

In-Service for Change

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Through a Free Learning Environment Program (FRELEA), the Pittsburgh schools have helped more than 200 teachers in 35 elementary schools change their teaching styles and the learning environment for thousands of children.

IN THE Pittsburgh public schools, as in many school systems across the country, the adoption of new approaches to education has created the need for in-service training for administrative staff and teachers. In-service programs designed specifically to change large numbers of teachers and their teaching strategies are not traditionally attempted by the larger public school systems. Most public school in-service programs deal with continuing staff development, leaving radical, large scale change through in-service to the universities.

Yet in an age when it is frequently stated that knowledge changes so rapidly that the purpose of education can no longer be to give a student a data base which he or she can use after leaving school, does it make any sense at all to assume that the knowledge a teacher has on completion of university training will be useful and sufficient throughout an entire career? Of course not. Ongoing, continuous, in-service education must be part of every public school system.

Critical to such an in-service program are the following:

1. *Congruency between theory and practice.* Bob Burton Brown¹ cites the importance of teachers' understanding the reason (theory) for change rather than learning a prescription for doing.

Even though they may perform such tricks well, teachers so trained never quite understand what they are doing or why. Given avenues on which to move intelligently back and forth from beliefs to logically connected practices, change is able to move in knowable directions rather than drift or skitter willy-nilly.

The first task then for a school system contemplating change is to define the change in terms of theoretical considerations as well as classroom practices.

2. *Self-choice.* Choosing freely is one of the most important ingredients of successful change and one of the most difficult for a school system to implement. Change cannot be forced. Many possibilities for self-choice can be created in a system by providing alternative programs in different schools, by recognizing the need for flexibility and support in establishing time tables for in-service (that is, a recognition of the teacher's

¹ Bob Burton Brown. *The Experimental Mind in Education*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968.

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readiness for change), and finally—and most important—by permitting the teacher professional autonomy in the classroom.

3. *In-service as part of the working day.* This kind of ongoing in-service should be provided by the school system as part of the working day. Several methods come to mind: releasing teachers from the classroom by using substitutes; daily, weekly, or monthly in-service by altering schedules to permit time for teachers without children present; and paid Saturdays or paid summer in-service.

In Pittsburgh, a new program for ele-

A professional library is available to any teacher in the Pittsburgh public schools as well as in-service participants.



mentary schools called the Free Learning Environment Program (FRELEA) which is a partially structured version of the British open classroom has followed these criteria for change. FRELEA is based on the theory that people (children and adults) learn by "sampling" from their environment (the physical environment and the psychological environment), formulating theories about what they encounter, and adjusting or discarding those theories when they no longer seem to fit the "samples."

FRELEA is a dynamic program, sensitive to individual needs, future-oriented, and humanistic because it focuses attention on people and on the general processes of sampling, conceptualizing, behaving, and feedback. There is no single model or prototype for a FRELEA classroom or school; rather there are many varieties of models reflecting the individuality of the persons involved and their human and educational needs.

FRELEA Must Be Requested

Self-choice has been encouraged in two ways. First, the FRELEA program must be requested by principal, faculty, and parents for a school. Sometimes, the impetus comes from parents, sometimes from the faculty, and sometimes from the principal. When there is general agreement among all three, the program is implemented in the school

slowly and in an orderly manner (as Featherstone² has recommended) usually by beginning in the kindergarten and primary grades and adding one or two grades each year. This provides educational continuity for children in the program and permits teachers not enthusiastic about the program to determine if they wish to remain in that school or request a transfer. The in-service workshops are designed to model the theoretical FRELEA program and at each session the teacher exercises self-choice regarding competencies to be developed, activities to engage in, and personal professional growth.

Most teachers in the FRELEA program are released one day a month by the use of substitutes. The substitutes themselves are trained to work in the FRELEA classroom, as "special" teachers. The same substitutes are assigned to a single school for the entire year. The schedule for workshops is planned so that no more than two teachers from a school are released on any one day. The substitute who plans the day's program becomes a familiar and welcomed member of the school faculty. The children look forward to the days their "special" teacher comes to their class.

