A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
INSERVICE TRAINING PRIORITIES FOR TEACHERS

Luanna Voeltz, Earletta Bailey, Audrey Nakamura, and Michael Azama

The number, nature and range of services available to handicapped children as a result of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) is, practically speaking, an innovation in public education. To prepare existing school-related personnel for this change and to equip participants with the necessary skill level to serve these special education needs, each state education agency is mandated to provide for a comprehensive personnel development system. This is to include appropriate inservice training of handicapped children. The precise scope and content of this training is expected to vary widely from region to region as a function of local needs. This variation of training needs includes a complex interaction of differences in priority target personnel groups, training content needs, and acceptable delivery systems (Rude, 1978). In each case, however, the provision of inservice training activities is to be based upon needs assessment data. While the legislation does suggest guidelines regarding a priori priority areas for personnel training (e.g., the severely handicapped area), the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) has clearly emphasized the collection of systematic data as the basis for establishing the specific details of personnel development plans in each region (Progress Toward a Free Appropriate Public Education, 1979).

In cooperation with the Special Needs Branch of the Exceptional Children’s Section of the Hawaii State Department of Education (DOE), the University of Hawaii Special Education Department is committed to the establishment of an inservice training system which is directed primarily to special and regular education teachers as the initial target audience. A major focus will be the development and updating of specialized and/or mainstreaming instructional skills. A service delivery training model has already been identified and process development is underway; training will be similar to Arizona’s (State Department of Education) SELECT (Special Education Learning Experiences for Competency in Teaching) modular program, with modules to be presented in short workshops. Hawaii’s version will be known as Ho’okoho—Hawaiian for “to make a positive selection or choice”—and will be teacher oriented and designed to allow maximum flexibility in responding to individual needs. The system will include the development of modular content by specialists in each area to supplement existing modules and the utilization of primarily “master” teachers for each topic as the instructional network.

As with any inservice training program, the service delivery system structure of Ho’okoho is partially dictated by administrative and other system-specific constraints. While this is perhaps unavoidable and restricts planning for an ideal training process to serve existing school personnel, similar administrative constraints upon the content of inservice training can be minimized. It would be unfortunate if Public Law 94-142 had unilaterally dictated the training content to be provided without allowing for local need variations, or if state educational agencies were to do so. In a very real sense, then, the requirement that inservice training be based upon empirical needs assessment data is a considerable improvement over most preservice training models. All too often, the sequence and content of teacher training is based exclusively upon the opinions of experts (the Delphi technique) who may themselves be many years removed from the classroom. While Ho’okoho can easily base training content in many areas upon estimated needs according to the expert opinion of university teacher trainers and Department of Education administrators at the state and district levels, a comprehensive needs assessment should
involves the training recipients—the teachers—as well (Ingersoll, 1976; Ainsworth, 1976; Griffith, 1978). What follows is a first effort by Ho'okoho to assess inservice training needs for both special and regular education teachers as they themselves perceive them.

Method

Subjects. All seven school districts were included in the survey (Honolulu, Central Oahu, Leeward Oahu, Windward Oahu, Hawaii, Kauai, and Maui). The special education survey was sent directly to all 676 special education teachers in the state; 380 surveys were returned, resulting in a 56% response rate.

From the total of 7,934 regular education teachers in Hawaii, a random sample of 979 teachers was made across districts in the following manner. Using the 1978-1979 Directory issued by the DOE Office of the Superintendent which lists all public elementary, intermediate and secondary schools in that order by district, beginning with the first district listed, every tenth elementary school (N=14), every fifth intermediate school (N=2) and every fifth secondary school (N=5) were selected. The principal of each of these 21 schools was sent sufficient survey forms and asked to distribute them to all regular education teachers at that school. Of the potential sample of 979 teachers, 251 returned completed surveys, for a response rate of 26%.

Surveys were mailed to the schools in mid-May 1979; a self-addressed, stamped envelope was enclosed with each survey for direct return to the Department of Special Education at the University of Hawaii by June 1, 1979. Given this short time line occurring at the end of the school term, the distribution of the regular education surveys through the principals—further shortening the return deadline—may have been one variable which contributed to the lower response rate for these teachers in comparison to the special education sample.

