective Test	171.5	1 and 16	4.15*
Adjusted Competency Rating	.61	1 and 16	.14

*p <.05

Discussion

It was hypothesized that the field-based training group would achieve scores at least equal to the on-campus training group on an objective examination and on a competency rating scale. The hypothesis was supported for the competency ratings, but not for the objective examination. On the examination the campus group was significantly superior ($p <.05$) even when covaried for MAT score.

On the competency ratings the two groups did not differ significantly either in the analysis of variance or when covaried for MAT score.

It seems reasonable to conclude, on the basis of these results, that field-based training is an

effective way of developing teaching competency. The results do suggest that it is not so effective in developing theoretical understanding, at least as the program operated in its first year.

For the second year of the project, changes have been made to increase the duration and intensity of on-campus study. The trainees will be on campus for approximately one half of the year, and most course work will be taught on campus. Practicum experience will be concentrated into shorter periods and will include only minimal academic work. Class periods during the practice will emphasize application of what has been learned to the teaching situation.

The attainment of the second goal, expanding services to SLD children, was not measured qualitatively. However, there was some information evaluation. During the internship four school districts were served which previously had had no SLD service. Administrators in these schools were unanimously positive in their evaluation of the program. At the training sites additional children received services, and those who were receiving services before had the benefit of greater assistance. At present nine of the ten trainees are working in school districts who are being served by SLD personnel for the first time.