The majority of past professional development programs were marginally successful at best. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 2000) described previous professional development activities as too linear or top-down in approach, characterizing them as “sit and get” sessions, in which relatively passive participants were made aware of the latest ideas regarding teaching and learning from “experts.” Such professional development programs were organized around brief workshops that were insufficient in duration or depth to bring about sustained, substantive change in practice (Abbott, Walton, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999; Malouf & Schiller, 1995; NJCLD, 2000 as cited by Klingner, 2004, pp. 248-49).

Professional staff development programs have been a major push in schools and districts across the nation to promote effective teaching by introducing teachers to the most current thinking about teaching and learning; yet, the conventional approaches to staff development, i.e., workshops, lectures, and demonstrations, seem to show little evidence of transfer to ongoing classroom practice. In conversations with our graduate students who have been classroom teachers and regular participants of professional staff development programs, we found that there appears to be a consensus around “sit and get,” stand-alone workshops as inefficient, ineffective, and unproductive (Klingner, 2004, p. 249). So, what accounts for efficient, effective, and productive professional staff development programs?

Janette K. Klingner's (2004) article, “The Science of Professional Development” summarizes research on professional staff development programs that have been successful in facilitating teachers' learning of new practices. Her article specifically addresses research related to improving practices for students with LD, and has a two-part focus (citing from Gersten, Chard, & Baker, 2000): (1) What do we know about providing professional staff development that supports teachers' implementation of evidence-based practices? (2) What are the constellation of factors that enhance or discourage the sustained use of desirable practices?

In the following sections, we will provide you with a synthesis of Klingner's (2004) comments in response to the above questions. Additionally, we will draw from Leonard and Leonard's (2003) “The Continuing Trouble with Collaboration: Teachers Talk,” and Xu's (2003) “Promoting School-Centered Professional Development Through Teaching Portfolios: A Case Study”.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT PROFESSIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In gathering evidence as to “what works” when providing professional staff development in evidence-based practices to educators, Klingner (2004) and her colleagues found that successful professional staff development programs are those that (1) provide “long-term support and including teachers as collaborators in the process”; (2) recognize teachers as “knowledge generators” and not merely as “consumers of research findings” (Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997, p.472); (3) are “dynamic and integrated” (NJCLD, 2000, p.3); and (4) “address the organizational, systemic, and cultural supports that are necessary (the context); the content specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed (the content); and the way in which knowledge, pedagogy, skills, and attitudes are acquired (the process; NJCLD, 2000)” (as cited in Klingner, 2004, p.249).
Collaboration seems to be an aspect of professional staff development that has been highly acclaimed for supporting teacher change as in a peer coaching model (Showers, 1990; Sparks, 1995). Through professional collaboration, teachers can enjoy procedural and affective support they need when they take risks to implement new methods (e.g., Cox et al., 1991; Nolan & Hillkirk, 1991; Busher, 1994). Teachers can focus on their strengths that would help them reflectively analyze their teaching and student learning. When the intellectual capacities of teachers are enhanced, greater intellectual achievement of students can be produced. All these suggest that the benefits of professional collaboration make it a critical element of professional staff development programs.

However, collaboration is not without its challenges. Lawrence and Pauline Leonard's (2003) on-line article, "The Continuing Trouble with Collaboration: Teachers Talk" discusses a research study they undertook with 238 Louisiana teachers addressing aspects of professional collaboration in North Louisiana schools. In open-ended question format, teachers were asked to reflect upon specific aspects of collaborative practices at their schools as well as at the district level and beyond. Teachers' beliefs about collaborative practice compared to what they perceived as actual collaborative conditions and circumstances in their schools were addressed. In this study, an interesting teachers' perspective on collaboration that has implications to professional staff development surfaced. Teachers suggested that in order for them to be able to "collaborate" successfully, they first need to undergo professional development focused on improving their collaborative skills. They also identified the most frequent forms of collaborative practices they experienced to include: faculty meetings, departmental meetings, grade-level or subject-area meetings, and special education meetings. Also noted are curriculum meetings, team teaching, lesson planning, and faculty workshops. While some teachers provided quite an extensive record of ways by which they engage in collaborative practices, some reported that collaborative activities were minimal or virtually non-existent. While the study demonstrates that teachers value a "collegial enterprise... based upon strong customs of routine professional interaction", these teachers acknowledge that there are some barriers in their efforts to establish effective professional collaboration, including: (1) lack of time/right scheduling; (2) poor attitude/persisting negative mindsets about the actual desirability of shared work and the resistance to moving beyond the traditional models of teacher relationships; (3) lack of commitment by teachers; (4) lack of appropriate compensation; (5) teacher personality conflicts; (6) lack of administrative support/lack of consistent resolve at the district and state levels; and (7) scarcity of opportunities to collaborate. As this study suggests, many teachers continue to encounter severe limitations in the capacity to work meaningfully with colleagues in ways that allow them to address the common goal of enhanced student achievement. (on-line, unpaged)