Instruments and Procedures. Although the specific content of the two surveys differed for special and regular education classroom teachers, each survey required all teachers to rate themselves according to knowledge and skill levels in answer to competency-type statements which were relevant to services for handicapped children. Items allowed for distinctions between mildly, moderately and severely handicapped children. Multiple items directed to each major competency area, for example: identification and referral procedures, characteristics of handicapped children, behavior management, curriculum content skills, interpersonal relations, parent participation, and current legislative and litigative issues were also included.

The “Inservice Training Needs Assessment” instrument for special education respondents is an adaptation of the Competency Attainment Record which is maintained for each M.Ed. student in the special education teacher training at the University of Hawaii. The competencies represent the core of the master’s program and the teaching content currently available in the Department. The “mainstream” instrument for regular education teachers is a revised composite of several such instruments in use by other teacher training programs nationally. Both instruments were updated and locally adapted with input from special education specialists in the Exceptional Children’s Section at the state level.

Each teacher received a letter of introduction and an instruction page to explain the intent of the
survey and to serve as orientation to the inservice program plans. Basic demographic information was requested regarding the numbers, ages and categories of handicapped children served by each teacher; district, school and grade level identifiers were included. Regular education teachers were also asked if they had taken the UH course SPED/EDCI 444, the Exceptional Child in the Regular Classroom (Mainstreaming).

Teachers were asked to rate themselves according to their self-perceived need for training in that area. Survey instruments utilized a four point rating scale which included: Needed immediately=4; Needed at some future date=3; Not as important as other needs=2; and Not needed at all=1.

Teachers were to complete the surveys anonymously, with one exception. A separate survey sheet was also enclosed asking each teacher to self-identify which, if any, of the needs assessment items/areas he felt sufficient competence and interest in to participate as a module instructor. This sheet, if completed, required identification. Teachers were told that additional training would be required in order to serve in this role, but that reimbursement for their services would be available to each module instructor who was selected.

Results
The first task was to identify priority training needs. Priority competencies were identified by comparing teacher ratings on each item. Competencies deemed as “immediate needs” or “not needed at all” were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Items Rated as Priority Training Needs by Regular Education Teachers (N = 251)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Training on Competency “Needed Immediately”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area: Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge of student’s academic strengths and weaknesses, including preferred learning strategies and modalities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tests and/or inventories to determine student’s specific functioning level in reading skills and in language.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Procedures to monitor and record behaviors (including problem behaviors) which are relevant to the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area: Methodology/Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Techniques to accelerate appropriate behaviors in: social and interpersonal behavior and in classroom behavior.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Training on Competency “Needed at Some Future Date”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area: Curriculum and Programming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Procedures to evaluate academic progress, including grading for varied performance levels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area: Professional Interaction and Human Relations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Knowledge of professional resources available to me within the system (Dept. of Education).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Knowledge of professional resources available to me from the University of Hawaii and other state agencies (Dept. of Health, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge of procedures to deal effectively with social interaction problems which arise because of individual differences in children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area: Procedures, Rules and Regulations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Knowledge of Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, and the support staff and procedures involved in the IEP planning meeting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge of evaluation, diagnosis and certification procedures that take place to determine placement of a handicapped student in a regular education class.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge and skills involved with identification of handicapped children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Knowledge of Rule 49 and Due Process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fairly obvious. Teachers either felt they needed the competency or did not, and there was no question of interpretation. Competencies rated “not as important as other needs” were usually matched with a high response to competencies “not needed at all.” There was a large response in the category “needed at some future date” on many of the items.

Table 1 lists the items which headed the list of competencies “needed immediately” and those “needed at some future date” as rated by the 251 regular education respondents. As can be seen from the table, regular education teachers were most likely to assign the highest priority rating to the need for training in criterion-referenced assessment and behavior management in the classroom. Curriculum-related needs in reading and language arts were predominantly rated in the “Needed at some future date” category, as were a number of academic behavior management needs, knowledge of resources, attitude change concerns, and due process and other legislative/litigative needs. Teachers did not feel they needed training in classroom arrangements (materials, equipment, furniture, etc.) for teaching situations, and tended to rate math content skill needs in the low priority category (“Not as important as other needs”).

