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Efforts need to be intensified for the new teacher

Staff development: A practitioner's reaction

By James M. Langford

While working as a junior high school classroom teacher for 16 years, the author has had a few positive experiences with staff development programs initiated by school districts in which he was employed. A few unexaggerated, personal examples of these experiences, illustrating how the administration of these districts have viewed the observation, evaluation, and in-service education aspects of the staff development process, follow:

three years with no in-service education activities, no observations of teaching, and only one conference which was called to warn the author against being in a classroom alone with a female student and against smoking in public;

three more years during which there were no planned in-service activities and where two observations took place which resulted in conferences called only for the purpose of having the author sign the evaluation form without comment from either teacher or administrator;

an observation which never took place because the students were involved in a laboratory activity when the principal entered the room so the principal left with the words, "I'll be back when you're teaching";

an observation which resulted in an evaluation form left in the teacher's mailbox over summer vacation with the author's "signature" affixed to it by a school secretary;

an evaluation conference during which the only "suggestion" by the administrator was that the teacher had been three minutes late to class **one** day during the year and should improve his punctuality; and

one (in 16 years) building-wide, released time, on-site in-service education attempt conducted by university faculty which was so totally out of touch with teachers' needs and so poorly planned that it resulted in a revolt by most of the school staff who refused to attend sessions beyond the initial meeting.

A working definition of "staff development" needs to be made to provide some common ground of understanding between the writer and the reader. Staff development is **not**

- (1) classroom observation culminated by completed evaluation forms,
- (2) perfunctory administrator-teacher conferences where no specific suggestions for improvement are offered by either party,
- (3) in-service education activities handed down by a benevolent administration to its ungrateful teachers, although in-service education can be a part of staff development, or
- (4) enrollment by a teacher in college classes to increase salary or renew certification.

Staff development **is**

- (1) a cooperative effort by teachers, curriculum supervisors, and administrators to develop a planned approach to the continual improvement of instruction through effective in-service education programs,
- (2) observation of teaching followed by supervisory conferences, the most important function of which is "promotion of the teacher's growth in effective instruction" and in which the secondary function is evaluation.¹
- (3) the availability and use of past and current research on the instructional process and materials related to curriculum development and implementation, and
- (4) the availability and use of the hardware and skills necessary for the process of teacher self-assessment.²

In-service Education

A school district typically schedules a certain number of days for paid in-service training (rarely more than two or three). The variety of programs offered teachers is rich but the quality is usually the same—poor. The consensus of most articles by curriculum specialists is that in-service training is in trouble. Houston and Freiberg liken in-service programs to "perpetual motion machines—they attempt to get something for nothing."³ Ryor stated that "in-service education has been in ill health for a long time"⁴ and Dillon has assessed teacher attitude when she

observed that "in-service education in the past has been perceived as only slightly more palatable (and necessary) than death and taxes."⁵

Given that problems exist with in-service education, what are some of the reasons?

(1) Research studies have shown that successful in-service education has been planned with the active input of the teachers it is designed to serve.^{3, 6}

It is much more efficient for administrators to plan and organize in-service programs but to do so usually dooms the enterprise to failure. There is a risk to the administrator in giving teachers too much freedom in choosing and planning their own in-service but to fail to give teachers that opportunity, administrators assume the even greater risk of staff revolt. The disastrous in-service effort described in the introduction to this article was planned by a small committee of teachers picked by the administration. That committee was quite unrepresentative of the majority of the faculty. In that instance, the administration was afraid to risk free teacher input and suffered a faculty schism which never healed. Research on learning shows that our students learn best if they actively participate in the planning of instruction. Teachers, as students, are not different from their younger pupils. It seems strange that school people can apply the lessons of educational psychology in their classrooms but forget those lessons when it comes to in-service education. Ryor translated these lessons to in-service education when he commented that "teachers learn best and accomplish more when they are involved in deciding what and how they learn."⁴

(2) In-service education must be specific to the needs of the teachers to be served and be problem oriented.

Programs which are designed only to provide services, job maintenance, or personal development, but are not oriented to solving problems "are not pertinent to the problems faced by teachers and principals."⁷ The experience and observation of the author has been that the topics chosen for in-service education programs have frequently had little, if any, connection with the self-perceived needs of teachers. While personal development workshops have a place, one was rejected by teachers in a school which was ridden with problems created by recent court-ordered desegregation and an influx of non-English speaking refugees. At the same time, science teachers in that school were trying to implement a new self-paced, individualized curriculum and were at the management "Level of Use of the Innovation."⁸ Their prime concern was how to manage equipment and supplies, not in how to be a better person. No effort was made to address these immediate concerns of those teachers. Since the primary stress of in-service education should be that which leads most effectively to pupil learning, any objective beyond that of increasing learning is beyond the scope of school sponsored in-service education.

