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INITIATION INSERVICE UNDER FIRE

A Staff Development Newsletter offers sound advice to teachers committed to stamping out staff development programs: Mutter frequently, "We tried that and it didn't work": "become obsessed by the really significant aspects of the program like parking, coffee and room temperature": and, "assure yourself that society is lucky you'll even work with today's impossible kids without folks expecting you to participate in staff development activities, too."¹

We were all too familiar with these refrains as we worked in four low-income schools (K-12) through the Stanford/San Jose Unified Teacher Corps Project. We couldn't blame teachers for not welcoming us with open arms. Teachers in our district were enduring a salary freeze, higher class size, and fewer teacher aides. In the wake of Proposition 13, they were facing massive layoffs and a disputed contract. Many teachers reacted to these pressures with a range of emotions from anger to despair, manifested by an official slowdown and threats of strike.

This paper describes specific strategies for initiating inservice in a growing number of schools like these which appear downright hostile to staff development. Recent research suggests that attempting change in this kind of school environment is a losing battle. RAND, for example, identifies a "healthy organizational climate" and "motivated participants" as essential preconditions at the school for a successful change agent project.² A secondary analysis of this data concludes that within this positive environment, successful innovation is most

likely when the project sponsoring the inservice and the schools receiving the inservice "mutually adapt" to each others' agendas.³

Left unanswered for us are two questions: 1. Can mutual adaptation occur in school environments lacking the preconditions identified by RAND? and 2. What are some specific strategies that contribute to achieving mutual adaptation?

On the basis of our first year's experience with Teacher Corps, we believe the answer to the first question is "yes." Inservice educators do not have to resign themselves to working in schools where they are needed least--that is, in schools which have healthy organizational climates and motivated participants. But to reach mutual adaptation in schools without these characteristics requires a very different relationship between the recipients and providers of inservice education.

The one key factor was to learn that practitioners were our colleagues rather than our clients. To build an environment of give and take essential to collegial relationships, we had to pay attention to changing needs in the schools, build trust and credibility, balance short-term and long-term goals, increase the decision making power of practitioners, and learn to be patient. This paper describes our efforts in each of these areas in the hope that others initiating inservice in less than salubrious climates will benefit from our experience. It is particularly directed to university faculty and students interested in conducting research as well as staff development.

Pay Attention to Changing Needs at the School

School people are overburdened with long, cumbersome needs assessments. Almost every categorical program requires a formal needs assessment that is usually out-of-date by the time it is submitted. With rapidly changing mandates from the federal,

state and district level and a high turnover of both teachers and students in inner-city schools, a one-shot, formal and complicated needs assessment does not make sense. We had to develop a variety of other ways to keep abreast of a staggering array of constantly changing needs.

One strategy was to require every person in the project to complete a one-page "Visitation Form" immediately after a contact at the school. The who, what, when, where and why on the forms was transferred to a card catalogue we labelled the "Concern File." This file was cross-referenced by school and subject area. Stanford people reviewed this file periodically before visiting schools and read it carefully before writing their plans for our second year. As a double-check to the "Concern File," we paid teachers and community members a small consultant fee to read and revise sections of our second-year proposal. They shared their reactions with Stanford teams in small group meetings. The result was a proposal reflecting the most up-to-date account of school concerns that could be obtained.

Build Trust and Credibility

School people do not want their students to be used as guinea pigs for some professor's experiment. They often fear that research means having their problems held up as dirty laundry for the rest of the world to see. University professors, especially in a place as research-oriented as Stanford, are generally viewed by teachers as living in an unreal world of computers, statistics, and self-motivated students. A major priority of our Project, then, was to build trust and credibility. The general strategies that seemed to work best were: carefully selecting personnel, completely familiarizing ourselves with each school, demonstrating our ability to deal with the concrete realities of the classroom teacher, maintaining high visibility at the schools, and gaining the support of administrators.

The university personnel who worked most closely with the schools were graduate assistants in various component areas of the Teacher Corps Project, (i.e., reading, writing, math, P.E., social studies, bilingual education, multicultural education, discipline and administration). Each graduate assistant worked under the direction of a Stanford faculty member. Since graduate assistants were the key link between the Stanford and school faculties, they had to be selected with care. A requirement for the position was previous teaching or administrative experience not in an elite, suburban school but in an urban environment. Once teachers saw that these "academics" had a practical understanding of their situation, they were more open to exchanging ideas with them and with their Stanford faculty advisor.

Building credibility also requires gaining a working knowledge of how each school operates. This means more than learning the statistics on enrollment, test scores and absence rates. We had to learn about the informal groupings and power structure in the schools. This meant sitting in on faculty and departmental or "pod" meetings, and listening to a wide array of teachers, administrators, students and parents. In this way, we identified at each school key people who were most knowledgeable about how the school really operated.

As well as learning about each Project School, Teacher Corps people from Stanford had to show that they could deal with life in the classroom. Graduate assistants and Stanford faculty introduced new curriculum materials in the classroom, tested students, and occasionally took over classrooms to free teachers for inservice education. One of our graduate assistants counselled students referred to the principal for behavior problems. When teachers saw that he was effective in improving the behavior of these youngsters, his credibility soared. By the end of the year, he had organized a committee of teachers and students that totally revamped the discipline policy of the school.

A large part of trust building is simply being there. By assisting in classroom activities, eating lunch with faculty members, participating in staff meetings, attending student activities, and even lifting a few beers with the Friday afternoon TGIFers, we attempted to become a welcome part of the school landscape.

