

A RESEARCH EVALUATION OF AN ACTION APPROACH TO SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH

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4. RESEARCH EVALUATION OF A SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAM

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FOR several years, the School Mental Health Project of the Michigan Society for Mental Health has sponsored a series of in-service training programs in mental health for teachers in the public schools. During the academic year 1958-59, a rather large scale program was carried out, involving seven separate school settings and numerous professional resource persons. The general goal of this program was to provide skilled consultation on mental health problems to the classroom teacher, the administrator, and the community.

Because of the magnitude of this effort, and because it represented a departure in philosophy and action from its forerunners, the Advisory Committee of the School Mental Health Project deemed it advisable to support a modest research program in connection with the in-service training effort. While the goal of this research was primarily exploratory, in the sense of aiming to develop instruments and methodologies for a future, more sophisticated research evaluation, it was hoped that it would also provide some concrete evidence of the efficacy of such an in-service training program, and thus provide the basis for the enlistment of broader support for such efforts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Accordingly, a series of research tools were developed or adapted for use in this evaluation. These included the following:

1. A supplementary information form, designed to provide descriptive data upon the participants in the study. It included questions on such things as "grades taught," "years of experience," "sex and marital status," "previous mental health courses," "interest in the program," "perceived seriousness of problems," etc.
2. A supplementary in-service form, aimed to provide estimates of how much help was expected (or obtained), preferred modes of organization for work, degree of satisfaction, etc.
3. A content orientation scale, designed to show how much formal content knowledge of the mental health area each participant had.
4. A sentence completion test, a projective device designed to assess underlying attitudes toward teaching, students and their problems, etc.
5. An adjective check list, intended to assess the self-perception of participants, their expectations of and reactions to the resource persons, and their view of an "ideal teacher" pre- and post-program.

Each of these measures (except No. 1) was collected at the start of the program and again at its conclusion. While we attempted to secure the cooperation of as many potential participants as possible, a strong effort to collect data was made only with those persons who had actually expressed an interest in participation. Thus, the sample is probably not representative of all the teachers in the seven schools which participated. In addition, even though we secured partial data on a total of 163 teachers, a large number of these failed to complete either the pre- or post-program forms, so that the effective sample size is reduced in the case of certain of the measures. For example, in some tests involving the sentence completion blank, the effective sample size reduces occasionally to as few as 50.

FINDINGS

The present report, while summative in nature, contains all of the findings of the major analyses of the data. Further analysis in detail is, of course, possible, but awaits the activity of an interested and motivated graduate student.

As stated above, a total of 163 persons participated in some phase of the data collection. It included 11 kindergarten teachers, 23 first and second grade, 20 third and fourth, 17 fifth and sixth, 18 junior high school, and 29 high school teachers, as well as 9 special services personnel and 5 administrators. The average length of teaching experience among the group was 10.9 years, with nearly half of the group responding having taught 12 years or more. In terms of formal education, 25 of the group had A.B. degrees, 47 had B.S.'s, 44 had M.A.'s, 10 were nondegree teachers, and the remainder of the 163 did not respond to the question on educational background.

Only 20 persons had had no previous mental health courses, and most of those who had had them felt that they were of some help in their teaching. On the other hand, more than half the sample (82 persons) had never had previous in-service training in mental health. Eighty of the respondents made a firm commitment of time to the program, an additional 44 said they would participate if they were given released time, and only 7 said they did not care to participate. Thus it appears that we were dealing with a well-motivated group which had not had much opportunity for in-service work in the past.

Measures of satisfaction. Two measures of satisfaction were collected. The first asked merely, "How satisfied are you with the mental health program as it was carried on in your school?" Thirty-five persons reported that they were extremely satisfied, another 54 said that they were moderately satisfied, 16 were neutral, 6 were moderately dissatisfied, and one was extremely dissatisfied. This finding is gratifying in the sense that it shows a very large

proportion of quite satisfied customers, but poses a difficulty for the research, in that it works against the possibility of identifying group or individual characteristics which contribute to satisfaction. In technical terms, this lack of spread on the major criterion effectively prevents meaningful correlational studies. The other criterion, concerned with "How has your situation been affected by the Project?" shows similar results. Only a few persons said that all of their problems had been solved, but the overwhelming majority felt that marked improvement had been effected in their situation. It might be pointed out that there were no significant differences between any of the schools in terms of the degree of satisfaction or improvement reported, and that satisfaction did not relate to any of the descriptive variables except the few noted below. As expected, the two criterion variables, satisfaction and perceived improvement, were highly correlated with each other.

Another interesting finding, which was not in accord with our expectations, was that there was no change whatsoever in the degree of content knowledge of mental health concepts and practices as measured by the content orientation scale. We had anticipated a general improvement in formal knowledge even though there was no direct instruction along these lines.

