

# TEACHER TALK

*Even the best professional development may fail to create meaningful and lasting changes in teaching and learning—unless teachers engage in ongoing professional dialogue to develop a reflective school community*

When the news media and policymakers talk about school improvement, they often mean spending large amounts of money for the “right” program to manage instruction and raise test scores. Rarely do they identify excellent and experienced teachers as the solution to education’s problems.

Teacher expertise is routinely devalued. In a recent example, the U.S. Congress mandated the convening of an influential National Reading Panel to determine the best ways to teach reading, especially at the early levels. The 12-member panel included experts from the fields of cognitive psychology, medicine, and higher education, but only two school-based members—an elementary school principal and a middle school reading teacher. This influential, highly publicized report is being used to determine reading practices in U.S. schools, yet no practitioners of beginning reading were included in writing the report. The clear message to the public is that teacher expertise and classroom-based research do not matter.

This notion runs contrary to everything we know about successful education. Knowledgeable, well-informed teachers make a greater difference than do specific programs. Linda Darling-Hammond, who champions the importance of teachers as professionals, states,

My research and personal experience tell me that the single most important determinant of success for a student is the knowledge and skills of that child’s teacher. (Goldberg, 2001, p. 689)

Yet every time a new national report emerges, it creates a crisis of confidence among teachers. Too

many teachers assume that “experts” outside the classroom somehow know more than they do. Even seasoned, knowledgeable teachers are quick to question what they believe is right and best for students.

When teachers are well informed—by learning theory and relevant research, as well as by careful reflection on their own experiences—they can make confident decisions about teaching practices. And one of the most powerful approaches to developing this kind of confidence is ongoing professional conversation among colleagues, built into a school’s professional development expectations for staff.

## Conversation to Sustain Change

For more than 30 years, I have taught in public schools. For about a decade, I facilitated weekly language arts support groups for teachers, which took the form of conversations—informal, nonjudgmental, exploratory dialogue, often with a common goal in mind. These weekly conversations, along with professional study, gave participating teachers the research, practical ideas, and confidence to move forward in a variety of areas, such as using portfolios and student-led conferences to report progress to parents, improving the teaching of spelling, teaching guided reading, and organized writing workshops.

Since the fall of 1998, I have been teaching in public schools around the country in weeklong school residencies. I spend most of the week demonstrating techniques and strategies in classrooms. For the first three or four days in a school, I demonstrate lessons in the classroom for teachers released to observe. On the last day or two, the teachers try the strategies as I coach and support them. Each teacher can choose to have fellow teachers observe or not. Even though it is difficult for teachers to do so, most agree to have their peers observe because they recognize the value of continued questioning and learning for all teacher learners.

In past school residencies—on the bases of the questions, conversations, and new activities being tried during the week of my visit—it certainly looked as if teachers were in the midst of real change. But return visits were disappointing. I saw new skills and

strategies being taught, but with limited connections to big ideas and key concepts in the curriculum.

Although my work in a school had included multiple demonstrations with students, daily conversations with teachers, and coaching several teachers, it still turned out to be a “one-shot deal”—just a longer one. Teachers learned new strategies, skills, and activities, but not necessarily with the understanding and rationale necessary for meaningful application. Experience suggested that the impact on student learning and achievement would remain very limited without ongoing professional reading, reflection, sharing, thinking, collaboration, practice, revision, and continual discussion about all aspects of teaching, learning and evaluating.

started by sharing ideas and talking about various teaching concerns. Linda has commented on the impact of the meetings:

Everyone seemed to get along better. When you see everyone each week and sit down together—instead of teachers just staying in their classrooms—people share more. It definitely pulled our staff closer together.

About six teachers also decided to meet weekly over the summer to discuss professional books. This past fall, the staff chose to focus in depth on teaching reading, especially to struggling readers. Diane Gillespie bought copies of *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* by Richard Allington (2000), and teachers decided how much they would read each week for discussion. Linda has noted that teachers are thinking more about teaching and what they are doing in their classrooms and that weekly attendance continues to exceed 90 percent of the faculty.

Each meeting still begins with Linda asking, “Did anyone bring anything to share?” but now the staff is also beginning to look carefully at theory and research and to make connections to their own beliefs and practices. During my next residency at this school to demonstrate teaching reading—with a focus on strategies for struggling readers—I expect that the “why” will now connect with the “how” and that teachers will connect the demonstrated strategies to their evolving beliefs about how students learn.

Professional conversations have sparked an interest in learning. More of the teachers are reading professional journals. Whereas no teacher at Huntsville Elementary had previously belonged to a national teachers’ organization or been to a national conference, now about one-third of the staff are members of the International Reading Association (IRA). Gillespie has made a commitment to send several staff members each year to the annual meeting of the IRA.

Although the teachers have not been meeting long enough to assess the impact of teacher conversation on student achievement, I believe that the increased staff collegiality will positively enhance student learning.

## **Teachers need time to develop in-depth knowledge through professional conversations, and time is in short supply.**

Finally, I decided not to return to a school unless weekly professional conversations became part of that school’s culture. I was no longer willing to put my energies into a school and not have the work and conversations continue after I left. On the last afternoon of a school residency, when meeting with teachers to discuss future goals, I strongly encouraged the staff to begin weekly professional conversations. I told the teachers that they were ready for such conversations, they needed dialogue to remain professional, and conversation would change their teaching practice.

