

Teachers' Strengths: Basis for Successful In-Service Experiences

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IN-SERVICE teacher education is potentially one of the most important and effective means of helping teachers acquire current professional information and learn alternative teaching strategies. This paper is addressed to techniques designed to assure successful in-service programs.

The Problem

Traditional in-service programs often have been ineffective in spite of substantial investments of time, funds, and consultant services. In many instances, teachers have found in-service programs threatening, confusing, or irrelevant (Harris, 1966). Teachers who are threatened by in-service programs may feel that their approaches or techniques have been wrong and that their skills are inadequate. Teachers also may fear trying new teaching strategies because of past failures (Conlin, 1967; Williams, 1966).

Other teachers become confused by in-service programs which deal with techniques or methods that appear to be in conflict with current procedures. Teachers become uneasy about what they are doing, yet do not know what they might do differently (Harris, 1966). Confusion may result when information is presented without practical suggestions for its implementation. Conflicting

testimony from consultants often adds another source of confusion.

Teachers are also critical of in-service programs which they feel are irrelevant to the problems confronting them and the children they teach. The problem of irrelevancy is intensified when consultants come to an in-service situation and attempt to *impose* upon teachers a particular method or technique.

A major reason for teachers' criticism of—or lack of response to—traditional in-service programs appears to be the emphasis placed on teachers' *deficiencies*. Too often administrators, supervisors, and consultants have looked for what is wrong, rather than what is right, with teachers and their teaching. Frequently teachers' interests, wishes, and teaching strengths have been ignored or overlooked when in-service programs are designed. Taken together, the problems make traditional in-service programs an intolerable threat to the security and professional well-being of many teachers.

The dilemma is intensified when those who plan and implement the in-service work are not held accountable for the results of the program. This lack of accountability may

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lead to lack of evaluation and to a perpetuation of the failure of in-service programs.

A Solution

One solution to the problem of providing relevant, effective in-service programs might be found in looking for teachers' strengths and assets and in accepting teachers' own interests and concerns. Waetjen states, "If a person is accepted and valued and esteemed, he becomes an inquiring person and he actualizes himself" (Waetjen, 1965, p. 243). Raths emphasizes that "... if those around us have genuine respect for us, they will not want to remake us into images of themselves" (Raths, 1954, pp. 159-60).

Maximum involvement of teachers in planning the in-service program appears to be another solution to the problem. Harris advises that planning should be "undertaken cooperatively, with those persons to be affected by the in-service program systematically involved in all stages of the planning" (Harris, 1966, p. 260). Results of a study by DeCarlo and Cleland reflect the positive attitudes which teachers develop toward in-service programs which give them what they want and need (DeCarlo and Cleland, 1968).

The following guidelines based on teachers' strengths and providing for maximum teacher involvement may be useful in planning in-service work:

1. Identify teachers' strengths, interests, and concerns through observation and discussion.
2. Utilize teachers' strengths, interests, and concerns in planning and conducting the in-service program.
3. Provide a feedback system whereby teachers can inform consultants if information is useful, relevant, and clear enough for implementation.
4. Guarantee consulting results in performance terms.

Project Bonus

Project Bonus, a Title I summer program in Carroll County, Maryland, serves as a model of an in-service program built on

teachers' strengths, interests, and concerns and providing maximum involvement of teachers in planning and implementation.

Project Bonus involved two phases. Phase I involved a week of in-service training in reading for teachers, and Phase II consisted of six weeks of pupil instruction. Consultant assistance was available during both phases.

Planning

1. In the initial planning session, county administrators met with university personnel to discuss the general objectives and dimensions of the project. Following this, consultants visited the Title I classrooms in Carroll County to meet the principals, teachers, and children who would be involved in the project. During the initial visits, consultants noted materials and instructional techniques which teachers used well and asked principals the question, "What do you believe are the greatest professional strengths of the teachers and aides on your staff who will be working in Project Bonus?"

2. A planning meeting was arranged in which teachers, aides, and resource personnel met in small groups to discuss interests, strengths, and concerns. A checklist of objectives to guide the workshop was developed on the basis of the interests and concerns identified by the teachers.

3. A second series of school visits was scheduled during which each teacher involved in Project Bonus met with a consultant-resource teacher team to discuss the proposed objectives. Teachers were asked to indicate which of the objectives were of greatest interest to them and to add any objectives which they felt were important. Each teacher was asked to list at least one area in which he felt he could be of help to other teachers or aides. The consultants noted special abilities or expertise with techniques and materials which each teacher displayed.

