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Starting With the Soul

How can we nurture teachers for the long haul? Stop putting subsistence strategies ahead of deeper needs.

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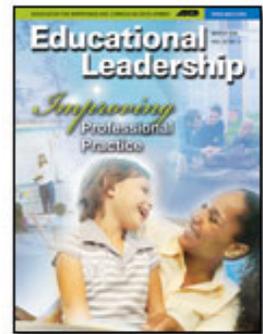
When it comes to professional development for teachers, we think Abraham Maslow had it wrong.

We make this claim partly because it has rhetorical flourish, but more because we believe that professional development practices in our schools adhere to a philosophical orientation resembling Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) posited that people are motivated by a certain order of needs: Our needs at the bottom of the pyramid, such as for food and safety, must be satisfied before we can pursue the higher needs of love, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

A similar logic holds sway in designing professional development. We assume that to be prepared for the reality of the classroom, teachers must first be trained in such subsistence strategies and techniques as classroom management, guided reading models, cooperative learning, and process writing. Once teachers learn these basic skills, we can address their higher needs by helping them reflect on their deeper purposes as educators. Yet as professional development workshops continue to emphasize content matter, technical skills, and pedagogical theory, many teachers are responding to these offerings with skepticism, impatience, and an underlying lack of enthusiasm (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003).

We believe that effective professional development and the powerful teaching it can cultivate require an inversion of Maslow's pyramid. We need to begin with the soul of the enterprise, the passion and purpose that animate teachers' ongoing commitment to students and learning. Too many of our conversations about effective teaching focus on content, teaching methods, and learning outcomes. We neglect teachers themselves, the individuals who step in front of students each day committed to engaging them in the unpredictable and challenging process of learning.

Teachers yearn for professional development experiences that not only advance their skills and knowledge base but also simultaneously probe their sense of purpose and invite deliberation about what matters most in good teaching. Evoking the inner life of our teachers—that is, engaging teachers in activities that cultivate their capacity to teach with greater consciousness, self-awareness, and integrity—is a necessary condition for successful professional development.



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Sustaining Growth for the Long Haul

Teaching day after day can exact a formidable toll on idealism, energy, and presence. No amount of professional development focused merely on technical proficiency will matter to teachers who are feeling overwhelmed, adrift in their mission, or disconnected from like-minded colleagues. You can be a lone ranger for only so long. Many teachers we work with describe their frustrations at professional development experiences focused on yet another curricular program, pedagogical innovation, or assessment tool. These teachers struggle most profoundly with how to keep learning and growing, and how to rekindle the sense of passion and purpose essential for maintaining such growth over the long haul. Schools need to better appreciate the role of professional development in sustaining teachers for the long term.

Models of Successful Growth

If we step back from our focus on schools and look at how any successful organization envisions professional development, it's not a stretch to say that groups who sustain their workers *do* turn Maslow's pyramid upside down.

Peter Senge's influential book *Schools That Learn* (2000) contends that if schools are to be successful in an increasingly competitive world—and if educators are to help students overcome systemic inequities—then schools must become organizations staffed by individuals who know how to learn and grow. Senge lays out the five disciplines of an organization that learns: personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking.

Senge asserts that instead of emphasizing the cultivation of technical skills or strategies, professional guidance should begin by helping each individual articulate a coherent personal vision. The primary challenge is to help people develop a set of practices that “keep their dreams whole while cultivating an awareness of the current reality around them” (p. 59). Effective reform and personal growth begin when individuals work to develop a deep understanding of their own thinking and when an organization comes together to foster a sense of shared purpose.

Two organizational researchers from Stanford (Collins & Porras, 1994) who examined what distinguishes an organization that is merely “good” from one that has achieved enduring success discovered that collective passion and mission were at the core of the latter kind of organization. Their findings dramatically support our contention. Organizations that flourish tend to be guided by what Collins and Porras call a “core ideology” that is infused among group members. The emergence of this ideology is not left to chance; the organization intentionally cultivates it by making it the centerpiece of regular professional development activities. This core ideology serves as the driving purpose and inspiration behind decision making, employee development, and resource allocation.

Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (1998) speak more specifically about reforming the profession of teaching. They argue that education policymakers and administrators typically overlook the role that a teacher's sense of purpose plays in education change. Educators will not change their practice, adopt new methods, or rethink their approach if they do not believe

in the goals of the reform. Hargreaves and Fullan advocate going deeper, leading teachers into hard thinking and soul searching about the fundamental value and purpose of what we do as educators.... Going deeper, in other words, involves purpose, passion and hope. (p. 29)

Professional Development for Inner Reflection

Weaving a focus on purpose, passion, and hope into professional development is no small feat, particularly in the face of such constraints as lack of time, slashed budgets, and the pressures of standardized tests. The cumulative effect of these pressures creates a sense of short-term urgency that often pushes those responsible for professional development toward one-shot training sessions in an effort to support teachers. We have witnessed how much more effective professional development can be when it puts equal focus on teachers' inner life and reflection. The following two models foster this balance.

Courage to Teach

One professional development program that focuses on the "person in the profession" is Courage to Teach. This program seeks to renew and deepen an educator's sense of purpose and to invite each teacher to explore what is important about his or her work. Parker Palmer piloted the program in 1994 with a group of Michigan teachers, and in 1997 the Fetzer Institute established the Center for Teacher Formation to develop and expand Courage to Teach. In this model, 20–30 teachers gather for a three-day retreat every academic quarter over a one- or two-year timespan. In groups and singly, participants explore what is at the heart of teaching for each of them, using personal stories, reflections on classroom practice, and insights from literature and various wisdom traditions. Consider a typical Courage to Teach group session:

Twenty-five teachers and administrators sit in a circle, giving their full attention as an elementary teacher speaks passionately, and poignantly, about her love for her students and her commitment to reach each and every one of them. She goes on to tearfully describe the personal toll this is taking on her own life—creeping guilt at not having enough time or emotional energy to give to her own family, bone-deep exhaustion, nonstop worrying about the safety of some of her students, the weariness of facing an always burgeoning mountain of papers and projects to grade, a sense of increasing isolation from friends and colleagues because there is simply no more to give. The listeners sit quietly, respectfully, as she finishes, each reflecting on their own version of her story....

