

# Teachers' Preferences in and Perceptions of In-Service Education

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*Recognizing that there are many approaches to staff development, these educators studied teachers' preferences in and perceptions of in-service education in order to help them improve their work with students.*

What kinds of in-service programs do teachers prefer? Believing that the answers to this question would be helpful to us in planning more effective staff development programs, the authors of this paper decided, during the fall of 1975, to collaborate on a statewide study of teachers' attitudes toward and experiences with in-service education.<sup>1</sup>

Our purpose here is to report and describe the kinds of staff development experiences that teachers have had. A second purpose is to explore teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of each kind of staff development experience. By looking at the kinds of staff development teachers had found useful, we have tried to identify those things that these experiences have in common that we feel cause them to be perceived as useful. It is our hope that these observations will be of help to teachers, curriculum specialists, and administrators in planning more effective staff development programs.

## The Study

In the fall of 1975, questionnaires were sent to a random sampling of teachers represent-

ing every school system in the state of South Dakota. A representative sampling of 1,239 teachers responded to one of three questionnaires. Although the study was funded by the state education agency, it was cosponsored by teacher, school board, and administrator organizations, and by several colleges and universities in the state. The questions and the overall design of the study were reviewed by representatives of each interest group.

For the most part, this paper will report and analyze the responses of teachers to only one part of one of three questionnaires—those questions dealing with the types and usefulness of various kinds of in-service activities. However, substantiation for the observations we make from this part of the study is found in other parts of the study—those that deal with the purposes and methods used in providing in-service education, with responsibility for initiating and planning in-service, and with incentives, resources, and follow-up.<sup>2</sup>

## Types of In-service Education and Their Usefulness

In order to determine the kinds of in-service

<sup>1</sup> In-service education for the purpose of this study was defined as "individually-planned and/or school-planned activities for the improvement of instruction and/or the professional development of staff members."

<sup>2</sup> Copies of the complete study may be ordered from Darrell Jensen or Loren Betz at South Dakota State University, Brookings, South Dakota 57006.

education that teachers had engaged in, respondents were asked to react to a listing of 21 different types of in-service activities. They were asked whether they had been involved in the activity during the past two years and how useful the activity was to their teaching. (See Tables 1 and 2). For the purposes of this paper, the 21 types of in-service activities have been grouped into workshops (conducted by district people and outside consultants), college or university classes, faculty meetings, observation of and assistance from other teachers, and professional reading.

### Workshops and Courses

The most-used types of workshops (one-day regional workshops involving several school systems and after-school workshops) were judged to be the least useful by respondents. Approximately one-third of the teachers who responded had also been involved in full-day, half-day, and one- to two-hour workshops conducted by outside consultants; however, those programs were not viewed as highly useful when compared to other types of in-service activities.

Over one-third of the respondents had been involved in workshops or courses carried out on a college or university campus during the past two years. They rated these staff development experiences as moderately or very useful. Fewer teachers had been involved in a "Current Trends"<sup>3</sup> workshop (17.8 percent) or in summer workshops at the local school (13.1 percent), but both were judged to be very useful. Current Trends was judged to be the most useful type of in-service activity included in the study.

### Faculty Meetings

The three types of faculty meetings listed in the questionnaire were often-used types of in-service activity; however, none of the three was judged to be highly useful. Faculty meetings planned by teachers or by teachers and administrators were judged to be more useful than faculty meetings planned solely by administrators. Forty percent of the respondents had been involved in in-service programs presented by educational sales representatives during the past two years. Teachers viewed these programs as the least use-

ful of the 21 types of in-service education included in the study.

### Observations and Assistance from Another Teacher

One-third of the respondents to the study had received assistance from another teacher in their classroom during the past two years.<sup>4</sup> This approach was viewed as a highly useful type of in-service activity. Twenty-three percent of the respondents had also observed teachers in other school systems, while 20 percent had observed teachers in their own school system during the past two years. Observation was also judged to be highly useful.