In some schools, ongoing in-service is provided in a 40-minute period at the beginning of each day. The start of school for the children is delayed.

A third form of in-service is offered in after school courses provided by the Pittsburgh public schools. These courses give the teachers credit which can be accumulated toward salary increments. Many Pittsburgh teachers have started FRELEA classrooms as a result of taking some of these courses. It is important that teachers starting a program on their own have the support of their principal and supervisor. In most cases, this is provided.

The in-service program is a three-year program with each year focusing on a different phase of growth. Year I or Phase I is the Orientation Phase when participants develop an accepting attitude toward the

² Joseph Featherstone. *Open Education and the American School*. New York: Agathon Press, 1922.



Teachers make use of the Teacher Training Center established for FRELEA in-service training. Supervisors and experts from the Pittsburgh area are often asked to contribute their skills and expertise at teacher workshops.

program by becoming familiar with the theory and practice of FRELEA. Phase II, the second year, is the Implementation Phase when participants develop skills in creating an environment for this kind of program. The third year, Phase III, is the Internalization Phase when the teacher values the program and initiates change independently.

Although the in-service program is stated in three phases, it is important to remember that a dynamic program, designed to be sensitive to teachers' individual needs and growth will not necessarily proceed in these steps. There may be much spiraling among the three phases. The in-service staff respects the professional integrity and dignity of each teacher (as every teacher respects the integrity and dignity of each student) and supports growth in an atmosphere of trust, honesty, empathy, and authenticity.

Needed Facilities and Staff

A Teacher Training Center has been established for FRELEA in-service training in a building which also houses other programs. The component parts of the Teacher Training Center are:

- A professional library with a viewing and listening room. The library is available to any teacher in the Pittsburgh public schools as well as in-service participants. The viewing and listening room contains films, videotapes, cassettes, and slide programs which pertain to aspects of open education and the FRELEA program.

- A seminar room for meetings, discussions, and special displays and announcements.

- An adult FRELEA classroom where all aspects of the program can be simulated and modeled. The adult FRELEA room also contains materials and equipment necessary



for making instructional materials and activities.

- A model FRELEA Children's School.³ The children's school consists of 60 volunteer students who are selected to represent a cross-section of the population of Pittsburgh public schools. A large observation booth permits in-service participants (and other

³ A number of elementary schools are now using the FRELEA Program, K-5. It is planned to phase out the small volunteer school this year (1975) in favor of having several field sites in more realistic school settings.

visitors) to see a FRELEA classroom in operation.

The in-service staff includes:

- The Program Director
- Peer Teachers (former expert FRELEA teachers who share their skills in workshops and classrooms)
- Child Development Specialist
- Multimedia Specialist
- Instructional Materials Designer
- Workshop Aide
- Staff of the children's school.

In addition to the personnel listed, the Center utilizes many other resources for in-service training of its staff. Supervisors and experts from the Pittsburgh area are often asked to contribute their skills and expertise at teacher workshops. Professors from nearby universities share their knowledge and the latest findings with staff and participants. The staff at the children's school contributes its talents to workshops and can be observed teaching at the Center. The School Volunteers Association trains volunteers to work in the classrooms. The perceptual motor specialist, eurhythmics staff, and outside consultants are often involved in staff development. With outside resources and a growing pool of internal resources readily available, FRELEA is able to develop a vibrant, growing program for educating young children.

Through the above program over 200 Pittsburgh teachers in 35 elementary schools are effectively changing their teaching styles and the learning environment for thousands of children. Strong administrative and community support indicates other teachers will be encouraged to pursue ongoing professional growth and change. FRELEA's adult learning experiences provide for continued interaction among the professionals involved in its management: the school principals, the teachers in the classroom, the aides, the parents, and other adults in the community served by the school. This interaction and communication focuses upon what the Free Learning Environment Program is all about, children learning. □

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