New Plots, New Heroes in Staff Development

“It will never work. It's all for show.”
You've heard the cautionary tales about restructuring efforts. These authors rewrite the scenarios for staff development to ensure that inservice leads to school improvement.

STEPHANIE HIRSH AND GERALD PONDER

S
ink or swim beginnings. One-shot workshops injecting all with the same patent medicine. New truths delivered by faraway prophets. This year's episode of "bells and whistles to make our district a lighthouse," sponsored by the same folks who brought you last year's version. The frustration of trying new ideas — alone — while schools and classrooms run on old ones.

There will be no true school restructuring if we sit idly and listen to previously lived staff development stories. Permanent changes in the ways schools function will come only when the practices of teachers and administrators evolve into different school cultures. Recent staff development research defines systematic processes for ensuring positive and successful change (Joyce 1990; Schubert 1989, 1990; Sergiovanni 1990). But we must rewrite the plots of the staff development stories we now know. Following are some cautionary tales, some common stories of staff development, along with some newer elements of the knowledge base that could recast the plots and characters.

Tale No. 1: The Emperor's New Clothes

Conventional Proverb: School improvement plans are for show, not go.

Franklin High recently finished a school improvement plan to comply with new state mandates. Staff members wearily leaving the planning session, commented:

“I enjoyed the planning process. Isn't it a shame that nothing will change as a result?”

“At least the plan will look good in the newspaper and satisfy the central office.”

“But what a waste of time to contribute to a plan that will only live on the principal's shelf. There really were some good ideas in there, you know?”

Caution: Schools need substantive plans; administrators and teachers need new understandings and new skills in order to achieve successful restructuring.

Conversations like those above typify initial restructuring efforts. Hours invested in school improvement processes set a goal of impressing visitation teams and accreditation officers, while little attention is paid to the actual implementation of the recommendations.

School improvement resides ultimately in people improvement. The people who inhabit schools must change if schools are to achieve their goals. Crisis management will no longer suffice. Success requires the development of a long range, comprehensive plan. These plans will enable schools to create their visions, identify their goals, and outline processes for achieving them (Hirsh 1989; Sparks and Hirsh 1990).

Staff development will be at the core of restructuring plans. Teachers and support staff will assume new responsibilities. Principals will need to learn participatory management techniques and teachers will require leadership training. Attention to readiness, planning, training, implementation and follow-up (Wood 1989) will permeate each effective action plan.

Tale No. 2: The Fisherman

Conventional Proverb: You can throw out the bait, but the learners still have to take the hook.

Two teachers discussing an inservice workshop:

First teacher: “I don't think I got a thing out of that session. Her ideas didn't seem relevant to my classroom, and she talked in a very theoretical way. What did you think?”

Second teacher: “I was really thinking more about the test I'm writing on Chapter 3.”

“How do you think your kids will do?”

“I don't know. That's up to them. I've done my part.”

Two principals after attending a staff development program on effective teaching:

First teacher: “I don't know. That's up to them. I've done my part.”

Second teacher: “I was really thinking more about the test I'm writing on Chapter 3.”

“How do you think your kids will do?”

“I don't know. That's up to them. I've done my part.”

Two principals after attending a staff development program on effective teaching:

“Those were fascinating ideas — I look forward to seeing how my faculty responds. I enjoy sharing new ideas with them and these will certainly make me look good.”

“I'm not sure I feel the same. We just spent three days learning about
effective teaching practices. Yet not once did we hear about where teachers used the new ideas to produce increases in student learning. I'm not so ready to share this information with my faculty."

**Caution:** Staff developers should be held accountable for the information they share. Consumers should ask for documentation regarding anticipated results.

Much of the early literature on accountability was filled with objections to simplistic process-product notions that judged a teacher's performance by students' scores on standardized tests. Teachers rightfully protested that the links between teaching and learning were far too uncertain for such a Draconian conception of teacher effectiveness. In like manner, inservice workshops were judged on the criterion of delivering the goods, not whether they were received or used. An excellent session was one that was clever or entertaining. Questions of effectiveness never arose. Learning was not thought of as a constructivist process in which learners actively made their own meanings from information presented. Teacher appraisal instruments didn't focus on student learning outcomes. But the body of research on effective teaching practices and a growing body of literature on adult learning now provide bridges to a more results-oriented view of schooling and staff development. Research studies in Richmond County, Georgia, and West Orange, New Jersey, have documented increases in student achievement as a result of staff development programs (Joyce, et al 1989; Sousa 1990). The link has been validated. Guiding the development of future proposals should be two questions: What will the effects of this staff development program be on student learning? What value will this add for the participants?