<sup>3</sup> Current Trends is a two-week workshop held each year, simultaneously at two sites in South Dakota. It gives teachers an opportunity to work with other teachers, with college and university resource people, and with nationally-known educators—sharing ideas and sorting out the implications of new ideas for classrooms as varied and diverse as the teachers are who attend Current Trends. The workshop is organized around four kinds of activities: a presentation in the morning by a well-known educator, one- to three-hour workshops, half-day curriculum study groups, and shorter one-hour sharing or "chat" sessions. Films are also shown continuously, thus providing another option to teachers. In all, six to seven hundred hours of sessions are scheduled during the two-week workshop, of which participants are able to attend approximately 75 hours. Nearly all of the 75 hours are optional and selected by each participant.

The purpose of Current Trends is to introduce and expose teachers to as many creative ideas, innovations, and new programs as possible during a two-week period. By design, the workshop also models some current trends in education—flexible scheduling, individualized learning, a variety of teaching methods, and self-evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> In the authors' opinion, teachers may have interpreted the phrase "assistance from another teacher in your classroom" in many different ways. Two years ago, the Division of Elementary and Secondary Education in South Dakota initiated a statewide Resource Bank of teachers to provide individual assistance to another teacher in his/her classroom in response to a need identified by the teacher who requests help. Although teachers in the state know about the Resource Bank, and although it has been positively evaluated when it has been used, it has not been known widely enough for teachers to refer to it when responding to a question from another teacher about its usefulness. More than likely, teachers thought about informal advice or ideas they had learned from other teachers when they responded to this question.

## Other Types

Teachers who responded to the study viewed the in-service aspects of their professional organizations (conventions, conferences, workshops, and helpmobiles<sup>5</sup>) as moderately useful when compared to other in-service education activities. Reading professional journals and newsletters was also viewed as only moderately useful by a majority of the respondents.

## Summary

In analyzing these findings, we looked for common characteristics among the types of in-

service experiences teachers found most useful/helpful. Our hunch was that there might be some philosophical and organizational concerns that prejudiced the reactions of teachers to particular types of in-service activities, independent of the content of those activities. We thought that factors like scheduling, the length and location of the in-service activity, as well as concerns about whether the in-service program was required and about who was involved in planning or as a resource person might be important in analyzing

<sup>5</sup> A sort of traveling workshop, organized by the South Dakota Education Association in which teachers conduct workshops for other teachers on Saturdays in school systems around the state.

Table 1. Types of In-service Activities of Teachers During the Past Two Years

Rank	Types of In-service In Descending Order of Involvement	Percent Involved	Percent Not Involved	Total Response
1.	Bulletins, newsletters, and brochures	87.3	12.7	409
2.	Reading professional education journals	80.3	19.7	411
3.	Convention sponsored by professional teachers' organization	60.6	39.4	409
4.	Local faculty meeting planned by administrators specifically for in-service	60.0	40.0	407
5.	Local faculty meeting planned by teachers specifically for in-service	49.8	50.2	404
6.	Local faculty meeting planned by teachers and administrators specifically for in-service	48.4	51.6	405
7.	One-day regional workshop involving several school systems	48.2	51.8	407
8.	Presentation by educational sales representatives	40.0	60.0	400
9.	Workshop—block of time set aside during the school year for intensive study of an educational problem in your school	36.1	63.9	407
10.	Workshop—carried out on a college or university campus	35.4	64.6	407
11.	One-two hour in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	34.7	65.2	400
12.	Assistance from another teacher in your classroom	33.2	66.8	401
13.	Full-day in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	33.0	67.0	406
14.	Half-day in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	30.7	69.3	401
15.	Conference or workshop sponsored by professional teachers' organization	26.1	73.9	403
16.	Observation of teachers in other school systems	23.0	77.0	404
17.	Special college courses conducted at your school by a college or university staff member	22.3	77.7	408
18.	Observation of teachers in your school system	20.0	80.0	404
19.	Two-week summer Current Trends workshop sponsored by DESE and South Dakota Colleges and Universities	17.8	82.2	404
20.	Workshop—block of time set aside during the summer for intensive study of an educational problem in your school	13.1	86.9	411
21.	SDEA Helpmobile	6.5	93.5	403

the responses of teachers to questions in this study. The purpose of the next section of this paper is to share our conclusions. Hopefully, they will be of assistance to those individuals who are involved in planning staff development programs.

