

Extract from Chapter 2 - Needs Assessment: Goals, Needs, and Priorities, Burton and Merrill (1991)

The Concept of Need

The term need is used in many different ways: psychologists refer to primary needs and learned needs, physiologists study biological needs, economists identify consumer demand needs, while the general public has its own conception of needs. Educational need, however, draws heavily on the concept of social need. One social scientist, Bradshaw (1972), has enumerated four types of needs: normative need, felt need, expressed need, and comparative need. These four, as well as a fifth type of need, anticipated need, are described below.

Types of Needs

1. *Normative Need.* A normative need is present when an individual or group has less than some established standard. Thus, an individual whose diet is deficient when compared to the Food and Drug Administration's minimum daily adult requirements, or whose income is low when compared to the federal government's poverty level income standard, has a normative need. A normative need also exists if student performance in a given school system is less than state or national standards or averages. Unfortunately, it is sometimes difficult to get experts to agree on what the norm or standard actually is. Dietary need is certainly affected by such things as climate, work output, body size, and other individual differences. Financial standards may not be the same in New York City and Niangua, Missouri.

2. *Felt Need.* Felt need is synonymous with want. This type of need is usually identified by simply asking people what they need. Although this approach has a certain democratic appeal to most of us, it also has some inherent problems. What people say they want is affected by their perceptions of what is possible and socially acceptable as well as what they think is available. Some people may be so independent that they feel it would be

inappropriate to express their felt needs to others. On the other hand, some people may ask for help that they do not really need. In an educational community citizens may not express a felt need for sex education because they do not see the school as an appropriate instrument. Thus, they may see a "need" for young people to receive sex education but at the same time not "want" the school to be involved. In another situation, a teacher may see a "need" for a certain course when in fact he/she means that he/she "wants" to teach it.

3. *Expressed Need or Demand.* An expressed need is similar to the economic idea that if people need something they'll create a demand. A felt need for gasoline may also become an expressed need if people wait to have their automobile gasoline tanks filled. In other words, an expressed need exists when a person puts his or her money on the line for a product. If more college students sign up for a course than there are seats available, administrators will begin talking about the need for more sections and staff. If there is a long waiting list for public housing, then there is a need for more public housing, and so on. Certainly, there will be no demand unless people perceive a need. Does a need exist, however, if there is no public housing to be on the waiting list for, or if the course "in demand" is the lesser of several evils necessary to meet an outdated requirement that satisfies no current need from the student's perspective?

4. *Comparative Need.* A comparative need exists when the characteristics of a population that does not receive a service are similar to the characteristics of a population that does receive it. Thus, if East Side High School has a modern chemistry laboratory, and West Side High has no laboratory, then a comparative need may be said to exist. Unfortunately, the concept of comparative need does not take into consideration the fact that those receiving a service may still have a need for more service or that there may be needs for which no service has yet been established. Comparative need has been a favorite in higher education.

5. *Anticipated or Future Needs.* Anticipated needs have to do with the projected demands of the future. When a city plans new roads to be built over a number of years, the people doing the planning must take into consideration where growth will probably occur. At the time the roads are planned it may appear that a lot

of money is being spent to service only a few people, yet the roads are designed to meet future as well as present needs of the community. It is the lack of such assessment of future needs that causes roads, schools, etc., to be obsolete or overcrowded by the time they are completed. Identification of this type of need may help us to prepare students to cope with their environment as it will be, rather than the way it is. Anticipated needs are a necessary component in both social and educational planning to avoid what Toffler (1971) has called "future shock."

Definition of Need

Each of the types of need described above carry the same central idea: *a need is present when there is a discrepancy or gap between the way things "ought to be" and the way they "are."* Thus, a *normative* need is a discrepancy between an individual's or group's present state and a given norm or standard. A *felt* need is a discrepancy between what a person wants and what he/she has. A need is *expressed* when an individual takes action to remove the discrepancy between what he/she wants and has. A *comparative* need is a discrepancy between what one group has and what another group, with similar characteristics, has. Finally, if there is a discrepancy between what is presently available and the projected demands of the future, then there is an *anticipated* need.

