

Staff Development and Instructional Improvement: Response to Robbins and Wolfe

Until staff developers find ways to increase teachers' acceptance of innovations and begin to focus on what *students* do, we will continue to see well-designed but ineffective projects.

The Napa/Vacaville Project was exceptionally well conceived. Teachers received instruction on three schooling variables—classroom management, effective teaching, and curriculum alignment—with reasonable amounts of empirical support. Not all knowledge and skills were presented or expected to be mastered at the same time. Rather, teachers were moved through a series of five developmental stages: readiness, planning, training, implementation, and maintenance. All faculty and staff participated. Concerns for "institutionalization" were voiced. Anyone with a checklist on "How Staff Development Projects Should Be Designed" would give the project high marks.

Unfortunately, the data on project effectiveness paint a somewhat dismal picture. The extent to which teachers implemented the effective teaching practices increased dramatically for two or three years and then declined, equally dramatically. Student time-on-task increased to its realistic upper limit (i.e., 94 or 95 percent) within the project's first year, thus losing its value

as an indicator of increasing project effectiveness. Student achievement changed negligibly. The largest increase, in reading, was 1.98 normal curve equivalents. Assuming a standard deviation of 21.06, this increase represents an effect size of 0.09, which would place the project near the bottom of the instructional quality variables summarized by Walberg (1984).

The story of the Napa/Vacaville project is not unique. Similar tales have been told about comparable staff development efforts (see, e.g., Stallings 1985). What must be done so that such stories need not be told again? We need to gain a greater understanding than we now have of the nature of teachers, classroom instruction, and schools. As a colleague once told me, "If you think you understand something, try to change it!"

The Nature of Teachers

Teachers are malleable human beings. They can change what they say and do in their classrooms at will. Much research points to the instability of teacher behaviors. Using data from

eight countries, for example, I concluded that in *all* countries the variation in teacher classroom behavior was caused more by differences in the days on which they were observed than by differences among the teachers themselves (Anderson in press).

Another example involves a school district that included the category of "grouping for instruction" on an observation form used to evaluate teachers. The first time they used the form, observers noted grouping for instruction in 25 percent of the classrooms. Following the tryout, teachers were given brief explanations of each of the categories on the form. The next time they used the form, observers noted grouping for instruction in 55 percent of the classrooms; an increase of 30 percent with no systematic staff development (Tillotson in preparation).

Then there was the teacher Stallings (1985) interviewed, who explained a dramatic decrease in his implementation of a staff development model by saying he "was disillusioned with the principal's efforts to keep the corridor noise down and in general was disillusioned with the model" (p. 330).

Certainly teachers can behave as expected when pressured. The key is to find ways of increasing teachers' acceptance of innovations so that they incorporate them into their repertoires (Joyce 1974). At that stage, use of an innovation rests with teachers' own professional discretion.

The Nature of Classroom Instruction

Most of life in classrooms can be divided into two parts: teaching and student work. During the teaching portion some presentation is made while students are expected to pay attention. During the work portion students are given assignments to complete.

Over 30 years ago, Ralph Tyler (1950) asserted that "learning takes place through the active behavior of the student; it is what *he* does that is learned, not what the teacher does" (p. 41). What students do in the classroom is academic work (Doyle 1986), much of which typically occurs during the work portion of the class period.

Unfortunately, most staff development programs are targeted toward the teaching portion, mentioning the work portion only to tell teachers what they should do while students work (e.g., circulate among students and monitor their work). Until staff development programs fully address the nature of the work portion of classroom life (e.g., the length of assignments, their intellectual demands, grading criteria and standards), their relationship with student achievement will continue to be minimal.

The Nature of Schools

Someone recently described a school as a "set of classrooms sharing a common parking lot," the implication being that most schools are not meaningful social units with common philosophies, goals, and instructional policies and practices. Rather, teachers work side by side with greatly differing perceptions of the educability of their students, their tolerances for misbehavior in their classrooms, and the extent to which they endorse and implement the classroom management techniques and instructional strategies to which they are exposed via staff development projects.

Although we are aware of teachers' differences (and often encourage

them on the grounds of teacher professionalism or academic freedom), we continue to aggregate data at the school level or beyond. The predictable result of this practice is huge teacher-within-school variation on all criterion variables. Although Robbins and Wolfe do not report standard deviations, the magnitude of this variation is abundantly clear in Stallings' 1985 study.

My point here is that data on the effectiveness of a staff development project should not be aggregated to the school level unless the school is a meaningful social unit. To do so is to attribute more significance to school-level effects of projects than is appropriate, while at the same time masking teacher- or classroom-level effects that may contribute greatly to our understanding of the nature of instructional improvement. □

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