It can be argued that these same barriers can be found in professional staff development. According to Klingner et al. (1999), lack of time to implement programs, and inadequate support from administrators are two of the greatest barriers teachers perceive they face in their efforts to implement new practices. (p.249) Klingner (2004, p.251) further adds to these factors that impede teachers' sustained use of practices, including:

1. High-stakes testing. Teachers experience intense pressure to prepare their students for the state-level assessments.
2. Pressure to cover content. Teachers are concerned with depth versus breadth... they feel pressure to get through the textbook or curriculum.
3. Time constraints. Numerous mandates to do other things... teachers need to adjust what and how they teach to meet competing demands.
4. Mismatch between teacher style or personality and the instructional practice. Some teachers are not comfortable implementing a particular practice.
5. Forgetting. Some teachers forget to use or how to use a practice.

It is clear that successful professional staff development programs need not only facilitate the sustained use of research-based practices, but must first understand just what teachers perceive to be barriers they face in making the connections between theory and practice in their classrooms, and to help them overcome these barriers.

HOW TO OVERCOME BARRIERS: RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Another significant aspect of successful professional staff development that also addresses barriers to successful professional collaboration is the long term support for teachers. Klingner (2004) states:

"Educators benefit from long-term support that facilitates their understanding and implementation of new strategies. This support may include background reading, watching videotapes of the strategy, observing live models in the classroom, and coaching from more expert sources. Teachers need to see concrete examples of how a new theory, principle, or instructional practice relates to their students and their circumstances. If teachers do not see the relevance of the strategy to their situation, little change is likely to occur (Englert & Tarrant, 1995). By adapting a new strategy to fit their needs, teachers make the strategy more relevant to their classrooms and develop a sense of ownership, promoting its sustained use in their classrooms." (p.249)
Citing Gersten et al. (1997), Klingner suggests six principles that can break down barriers to implementation and assist teachers' efforts in sustaining the use of research-based practices. The first principle is the reality principle. Teachers would ask themselves: Is the change feasible and fit for practice in the classroom? They may not be too eager to implement strategies that do not meet the immediate needs of their students, or are not relevant to their instructional goals/objectives. The second principle is the scope. Teachers would ask themselves: Is the change too broad or too radical to be overwhelming? Is it too narrow to be trivialized or ignored? They may not welcome change that threatens stability or consistency in their classroom. The third and fourth principles are technical and conceptual. Teachers would ask themselves: Is there ample and immediate feedback and support for implementation? What is the significance of the new practice? What is the difference between the new and old practice? What are the benefits of the new practice over the old one? When teachers are convinced of the benefits students enjoy from the implementation of a new practice, then they will be more willing to explore its potential in the classroom. The fifth principle is linking changes in teaching to student learning. Teachers would ask themselves: Are students performing better because of the new practice? If they are, there is no reason why they would not accommodate this new practice in their instructional repertoire. Finally, the sixth principle is collegial support networks. Teachers would ask themselves: Are the administrators, researchers, and teachers supportive of the implementation of the new practice? Teachers need a supportive and encouraging environment to take on the challenge of implementing a new practice. They always take into consideration the quality and level of support they can get particularly from their administrators and peers. (p.249)

Klingner (2004, p.251) proposes the following factors that can enhance teachers' sustained use of the new practices:

1. Support networks. A support network that includes other teachers, paraprofessionals, or individuals from the university.
2. Administrative support. Teachers know that the instructional practices are important to their principal and that the principal expects to see them in the classroom.
3. Student benefits. Teachers identify student benefits as a strong influence on their sustained use of practices.
4. Student acceptance. Teachers are much more likely to continue using a practice if their students like it and are enthusiastic about it.
5. Flexibility of practice. When teachers perceive that they can modify the practice to suit their instructional style or their students' needs, they develop more ownership of the practice.
6. Readily available materials. Teachers report that they simply do not have time to hunt around for materials, find books, or make materials on their own, so the availability of materials influence the extent to which they implement a practice.

