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THE READING FIELD AGENT: A MODEL FOR THE DIAGNOSTIC TEACHING OF TEACHERS

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Diagnostic teaching with all its ramifications is one of the trends in education which has had profound implications for the field of reading. Unfortunately, too much of the emphasis has been on diagnosis and not enough on teaching. Teachers are constantly bombarded with new tests – diagnostic, criterion referenced, etc. – all of which are reputed to accurately pinpoint the reading needs of all students. Many of the results of these measures are at best tenuous: the fact that a well trained teacher is the best diagnostician is one fact that is often ignored in any implementation of diagnostic teaching.

Another irony in the diagnostic teaching movement is the fact that although teachers are constantly exhorted to apply diagnostic teaching techniques, these same techniques are rarely applied to teacher training itself. In most cases teachers are routinely subjected to present graduate programs and inservice training with little attention to the specific needs of particular teachers and their students. The role of the reading field agent was developed to meet this need.

The development of the field agent model was also, in part, facilitated by the American interest in the British infant school. As hundreds of American educators travelled to England to observe “open education” they were also impressed with the British “teacher centers” for inservice training.

In the United States, the reading field agent model has been developed through two ESEA Title III Projects. The initial project developed in Greensboro, North Carolina (Goldman and Wolff, 1971) transported teachers and their students to a central location. A second project, the Delaware Reading Center, based on the Greensboro project and located in Newark, Delaware, deployed the field agents to the schools for most of their time. It is this model that is delineated here.

Definition

A reading field agent is a specialist hired specifically to assist the classroom teacher in utilizing his or her reading resources to the fullest. The field agent does not serve as a remedial teacher. In Delaware, the field agent was housed in a central location and reported to various schools throughout the county. Using the services of a field agent was voluntary, and teachers with the approval of their principal submitted applications. The Director of the Center and the field agents interviewed all candidates in order to ascertain where the field agents' services would be of most value.

Once applicants had been selected, the field agent worked intensively in one school for approximately five weeks.

The role of the reading field agent in the school was carefully delineated. The field agent's main function was to work in the classroom with one teacher. Every effort was made to fit the classroom training to the needs of a particular teacher. No effort was made to promulgate any one set of materials or methods. Another teacher at the same grade level was essentially an observing teacher. Hopefully, this intensive work with one teacher and somewhat less intensive work with another produced a ripple effect on the rest of the staff.

Stage I — Diagnosis

A field agent's work in a school began with a brief orientation workshop. The school principals, and teachers involved met with the Reading Center staff for a brief workshop during which the field agent's role was explained in detail.

The second step in this preliminary stage was planning. The field agent and the teachers involved discussed and diagnosed the needs of the participating teacher, and these were recorded in objective format. Generally, objectives for the field agent's stay fell into a few general areas:

- 1) *Management and Record Keeping:*
Ex. The participating teacher will maintain a class summary chart to show which centers have been completed by children.
- 2) *Phonics Instruction:*
Ex. The participating teacher will use a variety of techniques to aid pupils in the application of vowel knowledge to unknown words.
- 3) *Comprehension Instruction:*
Ex. The participating teacher will use additional direct teaching procedures for introducing those comprehension skills that are introduced in Scott Foresman such as getting the main idea.
- 4) *Development of Creative Writing:*
Ex. The participating teacher will use substitution and a variety of other approaches to motivate creative writing.
- 5) *Diagnostic Teaching Techniques:*
Ex. The participating teacher will use every-pupil-response strategy to help determine word recognition skill needs and mastery.

It should be noted that all these objectives were developed in terms of the participating teacher. However, the observing teacher was also charged with implementing the objectives that would be applicable to his or her classroom. The necessity of an observing teacher was supported by research which seems to indicate that in order for change to take place, more than one teacher had to be functioning as a change agent.

Once tentative plans and objectives were formulated, the field agent began an intensive period of observation. Several days were spent in the classroom of the participating teacher and at least one day was spent in the classroom of the observing teacher. At the conclusion of this ob-

ervation/diagnostic period, the field agent and the teacher involved formulated the final plans for the remainder of the field agent's stay.

Stage II — Instruction

Stage two was essentially an instructional period. The field agent assumed major responsibility for teaching the class of the participating teacher. During this time, which usually averaged two weeks, the field agent attempted to implement the objectives as planned. Concurrently, some released time was provided for all teachers involved in order to attend inservice workshops revolving around the stated objectives. Other teachers from the same district were also invited to some of the workshops. All of the teachers attending the workshops were shown the wide variety of resource materials housed at the Center. This instructional stage was very important, and during this time, activities were carefully structured so that the teachers involved were very much aware of exactly how the objectives were being implemented.

Stage III — Application

No learning takes place unless the learner can successfully apply what is taught. Thus, during the last stage of the field agent's stay in the school, the participating teacher gradually reassumed control of the classroom. With the aid of the field agent, the classroom teacher tried to apply the planned objectives as the field agent had demonstrated. Some released time was arranged so that any obstacles or problems could be thoroughly discussed. At the end of this stage, the field agent and teacher evaluated the various objectives and activities as they had been planned and implemented. Provision was also made for follow-up visits, and field agents outlined exactly what they would be looking for in these return visits.

Evaluation

Results of a comprehensive evaluation showed that teachers who received the services of a reading field agent showed some significant gains in their knowledge of appropriate teaching strategies than teachers who had not received those services. Work with a field agent also tended to change teacher attitudes in a number of areas relevant to reading/language arts instruction. After receiving the services, teachers showed an increased awareness of the importance of using learning centers, small group interaction, small group games for reinforcement, instruction based on diagnostic information and detailed records of pupil performance as well as a number of other areas. Teachers who did not work with a field agent, in general, did not exhibit this change in attitude.

Questionnaires administered to both teachers and principals showed that an overwhelming majority of both groups considered the project most valuable. Comments like the ones below were commonplace:

"It really helped me to focus in on the needs of my classroom."

1st grade teacher

“It’s the finest federal project I’ve ever had contact with.”

Elementary Principal

“Your (field agent) is an outstanding teacher and teacher trainer. I hope we will be able to have her return to our district in the not too distant future.”

District Superintendent

Implications

The applicability of the field agent model could be widespread since it is compatible with the trend to establish teacher centers or instructional resource centers. Field agents could be housed at these centers and deployed to schools throughout the district or county. If no teacher center is available, the field agents can operate out of the central office. Wherever they are housed, however, it is important that the model is preserved and the work of the field agent is not diluted with administrativia and one-shot inservice efforts. Certainly careful application of this model can help insure that every teacher is a diagnostic-prescriptive teacher.

REFERENCES

Goldman, B. & Wolff, H. D., Effectiveness of a Demonstration Reading School. *The Reading Teacher*, 1970, 24, 106-111.