However, there were many apparently meaningful changes in the groups as a result of the Project. Many of these might have been predicted on the basis of a "common-sense" personality theory. Others, as noted below, were rather surprising and need to be evaluated carefully in terms of the total effect of such programs as these.

The most significant single finding was concerned with changes in the teachers' perceptions of themselves, and the relationship that these changes bore to participation in the program. The total sample was divided into two groups, nonparticipants (those who had attended fewer than three consultation sessions) and participants (who had attended three or more). The adjective check list data pertaining to the teachers' self-perceptions were then analyzed as follows: 1) the adjectives were translated into the 16 dimensions of the Leary Interpersonal System; 2) an a priori system was developed which allowed changes in each dimension to be designated as positive or negative; and 3) the changes in self-perception among participants and nonparticipants were analyzed in terms of degree and direction of change.

The findings strongly support our expectations that meaningful changes in teachers' perceptions of themselves can be induced through their participation in such an in-service consultation program. Among the participants, 9 of the 16 dimensions showed significant changes in the positive direction, ($p < .05$), 2 others showed positive trends ($p < .10$) and 5 showed no change.

By contrast, the nonparticipants showed positive change in only one dimension, changed significantly but negatively in another, and showed no change in the remaining 14.

When asked to rank the relative seriousness of a list of problems in children, teachers overwhelmingly pick such factors as "quiet," "withdrawn" and "fearful." Aggression, defiance and bullying rank very low. However, in their conferences with the resource persons, teachers spent a much greater proportion of their time talking about the aggressive child than about the quiet, withdrawn one. Apparently they have learned the lesson we have tried to teach them about keeping an eye open for the shy and withdrawn child, but their chief concern as far as actual classroom practice is concerned is the child who is overt in his troublemaking. It should be noted that there is a significant shift in the direction of reporting bullying, defiance and aggression as serious problems by the time the program is over.

Impact of the resource program. One important area which we wished to explore was the effect of the resource person himself upon the success of the program. As stated previously, there was no difference in satisfaction among the several schools participating, so that we cannot identify the amount contributed by the individual resource persons. However, an extremely interesting finding is revealed when one compares the teacher's expectations about the resource person with what he finally (in the teacher's eyes) turns out to be. The general expectation among teachers was that the resource person would be a kind of "expert" who had strong opinions, was quite dominant, somewhat critical, and not particularly friendly or supportive. For the most part, teachers found the resource persons to be quite different from this stereotype. They felt that the resource persons were friendly, supportive, much less dominant than they had anticipated, and much more willing to engage in a peer-type problem-solving-oriented relationship than they had expected. The more that teachers saw this latter kind of relationship as existing between them and the resource person, the better satisfied they were with the program. Among the small group who were either moderately or extremely dissatisfied, all tended to perceive the resource persons as dominating, authoritarian, and handing out advice in a "superior" way. Apparently teachers do not care much for the "expert" who speaks to them ex cathedra, but enjoy and feel that they profit from one who works with them on an equal footing in an attempt to solve mutual problems!

Another interesting change is revealed by the adjective check list data. Teachers move significantly in the direction of seeing themselves more positively: as having more strength, as being less complaining and less timid, as being more supportive and more generous as a result of exposure to the program. It seems obvious that this does not represent a real change

in their personalities, but rather a change in their perceptions of themselves. It is as though the presence of the program gives them added confidence in their own resources and competence.

This finding is substantiated in the analysis of the sentence completion data, where teachers are asked how they tend to handle problem situations in their classrooms. At the beginning, they tend strongly either to ignore, exclude, or punish children who are troublesome in the classroom. As a result of their mental health consultations, they move strongly in the direction of seeking to control the child with their newly won resources. Occasions of ignoring or punishing him became very rare by the close of the program.

There is a general trend in the direction of what might be termed an orientation toward persons rather than toward the task of education. For example, when the group is asked what kind of pupils teachers like best, there is a significant change in the direction of liking happy, friendly, cooperative children, and a consequent movement away from favoring busy, hard-working, and attentive ones. Likewise, aggressive children come to be seen as less troublesome, and more as being in need of help as a result of the program. While these trends are apparent throughout the group, they are most pronounced among the elementary teachers.

Several of our measures show a positive relationship to degree of satisfaction expressed. In general, persons who made a flat commitment of time were more satisfied than those who wanted to participate only on a released time basis. Among those who committed time, those who said they would be willing to spend 20 hours or more were more satisfied than those who committed less time. Having had previous in-service training is associated with greater satisfaction. Apparently those persons who thought they would like the program, or believed it was a good thing before it started, also tended to report it as a good thing once it was completed. We would interpret this to mean that expressed satisfaction is pretty much independent of what has gone on in the program, and only reflects the general positive orientation which most people have toward such efforts. This factor is especially important to consider when the participants are all volunteers, as was the case in this project.