**Tale No. 3: The Doubting Thomas**

Conventional Proverb: You gotta believe before you can change.

"I'm so disgusted with our 5th grade team. We need to begin planning for the implementation of the new reading process. The principal impressed me with the research data, and the teachers from pilot schools really sold me on the program. I don't understand the hesitation of the 5th grade team. Why do they have to get on board before the rest of us"

**Caution:** If you wait for everybody to be ready, you may never begin the change process.

School administrators seeking to make a change introduce and attempt to sell a new program to the staff. The administrator parades previously successful users and cites the research benefits to the students as well as to the teachers. The administrator is convinced that support for the project is critical for success. Some faculty members are sold; others never will be. The administrator faces the ultimate decision: proceed, wait or abandon plans.

For many educators, change is not natural; the status quo is. Sometimes decisions to delay hurt other faculty members and ultimately the students. Current research suggests that attitude changes may not have to precede behavior changes (Guskey 1985).

Of course the ideal plot for this story allows for every person affected to support the decision. However, mandates — state, district, or building — offer an alternative strategy for achieving change. Both consensus strategies and mandates can facilitate success (e.g., Robbins and Wolfe 1987; Lieberman 1986).

Participation in planning increases ownership. During the early stages, teachers should be asked to suspend their disbelief for the honeymoon and wait to assess the impact in their classrooms. Expectations for change must be viewed practically. Innovations must be presented in pieces that are easily tested in the classroom situation (Fullan 1991; Doyle and Ponder 1977). Adequate information must be available. Incentives for involvement increase commitment.

Ultimately, improvement in student learning serves as the greatest motivator. When teachers see evidence of student gains, attitudes toward an innovation improve. In the end, neither process should exclude the other. A mix of top-down and grass-roots change efforts can produce effective results.

**Tale No. 4: Hell, No! We Won't Go!**

Conventional Proverb: Principals and teachers will not willingly choose inservice.

Fifth grade teacher: "Inservice day again! I'm not going. I have so many more important things to finish in my classroom."

High school mathematics teacher: "I despise inservice. Can't we have a contract which prohibits the district from mandating our attendance?"

Elementary principal: "I may quit the next time the central office calls me to attend a workshop during the school day."

**Caution:** Principals and teachers will not participate voluntarily in meaningless inservice.

How often have staff developers and school administrators been confronted
by these comments? Instead of trying to discover the basis for these feelings, staff developers have worked to design perfect systems to document teacher attendance on district inservice days. Very good teachers and principals who make such negative comments often use personal time to improve their knowledge and skills. These educators are not opposed to professional growth. They do object to spending their time in staff development programs that fail to address important and specific work needs they have identified.

At the core of the most successful school improvements are dedicated teachers who spend countless voluntary hours in staff development activities (Levine and Broude 1989). Fortunately, educational research has identified practices (e.g., effective teaching practices, cooperative learning, higher-level thinking) that are linked to positive increases in student learning and achievement (Sparks 1983). School restructuring will depend largely on the successful implementation of these practices. The discipline of staff development offers the framework for guiding this process. In the final analysis, information viewed as relevant, practical, and positive for children will always capture the attention and commitment of dedicated educators.

**Tale No. 5: The One-Trick Pony**

*Conventional Proverb: Staff development means training.*

A committee of teachers in Brown Elementary School planned a workshop. The speaker was terrible. The angry faculty complained that the speaker did not address its needs and wasted its time. The staff development committee was humiliated and frustrated. The principal empathized with everyone and announced a moratorium on staff development.

**Caution: Broaden your current definition of staff development.**

In the past, staff development has been equated with workshops. Fortunately for students, teachers do not stop learning when workshops are not offered.

