

Opportunities for Growth

DALE V. ALAM

**Assistant Professor, Department of Secondary
Education and Curriculum, Michigan State University, East Lansing**

TEACHER growth and in-service opportunities are considered by many educators to be synonymous terms. In reality, teacher growth is the goal of in-service opportunities; however, such growth cannot be guaranteed as a result of these opportunities. Whether positive growth results from the in-service education opportunities that are provided, depends upon what the teacher experiences in the process. How does the teacher feel about the results of the curriculum study? Threatened? Distrustful? Bored? Eager?

A recent study of teachers' attitudes and the in-service experience included 21 Florida secondary schools.¹ Some of the schools were engaged in curriculum studies while others were not. Questions asked in the study included the following:

- Do teachers' expressed attitudes toward students, toward the principal, toward other teachers, tend to become more or less favorable as the school year progresses?
- Does faculty involvement in a curriculum study help foster favorable attitudes in teachers? Does it matter if a university person conducts the curriculum study?

The study revealed that during the school term teachers' expressed attitudes in all schools shifted in the negative direction in terms of their attitudes toward students, the principal, and other teachers.

Forced curriculum studies had little effect on the expressed attitudes of the teachers. Only those forced curriculum studies directed by university personnel made a positive contribution. In curriculum studies in which university personnel were included, the degree of involvement was greater on the part of the faculties. This does not suggest that the university personnel necessarily made the differ-

¹ Dale V. Alam. "The Relationship Between School Self-evaluation Procedures and Changes in Teachers' Expressed Attitudes in Six Areas of Professional Human Relations." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville, 1966.

ence. It does suggest, however, that the degree of teacher involvement is related to the favorable attitude shift.

Several implications of the study seem to be important to persons engaged in curriculum development and supervision. Those responsible for in-service education need to consider the matter of teacher involvement in planning. In-service activities must be designed to get at the attitude level of teachers. They must be helped to feel better about themselves and their profession.

Often, too little effort is expended in removing or reducing barriers which hinder teachers in using practices consistent with their commitment or with sound educational theory. Many worthy teacher ideas are buried in gripe sessions or reduced to nothing as they fall on deaf ears. Teachers' ideas must be encouraged by providing opportunities in which these ideas can be explored and tested.

Teachers must be given opportunity to examine commitments they now hold and to reflect on new evidence which will challenge practices. Such opportunities are generally lacking in schools, as in-service sessions are usually aimed at the teacher rather than viewed as developing from the teacher.

Common in-service education practices seem to reflect several assumptions:

1. That the existing gap between teacher-held beliefs and practice is narrow enough to be ignored.
2. That the barriers viewed by teachers as confining and dictating content are real and insurmountable.
3. That true teacher growth occurs outside the confines of the group of teachers in any one school setting.

Surely no educator is willing to accept these assumptions as final. Rather such assertions may emphasize the challenge awaiting all educational leaders.

Surely there are some general dimensions of growth that can serve as guidelines in in-service education. Although there are probably many such dimensions, it seems important to list a few.

Meaningful Growth

In order that the teacher may experience growth:

1. In-service opportunities for teachers must provide for personal growth as well as for faculty growth. Practices of the classroom teacher give plentiful evidence that beliefs regarding what the teacher views as important are far from universal. It is senseless to believe that growth requires a consensus, but a growth experience should provide the opportunity for teachers to expose these beliefs so they can be tested by others. Often teachers are conditioned to conceal these beliefs rather than expose them. The act of concealing inhibits growth.
2. In-service opportunities for teachers require that new data be introduced to test further these stated beliefs. These are not necessarily current research findings, though they could be. These new data could easily lead to a guided effort on the part of teachers to integrate separate data into a meaningful context. For

example, few teachers realize the importance of viewing content in terms of their beliefs about student freedom, or human motivation. This integrating process can provide involvement that may result in growth.

3. In-service opportunities should help teachers begin to identify existing perceived barriers so that alternative proposals can be considered. These alternative proposals need to reflect new data gained through the growth experience. An example of this might be reflecting on the grading system in terms of stated beliefs about the learning process, human motivation, content, instructional media, and new knowledge of the nature of the learner.

4. In-service opportunities for teachers should help develop faculty trust. Without trust it is impossible for faculty members really to share their beliefs and feelings. Beliefs cannot be tested until they are openly expressed.

5. In-service opportunities for teachers should focus on the rationale which supports past and future decisions made by teachers. Too often the focus is on some innovative school program in practice somewhere. This experience presupposes a rationale based on teacher commitment.

Unless the rationale is clear and encompasses the commitments held by the teachers, it is a hopeless enterprise. The fact is, many educational planners hold that studying such an innovation will, in and of itself, provide for teacher growth. Obviously this is backward. The innovation must be an expression of teacher-held beliefs.

6. In-service opportunities should help teachers to examine the gap between their professed beliefs and their practice. If this margin is slight then this means either that the beliefs are inconsistent with those reflected in research and theory or the teacher is an exceptionally fine teacher. Once teachers examine this margin in the light of their commitments, then the barriers that seem to control their practices should be examined and reduced.

7. In-service opportunities for teacher growth require time. Beliefs are not changed or barriers reduced in one afternoon. Trust is not developed during faculty meetings. It is essential that the growth experience be viewed as continuous.

One possibility for initiating such an experience would be to bring the university to the school. Graduate courses should be offered the total faculty on their own ground where recommendations can be implemented and where continuing growth can evolve. Once initiated, a curriculum council or steering committee can continue the process and turn to resources which are deemed important for their growth.

Teachers need to begin to identify growth experiences for themselves, but this requires a different kind of opportunity than that typically offered teachers. Once teachers are identified as curriculum decision makers, then they should feel free enough personally to grapple with this concept of teacher growth. Until this occurs, in-service practices will remain in the control of a few and growth will be erroneously assumed. ❧

Copyright © 1967 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.