(3) In-service education must be part of an on-going, interrelated process.

The one-shot workshop has been shown to be ineffective in implementing change in teachers.⁹ Teachers who spend one or two days on a topic will welcome the relief from their regular classroom duties but will return to their class, pick up where they left off, and continue teaching in the manner they did prior to the in-service effort. In-service activities need to be planned over a period of time to enable teachers to utilize the ideas presented

and return to the training with feedback from actual use in a real situation. A model for this type of training is found in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) short courses offered throughout the country for college teachers. Participating teachers attend a week or more of training, return to their regular classes to work on a project which is an outgrowth of the training, then return to the training program a few months later to complete the training with the practical knowledge gained in their own situation and to share their experiences with fellow participants. The AAAS courses require a period of time between the first and second sessions due to the distance participants must travel, but a similar program in a school or district could schedule on-going feedback through regular sessions prior to the conclusion of the program. This type of in-service training could follow the model presented by Joyce and Showers which combines "theory, modeling, practice, feedback, and coaching to application" of the training to each situation.¹⁰

(4) In-service education should take place at a time and location that are convenient for teachers and are conducive to learning.

The Florida Department of Education study reported no differences in gain in teacher knowledge between school-based and college-based in-service programs; however, school-based programs reportedly fared better in improving attitudes of teachers.⁶ Dillon also claims that a program which occurs "closest to the classroom is seen as most helpful and is accepted best."⁵ In spite of what the public thinks, a teacher's day is long and hard. The teacher will harbor an *a priori* resentment toward any program which requires travel to some distant and unfamiliar location for training. Teachers are comfortable in their own building, feel secure there, and are more apt to be receptive to a program held on home ground. On the other hand, teachers tend to develop a sense of territorial rights to their school and providers of in-service programs need to be wary of the appearance of usurping these rights.

The after-school in-service experience is doomed to failure. Teachers are tired, have a pile of papers to grade, and want to get home to fix the basement ceiling or just relax. Time for in-service education must be provided which does not infringe on the teachers' personal lives and that enables teachers to come to the sessions without pressures from regular duties being foremost in mind. This seems to necessitate time scheduled within the regular school year, on weekdays, for which teachers are paid. During a very recent summer school class for teachers, the problem was posed as to how to get teachers to attend in-service training workshops to implement a new statewide program. The unanimous response from the class was: "Pay them." Pay alone will not make a program successful if other factors are not conducive to acceptance of ideas by teachers, but it should, at least, get the teachers to the watering trough—whether or not they drink the water depends on how palatable it is.

(5) In-service education must be provided by individuals who are knowledgeable of the real needs and problems of teachers.

Neither building and central office administrators nor college education faculty normally meet this criterion. School administrators are not trained to provide this type of assistance. Their training and concerns are in the areas of finance, organization, and relationships with school

clientele. Their idea of what goes on behind the closed door of the classroom is limited to far too few visitations and reports from a variety of biased sources. Their knowledge of subject content is limited to their own discipline and few have had training in instructional theory and methodology. Faculty of education have the knowledge of curriculum and instruction but rarely have the opportunity to gain first hand knowledge of the practical instructional demands presented by today's students, curricula, and school systems. This sounds like a worn out cliché but, in the experience of the writer, is still frequently true.

Who then is best suited to provide in-service education for teachers? The answer is simply, other teachers. A colleague who has had training and experience with the topic at hand is more likely to be well received by teachers than an outsider, which both administrators and college faculty are perceived to be. Kersch referred to an elementary teacher who "described the professor as a 'stranger' coming to work with a cohesive staff, well known to each other."¹¹ The appropriate in-service role for college education faculty is to provide training and background for teacher-leaders who can modify this training in light of the practicalities of teaching in a particular school and return to those schools to provide appropriate experiences for colleagues. This type of teacher-leader training could consist of the content of the training to be presented plus techniques for providing the training. As long as administrators are, or are perceived to be, line officers in a judgmental administrative hierarchy, they will not be able to serve as teacher-leaders for instructional improvement.