### **One School’s Story**

To my delight and surprise, in each of the schools where I urged teachers to begin ongoing professional conversations, teachers and administrators have taken up the challenge. At Huntsville Elementary School in Huntsville, Ohio, where Diane Gillespie is principal, 30-year veteran teacher Linda Benedict volunteered to spearhead the effort and facilitate weekly meetings.

Last spring, 90 percent of the staff came to each meeting. As is typical when such groups begin, they

Third grade teacher Carol Fleece recently commented,

“There is a unity of teachers in our building that wasn’t there before. We are open to new ideas and always looking for a good “professional read.” We have grown professionally as a staff.

And as Moffett (2000) has noted,

More than almost any other factor, the sense of a professional community in schools enhances student achievement. (p. 36)

## **Developing Good Conversations**

As teachers start meeting regularly, typical conversations may be superficial and touch on all aspects of teaching. Initially, many teachers use the time to air their feelings about school life. Because they aren’t used to “conversing,” they may have to get these general concerns out of the way first. It often takes more than a year for meetings to focus on curriculum and improving student learning.

Additionally, many teachers are embarrassed to admit that they need help. They believe that everyone else must be a successful practitioner who already knows how to teach a particular skill or discipline. In one district, it took six years before an intermediate grade teacher felt safe enough to say, “I don’t know how to teach reading when I get students who don’t know how to read.” That opened the floodgates, and teacher after teacher began to express similar concerns, which led to a three-month focus on how to teach reading in the upper grades.

Loretta Martin, a literacy coach with almost 30 years of experiences as a primary grades teacher, says she needed help when her district moved from a basal to a literature-based approach, but she was afraid to ask for it:

I knew in my gut that I was not using my reading time to really teach my students to become readers. Seeking advice from my administrator seemed like admitting failure. Finally, I said, “I need help. Can

you recommend a recourse or professional conference to learn more about the teaching of reading?”

She attended a week-long literacy conference out of state and began to take responsibility for her own learning. She returned more knowledgeable about the reading process, the research on reading, and the way students learn. Years later, she continues to learn through observing students, having conversations with colleagues, attending conferences, and reading professionally. For the past 13 years, Loretta has been intimately involved in professional development and has become a valued teacher leader and mentor teacher in her school district.

## **Moving Beyond Superficial Change**

Most change that occurs in our schools is only surface level. It is possible to walk into a classroom that appears to be based on the latest theory and practice—desks grouped in clusters, small groups of students working together, learning centers and computers in place—only to discover that the change is cosmetic. The rationale for and understanding of the physical and learning configurations are missing.

This surface level change is not surprising. In one school I visited, teachers had worked with outside experts in math, behavior management, writing, standards, spelling, and portfolios—all in the past two years! How could teachers be expected to understand the “why” of their practice when so much was being piled onto their teaching? There was no time for the reflection that is vital for all meaningful and lasting change.

In this particular school, the reason for my weeklong visit was primarily concern about the low test scores on the statewide grade 4 writing test—that is, systematically teaching the students to write a paragraph with a topic sentence and supporting details—students’ writing, including spelling and grammar, had not improved. In fact, some teachers told me that the quality of the writing had declined.

No surprise here. Students learn to write well when they engage in creating authentic texts for a

purpose and an audience that matter. Then revision and editing make sense, not the other way around. But without professional conversations and reflection about how real writers work, it's impossible to teach writing well.

We need to be continually asking:

- Why am I teaching this way?
- How will this activity or lesson contribute to students' literacy and growing independence?
- How do I know whether my students are learning?

If we don't ask these questions, we are just going through the motions. Our students may learn the skills and strategies that we teach them, but application to meaningful contexts will be limited.

### **SOME GUIDELINES FOR WEEKLY PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS**

- Make meetings voluntary and invitational
- Survey the staff for interests
- Begin on time
- Post an agenda
- Take minutes and distribute them to the entire staff
- Read and discuss professional articles and books
- Have a specific curricular focus
- Encourage a knowledgeable teacher or co-teachers to facilitate
- Request that the principal attend as a learner and equal group member
- Allow time for sharing ideas

## **Making Time for Conversations**

Teachers need time to develop in-depth knowledge through professional conversations, and time is in short supply. In one district where I worked for more than 20 years, there was only one required professional development day, and the teachers' union consistently resisted adding more days. Although we had well-attended, voluntary, weekly professional conversations in place in each K–4 elementary school—our “language arts support group”—some teachers noted that these meetings took place before school, on our own time.

Some possibilities for creating time for weekly professional meetings are to:

- Establish before-school support groups.
- Start school late or dismiss students early one day each week.
- Devote faculty meetings to issues of the profession.
- Create common planning times.
- Hire roving substitutes.
- Add paid days to the school calendar.
- Add more time to the school day.

Making a commitment to weekly professional meetings is not easy, but it is one of the best ways to develop thoughtful practice schoolwide and to improve teaching and learning. Ongoing, onsite professional development through reflective, self-guided weekly conversations about teaching practice is a necessity for sustained growth and transformation for both students and teachers.

## **References**

- Goldberg, M. (2001, May). An interview with Linda Darling-Hammond: Balanced optimism. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(9), 687–690.
- Moffett, C. (2000, April). Sustaining change: The answers are blowing in the wind. *Educational Leadership*, 57(7), 35–38.