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The Faces of Professional Development in Education

Multiple Intelligences at Work

I'd like to find a one best way, but that's just not the way it is.

—our reflective observer

Organizations—Models—Environments—Professional Growth

Forty years ago Bob Schaefer (1967) had it right in *The School as a Center of Inquiry*. He portrayed the school as a place where both students and educators are inquirers, where attention to learning by teachers and administrators has a place side by side with learning by students.

Schools are designed to teach students how to learn. Primarily, this is accomplished by healthy and growing educators. Our best and most exciting schools are places where the adult educators are in a high state of growth and give each other energy, knowledge, and skill. A high-growth environment for the adults infects the students.

Staff development is about learning—the belief that we are never finished. Our need for learning does not put us down but rather opens a better quality of professional and personal life. Also, students learn in proportion to the amount of learning that we do. Our learning propels their learning.

Professional development comes into being through deliberate actions by the organization—usually the district or school, sometimes the state or province—to generate learning by educators, to make the school a learning laboratory for teachers and administrators. These actions result in the various forms of staff development that are practiced today. These forms are directed toward several purposes, including

- Enhancing the school as a good place for learning by educators
- Enhancing the school as an organization, one that generates a high quality of life for students and staff alike
- Providing opportunities for professional learning by staff, from basic knowledge and skill to new approaches to curriculum and instruction, including tools for inquiring into student learning
- Enhancing the collaborative dimension of the school and reducing isolation, enabling the faculty to work together to help the students reach high states of growth

Note that several of these purposes deal simultaneously with improving the organizational climate of schools and the states of growth of the educators. Helping educators have a better quality of experience in the workplace and helping the school become a more positive and warm institution are worthwhile in themselves. These become the focus of the first level of evaluation in staff development and school renewal. Also, a generative social climate will lead to efforts to better curriculum and instruction for students, but as a derivative of educators' growth. However, in the models where curricular and instructional initiatives are central, the growth of the educators needs to lead directly to increased student learning.

Importantly, an approach to professional development can legitimately be used before there is solid evidence that student learning will change or increase. In fact, the most common forms of professional development do not have clear evidence of the student learning that will come from them. In the future, the evaluation of all approaches needs to generate documented educator learning, and the evaluation of initiatives in curriculum and instruction needs always to include the study of student learning.

Now, let's look at the most common ways that professional development services are provided to educators. Then, let's look at the processes by which they are nested in school and state organizations.

that have not yet been distributed in Canada. The Gunning assessment is of performance. The students' levels are measured directly by having them read material at various levels of complexity. Performance measures are strikingly different from multiple-choice tests, where reading levels are inferred from response to structured tasks rather than from engagement in reading books and text passages.

The Gunning Results in Kindergarten

Table 5.1 presents the results for the initial kindergarten cohort group at the end of the kindergarten year.

Table 5.1

Percent of Students Reaching Gunning Levels at End-of-Year Testing

| Level | Percent Reaching Level |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Picture (a few words, closely connected to pictures) | 2 |
| Caption (picture books, with text in captions) | 26 |
| Easy sight (simple text that carries meaning) | 30 |
| Above Easy Sight (extended text in complex stories) | 42 |

The students learned to read somewhat better than first-grade students usually did in our school district with an important addition—they *all* learned to read at some level. All eight sections apparently succeeded in bringing all the students to some level of print literacy. About 40 percent of the students appeared to be able to read extended text, and another 30 percent manifested emergent ability to read extended text. Twenty percent reached the 2-A level, which includes long and complex passages and requires the exercise of complex skills both to decode and infer word meanings. All the students could manage at least the simplest level of books. Very important to us was that no students experienced abject failure. Even the student who enters first grade reading independently at the picture level carries alphabet recognition, a substantial storehouse of sight words, and an array of phonetic and structural concepts to the first-grade experience. However, a half dozen students needed to be watched closely in Grade 1 because, although they were able to handle books at the caption level, they labored at the task, manifesting difficulty either in recognizing text-graphics relationships or using their phonetic or structural generalizations to attack unfamiliar words.

In previous years, about 30 percent would have been at the picture level or below at the end of Grade 1 at the end of the academic year.

instruction or achievement, it would be hard to claim that the change made a positive difference.

Although a simple design does not rule out factors other than the treatment, it is worthwhile and important. Many districts have instituted block scheduling because it is highly publicized but have not conducted their own evaluations. Those who have conducted them have much more information about whether to continue the practice.

Evaluations of initiatives in schools and school districts need to focus on the nature and effects of curriculums, ways of teaching, and the social climate provided to the students. But districts need not try to rule out all competing variables, and often it would be impractical to try. And schools are places of teaching and learning. Laboratory-style research can be set up temporarily to test a theory or practice, but making a school laboratory-pure would be like taking the air out of it. However, evaluations should be done carefully and with a eye on variables that might confound findings.

The evaluations of professional development models need to concentrate on resulting teacher behavior before proceeding to incorporate measures of student learning. Frequently staff development “evaluations” consist of the use of opinionaires after workshops or meetings of professional learning communities. There is little correlation between attitudes toward sessions and the use of new practice. Actual change has to be studied.

Design of Research in Field Settings

In Chapter 5 we identified sets of programmatic investigations into curriculum and instruction and school renewal and training. Substantial quantities of such research exist, and the results can guide decision making about initiatives both in schooling and in staff development.

Here we will concern ourselves with the creation of designs that enable a professional development practice to be tested as schooling takes place.

The core of research into whether particular practices make a difference is to test those practices by using them under conditions that enable the assessment of effects to take place and reduce the possibility that any results are due to another cause.

Designing studies of educational treatments in field settings involves careful efforts to build in controls, including

- clarifying the treatment and its rationale;
- designing and implementing adequate professional development;

- studying implementation—verifying that the teachers have learned the treatment, can use it, and do use it;
- studying effects formatively if possible; and
- studying effects against a baseline. Frequently this involves measuring performance before, during, and at the end of the period of study. When tests are used, those administering them will have to be prepared to do so reliably.

Using these controls is straightforward but takes energy and, despite best efforts, almost always is flawed.

A Prototype Effort

Suppose we want to test a curricular or instructional strategy, a variation in social climate, or a staff development procedure, and the purpose of the procedure is to cause specific effects on student learning. We should begin with a study with a relatively small sample. (Actually, our Saskatoon studies were much larger than the size we recommend for first studies.)

We begin with a cooperative, perhaps collaborative, school district. Within a given elementary school grade, say fifth grade, we identify 20 classrooms randomly. We assign, again randomly, ten classrooms to our treatment and ten as controls.

We provide extensive training to the teachers of *both* groups. The content for the treatment group is the curricular / instructional strategy designed to generate the particular effects that are the focus of our study. The control group teachers receive training on a generic curricular strategy where the treatment effects are not targeted but the control strategy has relevance to the curriculum area of which the treatment is a part. For example, if the treatment content is skills for comprehending text, the control might be wider reading from classroom collections, as in the McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, and Brooks study described in Chapter 6.

A pretest, focused on the treatment outcome, is given to the students in both groups.

Let's suppose the treatment period is six months—October to March. Past research on curriculum and instruction has indicated that a period of that length is sufficient for treatment effects to show up. If they haven't appeared in that amount of time, they rarely will do so. In our case, the test will be given in October.

During implementation the teachers report their levels of use of the content of the training, and observers visit and estimate levels of use.

The posttest is given in March.