The Dilemmas of Professional Development

Why do so few staff development programs incorporate features that research has shown to be effective? Ms. Richardson suggests that the recommended practices may be at odds with America's culture of individualism.

BY VIRGINIA RICHARDSON

THE GROWING body of research on professional development has provided us with consistent guidelines for planning and implementing staff development that may lead to the reform and improvement of practice. I can say this because I have been engaged in professional development and have conducted research on the topic for nearly 20 years. But I have been intrigued, concerned, and frustrated by the fact that, while we have had research evidence on the characteristics of effective staff development programs for some time, these features are not commonly seen in practice.

Indeed, most of the staff development that is conducted with K-12 teachers derives from the short-term transmission model; pays no attention to what is already going on in a particular classroom, school, or school district; offers little opportunity for participants to become involved in the conversation; and provides no follow-up. We have been engaged in this form of staff development for years, knowing full well that this approach is not particularly successful. We know from many studies[1] that research-based professional development exhibits a number of characteristics. It should:

- be schoolwide;
- be long-term with follow-up;
- encourage collegiality;
- foster agreement among participants on goals and vision;
- have a supportive administration;
- have access to adequate funds for materials, outside speakers, substitute teachers, and so on;
- develop buy-in among participants;
- acknowledge participants' existing beliefs and practices; and
- make use of an outside facilitator/staff developer.

We have known about the first six characteristics for some time; the last three are more current. And there might not be complete agreement about the need for an outside facilitator/staff developer, because there is not yet enough research on this point to suggest that it is essential.[2]

One form of professional development that employs these characteristics is the inquiry approach,[3] which I will discuss in some depth below. With this approach, the participants determine their individual and collective goals, experiment with practices, and engage in open and trust-

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ing dialogue about teaching and learning with colleagues and outside facilitators.

Why are the nine characteristics listed above not standard practice in school districts' staff development programs? While I do believe their use is increasing, the overall approach still is not standard. For some time, I have been thinking about reasons why these research-based practices are avoided, and I've come up with a number of explanations. First, the approach is expensive. Second, such staff development processes need to take place over a long period of time. And, should the particular professional development process chosen be an inquiry approach, there are two additional reasons districts might avoid it: it is hard for a school district to determine how to support an inquiry approach (and even harder to figure out how to mandate it), and giving participants the power to make decisions about the goals to be pursued and the changes to be made might lead to unacceptable decisions. This last issue often leads districts to seek to standardize goals in advance, and that poses problems for teachers and professional developers who are involved in inquiry/constructivist processes.

But I am not completely satisfied with these explanations. There may in fact be a cultural norm — the norm of American individualism — that works against the use of research-based staff development practices and operates at a quite different level from the four reasons listed above. Let me explore this norm on the way to a discussion of a form of professional development that can bring teachers together around a problem and that requires their joint effort, while allowing them to maintain their sense of autonomy, expertise, and individual efficacy.

In approaching the cultural norm of individualism, I will refer to one of the most perceptive descriptions of the culture of individualism in American institutions and character that has ever been written. In the second part of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville focused on the remarkable independence and rugged individualistic nature of the life of an American.[4] In many nations, this foundational sense of independence and individualism is not present to the degree it is in the dominant culture of the United States.

Even as he was documenting the independence of the people he observed, de Tocqueville was not unconcerned about the problems posed by individualism, which he described as "a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows, and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself."[5] Against the background of individualism, he juxtaposed those "free institutions" — elections and political activities — that can bring people together in the understanding that they need one another. "Local freedom, then," he continued, "which leads a great number of citizens to value the affection of their neighbors and of their kindred, perpetually brings men together, and forces them to help one another, in spite of the propensities that sever them."[6] De Toqueville suggested that voluntary associations and intermediate institutions put America on the road to democratic liberty rather than to a situation that he feared: the tyranny of the majority.

What, then, does this have to do with professional development? The American character strongly affects the way in which many Americans — teachers and other professionals included — approach their work. In schools, it is abetted by the egg-crate environment and the practice of "closing the classroom door." Many classroom teachers would subscribe to the following view: "This is my space, and I am responsible for it. It is mine. It reflects me. I am the teacher here. This classroom is unique and is therefore unlike any other classroom because of my uniqueness and my particular group of students."

