

SYMPOSIUM NO. 10:

RESPONSE

**A Reexamination of Assumptions
of University Teacher-Training
Programs Within a Social-
Systems Model**

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The purpose of Roger Reger's article is to illustrate why special education administrators should know how to affect the direction and operation of teacher-training programs. Reger also indicates why input from practicing administrators has not been solicited. He concludes by suggesting a strategy to provide for systematic input from administrators and other consumers (i.e., parents) in the determination of new models for special education teacher-training programs.

The three major issues explored by Reger are: (a) *The role of the practicing administrator of special education as a consumer of the teacher-training program.* Reger identifies a number of assumptions which affect the role expectations of university personnel, the special education administrator, and the trainees. He describes the real and ascribed role expectations of these groups by themselves and others. (b) *The discrepancy between how a person is trained and the relevance of his training to the job expectations held for him.* (c) *The suggested development of an advisory board of consumers, appointed by the chief state school officer, to assist in the determination of training programs.* This is the major vehicle suggested by Reger to make the training programs more relevant to the needs articulated by consumers.

I would expand Reger's listing of program consumers to include the teacher trainees themselves. Often ill prepared, they have been unable to affect their own destiny, since they have been given little freedom to define their learning objectives. Besides trainees, parents, administrators, and representatives of lay business groups in the community, any listing of program consumers should also include professional colleagues in the allied helping disciplines who function within

schools and in other community agencies; as well as the ultimate consumers of this process, the children themselves, whenever possible.

Reger mentions some of the assumptions which guide the practice of teacher trainers: that their experience as former teachers gives them sufficient information to make judgments about the components of teacher-training programs; that feedback comes from the students; that successful employment of the teacher provides sufficient feedback regarding the effectiveness of the training program. I would add that teacher trainers see the training responsibility as being primarily theirs: After all, state departments of education, which are responsible for certification, have deferred to the expertise of university personnel to evaluate how well students meet the expectations of their employers; therefore university personnel are in the best position to certify that a student has successfully completed a teacher-training program and is ready to meet the demands of a classroom situation.

I would like to suggest some additional assumptions to establish a new set of role expectations for both university trainers and the consumers of their programs. These assumptions may suggest responsibilities for each group of trainers and trainees in program development, implementation, and evaluation. Unless we deal with the basic premises of each group, any new training program will not be significantly different from those of the past.

Assumption 1.

The terms "teacher," "education," "trainer," and "training" are distinct not only from one another but also from the terms "learner" and "learning." Education is defined here as the

acquisition of a knowledge base and the development of a set of personal attitudes toward all aspects of life within a number of different ecologically determined solutions.

Assumption 2.

Training deals with attaining a level of competence (established in accordance with some predetermined criteria) in a set of skills essential to perform certain meaningful tasks.

Assumption 3.

Learning is discovering where one is conceptually, socially, and personally; it is a constant state of becoming, through an infinite number of interactions within the environment. In this framework, learning becomes a lifetime endeavor that is ultimately and solely the responsibility of the individual learner.

Assumption 4.

Teachers (or trainers) and learners act in a mutually determined interdependent fashion, through a series of input and feedback cycles, to obtain either new knowledge, attitudes, or specific skills concerning themselves, others, or objects in their total environment.

While these assumptions are by no means exhaustive, completely defined, or specifically qualified for our present purposes, they provide within a social-systems model a basis for defining the components of teacher-training programs. They also provide a basis for deciding who should participate in the decision-making process in order to maximize the transfer of training from university to job so as to meet the job expectations held for the teacher by significant consumer groups (including trainee and trainer). The Getzels-Guba (1957) social system provides a paradigm that illustrates who, in a complex interactional process, deter-

mines what the job expectations will be. As Reger indicates the essential issue is one of relevance.

Figure 1 illustrates the general model of the major aspects of behavior in a social system. All aspects are in a state of interaction and operate within a physical and economic environment. The culture provides the contextual aspect of the interactional processes. In the community the culture is manifested in the behavior of individuals within and without institutions designed to serve a variety of individual needs.

Getzels, Lipham, and Campbell (1968) described the cultural dimension in the social-systems model as

The expectations of behavior in a given situation [are] not only derived from the requirements of the social system of which the institution is a part, but are also related to the values of the culture which is the context for the particular social system [p.92].

Expectations for trainees or graduates of a university training program, for example, are related to the values and expectations held by others in the larger community. Sarason (1971) provided some insights into how the larger community views university life and its products:

1. College life is unrelated to real life and is an inadequate preparation for it. In addition, universities are unresponsive to the needs of the surrounding communities.

2. Universities (like school systems) have been amazingly successful in resisting change that might present a break, small or large, with traditions and accustomed style of functioning.

