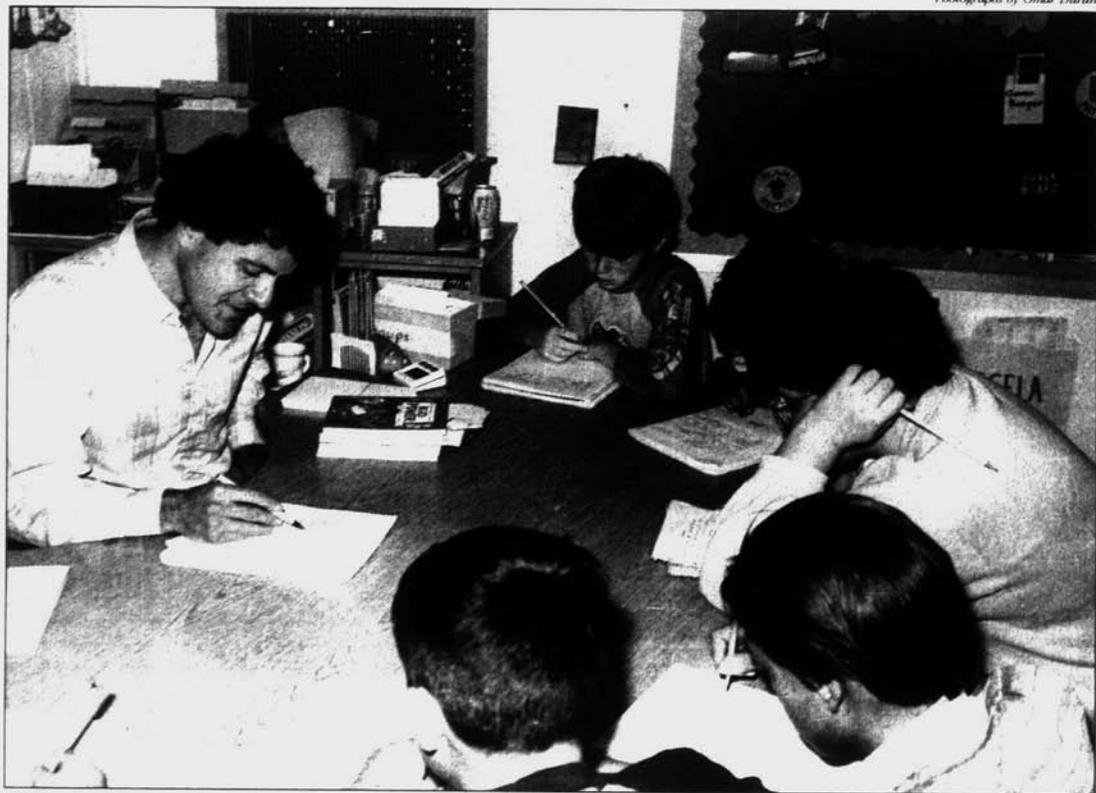


# Teachers Reflect on Change

Albuquerque teachers record in journals the troublesome and exhilarating process of professional growth.

*Photographs by Omar Duran*



*A teacher wrote, "I am feeling very comfortable with the theory behind letting children write, and I'm therefore coming to terms with it in my own classroom. I do enjoy doing a lot of writing. . . . I just wish that teachers were not so pressured about test scores."*

To promote professional growth and combat insecurity in Albuquerque schools, teachers have been participating in an innovative program called Support for Instructional Development. The program releases teachers like ourselves from the classroom to work in staff development in schools throughout the district.

When we began working with Support for Instructional Development at our first school two years ago, we presented a menu of our services to the faculty. Teachers chose from among demonstrations and activities to promote reading and writing. But at no time were they more than spectators. For our part, we duplicated articles on current reading theory and left them in the teachers' lounge and arranged two final presentations on current research in reading comprehension, but there was no time, during our work at the school, to discuss the instructional implications of the research.

Based on our own experience as teachers, we expected our staff development program to be a success. Based on numbers, it was. We performed myriad demonstrations and worked in nearly every classroom in the school. Yet, by the second week, we began to recognize that each teacher faced a different instructional dilemma. Although teachers politely considered and maybe even accepted our solutions, the result looked different in every classroom.