In retrospect, the seed for a number of our inservice activities was planted at these spontaneous encounters. For example, during a chat in the high school faculty lounge, we learned from a few reading teachers of their anxiety about proficiency tests for graduation. Our reading team immediately did a content analysis of student performance on the test. Within a few days, they provided reading teachers a list of test items most frequently missed by their students and suggestions for raising test scores.

All these efforts to build trust and credibility with teachers would have been futile without the support of the principal. The principal is the school "gatekeeper" of educational reform.⁴ The principal can identify teachers who will be interested in various parts of the project. The principal also provides recognition to those who participate in "extra" activities such as inservice planning and training. We, therefore, met frequently with school administrators. Administrators rewarded our efforts by supporting the Project through attending inservice sessions, introducing us to teachers who were interested in working with us and publicizing our work through their faculty meetings.

Balancing Short-term and Long-term Goals

To gain the support of university faculty, an inservice program must allow researchers to develop a continuing relationship with school people in order to collect data over time. To gain the support of school staffs, teachers need to see results without waiting months or even years. There is, thus, a built-in tension between university professors

committed to long-term research and practitioners facing daily crises.

The best solution for balancing long-term goals with short-term needs is to negotiate. The university faculty agrees to help fulfill some short-term goals in exchange for the promise to conduct studies. We have found that it is best to let school people know the specific terms of the exchange agreement. We advocate that agreements between university and school personnel be written in minutes of their meeting so that each has a clear idea of what is expected. We suggest that both parties read over and revise these minutes into a blueprint for future activities.

Before teachers agree to cooperate in a research study, university staff may have to help accomplish short-term goals. Those activities which addressed an important need and were highly visible recruited converts to the Project. For example, Teacher Corps involvement in developing a slide/tape show to orient new students and parents to one of our Project schools was instrumental in winning the support of school people.

Increase the Decision Making Power of Clients

In our Project, teachers decided if they needed inservice, the type of training, and the times it would be offered. Teachers helped formulate the inservice agenda in three ways: 1. by informally voicing their concerns to Project people, 2. by revising the Project proposal, and 3. through their representatives on the School Steering Committee. The School Steering Committee which met at least once a month, was composed of representatives from each Project school. It was responsible for approving expenditures for teacher inservice stipends and instructional materials. Control over the budget is a necessary condition for real decision making power.

A less formal but effective way to increase the decision making power of clients is to identify the leaders in the school and elicit their input in the

planning stages of the inservice program. For example, in the writing component the graduate assistant interviewed department chairpersons and other teacher leaders to ascertain the different types of writing teachers required and their assessment of the writing level of students. Bridging the gap between teacher demands and student skills became the theme of a two-year program in cooperation with the Bay Area Writing Project. The core of participants in this ongoing inservice activity was the teachers and their recruits whose interview responses shaped the program.

Learning to be Patient

Of all the lessons we learned in our first year, to be patient was perhaps the most difficult. In the beginning stages of the Project, it was not uncommon for teachers to break appointments at the last minute, to arrive at a workshop explaining that they had to leave in ten minutes, or to politely request that we stop pestering them. Because the Project staff and university people had to drive over half an hour to the schools, these behaviors were particularly disheartening. In one school, we were pretty much ignored for several months.

Patience also dictated that we start small. Taking advice from Dale Mann in Making Change Happen, our aim was to gain the acceptance of a "critical mass" of teachers at each school.⁵ Mann defines a critical mass as approximately one quarter of a school staff. This modest expectation allowed frequent meetings with many individual teachers and small groups over the course of the year. Each of our teams began by contacting one or two teachers whom the principal or colleagues had identified as potentially interested in Project activities. Sometimes, two or three meetings with these individuals were necessary before we could suggest that other teachers might want to join us. Other times, a teacher would ask us to come back the following week when arrangements could be made to invite colleagues. These key individuals

were much more successful in recruiting other teachers than we were. When they began a meeting saying, "These people can help us," the battle was more than half over.

Negativism flourishes in large groups. When the same topic was presented in a large faculty meeting and in a small informal group, the topic would be greeted with silence in the large meeting, but would spark lively discussion in the smaller group. We learned to approach large groups of teachers only when we had established our cadre of support.

For the better part of our first year, we were unsuccessful in building such a cadre at one of the Project schools. When this school staff repeatedly refused to participate in Project activities, we simply waited. It took several months before they made a tentative request for a workshop to improve writing skills. They were pleased with the workshop. They soon requested assistance in other areas including reading and multicultural education. We are convinced that a more aggressive approach at this school would have resulted in the staff severing ties with our Project. The payoff for patience is a strong cadre of teachers who are enthusiastic supporters of Teacher Corps.

FOOTNOTES

1. Staff Development Newsletter, September 1975, Professional Development Associates, Stanford/San Jose Unified Teacher Corps, Austin, Texas.
2. RAND, Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change, Vol. IV, Findings in Review (prepared by Paul Berman and Edward Pauly), April, 1975.
3. Milbrey, McLaughlin, "Implementation is Mutual Adaptation: Change in Classroom Organizations" in Making Change Happen? (Ed. Dale Mann), New York: Teachers College Press, 1978, pp. 19-31.
4. Mann, Dale, "The Politics of Training Teachers in Schools" in Making Change Happen? (Ed. Dale Mann), New York: Teachers College Press, 1978, pp. 8-9.
5. Ibid, pp. 6-7.