A training workshop should be only one strategy. The success of the effort should be measured in the achievement of the goals, not the identification of a single strategy for achieving them.

**Tale No. 6: The Prophet**

*Conventional Proverb: The value of information varies inversely with the distance it has to travel.*

A new speaker is introduced. The host cites the number of school districts where the consultant has worked as well as his vast number of publications. The audience is expected to be duly impressed. They obviously will listen with great intensity. They will begin planning immediately ways to implement these prophetic truths. Or will they?

**Caution: Seek expertise from within before you go searching outside.**

For years, external consultants have been viewed as the only professionals capable of providing new and valuable information. Districts have spent untold dollars on outside experts expected to be able to cure the district woes. But they have ignored the practical knowledge of their staff and shunned perhaps their greatest chance for success (Lambert 1988).

A one-shot or series of infrequent expert presentations will not result in transfer of knowledge into practice in classrooms. Successful staff development efforts require a substantial amount of ownership, participation, and time for participants (Levine and Broude 1989).

Successful school restructuring results when teachers are viewed as professionals, and when they participate as valued partners in the staff development process. The challenges of the 1990s will require the solutions of the practitioners of the 1990s. Teacher-astatrainer models offer one practical solution to this dilemma. Teacher cadres are being used in successful staff development programs across the country (e.g., Richardson, Texas; Richmond County, Georgia; Jefferson County,
Colorado; North Glenn, Colorado). Districts not only benefit from the practical knowledge of their own professionals, participants prefer learning from their peers, and programs are more easily customized to meet local needs and priorities. As a result, we have greater willingness to try the ideas (e.g., Britton 1989).

Teacher-as-trainer models do not preclude the use of external prophets. Outside consultants can introduce cutting-edge research, help district trainers plan programs, and provide presentation feedback. Districts will never cease buying their services. But they will seek only those services not available within their own organizations.

Tale No. 7: East Is East, and West Is West

Conventional Proverb: Teachers teach, and researchers do research, and never the twain shall meet.

Mrs. Jones has encountered an instructional problem in her science classroom. She hypothesizes a solution and tries an experiment. She wants to invite other teachers to participate in a small research project to validate her findings. She needs the support of her principal to issue the invitation. The principal not only is unwilling to allow her to invite the others, but he also warns her that the classroom is not the place for research studies. “Stick to teaching and leave the research to the college professors,” he tells her.

Caution: Teacher-as-researcher models provide proven ways for teachers to conduct systematic inquiry into classroom problems. The future will see greater collaboration between university professors and school practitioners in research on practice.

In recent years, real teachers in real classrooms have discovered significant research findings (Glickman 1986; Gable and Rogers 1987; Sparks and Simmons 1989; Sparks and Loucks-Horsley 1990). The new teacher-as-researcher concept challenges assumptions about the traditional roles of educators.

The teacher-as-researcher model recognizes the teacher as one who is capable of independent learning. (Loucks-Horsley, et al 1987; Schon 1987). Teacher researchers, like college professors, define problems and begin a systematic approach toward solving them. Teachers test hypotheses and discover why some strategies work while others don’t. In the future, more teachers will revisit abandoned strategies to discover how they may be used more appropriately. Classroom teachers can test possibilities. University professors increasingly are leaving the ivory tower to collaborate with teachers to find workable solutions.

A person’s greatest opportunity for growth is systematic inquiry into one’s own learnings. Classrooms are the real world. This is where experimentation for the sake of improvement must take place.

Tale No. 8: New Kid on the Block

Conventional Proverb: Successful teachers swim, others sink.

“Mrs. Gray, welcome to our school. Here are your keys, the teacher’s edition of your textbook, and your school handbook. Your room is B203. We’ll see you at the Christmas party. Until then, the best of luck!”

Caution: New teachers have unique needs and need special attention.

“Sink or swim” has been used to refer to the ritual of the first year of teaching. New teachers “born to teach” survived the trials while countless others were written off as not possessing the right stuff. With an attitude like this, no wonder 25 percent of new teachers have left the profession before entering their fourth year (Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Pease 1983).