College teachers are provided the opportunity of attending regional and national meetings for instructional improvement. Local and state conferences of "professional" organizations such as NEA or AFT rarely emphasize the improvement of instruction. The membership of these organizations is so broad that it would be difficult for them to do so. Instead, those issues which affect all teachers are generally addressed—typically those dealing with working conditions. Although membership in such organizations as the American Association of Physics Teachers (AAPT) and the National Reading Association (NRA) are open to pre-college teachers, attendance at the meetings is generally limited to college personnel. Meetings of AAPT which the author has attended provided a forum and informal discussions with peers and curriculum leaders. School districts should make provision for attendance by teachers at these meetings and should encourage active participation. The expense to the districts could be large but the benefit through better and more creative teaching should make the expense worthwhile.

(6) In-service education must be presented at a level appropriate to the target population and in a variety of styles.

Another lesson from learning theory which is often forgotten in in-service efforts is that human beings possess a variety of learning styles and that the most effective instruction is geared to the individual. Some teachers delight in group activities and function well in them. Other teachers would gain more from a lecture by an informed specialist or by reading a set of materials provided for them. Of course, some teachers refuse to learn from any method but there are students like that too.

An elementary teacher recently told the author that she wished she could have more instruction in physics content but that the last in-service activity she attended in that area was conducted by a Ph.D. theoretical physicist and she did not understand a word he said. She expressed a desire for some training that did not make her feel "like an imbecile." On the other hand, highly knowledgeable and skillful teachers are often subjected to in-service activities more properly suited for use with pre-school children. Individualizing in-service education is no easier than providing for the individual differences in an eighth-grade classroom, but teacher/educators and school administrators need to attempt to "practice what they preach."

Observation/Conferencing/Evaluation

Although the author is certified as a junior or senior high school principal, his training for that certification provided no knowledge of classroom observation techniques or instruments. If experience is an indication of truth, neither did the education of any supervisors with whom the author has worked. The classroom observation has generally been for the sole purpose of using some arbitrary scale to rate the teacher on four or five general items such as "instructional techniques."

When an administrator goes from one room to another without pencil or paper and observes five or six teachers in a day, one wonders how much specific information the administrator has to form the basis of an evaluation. When a teacher is rated "excellent" on instructional techniques or classroom management, the teacher needs to know specifically what the observer considered excellent and what the teacher might have done differently to improve learning by the students. Teachers need specific information such as how questioning technique was perceived, did the teacher stand too aloof from the class, did the teacher give students enough time to answer questions, and so on. The conscientious teacher is able to gather much of this information through self-assessment practices but the supervisory conference should provide an independent measure of these generic skills. With the kind of specific information mentioned, a teacher and supervisor could have a meaningful conference after an observation rather than one like the all-to-frequent example given by Hunter:

"You're a fine teacher; I've marked you outstanding in every category. Sign right here and tell me about your summer vacation plans." "Thank you, you're a mighty nice principal too; we're thinking of a motor trip to Canada."¹¹

The conference which follows an observation or, preferably, observations must be more than an opportunity to smile, sign a form, and engage in idle chit-chat. It needs to be a truly "supervisory conference," the purpose of which is to improve instruction and thereby increase learning. Hunter's description of six types of conferences is an excellent prescription for making a frequently meaningless exercise into a useful endeavor beneficial to all—administrator, teacher, and student. The conference can be a valuable experience whereby the teacher is able to identify positive teaching behaviors as well as negative ones. Subjective self-evaluation often results in erroneous conceptions so a supervisory conference with true two-way communication can provide for a more objective approach. After appropriate and inappropriate teaching behaviors have been identified through the

conference, the teacher should be able to work with the supervisor to develop a plan to maintain the former and modify or eliminate the latter. It is here that most building principals would not have the training to be of much help. For that reason, it is urged that these observations and supervisory conferences be conducted by curriculum and instruction specialists rather than by building administrators and/or superintendents. Principals in small school districts without curriculum and instruction specialists should take it upon themselves, through their own professional development program, to become skillful in classroom observation and the supervisory conference.

The failure of most teacher-principal conferences does not lie only with the administrator. Classroom teachers do not understand the nature or purpose of the conference either. Teachers generally enter such a conference "in fear and trembling." Doubt about this can be resolved by visiting any teachers' lounge prior to an upcoming teacher-principal conference. Many otherwise calm and collected teachers exhibit a nearly pathological fear of the conference with the principal. It would seem that this fear should dissipate given the innocuous nature of most conferences but it does not. Pre-service teacher education must also teach about observation instruments and techniques, how and why they are used, the research base behind them, and how they are useful for instructional improvement. Defensiveness against any suggestion for improvement must somehow be countered by pre-service training if the new teacher is to establish a teacher-supervisor relationship which leads to instructional improvement.