Across all categories of exceptionality, special education teachers rated curriculum content needs, instructional strategies, criterion-referenced assessment, behavior management of negative behaviors, and utilization of local resources as immediate training priorities (see Table 2). Additional curriculum content needs, IEP (Individualized Education Program) concerns, techniques for consultation with parents and with regular education teachers, and measurement concerns comprise the “Needed at some future date” items. Special education teachers did not feel that they required training in definitions, terminology, classification systems, handicapping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Items Rated as Priority Training Needs by Special Education Teachers (N = 380)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Training on Competency “Needed Immediately”**
   1. Identify curricular goals for the education of handicapped children.
   2. Describe the major strategies for the education of handicapped children.
   3. Utilize local, state and national resources to meet program needs for handicapped persons.
   4. Select, modify, and develop programs, methods, materials and activities for use in the instruction of moderately and mildly handicapped pupils.
   5. Utilize programs, methods, materials and activities to instruct moderately and mildly handicapped pupils in: oral language; social skills; affective behaviors (e.g., emotions and valuing); reading, spelling and writing; problem solving skills; pre-vocational and vocational skills.
   6. Utilize appropriate informal and formal assessment procedures and instruments to assess the learning characteristics (e.g., learning rate, learning style, input and output modes, etc.) and functioning levels of handicapped pupils.
   7. Identify and implement strategies for changing deviant classroom and playground behavior.

2. **Training on Competency “Needed at Some Future Date”**
   1. Describe approaches to communicating with parents about their child who is receiving special education.
   2. Select, modify, and develop programs, methods, materials and activities for use in the instruction of severely handicapped pupils.
   3. Utilize programs, methods, materials and activities to instruct severely handicapped pupils in acquisition and development of language skills; social skills development; affective behaviors (e.g., emotions and valuing).
   4. Utilize programs, methods, materials and activities to instruct moderately and mildly handicapped pupils in: self-monitoring skills; quantitative skills; independent living skills.
   5. Describe and demonstrate procedures used in establishing an appropriate environment for formal and informal assessment of handicapped pupils.
   6. Conduct and communicate the results of an educational assessment of a handicapped pupil.
   7. Involve parents in planning the Individualized Education Program (IEP) for their handicapped child.
   8. Advise and consult on a regular basis with regular teachers who work with handicapped children.
   9. Design and implement a measurement and recording system for an entire special education class or group which indicates each pupil’s monthly progress in relation to goals and short-term objectives identified in the IEP.

*The higher priority assigned to competencies needed to serve mildly-moderately (rather than severely) handicapped children can be largely attributed to the greater number of teachers serving in these areas who have responded to the survey.*
causes, and characteristics of the various categories of exceptional children. There appear to be minor variations when the ratings are analyzed separately for each of the categorical areas served by the teachers.

It is notable that both regular and special educators rated implications of federal legislation and other legislative/litigative concerns as low priority items which could be postponed for future efforts. In her review of the state personnel preparation plans for inservice training submitted to BEH, Rude (1978) concluded that the overwhelming planning focus of the various states on due process-related topics did not appear to be supported by available needs assessment data. Nationally—where needs assessment has occurred—teachers instead emphasize the day to day field concerns of establishing and maintaining effective programs and services in the classroom. Hawaii’s teachers concur with this emphasis. Specific content-related training is desired by regular education teachers in criterion-referenced assessment, behavior management, and the curriculum areas of reading and the language arts. Special education teachers also express a need for training in criterion-referenced assessment and behavior management skills, but seem to emphasize affective and social skills curriculum needs as well as language development across categories.

The results of the survey indicate clear priorities for inservice training activities as perceived by the teachers themselves, and provide support for postponing the development of modules in those areas which were ranked as low priority. Of course, one has no way of knowing whether teacher ratings were assigned on the basis of interest in the topic or actual skill training needs which would ultimately be reflected in pupil performance data. Prior to a decision, for example, that math and other quantitative curriculum strategies are not a training need of regular education teachers working with mainstreamed handicapped children—a decision supported by the data reported here—further information is necessary. It may be that handicapped children are unlikely to be mainstreamed into the regular classroom for mathematics, and that math needs in general can be more readily ignored by the mainstream regular education teacher than reading and language arts needs, which are often prerequisite skills affecting a child’s performance in a variety of other content areas. Special education teachers serving mildly to moderately handicapped learning disabled, mentally retarded and seriously emotionally disturbed children, however, also rated, in the survey, the need for training in the area of quantitative skills lower than their needs for reading and language-related skills.