This sense of individuality pervades everything we do; it is in the air we breathe. We usually aren't completely aware of it, but it makes the development of a collective sense difficult for professionals and others even to contemplate. As teachers, the individualistic culture affects the way we think about change, how we seek help for the improvement of practice, whom we talk with about what we do in our classrooms. In fact, this way of being makes it very difficult to import great ideas from Japan or other nations where the ways of life are quite different.

I am not suggesting a change in this way of life. That would be a monumental task, and plenty has been written about the problems with communitarian life.[7] In fact, there is research indicating that teachers who avoid involvement in schoolwide or districtwide reform programs and "tinker" with change in their own classrooms are much more satisfied with their careers later in life than are those who are heavily involved in such projects.[8] It is certainly important to understand this insular way of life and its consequences whenever we are working with teachers in a change process.

Nonetheless, there are times when a collective sense of goals and instructional approaches is called for. I do believe that, at the school level, it is important that there be some understanding of a schoolwide reading program if one is interested in following individual students throughout their school careers, not just in a single grade or classroom. That is, it is probably important for some students

— particularly those at the lower end of the achievement scale — to have consistency in their programs across grade levels and, therefore, across teachers.[9] And the school is the ideal unit for reform because it is the level at which all parties can be involved in the decisions concerning reform.

One of the interesting things about all of this is that most education policies these days — particularly at the state and national levels — are working to break this individualistic way of life. These policies are pushing toward a standardization of curriculum and of teachers' ways of thinking. Proponents of these policies believe that such standardization might reduce the incidence of poor teaching and thus improve all teaching. And the push toward standardization is being felt through national standards and assessments for students, for teachers, and even for teacher educators.

However, these policies are pushing for collectivity only in the sense that they seek to have all teachers at a particular grade level teaching a particular subject matter using the same curriculum and the same approach. While these state and national policies are fighting the individualistic norms, they are not working toward any feasible alternative other than standardization — which I don't think is viable. If not handled very carefully, this effort could become an example of what de Tocqueville called too much government, a condition that "hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes and finally reduces the nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid . . . animals, of which the government is the shepherd."[10]

Here we are again, in the midst of an educational dilemma. The need for some sense of community activity with common goals is apparent today, but we probably shouldn't have too much of it. What's more, we must always be careful of the tyranny of the majority — a situation that would certainly come about if we were to attempt to mandate collectivity. And we probably shouldn't attempt to completely break the strong, independent, action-oriented culture that de Toqueville found in America. These individualistic norms are the default condition of teaching or any other professional activity in a democratic America. If once in a while we feel it is necessary to adjust these individualistic norms toward a more collective sense of teaching, we must first acknowledge their pervasiveness and then work to create an environment and the supporting structures to encourage the operation of voluntary collectivities with communal goals and actions around important topics in instruction.

This is where professional development comes in. What I would like to examine next is what we know and how we think about teacher change. This information can guide us as we consider the role of professional development and how we can all work toward a sense of collectivity for some of our educational activities.

TEACHER CHANGE

We have lived for a number of years with a model of change that suggests that teachers *don't* change, that they are recalcitrant. This view is itself changing, though we still hear it repeated quite often. The recalcitrance model of change assumes that someone outside the classroom claims to know what teachers should be doing. And teachers — when told about or trained in these other methods, curricula, approaches to students, or ways of thinking — simply refuse to implement them. Examples of different "ways of thinking" include the process approach of teaching writing or the introduction of a content area reading program in grade 2. Because some teachers don't implement these changes in their classrooms, many people conclude that teachers don't like to change — that they are recalcitrant.

On the other hand, there is considerable research that indicates that teachers change all the time. They reorganize their classrooms, try different activities and texts, change the order of topics in the curriculum, emphasize different interpersonal skills, and so on — all on a voluntary basis. When teachers experiment with new activities in their classrooms, they judge the new practices according to whether or not they "work." When these new activities engage the students, do not violate the teacher's particular need for control, match the teacher's beliefs about teaching and learning, and help the teacher respond to system-determined demands for such outcomes as high test scores, they are deemed to work. If they do, they are internalized and absorbed into the teacher's repertoire.

Our first step as professional developers is to try to operate within this naturalistic sense of teacher change. Since teachers change all the time, a strategy here would be to determine the ways in which they make their decisions to change and provide input and help when they do so. The second task is to help teachers see the usefulness of a collective approach to some change-related decisions and actions.