4. A new set of objectives was formulated on the basis of teacher reaction to the original objectives. The new set of objectives,

the Project Bonus Objectives Checklist, became the blueprint for the workshop and the basis for post-workshop evaluation. This list follows:

PROJECT BONUS OBJECTIVES CHECKLIST (Check each one Yes or No)

1. Teachers will be able to use alternate strategies in teaching reading comprehension. For example:

- a. Teachers can stimulate peer questioning.
- b. Teachers can stimulate questioning beyond a literal level.
- c. Teachers can develop activities that allow children to work together.
- d. Teachers can develop activities that require manipulation of materials.

2. Teachers will be able to use the language experience approach and develop skills from it. For example:

- a. Teachers can draw a story from children.
- b. Teachers can use experience stories to develop sight vocabulary.
- c. Teachers can use experience stories to develop comprehension skills.
- d. Teachers can use experience stories to develop discrimination skills.

3. Teachers will be able to use alternate strategies to workbook type independent activities. For example:

- a. Teachers can use learning centers to stimulate creative writing.
- b. Teachers can help children use magazines, newspapers, and photographs in independent activities.

4. Teachers will be able to develop skills in book sharing. For example:

- a. Teachers can use role playing or creative dramatics for book sharing.
- b. Teachers can encourage the use of alternate endings or different titles for stories.

5. Teachers will be able to examine the performance of children to determine their strengths. For example:

- a. Teachers can diagnose strengths from oral reading.
- b. Teachers can use interest groups or skill groups.

Guarantee

The consultants guaranteed county administrative coordinators that at least 80 percent of the teachers would indicate that they had met all the objectives proposed for the workshop. Consultant pay was based upon that guarantee.

Implementation

Project Bonus was initiated by having teachers, aides, and resource teachers meet in groups of three to tell one another of their experiences, abilities, and teaching strengths. These were summarized, recorded, and immediately distributed to workshop participants, consultants, and visitors. The summary sheet helped workshop participants to use peers in consultant roles.

Teachers who had previous experience with materials or techniques described at the workshop assisted other teachers in micro-teaching situations and frequently acted in a resource capacity. For example, teachers familiar with the language experience approach did peer teaching to demonstrate techniques such as recording stories. One teacher displayed pupil-made books and explained how independent activities could be developed from these books. A teacher interested in dramatics described ways to use creative dramatics in individualized reading programs.

The consultants guided the teachers in the development and reinforcement of new methods and techniques, and demonstrated the use of techniques and materials. They also supplemented present knowledge with additional information, and encouraged teachers both to capitalize on their present teaching strengths and to begin using alternate strategies presented during the workshop.

Feedback

Feedback concerning the clarity, effectiveness, and utility of each day's session was provided through use of every-participant response techniques in which all participants

responded to questions regarding methodology, materials, and ability to implement new procedures. If incorrect or negative responses were made, reteaching, further explanation, or demonstrations were offered.

Evaluation

Evidence of the success of Project Bonus was derived from workshop evaluation, teacher performance, pupil progress evaluation, and principals' reports of behavior change evidenced during the fall semester.

1. At the end of the workshop, teachers evaluated their experience by means of the Project Bonus Objectives Checklist. All teachers (100 percent) rated favorably the five major areas included on the checklist, indicating that they could implement those particular skills immediately in the classroom. At the end of the teaching session, 97 percent of the teachers who reevaluated the behaviors on the checklist indicated they had actually practiced the behaviors in the classroom and planned to practice them during the fall.

2. Project Bonus teachers implemented

with their pupils the techniques and skills discussed during the workshop. For example, learning centers were in almost every classroom.

3. Project Bonus teachers observed both a dramatic, positive change in the attitude and behavior of a majority of their pupils and a significant improvement in scores on a test of word recognition.

4. Reports from principals early in the fall semester indicated that Project Bonus teachers not only were using new techniques and skills in their regular school classrooms but also were sharing these ideas with colleagues.

It appeared that a major reason for the success of Project Bonus was the high amount of teacher involvement in its planning and implementation. Also helpful was the emphasis placed on identifying and utilizing teachers' strengths and interests rather than their weaknesses and deficiencies.

Likewise it appeared that the positive approach taken with teachers was reflected in the significant improvement in attitude and achievement among pupils in the summer session.

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