It may perhaps be inappropriate to rely upon inservice teachers to know what they don’t know in the identification of training needs. Stufflebeam1 has described this approach as the “Democratic View” where a need is a “change desired by a majority of some reference group.” While this approach presents certain advantages—high public relations value, the involvement of many individuals in goal setting and potentially useful information regarding the relative importance of various needs—it also presents several major disadvantages. These include: 1) the confusion of need with preferences; 2) a possibly erroneous assumption that the respondents are at least partially informed (and do, in fact, know what they don’t know); 3) a confusion of needs determination with cost and comfort considerations, and; 4) a very real threat of establishing goals which are invalid. Because of these problems, Stufflebeam discourages the use of needs assessment surveys of the kind used here in the absence of a variety of other needs sampling procedures. He particularly favors an analytic case study approach in which informed consultants combine intensive interviews with in situ observation of classroom teachers who represent the range of training needs within each area.2 Secondly, since the needs assessment data reported here is based upon teacher self-perceptions of actual skill level, the actual skill level remains an unknown. Voting on or self-ratings of skill level may be of questionable validity; an actual sample or testing of teacher performance as the basis of need determination would be preferred and has higher face validity, but is much less cost-effective. Furthermore, Snell, Thompson and Taylor (1979) caution that inservice education has a history of producing dissatisfied and unimproved teachers. To some extent, the success of inservice training efforts depends upon teacher perceptions that training activities are responsive to field concerns. Edelfelt (1977) argues that this field base should be the primary concern in training efforts, such that teachers will not only be the best source of data regarding needs but that “on the line” personnel will also be viewed as the optimal instructors if such professionals are competent and highly respected by their peers. Particularly when participation in inservice training activities is contingent upon voluntary cooperation, it may be crucial in the early stages of that process that the prioritization of

1

2
content is considered to be highly responsive to those teacher need perceptions. However, future efforts including in situ validation of priority inservice training needs should be undertaken.

In addition to the validity question, the scope of the needs assessment results reported here is specific to the issues which were surveyed. This should not be interpreted as a comprehensive statement of all inservice training needs relative to the implementation of Public Law 94-142 and special education services in the state of Hawaii. A limited set of questions (i.e., referral, legal information, mainstreaming, assessment, curriculum, etc.) was directed to one specific professional role—the classroom teacher. And while the teacher sample included separate sets of items directed to either the special or regular education teacher, not all issues relevant to these participants were assessed. With respect to the regular classroom teacher in particular, the survey was concerned primarily with teacher perceptions of referral and identification procedures and with specific content and process needs for serving mild to moderately handicapped children in the mainstream. Regular classroom teachers were not asked to report needs relative to the presence of severely handicapped children on public school campuses, for example. The latter concern has been specified by BEH as a primary training need nationally. Voeltz has collected data from a sample of teachers at two elementary schools serving both regular education and severely handicapped children which does address this issue in conjunction with a comprehensive inservice training effort which will prepare the community for the integration of severely handicapped children in community school settings.

Finally, teachers represent only one of the possible target groups for inservice training activities. Other school-based training audiences include professional and other support personnel (speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, school nurses and other medical personnel, paraprofessionals, school social workers and counselors), professionals in related fields (vocational rehabilitation workers, recreational therapists, etc.) and administrative personnel (principals, special education specialists, district superintendents, etc.). Training of school board members, hearing officers, parents and guardians, and even the state legislature might be needed (as Alaska intends). Thus, much work remains to be done in assessing inservice training needs relative to expanded special education services in Hawaii.

Footnotes


References


Luanna Voeltz is Assistant Professor of Special Education, University of Hawaii. She received her Ph.D. in Special Education in 1976 from Indiana University.
Earlota Bailey is Inservice Training Coordinator, Department of Special Education, University of Hawaii. She received her M.S. in Special Education in 1976 from Portland State University.
Audrey Nakamura is Master of Education Candidate, Special Education, University of Hawaii, specializing in emotional disturbance. She is also resource room special education teacher at Aikahi Elementary School in Kailua, Oahu.
Michael Azuma is Master of Education, Special Education, in the area of mental retardation. He received his degree in December 1979.