The definition presented above has certain implications and difficulties that are of importance when considering methods of assessing needs. First, there must be a discrepancy for a need to be present. To say you need love when the love you have matches what you ought to have is incorrect in the language of needs assessment. However, if you were to experience a loss of love, then a discrepancy would exist, and you would have a *need* for love. Thus, according to the definition of need presented above, the basic needs of food, water, shelter, love, sex, etc., are only needs during a state of deprivation. They would not be considered needs during a state of satiation.

Second, the measurement of the way things "are" involves a degree of error which is related to the reliability and validity of instruments used.

Third, the way things "ought to be" is a value judgment which cannot be separated from the value structures woven into

each of us by our experiences. Given different value structures, the determination of a consensus as to what "ought to be" is difficult. If we try to establish the way things "ought to be" in the future by extrapolating from existing conditions and trends, the error in our projections can be expected to increase as a function of how far into the future we predict.

Fourth, to eliminate a discrepancy or need, at least two alternatives are available—change the way things are to conform to what ought to be *or* change what ought to be to conform to the way things are. There is some question, for example, as to whether the American perception of how much fuel, food, fertilizer, etc., that there ought to be is a responsible perception in light of dwindling resources, growing population, etc. This is a problem of solutions rather than needs assessments, but it is raised here to serve as a caution not to assume that only one type of solution is possible.

Educational Needs

In educational needs assessment, one should try to consider all five types of needs by involving as many people as possible in the process. Professionals, business leaders, labor, and parents have access to *normative* data. ("The government indicates that 75 percent of all high school graduates seek a position within x miles of their home town." "A medical survey indicates that the average number of hospital beds for a city our size is" "The average salary for an assistant professor in the Big Ten is") Administrators and interested action groups usually have *demand* data. ("Our records indicate that more students signed up for introductory psychology than we had seats for." "Since this program for the aged began six months ago, we have had to turn away x people due to lack of space.") Many people can provide at least informal *comparative* information. ("When I lived in x we had two free health clinics." "When I worked for the x school system we had a student-teacher ratio of 10 to 1.") Government and research reports may provide data for projecting anticipated needs. ("This report says that when E.R.A. goes through we will have to spend equal monies for men's and women's athletics." "By the time my kids grow up, the Social Security system will have collapsed.") And everybody has *felt* needs. ("I wish we had a swimming pool

built into this school.” “We need to have a course on karate.”) Hopefully, a broad spectrum of needs will be addressed by involving a broad spectrum of the community in the needs assessment process.

The Concept of Needs Assessment

We have stated that a need is a discrepancy between the way things ought to be and the way things are. *A goal is a statement of what ought to be.* It follows then that *needs assessment is the process of determining what ought to be (goals) and measuring the amount of discrepancy between what ought to be and what actually is (needs).* It should be noted that neither goals nor needs are solutions. Solution alternatives are identified during later stages of the instructional development process, and will be discussed in depth in succeeding chapters. It would appear that we now have definitions for goals, needs, and needs assessment—but have we? Are all goals equally important, and are all needs equally important? The answer is, most assuredly not. Then, we must modify our definition of needs assessment in this manner: *needs assessment is the process of determining goals, measuring needs, and establishing priorities for action.* Notice again that we have avoided the determination of what *type* of action should be taken, which would get us into the realm of solutions.

Why Needs Assessment?

We have tried to build a case for needs assessment on the grounds of relevance and accountability. Klein (1971) has suggested the following additional rationale:

- (a) Needs assessment focuses the attention of program planners on salient problems. It can be used to facilitate planning decisions regarding the modification and development of educational programs. Needs assessment data can thus be used to ensure more efficient utilization and allocation of personnel time and resources.
- (b) Needs assessment justifies focusing attention on some