We soon realized that if we did not use the strengths and talents of individual teachers or acknowledge their control of classroom change, then our time and theirs would be wasted. So, in midstream, in midyear, we began to evolve what we considered to be a more enlightened and a more functional approach to staff development.

At our second school, we discussed current research on reading theory in eight hour-long seminars after school. We asked teachers to record in journals their reactions to articles and any feelings they had about using the theory in their classrooms. Rather than conducting demonstrations, we devel-

oped exercises in team teaching with the host teachers as we attempted to evolve theory into classroom practice. We retained this basic format of seminars, journals, and team teaching for our next five schools. Our experiences in these schools have taught us four fundamental principles about the teacher's role in school change.

### Change Is a Process

First, educational change is a process, not an event. In Michael Fullan's book, *The Meaning of Educational Change* (1982), he states: "Assume that effective change takes time. It is a process of 'development in use.' . . . Expect significant change to take a minimum of two or three years." Teachers, in their journals, agree. C. G. writes:

After eight weeks, I am still seeking the answers, and I feel I'm still a million miles away from them. This class has brought me pleasure and frustration, new ideas and the reinforcement of old. . . I have changed and my theories have changed. . . I need time, like children do, to develop my practice, explore, and take risks. Like a child, I am in a developmental stage.

Another teacher, T. R., responds:

How much of what I believe about how children learn and grow and develop am I compromising to "respond" to the pressure from society, from administration, from parents (from other teachers!) to get "back to the basics"?

The conflict is tremendous . . . and it's all based on differences in philosophy. The district is putting on the pressure to *raise those test scores*—to isolate skills, to drill our children, to prepare them for standardized tests—and then turns around and puts out curriculum guides and implements programs that promote "holistic education."

Parents are asking for spelling tests and other tests on a regular basis, for workbooks and basals and questioning all the "playing" that goes on (committees, self-selection, etc.).

The conflict is so energy consuming. Sometimes just thinking about it (or writing about it) and dealing with it is draining. And it's our children who suffer.

### Conflict Is Inevitable

Second, change without turmoil is unavoidable. Teachers who initially found the theory articles exciting soon admit that they challenge, and even conflict with, their beliefs and instructional practices. Somehow, this turmoil provokes their ability to change.

Fullan agrees: "Assume that conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change. Since any group of people possess multiple realities, any collective change attempt will necessarily involve conflict." C. H. discusses a personal yet theoretical conflict in her journal.

And, of course, I am still fighting the "to-do-skills or not-to-do-skills" battle. After reading "Make the Reading/Writing Connection" [by Lucy McCormick Calkins], I was again reminded of how much my kids need to *write*. They are writing, but they should be doing more. . . . Well, I am learning that with all that writing they are "assimilating" those skills. And after all, that is the goal. But, (always the famous *but*) can those children isolate the skills on a test? Probably not. So, I still feel pressure to practice isolated skills so that they can recognize them. So . . . here I am. I *really* want to do all these super writing (and also reading) activities.

But I can't do everything. So—dilemma! And I am progressing in that direction. I just feel so muddled. I just get my plan figured out, and then I start revising. It will be so nice to become a little more stabilized.