### Why Teachers Like What They Like

The first similarity we noticed among useful types of in-service education relates to qualities of newness or innovativeness that these types have in common. The intended purpose of Current Trends is to introduce teachers to new ideas in education; the other types that were rated as useful tend to respond to teachers' needs in new ways other than through traditional college courses or after-school workshops. A related overall observation we can make is that the kinds of in-service education teachers have most frequently experienced in the past are seen as least useful. In other words, teachers seem to be anticipating that "new" kinds of staff development programs will be more interesting and useful to them than previous kinds have been.

The second characteristic that most useful types of in-service education share is that they seem to build on teachers' interests. This is especially true of Current Trends, of assistance from or observation of other teachers, and of workshops designed specifically around locally-identified needs. In each of these cases, it is the teacher's own definition of his/her learning needs, rather than school administrators', college professors', or a curriculum committee's definition of need that becomes the starting point for self-improvement.

The third characteristic of most useful types of in-service education is "choice." Staff development experiences that provide choices are more "personalized," a sense that teachers probably don't have about most traditional, nonvoluntary types of in-service activities. Despite the fact that some of the types of in-service education that teachers find useful are scheduled on specific dates and may occur only once during a given period of time, participation in all of the types of in-service education teachers found most helpful is voluntary.

In the most useful types of in-service education, teachers also have a choice about what to focus on, when the "in-servicing" is to take place,



*"Teachers like to learn from each other and find in-service experiences that promote the exchange of ideals helpful."*  
Photo: Staff

and who the resource people are to be. For example, in Current Trends, teachers select which sessions to attend and which topics to focus on from a wide range of offerings. In summer workshops designed around locally-identified needs, teachers choose the content of the workshop and often the methods of instruction. Furthermore, these workshops are scheduled at times when it is convenient for teachers to attend, times about which they have some choice. In another example, when a teacher observes or seeks assistance from another teacher, it is usually at a time when assistance is needed and in response to a concern he/she has chosen to work on. In all of these cases, teachers also choose the resource persons from whom they are going to learn.

A fourth similarity we identified is that longer in-service experiences are seen as more useful than in-service activities that last only a day or part of a day. This is true, with the exception of "observation and assistance from another teacher." However, even in this case, teachers may perceive that they are assisted by other teachers over a period of time in relation to several problems, not a specific one.

A fifth commonality seems to be support for the idea that teachers like to learn from each other and find in-service experiences that promote the exchange of ideas helpful. With the exception of workshops carried out on college/university campuses, teachers consistently ranked

in-service experiences conducted by outside consultants as less useful than experiences that promote teachers' sharing ideas or working on a mutual problem. It may be that teachers find other teachers more approachable than outside consultants or they may feel they can get more

immediate help, and, subsequently, acceptance and support for change from other teachers.

Finally, the idea that teachers regard in-service experiences over which they have some control as useful is supported by an observation that, with the exception of Current Trends and

Table 2. Degree of Usefulness of Selected Types of In-service—as Perceived by Respondents