One of the stumbling blocks that prevents supervisory conferences from resulting in instructional improvement is the dual role of the principal as instructional leader and administrative evaluator. ASCD recently published a report of a committee on "Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors" in which the recommendation was made that supervision be divided into two distinct roles: consultative and administrative.¹² Ness, a member of that committee, strongly dissents from that recommendation,¹³ but the view expressed by the committee is the one which has been held by the author for some time. As long as the principal, or other administrator, is the person responsible for the dismissal of teachers, conferences between that administrator and teachers will continue to be superficial. Ideally, that should not have to be the case but is a fact of life. For this reason, the functions of administration and that of instructional improvement should be separated wherever possible. The supervisor in charge of instructional improvement should have no connection whatever with the evaluation of teachers for salary or tenure purposes. This might require two sets of observations—one from an instructional supervisor and one from an administrator—but this duplication of effort could result in greatly improved teaching by creating supervisory conferences which really result in change.

Self-directed Professional Development

The most powerful tool for instructional improvement lies in equipping all teachers with skills in self-assessment. Teacher self-assessment practices are the topic of another article so will not be discussed in detail here.¹⁴ The classroom teacher with thorough grounding in the theory and practice of self-assessment will be able to

effect much instructional improvement independently, will be able to enter the supervisory conference with knowledge and understanding of what it is all about, and will serve as a role model for colleagues to improve the instructional climate of the whole school.

In order for teachers to engage in self-assessment, the school district has a responsibility to provide for training, hardware, and time for the effort. Teacher self-assessment is an excellent topic for in-service education with the hope that some of the threat from external evaluation could be removed. Video cameras, recorders, and monitors should be available for use by teachers to examine their own teaching. Sufficient time should be included in the teachers' professional day to make use of self-assessment practices. Schools or districts should provide an up-to-date professional library which includes educational research journals, content journals, curriculum projects, and recent books on topics relevant to the improvement of instruction.

The New Teacher

Providing help for the new teacher is probably one of the most important aspects of an adequate staff development program. It was previously indicated that the best in-service education comes from fellow teachers. Unfortunately, many new teachers are assigned the worst teaching schedule, given three coaching and "extracurricular" assignments, and then left to their own devices to "sink or swim." Every new teacher should be assigned to a master teacher for help and counseling and given a limited teaching schedule for the first year of teaching. Observations and supervisory conferences of the type suggested in this article should be frequent and supportive. Professional development and instructional improvement would then be seen as an on-going function of the teaching process from the first day in the classroom and would cease to be reserved for that terrifying 20 minutes of observation and five minutes of evaluation conferencing.

Conclusion

Staff development is a complex mix of activities which requires the involvement of university faculty, school administrators, curriculum and instruction specialists, and classroom teachers. This article suggests that university faculty exercise their expertise in the training of teacher-leaders who, in turn, will extend this training to their colleagues in the schools. Selection of the content of such in-service training should be made by those teachers who will receive it. With real teacher input, in-service training programs would better meet the needs of teachers than would programs designed by school administrators and/or university members without reference to such input. The in-service training programs thus developed would comprise an on-going learning process for teachers and not be limited to a series of unrelated *ad hoc* experiences. For the in-service effort to be effective, it needs to be available during paid school days with teachers released from their usual duties. It is the responsibility of school administrators to make provisions for such training and to serve in a capacity which is supportive of the effort but not demanding of it.

In-service education is not the sole answer to effective staff development. Teachers should have the opportunity to interact freely and frequently with curriculum and instructional supervisors in non-threatening super-

visory conferences, the major purpose of which is to increase learning through improved instruction. These conferences lose much of their efficacy if conducted with a supervisor responsible for administrative personnel decisions or with a supervisor not well grounded in observation techniques, instructional theory, and teaching methodologies. Teachers also need to be instructed as to the nature and purpose of these supervisory conferences if they are to take maximum advantage of them.

The most effective way to improve instruction is through a self-directed approach to instructional improvement. Administrators, curriculum and instruction specialists, and university personnel need to assist teachers in gaining the skills necessary, to provide appropriate hardware and publications, and to make the time available for teachers to engage in the self assessment process. It is suggested that training in the use of this process could be a valuable part of in-service education.

Finally, staff development efforts need to be intensified for the new teacher. Pre-service teacher education can not be expected to produce a highly effective teacher in just four academic years and a few weeks of student teaching. A helpful, supportive, staff development effort from the first day on the job should provide all teachers with the impetus to continually strive for instructional improvement throughout their careers.

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