3. Universities are hierarchically and elaborately organized within both the faculty and the administration so that several consequences are frequent: change is slow and diluted, the bureaucratic struggle is ever-present and exhausting, and deviant proposals and individuals tend to be screened out [p. 17].

Sarason stated that a similar list of community views of the public school

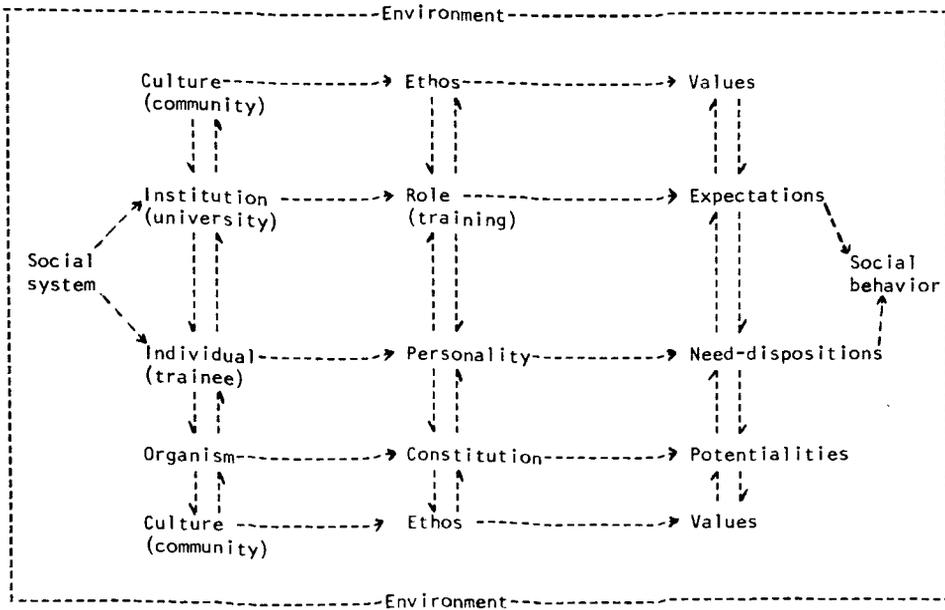


Figure 1
Social-Systems Model

(Adapted from Getzels, J. W., Lipham, J., and Campbell, R. *Educational administration as a social process*. New York: Harper, 1968, p. 105, with permission.)

system can be easily generated. The element common to both listings is the general conception that universities and public schools are resistant to change and attempt to insulate themselves as much as possible from outside critics.

Reger states—and I agree—that there is a need to make the relationship between the expectations of university training programs and the values and attitudes of administrators and other consumers explicit in the larger community. He recommends “institutionalized avenues for input that have legitimate recognition and currency.” This must come if the expectations held for trainees within university programs are to become relevant to the expectations of administrators and other consumers in the field. I would suggest some additional factors, based upon the assumptions listed earlier, which would affect this relationship between trainer and consumer.

Assumption 1 deals with the distinction between education and training. Responsibility for the development and the implementation of models of educational and/or training programs designed to develop specific competencies lies within the university. The teacher-training programs should also provide trainees with the opportunity to demonstrate their competencies in applied situations before, during, and after any treatment in order to determine whether or not given individuals need to continue in any particular area; they may already possess the knowledge, attitude, or specific skill required. The development of evaluative criteria to determine how successfully a trainee has met preestablished standards is also the responsibility of the program trainers. The trainers and trainees should together decide how to ascertain whether the trainee has the skills he says he has; continued and systematic

feedback must be provided to the trainee so that he can see where he is and where he needs help. One possibility might be to provide for a variety of field experience for the trainee in a one-to-one clinical relationship and in small-group and large-group activities. To meet its obligations, the university training-program personnel must solicit inputs from its consumers through regular consultation and direct observation in field settings.

With regard to Assumptions 1 and 2, the distinction between education and training was made to illustrate what I believe to be the antitheoretical approach of special education to training and practice. For example, the Conceptual Project of Rhodes & Tracy (1971) represents an effort to determine which intervention techniques and innovations that are consistent with theoretical frameworks also have validity and reliability in applied situations. The distinction between education and specific skill training can best be understood in terms of the distinction between theory and intervention: Each can better be seen separately within a framework that begins with theory, rather than a framework that confuses the acquisition of new knowledge with the demonstration of appropriate use of an intervention strategy under specified conditions.

To apply the predetermined criteria and to certify that a trainee has met the expectations of the teacher-training program is not, however, the responsibility of the university personnel. To ask the university personnel to educate and to certify that trainees have met predetermined criteria is both unrealistic and incompatible with their education and/or their training function. It is the consumers—administrators, supervisors, parents, and others—who are in the best position to decide whether the trainees

are able to meet role expectations. The university personnel can assist school personnel in providing feedback concerning how to evaluate product outcomes, but the evaluation activity itself is the primary responsibility of the consumer in the field. This takes university personnel out of the business of making evaluations under artificial conditions concerning the competencies of their trainees; instead, university personnel should be responsible for generating data on those skills which best facilitate learning in the variety of environments in which the child must function.