However, recent research has described practices that ensure successful transitions between college and classroom. By encouraging a new teacher’s feelings of professional pride and competence, these programs lead to accelerated professional competence and student learning. In response, states and school districts are enacting local policies to assist new teachers with the critical induction years. Currently, 10 states have mandated policies regarding the induction and evaluation of new teachers. Twenty more are considering similar legislation (Hawk and Robards 1989; Brooks 1987). In addition, several universities, states and local school districts have implemented induction programs in recognition of the need rather than in response to a mandate.

Beginning teachers have three sets of needs. They have a need to develop professional satisfaction with their commitment to teaching. They need to be integrated into the culture of a school and system. Finally, they need to develop professional competence in their assignment (Huling-Austin 1988; Hirsh 1990). If schools ignore the need to induct and enculturate new teachers, they’ll divert energy from the agendas of restructuring.

Some schools do not wish to be left in this predicament. Several universities offer guarantees to school districts that hire its graduates, offering to provide retraining and assistance for any struggling new teacher. California has mandated a mentorship for all new teachers. School districts have expanded contracts for new teachers to allow for more transition time and support. In addition, they are assigning mentors and creating support groups to assist a new teacher with the daily challenges of a new classroom.

The experiences teachers have during their beginning years have consequences for the kind of teachers they will become. Those experienced in the profession must do everything possible to see that beginners meet with far more success than failure. Until new teacher needs are attended to, we lose precious time in our efforts to improve.
Tale No. 9: The Miracle

Conventional Proverb: Changing behavior is relatively easy.

"You know, that speaker had a lot of interesting ideas to offer. I wish I had someone to come to my classroom and demonstrate how to use the strategies she was suggesting. Do you think our principal would allow me time to observe in her classroom?"

Caution: Until we give appropriate attention to follow-up, staff development will continue to lack impact.

Many administrators still believe that you can change teacher behavior with one-shot answers. Some unrealistically expect immediate implementation as they check off the teaching process on a district-produced evaluation form. This practice, more than any other, has worked to discourage teacher participation in workshops.

Effective staff development that results in true school improvement must address all critical attributes of change theory. Readiness must be established and plans must be written collaboratively. Training must address opportunities for theory and practice, and follow-up and maintenance activities must be planned (Wood 1989). If we stop our efforts after training, then we lose 90 percent of our investment. Put another way, as Joyce and Showers (1988) have documented, 10 percent of our teachers are able to transfer new knowledge, new attitudes, and new practice, more than any other, has worked to discourage teacher participation in workshops.

Several strategies can provide follow-up assistance: peer coaching, collegial support teams, mentoring, study groups, audio-taping oneself, video-taping oneself, as well as others. Follow-up strategies enable teachers and colleagues to focus on new skills and judge the impact on students. Follow-up provides necessary feedback to usually isolated individuals and increases their ability to change their own teaching patterns. The critical point is that follow-up be planned for and not be an afterthought of school improvement teams. Districts that spend strategies for restructuring must not ignore the research base that supports the value of follow-up. It is no longer acceptable to spend resources on ineffective and instrumental in school restructuring.

References


Joyce, B., C. Murphy, B. Showers, and J. Murphy. (1989). "School Renewal as
Creating Communities of Literate Thinkers: An ASCD Mini-Conference on Whole-Language Instruction
February 24-26, 1992
Alexandria, VA

ASCD's new mini-conference explores the research rationale for an integrated language arts curriculum. Discuss the practical issues involved in making a successful transition to whole-language instruction, assess your current language arts programs, and consider the steps you need to renew your K-8 language arts curriculum in ways that will lead to increased student literacy.

Presenters:
Andrew Butler, Roger Farr,
Kenneth Goodman,
Angela Jagger, Ann McCallum,
Anne Meek, Patricia Robbins,
and Dorothy Strickland

Fee:
Member $295, Nonmember $325
HRDP: 1 voucher
Materials Fee:
Please add $50 to your registration fee.

Register by calling ASCD at (703) 549-9110 or see page 18 of the 1991-92 Professional Development Catalog for more information.

Stephanie Hirsh is Associate Director, National Staff Development Council, 7602 Kilmichael, Dallas, Texas 75248. Gerald Ponder is Professor and Chair, Department of Secondary Education, University of North Texas, P.O. Box 13857, Denton, Texas 76203.