The next person to speak, a newly appointed principal, describes her recent attempts to mediate an explosive situation between a student, his parents, and a teacher. In the midst of helping the parties work through their threats and misunderstandings, she has become aware of the heavy burden of responsibility she carries. Yet in the telling of her story, she also is recognizing a growing confidence and inner sense of authority, grounded not in her role as a new principal but in her personal integrity. And on around the circle it goes—each person relating stories and examples of how their complex journey as teachers and leaders has unfolded since the last time they

were together a few months ago. (Jackson & Jackson, 2002)

As this vignette illustrates, Courage to Teach retreats do not focus on pedagogical methods or content knowledge, but rather on exploring personal and professional beliefs and how these beliefs affect our teaching. Facilitators also encourage participants to continue to reflect privately and with their colleagues during the school year. This inner exploration by teachers builds the foundation they need to engage with ongoing activities at the other end of Maslow's hierarchy—pedagogy, content, and policy.

Multi-Level Learning

Dutch researcher Fred Korthagen (2004) and his colleague Angelo Vasalos (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) have developed an approach to professional development that uses insights drawn from psychotherapy and research on human consciousness to support intensive reflection on teaching practice. This approach, which they call *Multi-level Learning*, invites teachers to think about specific events in their teaching and to engage in a process called *core reflection*. The idea behind core reflection is that a teacher's core personality—including his or her identity and mission—profoundly influences the way that teacher practices. Teachers reflect on their core qualities by exploring such questions as, Why did you become a teacher? and What do you see as your calling in the world?

Multi-level Learning also aims to help teachers develop specific coaching behaviors that support their colleagues as well as their students. Because mastering such behaviors requires practice, Multi-level Learning is not taught through a retreat, but through courses of about three days each spread out over two to three months. Participating teachers practice specific interventions for learning how inner realities influence their teaching behavior and apply these guidelines to their own learning and problem solving. Between course days, teachers practice using what they have learned with their students and also with their teaching colleagues. The approach is currently used to enhance teaching throughout the Netherlands, and there are plans to offer Multi-level Learning courses in the United States.

Improving Teaching

Programs like Courage to Teach and Multi-level Learning reconfigure the cycle that now dominates the landscape of professional development in education, ensuring that professional development begins by addressing those issues at the pinnacle of a teacher's professional life. Once teachers' purposes are clarified, their emotional resources rejuvenated, and their spirits nurtured, they will more effectively engage with their students, their colleagues, and their methods.

Poutiatine (2005) reviewed the empirical research studies that have been conducted on teacher renewal programs and concluded that participation in such programs results in significant personal and professional growth. Teachers who took part in experiences like Courage to Teach or Multi-level Learning

- Articulated a renewed sense of passion for their work.
- Focused more on creating hospitable learning environments for students.

- Devoted more attention to framing good questions and listening to students.
- Clarified and renewed core beliefs about students and teaching.
- Committed to taking on leadership roles at their school sites.
- Deepened their appreciation for collegial relationships.

The process of telling about and reflecting on one's teaching life not only invites attitudinal change but also can stimulate changes in teaching behavior and classroom procedures. Professional development with this focus brings to the fore individuals' inner directives about teaching. With greater awareness of how those inner directives play out in their professional practice, teachers can make more discerning judgments on what's worth fighting for, letting go, or attending to in their daily teaching practice and in their long-term professional lives. As one Courage to Teach participant said,

After I turned inward and asked myself what was really important in my teaching, I began altering the basic structure of my classroom. First I found myself asking more questions and really listening to what my students said. Then I started to alter the physical arrangement of the classroom, so that students were facing each other and engaging in more reflective exercises about the literature they read.

Working From the Inside Out

In a climate of standardized tests, prescribed curricular strategies, and high-stakes accountability, it is understandable that many administrators and policymakers might construe a focus on teachers' inner lives as a luxury, or at least as secondary to such issues as pedagogical technique and curriculum development.

But if we are right about needing to invert Maslow's pyramid, then professional guidance focused on rekindling teachers' sense of purpose is no luxury. Rather, it is the foundation that enables teachers to engage in deliberation on student learning and effective schools. Without laying the groundwork that creates purposeful, resilient teachers, any benefits of training centered around new procedures, techniques, and strategies will eventually fade. Overloaded teachers who work in isolation will not retain what it takes to do their most inspired teaching.

As one veteran kindergarten teacher said, comparing programs that focus on the inner life with more conventional forms of professional development,

This approach did not offer a prepackaged right answer, technique, or style. There was not "something" that one could bring back to the classroom for Monday morning in a tangible way. Yet I would bring more of myself to the classroom each time.... Therefore, I was a better teacher. (Intrator & Scribner, 1998, p. 33)

As it turns out, Maslow had it right. It is human nature to feel compelled to attend to our concrete, immediate needs before we aim higher. Efficient, programmatic professional development that focuses on content or classroom survival skills may appeal to schools because such programs seem to represent the education equivalent of food and safety. But

such programs alone don't ultimately answer teachers' deepest needs. If we want schools to sustain and develop effective teachers for the long term, and to foster both teacher growth and student learning, then we must recognize that the way to truly increase teachers' capacities and skills is to engage their souls.

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