There is a popular and very effective way of working within this naturalistic model of change. It is called the inquiry approach. I have used this approach in several staff development programs designed to help teachers examine and improve their teaching of reading and the language arts. It is grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, and this affects the process.

Constructivism is the learning theory that suggests that

human knowledge is constructed within the minds of individuals and within social communities. The theory states that individuals create their own new understandings based on the interactions of what they know and believe with the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact. It is a descriptive theory that describes the way people actually *do* learn; it is not a normative theory that describes the way people *should* learn. It seems strange to be describing constructivist theory at this point because it is so much a part of our way of thinking about education these days that it may be thought of as our fundamental educational philosophy. However, it was introduced into schools relatively recently, and there are many, many classrooms in which this approach to teaching and learning is not present.

An inquiry approach to staff development has a number of characteristics that go beyond constructivism. It suggests that teachers have expertise that they can articulate, develop, and share. They also have questions, problems, and dilemmas that they are continually confronting. These and other questions and problems never go away, because many of them are enduring dilemmas.[11] Thus an orientation that seeks continuous improvement is desirable. This is not change merely for the sake of change, even though much in education looks like that. Instead, this is an orientation that continually examines practices, student learning, goals, and achievements and that allows us to adjust practices to more closely meet our goals. The inquiry approach also asks teachers to engage in systematic inquiry — beyond the inquiry that is normal in teaching — for purposes of addressing specific questions.

This approach does not differentiate between experienced and novice teachers, old and young teachers, male and female teachers. Those who have worked with an inquiry approach in professional development have found that participants may change their practices and may even change their beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning. Indeed, research has been conducted that indicates that the students of participating teachers gain in achievement — or at least learn what it is their teachers intend to teach. In my experience with this approach, for example, teachers changed their beliefs and practices, and their students gained in reading achievement.[12]

Despite such successes, I do not want to advocate just the inquiry approach and nothing else. There are two reasons. The first relates to the individualistic aspect of the inquiry approach — particularly the one that I worked with — and the second has to do with the need for a mixed model of professional development. Let me start with the first issue.

In the original inquiry project in which I was the staff developer, we brought the teachers in a particular school together every two weeks to talk about issues of common interest. But we also worked closely with individual teachers as they pursued their particular interests in their classrooms. This personalized work included videotaping and something called "practical arguments," in which the staff developer and the teacher examined the videotape together and talked about the premises behind the various decisions made and actions taken by the teacher.[13] (It is important to note that this staff development did not focus on a particular approach to reading. However, there was considerable expertise available to help teachers think about different approaches and classroom behaviors.) As researchers, we were interested in helping teachers think about, experiment with, and justify changes in their practice. The process fit within the norms of individualism and independence in the professional act of teaching.

The question then becomes, Why would I advocate a more collective approach to a reading program in a school? The answer seems obvious: it is for the students. It is not necessarily good for students — particularly low-achieving students — to move from one reading program to a very different one as they go from grade to grade. So while we might solve the problem of operating with teachers within a naturalistic framework of change, there is still the matter of developing a program that engages a group of teachers in solving a common problem that is best solved if they work together. For example, a group of teachers in a school could come up with a reading program that provides consistency for students as they travel from grade to grade.

Please note that such a process would be at the opposite end of the autonomy continuum from something like Success for All,[14] which also achieves the goal of providing all students in the school with a consistent program of reading instruction. After the teachers sign up for such a program (and there needs to be a strong buy-in from the teachers), they also buy into a highly scripted program that leaves them with few decisions concerning the nature of the curriculum. Is it possible to consider an approach in which the teachers have more autonomy in selecting their program and process?

Recently, M. Bruce King and Fred Newmann examined the relationship between staff development and the building of school capacity.[15] On the basis of some research on school reform and capacity building, King suggested that the inquiry approach would be effective for building capacity. Therefore he examined such staff development in a number of high-capacity schools in low-income settings. He decided that an inquiry approach has the following characteristics:

• teachers have considerable control over process and content;

• teachers critically discuss issues of school mission, curriculum, instruction, or student learning;

• teachers draw on relevant data and research to inform deliberations; and

• teachers sustain a focus on a topic or problem and reach a collective decision.

I am now engaged in just such a project at the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement at the University of Michigan, working with Barbara Taylor and David Pearson. The project is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, and is called the Instructional Change Study.[16] This project is working in a number of schools across the country, trying, in a sense, to "scale up" the inquiry approach, but also to ensure that the whole school is engaged in the effort.

