

For Whom and How Long Is the Hunter-Based Model Appropriate? Response to Robbins and Wolfe

Along with coaching, experienced teachers need time for self-analysis and reflection if the positive effects of staff development on student achievement are to endure.

Pat Robbins' and Pat Wolfe's reflections on their experience with a Hunter-based staff development project reveal a deep commitment and sensitivity to teachers and principals. When a research effort extends over four years, people come to know and appreciate each other. As the evaluator, I too became involved with the people in the project.

During my formative evaluation meetings with each teacher, we discussed the implications of classroom organization and engaged rate patterns. Some teachers could see, by analyzing their own data, that a plan which expected first-graders or low achievers to do seatwork independently for 30-45 minutes led to high

rates of off-task behavior. Giving teachers specific feedback on student behavior led them to change the types of activities and the length of time they expected students to work independently.

Funding agents examine different issues. They ask if the expenditure of \$400,000 (over four years), which provided training to 15 teachers in 2 schools, was well spent. They ask if the children in project classrooms changed so that the prognosis for their success in school had improved.

Of the 520 students enrolled in 1982, only 102 remained at the two schools when the project ended in 1985, indicating a highly mobile population. The students who had been in

the project from its inception in 1982 achieved higher scores in reading and mathematics during the last year (1984-85) than did those students who entered the project that year. This finding suggests a long-term project effect. Another bright spot is the positive gain made by limited-English-speaking students in reading and mathematics (Stallings et al. 1986).

The sobering fact is that during the four years of the study the project children did not achieve higher scores than did children in the control schools in either reading or mathematics. The control school SES levels were similar; they continued to use Title I services, to participate in district

staff development functions, and to enjoy dedicated faculties. The result was that control students gained as much or more than project students in reading and mathematics.

When the National Institute of Education (NIE) conceptualized this Follow Through project, their goal was to find out if comprehensive staff development might lead to higher student engaged rates and higher student achievement. Our analyses found that the positive relationships among the variables were capricious; that is, significance among variables shifted from year to year (Stallings and Krasavage 1986).

A second goal for NIE was to ascertain whether comprehensive staff development programs would have more impact on student achievement than would Title I services. Of particular interest was the comparison of project classrooms without aides to control classrooms with aides. When resources are scarce, funders want to get the most student improvement for their dollars. To receive the NIE grant funds, project schools had to relinquish all Title I services in the first-through fourth-grade classrooms, even though the loss of aides was a great concern to teachers. Superior gains in the project schools might have suggested a larger federal investment in comprehensive staff development and less in Title I services. But because achievement gains were somewhat greater in the control schools, the hypothesis regarding comprehensive staff development was not supported.

To remedy the problem of teachers' sagging instructional-skills scores, Robbins and Wolfe suggest that teachers should receive coaching and feedback until they reach the routine-use state. They imply that with continued coaching, teachers' instructional skills might have steadily improved along with student achievement scores. I think the reduction of modeling, coaching, and feedback was not the problem. During my exit interviews with project teachers in 1985, many teachers were excited about the new turns their lives were taking. They were moving on—writing articles, mentoring other teachers, enrolling in advanced degree programs. Some teachers had felt constrained by the project and were happy to have their

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classrooms and their aides back again. Two teachers had resisted the ideas and methods used throughout the project; they liked the project leaders, but they did not change their classroom procedure. Most teachers wanted to apply what they had learned to their own teaching decisions.

In spring 1986, the year after the decline experienced in the project's maintenance year, student achievement scores began to increase. Was this improvement due to new spelling programs, to a new comprehensive district reading program, to the computer labs, or to the teachers' integration of project ideas? My hunch is that staff developers are like gardeners. They plant ideas that grow in people. Ideas continue to grow in various ways and to show up distinctively in the work of different teachers. This is called evolution.

If staff development provides teachers with a way to think about teaching, rather than with a set of formulas, their contextual teaching decisions may diverge somewhat from the training pro-

gram. One might interpret this as a laudable result rather than as a rationale for more coaching. For me, Robbins' and Wolfe's premise that teachers were left to practice independently too soon is questionable. Two years of intensive staff development and an average of 12 staff development released days a year with continuous observation, coaching, and feedback seem quite adequate for experienced teachers. If teachers do not accept or internalize a program in that amount of time, more coaching and feedback are unlikely to change their behavior. If the program could not operate without continued coaching, then perhaps the teachers depended too much on the outside project staff. Perhaps the project modeled dependency rather than independent judgment.

An alternative conclusion is that teachers were at different stages of their professional development during the years of the project. Glickman (1981) suggests novice teachers would have been best suited for staff development that includes modeling, coaching, and feedback. Novices need a clear, direct approach to instruction. Professional teachers, on the other hand, prefer a collaborative approach to teaching decisions. They need a facilitator rather than a director. They are better suited to a program that encourages self-analysis and reflection. Perhaps the Napa/Vacaville project helped teachers move to a higher stage in their professional development, but did not facilitate their momentum for growth. □

References

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