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How Valid Are Surveys of Teacher Needs?

Linda L. Jones and Andrew E. Hayes

Asking teachers what inservice they want may not produce an accurate assessment of needs.

The literature on inservice education almost always recommends a thorough assessment of teacher needs before staff development efforts. The need for doing this has been well established, but planners of staff development programs and persons conducting research on staff development may wrongly assume that statements of needs made by teachers *are* their needs rather than symptoms of needs that must be diagnosed more completely.

Questions about the validity of self-perceptions as measures of needs have been raised by others, such as Moburg, who advised that ". . . research be conducted which compares the self-perceived instructional needs of teachers with a needs assessment obtained through other means."¹ Moburg's recommendation was the basis for the primary question addressed in this report, which is:

To what extent do teachers' perceptions of needs correspond with other data relating to experiences and actual knowledge and understanding of instruction?

This question was addressed as it relates to the teaching of reading in elementary school by collecting data pertaining to:

1. The status of teachers' professional background in reading and related areas, including their preservice and inservice education, teaching experience, and teaching level (primary or intermediate);
2. The status of their knowledge of reading and reading instruction;
3. Their perceptions of their needs for knowledge of reading and reading instruction;
4. Their perceptions of hindrances to effective instruction.

The research² was conducted in an urban school system in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with the sample consisting of 86 K-6 classroom teachers from six schools. The instruments used for data collection—the *Inventory of Teacher Knowledge of Reading*³ and a questionnaire developed for the

¹ Lawrence G. Moburg, *Inservice Teacher Training in Reading* (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1972), p. 36.

² Linda L. Jones, "Elementary School Reading: Relationships Among Teacher Background, Needs, Knowledge and Hindrances to Effective Reading Instruction. (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1976).

³ A. Sterl Artley and Veralee B. Hardin, *Inventory of Teacher Knowledge of Reading* (Columbia, Missouri: Lucas Brothers Publishers, 1971). This instrument has since been revised.

study—measured the teachers' knowledge and perception of needs in reading readiness; word perception; comprehension and critical reading; differentiating instruction; silent and oral reading; evaluation, diagnosis, and correction; and goals of reading instruction.

In addition to the perceptions of needs, the questionnaire asked about characteristics of the teachers' professional backgrounds in reading and their perceptions of hindrances to effective reading instruction.

The Findings

Several of the findings have definite implications for planning inservice education.

The greatest perceived needs for knowledge were in the areas of "differentiating instruction" and "comprehension and critical reading"; however, the degree of need perceived was only moderate, and the total of all reported perceived needs was quite low. Apparently, the teachers either were unaware of much need for additional knowledge or were reluctant to express their needs. Contrary to expectation, no differences were found between the needs perceptions of primary and intermediate teachers.

The mean scores for the seven subtests of the *Inventory* ranged from 49 percent (silent and oral reading) to 64 percent (goals of reading instruction). For the total *Inventory* the average percentage of items correct was 61. Because of differences in content and emphasis of primary and intermediate reading instruction, it was expected that teachers at the two levels would differ on their knowledge in certain of the areas. While differences were identified, they were not always in the direction that would be expected. Comparisons revealed that the intermediate teachers scored significantly higher on knowledge than the primary teachers on word perception (word recognition skills); comprehension and critical reading; evaluation, diagnosis, and correction; goals of reading instruction; and the total *Inventory*.

The finding that the primary teachers did not exceed the intermediate on any of the knowledge dimensions—even those areas in which they would be expected to be more knowledgeable (readiness and word perception, for example)—was somewhat disconcerting and surprising, because preservice reading courses typically place greater emphasis on beginning reading skills than on more advanced ones.