Rank	Types of In-service— In Descending Order of Usefulness	Mean	Degree of Usefulness			
			Not Useful Percent 1	Somewhat Useful Percent 2	Useful Percent 3	Very Useful Percent 4
1.	Two-week summer Current Trends workshop sponsored by DESE and SD colleges and universities	3.530	1.2	6.0	31.3	61.4
2.	Assistance from another teacher in your classroom	3.308	2.1	9.6	43.8	44.5
3.	Workshops carried out on a college or university campus	3.296	1.3	17.1	32.2	49.3
4.	Observation of teachers in other school systems	3.105	4.8	18.1	39.0	38.1
5.	Observation of teachers in your school system	3.000	4.3	26.6	34.0	35.1
6.	Special college courses conducted at your school by a college or university staff member	2.990	5.2	19.6	46.4	28.9
7.	Workshop—block of time set aside during the summer for intensive study of an educational problem in your school	2.943	8.6	25.7	28.6	37.1
8.	Conference or workshop sponsored by professional teacher organization	2.823	8.0	27.4	38.9	25.7
9.	SDEA Helpmobile	2.769	7.7	33.3	33.3	25.6
10.	Reading professional education journals	2.745	3.6	37.7	39.2	19.5
11.	Local faculty meeting planned by teachers and administrators specifically for in-service	2.709	2.4	38.8	44.2	14.6
12.	Convention sponsored by teachers' organization	2.702	6.1	35.9	39.6	18.4
13.	One-day regional workshops involving several school systems	2.698	6.4	36.6	37.6	19.3
14.	Local faculty meeting planned by teachers specifically for in-service	2.646	4.3	40.2	42.1	13.4
15.	Bulletins, newsletters, and brochures	2.597	4.0	44.0	40.3	11.6
16.	Workshop—block-of-time set aside during the school year for intensive study of an educational problem in your school	2.584	9.7	39.6	33.1	17.5
17.	Full-day in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	2.566	11.0	37.5	35.3	16.2
18.	One-two hour in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	2.526	10.5	38.2	39.5	11.8
19.	Half-day in-service program conducted by an outside consultant	2.416	12.4	43.8	33.6	10.2
20.	Local faculty meeting planned by administrators specifically for in-service	2.335	14.3	46.2	31.1	8.4
21.	Presentations by educational sales representatives	2.281	13.2	49.7	32.9	4.2

workshops on college campuses, teachers seem to prefer in-service experiences that occur in the local school setting. Even though they don't like faculty meetings or in-service programs conducted by outside consultants when they occur in the local setting, they do like types of in-service like individual consultation with another teacher and on-site workshops or special courses designed in response to locally defined needs.

### What Teachers Don't Like and Don't Find Useful

Another way to understand what teachers do like and find useful, is to look at what they don't like and don't find useful. Teachers rated bulletins, programs conducted by outside consultants, faculty meetings planned by administrators, and presentations by educational sales representatives as not useful. None of these activities build on teachers' resources or sharing. Often, these kinds of activities are required. It is probable that they provide few, if any, choices to teachers. Generally, there is no continuity or follow-up to these kinds of staff development experiences, since they are so short and, in most cases, are simply used to fill a designated amount of time set aside for "in-service." In summary, although these kinds of in-service activities are frequently used, they don't generate a lot of excitement and teachers don't find them very useful.

### Conclusions

What can planners of in-service experiences for teachers learn from this reporting and analysis of the types and usefulness of various approaches to staff development? We believe that:

1. The list of in-service activities itself demonstrates that there are many approaches to staff development and that some less-frequently-used approaches (for example, observation and assistance from other teachers, "Current Trends"-like workshops, and summer workshops designed around local needs that are held in the local school) should be included in staff development program planning.

2. Useful in-service education programs are planned in response to the assessed needs of teachers and build on the interests and strengths of the teachers for whom they're designed.

3. Our observations substantiate the need to provide teachers with choices about whether to attend, what to focus on, when to start, and who to use as a resource for professional growth.

4. More time has to be set aside for staff development—time for planning and carrying out initial staff development activities and for planning follow-up activities that help teachers extend and apply what they have learned.

5. Useful in-service experiences start with the assumption that teachers can be resources to each other and, therefore, these experiences provide opportunities for teachers to share ideas and resources with each other.

6. Teachers are more committed to staff development if they have been involved in planning and feel that they have some control over their own inservice experiences.

Taken together, these observations have helped us reassess the purpose of in-service education, which should be to support teachers in learning how to improve on what they are doing with students. By asking teachers themselves to become involved in planning, organizing, and carrying out their own staff development programs, we have tried to incorporate what we have learned through this study into what we do as educators with some responsibility for coordinating staff development programs for teachers—so that, in the long-run, our efforts are more useful to teachers, and teachers' experiences in staff development are more useful to students. <sup>EF</sup>



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