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STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN READING: WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

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The author interviewed Dr. Ira Aaron (University of Georgia), Dr. Harold Herber (Syracuse University), Dr. Wayne Otto (University of Wisconsin) and Dr. Robert Ruddell (University of California at Berkeley) during the IRA convention held in Miami in 1978. Dr. Roselmina Indrisano (Boston University) and Dr. Olive Niles (Connecticut State Education Department) were interviewed in their respective offices several weeks later.

They were selected based on these criteria: a) their prominence in action staff development research, b) their contributions to the recent literature in the field, c) their leadership roles in the International Reading Association, and d) their representation of a geographic cross-section of the country.

The term "in-service" has been employed to encompass the planned activities for the instructional improvement of professional staff members (Harris and Bessent, 1969). It has been used to describe a multitude of activities, from the selection and development of instructional materials, to designing a new curriculum, to public relations.

Staff development, as it exists in 1977, became a reality as certain signal events occurred in the federal government's interest in educational research and development. Since the N.D.E.A., the Cooperative Education Act, the E.S.E.A., the Right-To-Read, and more recently, teacher training centers, competency and field-based programs, staff development activities have steadily increased.

As trends continued to support its need and project it into the future, staff development should be more effective than ever before. In an effort to discover the dynamics constituting effective staff development experiences, six experts were asked several questions.

Q. #1 Has staff development changed in the last ten years?

Dr. Aaron: I suspect it has changed some, but mainly in terminology. Almost everything that we once thought of as in-service work, I would consider to be staff development.

Dr. Herber: I see an increase in the need and the recognition of the need for staff development that has come probably as a result of the diminishing availability of new positions in education. But I don't see that there has been any great difference in the activity.

Dr. Indrisano: In the last ten years we have seen the inception of programs that are field-based. Earlier activity tended to be a series of

courses, whereas more recently we have initiated field-based programs which can be part of degree granting programs.

Dr. Niles: Yes, I think it's very different. There is much more recognition of the importance of it. School systems are beginning to recognize that broad-based staff development is not very effective, that what teachers want and need is specificity, more of a rifle approach and less of a shotgun approach.

Dr. Otto: I would say there is more inclination to provide formally for it, because of unionization if for nothing else. Where in-service used to be an after school affair, now it's a carefully planned affair because it may even be called for in a contract. Because it costs more, it's valued more.

Dr. Ruddell: I don't think there has been a great deal of change in recent years. There are very distinct restrictions on finances on schools. In addition there is a knowledge vacuum present in the area of staff development. A third reason is the overload found in a public school where you've got a person in charge of staff development but also charged with a half dozen other responsibilities. On the brighter side, there is potential for change and I think you can find certain programs that could be viewed as model programs for staff development.

Q. #2 Is there any difference between a change agent operating in an educational setting and one operating in another setting, such as industry?

Dr. Aaron: The difference is that the person who has to work with teachers has to be constantly considering the youngsters that the teacher is going to be working with. You could have a successful operation and kill the patient. In industry you may be dealing only with one level, the person who is making the product. I believe the leader in staff development in reading has perhaps a more difficult job.

Dr. Herber: I can't imagine so. I think it's like reading, as I view reading. It is applicable across all disciplines. The process is essentially the same; what differs is the substance to which it applies. What you are trying to do is apply the principle of showing people how to do what they want to do, giving them as much help as you possibly can . . . It seems to me that regardless of the discipline, the area of human endeavor, that principle would hold.

Dr. Indrisano: I am not an advocate of the industrial model for education. Industry has the thing as its goal; education has the human as its goal. I do not mean to suggest that there is no place for the literature on change. Teachers are adult learners and we have sometimes used the principles of pedagogy rather than andragogy in staff development. The change agent's role is to assist the client, not to impose change, but to facilitate it.

Dr. Niles: Graduate schools of education, when they are training people to do consultant and supervisory work in education, should find somebody who has some knowledge of management techniques. Hopefully, it would be somebody who knows education. It needs to be done, however, because more and more people in supervisory or consultant positions are being expected to be change agents.

Dr. Otto: Yes, I think there is a difference. A change agent in education has to be more sensitive to all community needs because of the funding mechanisms. Also, the agent must be sensitive to the fact that we are not dealing with a tangible product, such as in industry, where people can see exactly what change is occurring.

Dr. Ruddell: There are similarities and differences. Similarities such as encouraging staff when quality efforts are present, and providing opportunities for staff to interact with the individuals who are assisting in the design of the in-service efforts leading to change. The big difference between industrial and educational settings is the definite authority hierarchy that's established in many industrial settings, inhibiting communication. It is extremely important to incorporate teachers and employees in the in-service process and provide options to allow them to self-select in in-service situations. This is in distinct contrast to a set hierarchy of staff relationships that discourages any degree of interchange.

Q. #3 What is the primary purpose of staff development?

Dr. Aaron: The primary purpose would be to help teachers, administrators, and other educational workers to do a better job of helping youngsters learn to read. The ultimate purpose ought to be pupil improvement in reading.

Dr. Herber: I would say the main purpose is to have teachers study what they do so that they can develop more efficiency and effectiveness in what they do. Also, to develop independence of outside sources as rapidly as possible, so that they can take over their own staff development.

Dr. Indrisano: To increase the competence of teachers and, in the case of highly competent teachers, to update information, to share recent knowledge and research. The process depends upon the person's own stage of development.

Dr. Niles: I think that the purpose of staff development should be to come as close as possible to meeting individual, self-identified needs. If they are good teachers, they know what they need. In-service education should meet these needs that they recognize at whatever time the staff development is to occur.

Dr. Otto: Planning and self-help . . . the need is to identify *local* needs and then to focus staff development to meet these needs. The fact is that as often as not the resources are available locally – no need to look elsewhere for the messiah!

Dr. Ruddell: The major purpose of staff development is to enable the teacher to become more effective in the classroom, to more effectively meet the needs of the youngsters. The key to successful in-servicing work is found at the local site level, building around the needs identified by teachers. An in-service program providing constant interaction and feedback to teachers requires high quality leadership at the local school site, budgetary support for release time and strong administrative support at the central and local school office level.

Despite their widely differing backgrounds and tendencies to emphasize different aspects of staff development, the six experts stand on common

ground in several major areas. They dispel any notion of the “expert from afar” as an effective staff developer, eschewing this in favor of utilizing local talent. While acknowledging the necessity of promoting competency, they lean heavily on the side of human resource development and facilitation. They echoed each other in recommending a staff developer who, according to Dr. Aaron, “could work well with people.” Summarily, they concur with Dr. Otto’s succinct description of the characteristic of an effective staff developer: Empathy!

REFERENCES

Harris, B. W. and W. Bessent. *Inservice Education: A Guide to Better Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969, p. 2.