There is no doubt that in order to bring about the sustained implementation of research-based practices, ongoing professional staff development is critical. It is equally important to ensure that professional staff development can facilitate lasting change. Lasting change can be facilitated through (1) clear expectations from the principal that a practice is important; (2) a community of practice in which teachers feel empowered to seek and provide help to their peers; (3) research results that clearly link an instructional practice with improved student outcomes; (4) resources that support implementation; and (5) flexibility to modify a practice to fit the needs of teachers and students. (Klingner, 2004, p.251)

Leonard & Leonard (2003) concur with Klingner's (2004) thinking around how to effect lasting change through professional staff development. In the "Conclusions and Implications" section of their research on teacher's perspectives about the nature and extent of collaborative practices, they state:

"Attempts at school improvement cannot be individual and fragmented but rather must be embedded in collaborative practices that address the day-to-day needs of students (Louis & Marks, 1996). To that point—and perhaps most debilitating of the concerns that teachers continue to espouse about efforts to establish learning communities founded on principles of professional collaboration—is the lack of consistent resolve at the district and state levels. While many schools have creatively juggled schedules and identified additional resources that are used to occasionally free up teachers for shared work, many others have not. If habitual teacher collaborative practice is truly valued, it should not be left to the vagaries of particular schools and personnel who demonstrate the will and the means to endorse and enact it. Rather, it should be a certain expectation that is clearly espoused at the highest policy and administrative levels and supported in actual measures. Making provisions for teachers to work together during and outside school hours may indeed require reallocation of resources or securing additional funding." (on-line, unpaged)

EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT

An interesting article, "Promoting School-Centered Professional Development Through Teaching Portfolios: A Case Study" (Xu, 2003) offers a fresh look at professional staff development. Xu (2003) describes a case
study in which teaching portfolios evolved as a forum for promoting a school-centered professional development in an urban elementary school. Xu asked two questions: (1) What was the impact of the teaching portfolios on professional learning and collaboration? (2) What were the enabling conditions that helped foster school-centered professional development through this portfolio project? (pp.347-348)

During the study, the author worked with 12 teachers along with the principal and a staff developer, taking into account gender, grade level taught (K to 6), and years of teaching experience (1 to 30 years). Data sources included: (1) open-ended interviews with the sampled teachers, principal, and staff developer, and (2) a collection of portfolio-related documents. The interviews focused on what the portfolio project meant to the participants, documenting their thoughts concerning its processes, and noting perceived change as a result of involvement. Teaching portfolios were used to take a closer look at the participants' areas of interest and the development of ideas. The teaching portfolio included three sections: (1) a statement of teaching philosophy, (2) a main entry that documented one's learning in a specific area of interest, and (3) an inclusion of supplementary materials. These materials were to provide justification for the work as well as to enhance individual learning and group sharing. (p.352)

The data revealed that the portfolio project had positive impact on professional learning. The portfolio project enabled teachers at different developmental stages to approach their work more meaningfully and purposefully; encouraged teachers, particularly veteran teachers, to take risks; provided teachers with ongoing learning opportunities; and helped teachers know their students better and become responsive to their needs. Another significant revelation had to do with professional staff development. The portfolio project affected the teachers' professional collaboration. It became a vehicle for them to learn with and from each other. The project became a "common language" to help connect new teachers with experienced teachers. The portfolio project changed working relationships between teachers and administrators. It changed teachers' stance toward administrators, and administrators' stance toward teachers—both in positive ways. Finally, some teachers viewed themselves as agents of systematic change—readily sharing what they are doing, what has worked for them, how they can improve, and what they can learn from it. (pp.353-354)

However, Xu (2003) suggests that in order for the portfolio project to positively impact on professional learning and collaboration, two conditions have to be in place. These are: (1) building an environment of trust, and (2) developing a model of supervision consistent with professional learning and collaboration. (p.354) For example, nurturing open lines of communication between teachers and the administrators plays a crucial role in building an environment of trust. It is encouraging for teachers to feel that the administrators are there to listen to them, and to provide ongoing support based on the teachers' needs. In addition, the administrators can supervise teachers without necessarily having to be in their classrooms all the time. This gives both the teachers and the administrators a sense of joint control over professional learning. For the teachers, this joint control means opening up a door for them to think about working on something individually interesting as well as meaningful. (pp.354-355)

It appears that the professional learning via teaching portfolios "... generated an electric atmosphere for professional collaboration". (p.356) As a result of his case study, Xu (2003, p.357) strongly supports the idea of using teaching portfolios in promoting school-centered professional development. He concludes:

"... the portfolio project served as a means of generating teacher reflection and collegial sharing in the school community. It provided a sense of purpose and energized teachers at different stages of development to take risks and to examine their practices on ongoing basis. It helped create a sense of affiliation and provided a vehicle for teachers and administrators to work collaboratively and constructively. These findings provide empirical support to numerous theoretical claims of the viability of school-centered professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan, 1995a; Lieberman, 1995; Little, 1993; Loughran, 1994; Loughran & Gunstone, 1997; Sparks, 1995) and of the importance of providing mechanisms to promote school-centered professional development (Daniel & Stallion, 1996; Wilson & Berne, 1999)."

REFERENCES


The NERA Journal (2004), Volume 40 (2) | 91