Correlations were computed: (a) between each of the seven areas of knowledge and need for knowledge in those same areas; and (b) between the total needs measure and the percentage of correct responses indicating knowledge. Only one of the correlations was statistically significant—the correlation

between need for and knowledge of "silent and oral reading" and that was low ($r = .24$). This finding, especially when considered in conjunction with the findings that the teachers expressed only little to moderate need for knowledge, and that they demonstrated lack of mastery of skills and understandings in reading and reading instruction, would seem to imply that needs perceptions are an inadequate indicator of staff development needs.

Questions were asked to determine the teachers' participation in specific kinds of programs and their opinions about the most beneficial type of inservice education. The activities most frequently attended were grade level meetings at school, programs at regular school staff meetings, demonstration lessons, workshops for certificate renewal credit, and courses for certificate renewal credit. The types of inservice education felt to be most beneficial were demonstration lessons and workshops. One probable reason for such a response is that teachers consider the activities to be immediately useful because of their focus on instructional materials and techniques rather than on underlying theory. However, in order for demonstration lessons and workshops to be assumed valid, the teachers must already possess the knowledge background needed to apply the methodology effectively and to generalize the techniques to a variety of applications. Unfortunately, these teachers apparently did not possess a solid foundation of knowledge of reading and were not aware of much need for additional knowledge. Their preferences for inservice activities, therefore, did not necessarily reflect their real needs.

Needs—or Symptoms?

An important purpose of the research reported here was to determine the extent to which teachers can express directly their needs for development. Two primary factors make this a crucial question. First, throughout the country large amounts of resources have been and continue to be allocated for staff development for teachers. Second, researchers and practitioners in staff development emphasize the importance of basing staff development activities on the assessed needs of teachers. In practice—and, indeed, in recommendations—this emphasis has taken the form of planning programs to address needs teachers say they have, and more often than not the programs have been conducted in formats preferred by the teachers.

In the research reported here, little relationship was found between expressed needs for knowledge and measured knowledge of reading. The sample of teachers studied reported relatively low needs for additional knowledge even though they did not ex-

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hibit a strong understanding of reading and reading instruction. Indeed, there was little reason to believe the results should be otherwise, since their formal training in reading and language arts amounted to only a few credit hours equivalent to about two courses.

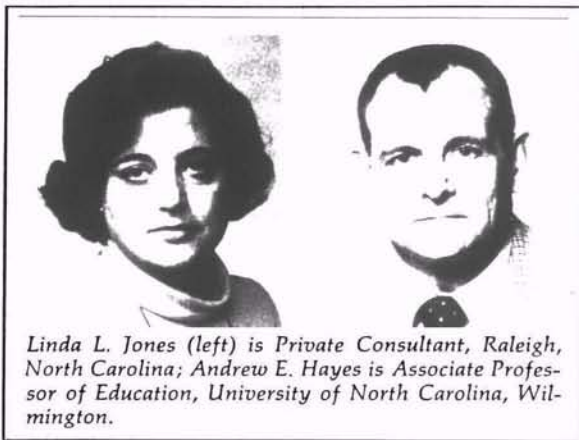
These findings suggest that determining needs and securing statements from teachers about concerns or current problems are two distinctly different tasks. A person charged with the task of determining in-service needs of teachers must consider alternative methods such as observation, formal testing, and interviewing.

If needs are assessed formally, the assessor must be careful not to establish inappropriate expectations regarding what services will be delivered or how they will be delivered. Questions should be asked in a form that identifies symptoms rather than development activities. For example, a question about difficulties of teaching students with different abilities or interests may be more useful than one that asks about needs for a workshop on learning centers.

Many of those who advocate surveying teachers to determine needs say it results in commitment to staff development efforts. Commitment is important to the success of programs, but there are many ways to get it. Commitment development activities should be planned deliberately, taking into account the wide range of motivations teachers may have for participating in inservice activities.

Responsibility of the Planner

Our research suggests that teachers can express symptoms of needs but may not be aware of their actual needs. The needs they report must be analyzed by objective means to determine the underlying conditions that resulted in expression of the symptoms. That analysis is a responsibility of the staff development planner. *ET*



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