There are a number of elements in the framework for this project. They are:

• 75% of the teachers in a given school must agree to participate;

• a school facilitator is hired to help teachers in the change process;

• the facilitator receives considerable training and support from the project;

• a change team within the school is appointed by the principal or selected by the other teachers;

• much of the planning goes on in grade-level meetings, and a member of each grade-level team is a member of the change team;

• there are no specific "answers," and teachers themselves determine what the changes will be in the schoolside reading program;

• teachers are given some expert help, are offered a number of choices of research-based programs, and have access to considerable additional help on a website devoted to the change process; and

• the project is data rich, with student test scores *and* results of classroom observations to be used by the teachers in developing their plans and by the researchers in assessing the success of the project.

This framework is based on our examination of the research literature on school organizational change and teacher change. I think de Tocqueville would be pleased. In a sense, we are working with a "free institution" in which a voluntary group of teachers can see the need to improve early reading instruction in their schools. In order to participate, they must work together and use one another's expertise to build a reading program for the whole school.

I mentioned above that there is a second reason that keeps me from recommending that all professional development be inquiry oriented. It has to do with the fact that an inquiry program leads to a particular form of change — changing beliefs and understandings with regard to instructional practice and subject matter. It also leads to an improvement orientation and to significant reforms in instructional practice. However, there are other goals for professional development, and staff development approaches other than inquiry might be more appropriate for pursuing these goals. Here are some of those other goals:

• *Increasing energy for the new school year.* A kind of rah-rah, feel-good process can help to increase energy for the task at hand. This is a legitimate goal and is usually handled by a skillful speaker, who can shift quickly from one topic to another, often accompanied by a multimedia presentation.

• *Learning a software program for use in instruction.* Direct instruction is probably fine for this goal. I am not interested in delving deeply into the theory of computers or the history of software used for these purposes, and I don't want to share deep understandings of computer usage with my colleagues. I just want to figure out how to make the thing work.

• *Obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the theoretical foundations of a process.* For example, suppose I were interested in reconnecting with the cognitive theory that frames reading in the content areas, so that I can begin to think through the teaching of reading in science and social studies in my second-grade classroom. A lecture will serve my needs just fine.

• *Learning about a specific practice in a fellow teacher's classroom.* In this case, classroom observation would be an excellent professional development approach.

Considerations such as these suggest that the approach to professional development must meet the specific goals of the institution or the individual planning to use the process. While the inquiry approach is effective for goals that involve changing beliefs, understandings, and practices, it might not be effective for all goals.

BACK TO DE TOCQUEVILLE

Let us first assume that it is important that the profession of teaching muster some collective effort around the needs of students. Yet we still have a strong "close the classroom door" mentality in our profession. Most of the writings that treat this topic blame the teachers or the institutions for promoting this attitude. What de Tocqueville suggests is that it is not simply our institutions that push for

an individualistic approach to teaching. Rather, it is a norm of the dominant culture that surrounds us. It is in our heads, our bodies, our beings.

If that is the case, we must think carefully about whether we really want to change this norm to allow for collective action. An examination of this issue suggests that the individualistic norm is extremely important in American professional lives. There is a certain sense of expertise, autonomy in practice, and self-efficacy that accompanies this way of life. A communitarian approach to change in schools and districts has its downsides, particularly in relation to the time that must be devoted to meeting in groups and coming to agreement about goals and implementation strategies. And such approaches may also be more difficult for those in the minority. Noddings points out: "In all strong communities, there is a significant measure of normocentricity . . . [which] can produce admirable or deplorable results."[17] While it is important that some collective activity within a school, school district, or state take place, it is probably not necessary for all aspects of teaching. Individual teachers need to see that it is in their own best interest to work together at times. But a forced collectivity could lead to the tyranny of the majority.

Thus a judicious approach that maintains individual autonomy while bringing teachers together to make crucial decisions collectively becomes a significant element of school reform through professional development. This approach certainly complicates the process of staff development. While those new to the field might think that all you need to do is tell the teachers the right things to do and make sure they do it, those of us who have been in it for a number of years know better. Professional development is a complex enterprise — full of ethical, structural, and cultural dilemmas. Considering such foundational sources as *Democracy in America* can help us think about the nature of the society within which we are working as we strive to achieve significant and worthwhile school change through professional development.