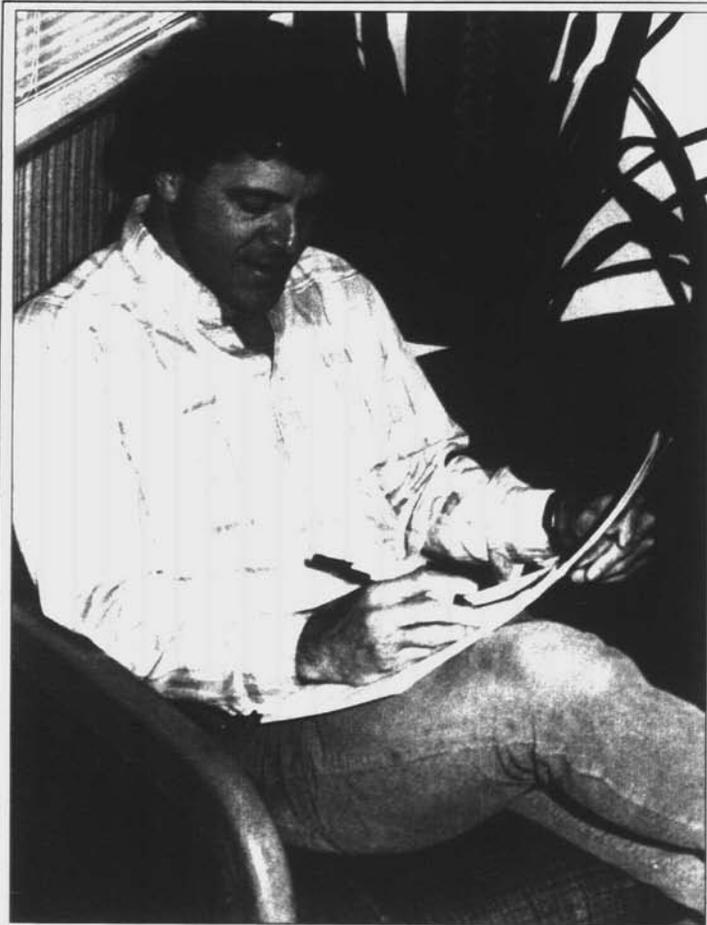
C. H.'s last journal entry, however, celebrates her growth.

I am feeling very comfortable with the theory behind letting children write, and I'm therefore coming to terms with it in my own classroom. I do enjoy doing a lot of writing in my classroom. I just wish that teachers were not so pressured about test scores. It certainly blows the wind out of your sails sometimes.

### Beliefs Are Mutable

Third, change is personal and complex. Teachers make decisions based on their beliefs about instruction and learning, which, in turn, influence their use of any program or set of materials. If instructional change is to be more than superficial, teachers must examine, compare, expand, and reshape their beliefs. It is this process that we attempted to promote, and which A. W. discusses in her journal.

I was drawn to the passage [from Jerome Harste's "Understanding the Hypothesis: It's the Teacher That Makes the Difference"], "No one [reading] approach is so distinctively better . . . than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively." I can certainly relate to this because, as a new resource teacher, I purchased various



*The reflective journal process caused one teacher to observe, "The district is putting on pressure to raise those test scores—to isolate skills, to drill our children . . . and puts out curriculum guides that promote 'holistic education.'"*

materials on the recommendations of successful teachers, and found that their success factor for *me* was *zilch!* It didn't take me very long at all to realize that if I didn't *believe* in a program, it would not work for me—which is why I make it up as I go along, using lots of poetry and incidental things—I haven't related to a packaged program yet!!

### Theory Evolves into Practice

Finally, each teacher controls the appearance and substance of change. "Assume," Fullan continues, "that any significant innovation, if it is to result in change, requires individual implementers to work out their own meaning." S. L.'s journals reflect this personal, theory-in-practice quest.

I especially like Nancie Atwell's article,

"How We Learn to Write." It really brought back some memories of my own experiences as a child and how I too learned to write. Nancie and I must have attended the same school—same classroom—and had the same teachers. I'm just sorry she beat me to the authorship of the article! It really made me stop and think about the kinds of writing that have been relevant to me in my life. The really important, useful, meaningful writing 99 percent of the time occurred *outside* of a "school setting." This article is extremely beneficial to me as I go through the process of reinforcing my beliefs about how children learn to write. It encourages me to keep trying with my own students. I also read "Growing Writers in Classrooms" by Glenda L. Bissex. It helped me to better evaluate where my children are with their knowledge of writing. What I learned here will help me to better individualize the help I give each child with his or her own writing growth.

Over the last two years, we have worked in seven elementary schools with over 100 teachers and 2,000 children. We have learned that the best educational change must incorporate "respect for the teacher as a professional thinking person who takes responsibility for his or her own practice" (Mohr 1985).

When teachers are relegated to classroom managers instead of professionals, we undermine academic freedom and sacrifice personal interaction. When we support teachers as they refine and build their craft, we make room for enlightened change and a legacy of effective, personal, and humane teaching. □

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