

“Well Acquainted” Is Not Enough: A Response to Mandeville and Rivers

A program should not be judged
by a poor implementation.

I heartily commend Mandeville and Rivers for trying to take a research-based, analytic look at a model that can make a difference in education. I also appreciate that, unlike some critics, they have spent time becoming familiar with the intent and properties of our teacher decision-making model. They have captured the purpose of our work when they state, “The essence of the Hunter model is to enable teachers to make conscious and appropriate decisions as they plan and execute their teaching activities.” The words I use are “implement those decisions.” Unfortunately, many teachers and coaches do “execute”—in the sense of “kill off”—spontaneity, artistry, and informed decision making as they incorrectly look for what *should* be in the lesson, rather than for the appropriateness and artistry of teaching decisions and behaviors.

Mandeville and Rivers also acknowledge that successful implementation of the model is based on practice with feedback for conditional knowledge, so the teacher knows when and why various procedures are appropriate and recognizes when modifications are necessary. They state that conferences should be conducted by a coach who is “well acquainted” with the model. Mandeville and Rivers have shown that they themselves are well acquainted with the model; but I doubt they would consider themselves adequate, let alone artistic, in conducting a growth-evoking instructional conference after an observation. In

fact, in their article they have supplied the explanation for their findings of “no difference”: “Well acquainted” does not mean proficient in implementation!

Let’s look at some of the evidence.

1. Teachers had five to six days of “training.” As a beginning, that may be adequate. Teaching decisions, however, are deceptively simple in concept, incredibly difficult in application. Mutations inevitably creep into teaching behaviors. Ongoing staff development (conducted routinely in staff meetings in the more successful projects) is essential to maintain integrity and add new knowledge about ways a teacher can influence learning.

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2. Mandeville and Rivers state, “Classroom observation and feedback—‘coaching’—is an important aspect of model implementation.” One or two days of coaching a year is hardly adequate to transform workshop information into knowledge, into professional judgment, into wisdom. Unless the latter two states are achieved, we are making robots out of teachers. My statement was that, for a wide variety of content and situations, it takes approximately two years of practice *with coaching* to internalize behaviors to proficiency—not coaching two times in two years, which is what seems to have happened. The researchers themselves report that the data “appear to support the relationship of student achievement to the quality of the coaching the teacher receives.”

3. Our findings have shown that unless the principal is skilled and active in coaching, very little happens. In South Carolina, principals had one “course” with no required certification for competence in performance. This would seem to explain why teachers were more satisfied when they were coached by trainer and principal than by the principal alone.

4. The State Department of Education in South Carolina has been concerned about the adequacy of previous training and certification of some teachers currently in classrooms. Those teachers were among the first recommended to be “trained” in five to six days. This professional inade-

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quacy was further compounded by the teachers' receiving training and coaching from well-intentioned people who had one or two additional courses but no certification in their training or coaching skills.

One wonders whether the 900 teachers including a greater ratio of the critically remedial should be compared to the 3,000 teachers, a greater proportion of whom already were adequate or outstanding. Remember, teaching that demonstrates excellent use of principles of learning is already being practiced, albeit intuitively, by excellent teachers.

The amazing result is that teachers' attitudes were positive. A year or more later, they reported they were using what they had learned with positive results. (It is regrettable that classrooms were not sampled to see if this was really occurring.) How many in-service programs attain these attitudinal results?

The teachers' answer to the question, "Was it worth doing?" seems to be "Yes." The next question should be, "Was it done well?" Evidently not. The final question—"Was the program successful?"—should be answered on the basis of the first two. If a program is not done well, how can one say that it is not successful?

I am grateful to Mandeville and Rivers for highlighting the need for adequate training of principals and coaches. This element of our model is often inadequately implemented. Their research also supports the need for sufficient coaching so that professional information transfers, appropriately and artistically, into consistent and informed teaching.

Educational excellence does not stem from the quick fix of merely helping teachers learn about effective professional behaviors. Excellence requires a long-range plan for professional assistance to help teachers internalize those behaviors and use them on a daily basis with integrity and artistry. □

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