1. The following sources have informed my work in this area: Patricia Anders and Virginia Richardson, "Research Directions: Staff Development That Empowers Teachers' Reflection and Enhances Instruction," *Language Arts*, vol. 68, 1991, pp. 316-21; Tom Corcoran, "Schoolwork: Perspectives on Workplace Reform in Public Schools," in Milbrey McLaughlin, Joan Talbert, and Nina Bascia, eds., *The Contexts of Teaching in Secondary Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), pp. 142-66; Katherine Devaney and Lorraine Thorn, *Exploring Teachers' Centers* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1975); Michael Fullan, "Staff Development, Innovation and Institutional Development," in Bruce Joyce, ed., *Changing School Culture Through Staff Development* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1990), pp. 3-25; Claude Goldenberg and Ronald Gallimore, "Changing Teaching Takes More Than a One-Shot Workshop," *Educational Leadership*, November 1991, pp. 69-72; Gary Griffin, "Implications of Research for Staff Development Programs," *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 83, 1983, pp. 414-27; Bruce Joyce, "Prologue," in idem, pp. 1-3; Judith Warren Little, "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 19, 1982, pp. 325-40; Susan Loucks-Horsley et al., *Continuing to Learn: A Guidebook for Teacher Development* (Andover, Me.: Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands/National Staff Development Council, 1987); Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert, *Contexts That Matter* (Stanford, Calif.: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary Teaching, 1993); Mark Smylie, "The Enhancement Function of Staff Development: Organizational and Psychological Antecedents to Individual Teacher Change," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 25, 1988, pp. 1-30; and Beatrice Ward, "Teacher Development: The Challenge of the Future," in Shirley Hord, Susan O'Neal, and M. Smith, eds., *Beyond the Looking Glass* (Austin: Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, University of Texas, 1985), pp. 283-312.

2. However, the research that exists suggests that an outside facilitator might be helpful. See Deirdre LeFevre and Virginia Richardson, "Staff Development and the Facilitator," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 18, 2000, pp. 483-500.

3. Virginia Richardson, "Teacher Inquiry as Staff Development," in Sandra Hollingsworth and Hugh Sockett, eds., *Teacher Research and Educational Reform: 93rd NSSE Yearbook, Part I* (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 186-203.

4. A number of editions of de Tocqueville's classic work have been published. I used Richard D. Heffner's New American Library abridged edition from 1956, though I also referred to J.P. Mayer's complete edition, with a translation by George Lawrence, published by HarperCollins in 1969.

5. De Tocqueville, 1956, p. 193.

6. Ibid., p. 196.

7. Nel Noddings, "On Community," *Educational Theory*, vol. 46, 1996, pp. 245-67.

8. Michael Huberman, "The Professional Life Cycle of Teachers," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 91, 1989, pp. 31-58.

9. Virginia Richardson, "Professional Development in the Instruction of Reading," in Jean Osborn and Fran Lehr, eds., *Literacy for All: Issues in Teaching and Learning* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), pp. 303-18.

10. De Tocqueville, 1956, p. 201.

11. Ann Berlak and Harold Berlak, *Dilemmas of Schooling: Teaching and Social Change* (New York: Methuen, 1981).

12. Virginia Richardson, ed., *Teacher Change and the Staff Development Process: A Case in Reading Instruction* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994).

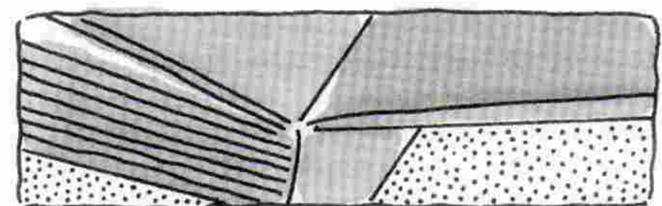
13. Gary D Fenstermacher, "The Place of Practical Arguments in the Education of Teachers," in Richardson, pp. 23-42.

14. Robert E. Slavin et al., *Every Child, Every School: Success for All* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Corwin, 1996).

15. M. Bruce King and Fred Newmann, "Will Teacher Learning Advance School Goals?," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2000, pp. 576-80; and M. Bruce King, "Professional Development to Promote Schoolwide Inquiry," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1999.

16. Information about this and other projects within the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement can be found at www.ciera.org.

17. Noddings, p. 254. K



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