An examination of Assumptions 3 and 4 (indicating that learning is a continuous process that does not conclude with graduation from the teacher-training program) leads to a reconsideration of the roles of the university personnel and local educational personnel in the development of in-service training programs. Both groups, I believe, share the perspective that the first 2 years of teaching are the most critical in the professional life of a teacher; yet little follow-through is provided by the university personnel during this period. The systematic procedure of follow-through should be coordinated by university personnel in conjunction with local administrators and supervisors, in order to provide feedback to the trainer regarding the development of education and training objectives; there should also be data collection in order to determine the most appropriate criteria to be used by local administrators in teacher evaluation. An alternative approach might be to make the 4 years of training an internship, with regular supervision and the provision of supportive help when necessary.

The role of the state education department should be either through its own staff or through regional

offices in intermediate school districts to insure that teaching conditions are not unrealistic in terms of the expectations set by the local educational agency. Teaching conditions sometimes vary within a single school district; but more often differences appear across neighboring districts. The state department might have to consider an appellate structure in order to protect teachers from placement in untenable situations where their failure is certain.

This role of the state education department also implies the responsibility of the local educational agency for developing a support system for classroom teachers that is of a diagnostic-prescriptive nature—a personalized, helping relationship rather than a depersonalized and punitive one. Providing for the mental health needs of teachers working with a variety of handicapped children is often overlooked by personnel in both local educational agencies and university training programs.

As was implied earlier (implication under Assumption 2), the movement to a competency-based, noncategorical model for preparation of teachers in special education is most prevalent in university training programs across the country, owing to the emphasis of the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped on providing a more generic set of training programs. Most university trainers, however, will continue to operate in a categorical fashion until training faculties reexamine their own assumptions and begin to develop a new frame of reference concerning personnel training in diagnosis, programming, and evaluation. Field experience within a highly supervised environment must also be reevaluated as a basis for providing continual feedback regarding the student's ability to synthesize information and perform in real and simulated situations. Field

supervision should come not only from graduate students but also from senior faculty who assume responsibility for theory, diagnosis, remediation or developmental methods, and other aspects of the student's programming. The student-faculty dialogue should continue throughout the training program and into follow-through activities.

As we focus on the complexities of delivering services to handicapped youngsters in public schools, it is apparent that the training program needs course work and experiences in relating to others, course work in management and facilitating change within systems, and student self-examination from a mental health point of view. When we talk about handicapped children and integration, I am reminded of what Trippe (1966) said:

The major task for educators today is to find increasingly more effective ways of introducing flexibility into our organized schools. This will not be done by wholesale movement to set up "special services for handicapped youngsters" no matter how well conceived and conducted they might be. It cannot be done without examining the stance of the school in relation to all children [pp. 245-246].

Unless we reexamine the basic assumptions under which we operate, we will continue to perpetuate a segregated system for certain children, regardless of what we believe is best for others. The issue of integration necessarily involves our perception of all children. Obviously we must consider delivery strategies which take into account the roles of regular teachers, parents, and general education administrators, specifically the front-line manager, the building principal.

Therefore, an essential part of the curriculum is to develop the skills of teachers in assessing ways of interacting with others in school systems to bring about changes in perception and practice with regard to handicapped

children; this aspect of training has received little or no attention in special education university training programs. The development of consultation skills becomes essential.

The advisory council procedure suggested by Reger could become the basis of a more generalized relationship between university training personnel and local school district interest groups. The development of linkages among universities, intermediate regional-county or multicounty organization units, and individual school districts may lay the foundation for a system of educational renewal based upon a concept of an outside-inside-outside consultation framework (Burrello, 1972). Here the university trainers would have continuous access to a data base in order to refine the competency-based models of training and to obtain feedback on the performance of former trainees, in order to test the relevance of the skills training provided earlier. The regional school personnel would receive assistance in the application of theory to practice through a field-test intervention network in their constituent school districts. The individual school district would have available the combined expertise of both university personnel and other educators based in their regional office in the continuous upgrading or development of the professional skills of their staff. The individual school district personnel also can provide invaluable sources of feedback regarding the appropriateness of educational intervention for a variety of target populations—children, teachers, parents, and so on.

The interdependent nature of these relationships between university trainers and consumers of training programs is critical to the initiation, development, and maintenance of the programs. The renegotiation process

may hopefully reduce the parasite-host relationship that has pervaded the university-practitioner relationship.

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