We also explored the general attitudes of the participants toward teaching. It can be said unequivocally that the majority of teachers are satisfied with their work. When asked to express their major complaints about teaching, a majority rank "school plant and materials" as the most important source of dissatisfaction. Following in order of importance are "parents," "relationships with administrators," "specific extra duties associated with teaching," and pupils. Of the entire sample, only three list "play" as a major source of dissatisfaction.

Some changes occurred in these variables as a result of the program. In

general, fewer female teachers saw themselves in conflict with administration after the program than before. In addition, Master's degree personnel, who listed conflict with administrators as their major source of trouble (significantly greater than among other groups) showed a slight decrease in the amount of expressed conflict. Conflict with administrators was of no importance to nondegree personnel, and there was less of it among persons who had had moderate to high exposure to mental hygiene courses in the past.

When asked what the major goal of teaching was, the overwhelming majority chose "personal satisfaction" above such alternatives as "training good citizens," "imparting content knowledge," "helping children with their social adjustment," etc. This proportion increased somewhat, although not significantly, following the project.

The participants with B.S. degrees showed several interesting differences from the other groups. A greater proportion of them wanted released time as a condition of participation in the program. They see troublesome pupils less in need of help than do the other groups. They are generally less satisfied with the program, are more concerned with plant and facilities as a problem, tend more often to punish aggressive children, prefer hard-working to happy pupils, and show the least amount of over-all change in orientation and the handling of classroom problems. Apparently B.S. degree teachers are not the best group to whom to offer such a program, and we suspect once again that this is the result of a basic difference in orientation, rather than to any differential handling of this group in the program.

Willingness to give of one's own time in order to participate in the program is apparently of considerable importance both to satisfaction and to ability to change as a result of the program. Those persons who demanded released time changed less in their perception of a troublesome pupil's being in need of help. Those persons who were least willing to give time of their own ended up by favoring punishment as a means of handling problem children. They also see their major goal as being that of training citizens, and are more oriented toward problems with plant and material and the administration than toward those of children. However, they showed some change in the direction of trying to give more time to children with problems, and stressed happiness in the classroom as an important value to a greater extent after the program. Those who were willing to give their own time to the program stressed problems with children as being a major source of concern, but show a significant change in the direction of dealing with such problems with their own resources, rather than through punishment, exclusion, or ignoring them.

Apparently, willingness to commit time to such an effort as this one is a part of a general "mental hygiene orientation" which contains part "do-

good," part flexibility, and part a rather uncritical enthusiasm for such programs. Another aspect of this syndrome is apparently connected with previous work in mental health courses or in-service programs. Teachers who have had considerable exposure to mental hygiene courses in the past tend to isolate and punish children more, stress happiness as a desirable classroom condition, and complain more about facilities and administration. In addition, they tend to be somewhat less likely to change than the group which has had either no (or little) previous formal mental hygiene exposure, or has taken its mental hygiene instruction on an in-service basis. We would interpret these facts as a part of the general pattern of seeing answers in formal course work as a substitute for actually involving oneself in the work of managing children and knowing one's own role in the process. It represents an intellectual approach to the solution of mental health problems, rather than a personal action approach.

CRITIQUE

In summary, it appears that the nature of previous motivational factors is extremely important in determining the extent to which persons participate in an in-service program such as this, and in the degree to which they feel satisfied with it once they are in it. The greatest finding is that testimonial evidence of satisfaction bears only a very weak relationship to actual changes in perception and practice, and that clearer criterion measures of success need to be established. Similarly, the effect of special orientations (to science or to an intellectual approach to mental hygiene activity, for example) upon the potential success of such programs must obviously be considered.

We feel that this research provides substantial evidence that in-service mental hygiene programs based upon individual consultation with teachers do have a beneficial effect upon the mental hygiene efforts of the participants. However, it is equally clear that it works only with people who come with a readiness and motivation for change, and that it is less effective with those who do not. Obviously, such programs must be conducted with volunteers, as they do not, in their present form, reach personnel who are resistant to the general "mental hygiene" approach to their life and work.

This research contains some serious defects which necessitated the conservative interpretation of our findings. First, no really suitable criterion measures were available. The ratings of satisfaction and perceived improvement did not provide a sufficient range of response to be really valuable in correlational analysis. Most glaring, of course, was the complete absence of any measures relating to the actual classroom behavior of the teachers and its effect upon their children. An obvious weakness was the fact that many persons failed to complete a number of the measuring devices, thus reducing

effective sample size to a point where two and three variable relationships could not be explored at all.

CONCLUSION

In providing a degree of research support in connection with its service program, the School Mental Health Project of the Michigan Society for Mental Health has made possible the first real field evaluation of in-service training programs in mental health. This effort is certainly of vital significance and sheds a beginning light on a field of critical importance. With the findings gleaned from the Project, and with the lessons of methodology and technique which have been learned, it is now possible to move forward more intelligently in our in-service training efforts. We hope future research will be improved as a result of this pioneering effort.