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Abstract

The Michigan Reading Association (MRA) believes responsibility for professional development resides with both the educators, who must assert themselves as individual learners, and with the school systems — both local and statewide. Michigan needs a system for addressing best practices prescribed by the educational community at large, but there also must be validation of individual professional development needs. Recent studies of professional development innovations emphasize personal choice combined with collaborative reflection on practice and professional growth. An educator's growth is stimulated by writing, reading, speaking and listening, researching, and by using technology. Teachers' applications of professional development should feature legislative awareness and involvement as well as classroom applications. Effective staff development programs begin with the assumption that teachers are professionals who continue to learn throughout their careers. In the same way that American business is finding success by investing in human development, school systems must provide adequate funding and release time for educators to maintain and enhance their knowledge of content and of teaching strategies. MRA endorses groups of educators trying to grow collectively through interaction around school improvement visions; however, MRA believes that there needs to be a balance within professional development so that individuals' learning needs and school improvement efforts are each accomplished.

[A] concern for personal reality cannot be divorced from a concern for cooperative action within some sort of community. It is when teachers are together as persons, according to norms and principles they have freely chosen, that interest becomes intensified and commitments are made. And this may open pathways to expanded landscapes, richer ways of being human …
                            (Greene, 1991, p. 13)

The Michigan Reading Association (MRA) exists in large part to provide professional development opportunities for educators in the belief that such learning opportunities will enhance the literacy of both children and other adults. MRA believes responsibility for professional development resides with both the educators, who must assert themselves as individual learners, and with the school systems — both local and statewide, which must support teachers and other educators as they work to continuously improve their practices. This position paper describes MRA's current research-based understandings about the complex and dynamic process of lifelong learning for professional educators who work in public or private schools.

According to surveys of employers, most workers (81%) receive formal training related to their work tasks and there are "significantly positive effects on

establishment productivity associated with investments in human capital" (Lynch & Black, 1996, p. 28). This on-the-job training — the vast majority of which goes toward upgrading high-level skills rather than for remediation — is one reason why the United States leads the world in productivity (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) has recently calculated, based on information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that the $55.3 billion spent by American firms on training in 1995 is a 20% increase in dollars for training since 1983 (ASTD, 1996). In the same way that American business is increasing its spending on human development, school systems must provide adequate funding and release time for educators to maintain and enhance their knowledge of content and of teaching strategies.

Basic Terminology

Some of the terminologies connected with teacher growth are being slowly replaced because they reflect, almost exclusively, top-down "training" of teachers and assume knowledge deficits (Anderson & Santillan, 1997). *Professional Development* is a term that is increasingly used because it assigns more responsibility to individuals than other terms or approaches do. *Development* must be distinguished from inevitable change and refers to "increases in ability, skill, power, strength, wisdom, insight, virtual, happiness, and so forth" (Jackson, 1992, p. 63). MRA believes that *professional development* may include personal endeavors, membership in professional organization or enrollment in a graduate program, and may have no direct connection with one's school district. Yet *professional development* also encompasses the aspects of school-administered inservice or staff development that help one learn as a professional. According to Fullan

and Stiegelbauer (1991), the main problem for those who evaluate teachers' performance "is not how to get rid of the deadwood, but rather how to motivate good teachers throughout their careers" (p. 142).

Adult Learning within Educational Inservice

Adult learning is facilitated by several factors:
- relevance to the learner,
- learner-controlled pace,
- collaborative interpretation and exchange of information with others,
- consideration of individuals' outlooks and personalities,
- expectation of dynamic processes, and
- acknowledgement of the importance of context, including societal variables such as economy, politics, and culture (Smith, 1996).

Unfortunately, inservice training has been too often ineffective. Teachers have been afforded few opportunities to make personal choices about their own learning, insufficient time to reflect on their individual professional development, delayed access to new technologies, and virtually no time to effectively collaborate around issues that really matter to them.

The single most important study of professional development is the four-year Rand project led by McLaughlin and Marsh (1990). Focusing on numerous federally-funded projects which were aimed at change of educational systems, the study concluded that current staff development is not paying good dividends. It was a two-phased research project. The first phase looked at factors affecting the initiation and implementation of change in nearly 300 projects, and the second phase looked at the persistence of the programs' effects in 100 cases. McLaughlin and Marsh reported:

... the only consensus that appears to exist about staff development is that what we have now is ineffective and a waste of time. The general feeling is that most staff development programs have benefited neither teachers nor students. If effective staff development is not an isolated workshop or an evening extension course, what is it? (1990, p. 213)

Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) exemplify the many educational researchers who agree with the above criticism: "Simply put, most forms of inservice training are not designed to provide the ongoing, interactive, cumulative learning necessary to develop new conceptions, skills and behaviors" (p. 85).

One of the most startling findings of the Rand study was that most teachers' growth, in terms of effectiveness within the classroom, peaks in a matter of five to seven years, thereafter either declining or merely holding steady. What's more, resistance to change and maturity were correlated: the greater the experience of the project teacher, the less likely was the project to achieve its goals — including the improvement of student performance (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1990). Teachers' low capacity for change and learning was tied to ways schools are managed and to the ineffective professional development activities which dominate.

Effective Professional Development

To focus on the positive, the Rand study found that effective staff development programs, where teachers are treated as professionals who continue to learn throughout their careers, most often assume that (a) learners have different needs at different times, and (b) the learners themselves must identify their own learning needs (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1990). Furthermore, effective

professional development typically includes:
- engagement of teachers in a concrete set of tasks;
- inquiry and reflection which are participant-driven;
- collaborative sharing of knowledge with a focus on teachers' communities of practice, rather than on individuals;
- sustained, ongoing and intensive support through modeling, coaching and group problem-solving; and
- connection to other aspects of school change (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 598).

New policies and structures are needed to help teachers learn by doing — for example, via collaborative sharing, reading and writing throughout their careers.

Collaborative Learning Groups

Recent studies of professional development innovations revolve around personal choice in combination with collaborative reflection on practice and professional growth (Knowles, 1973/90; Schon, 1985; Brookfield, 1986; Freire, 1993; Short *et al.*, 1994; Featherstone, 1995; Anderson & Santillan, 1997). American models for adult learners have been present for many years and include Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote "Self Reliance" and "American Scholar." Another is Benjamin Franklin's "club of mutual improvement," which met for nearly 40 years for the purposes of discussion, review of each others' essays (each club member produced one paper every three months), and the sharing of precious books (Franklin, 1932, p. 64). Gross (1971) connected the notion of lifelong self-education to learning groups, which he believed to be easy to organize: people can be "drawn together by a mutual urge to grow, to know themselves and others better; they want to enliven and strengthen their capacity for

relationships with others" (p. 111). The local reading councils affiliated with MRA represent such learning groups, as does MRA itself in a larger context — such environments in which teachers collaboratively reflect on professional experiences result in profound learning.

Growth from Writing, Reading, Speaking and Listening, Researching and Using Technology

Most teachers do desire learning, and this points to an opportunity to design specific professional development offerings for individuals. There are many ways that educators can work to improve professionally. Professional writing offers some teachers a way to select issues which suit their own interests and needs, which provide sharing of information and exploration of issues between inexperienced and experienced teachers, and which bring out ideological and political aspects of education in a manner that relates subject and object. Composing articles for professional periodicals such as the *Michigan Reading Journal* or *News and Views on Reading* allows teachers to satisfy their need to express their experiences and thereby enables them to reinterpret their own practices. Likewise regularly reading professional publications — including regional publications which deal with Michigan issues — is a significant way to grow as an educator. Speaking or presenting at conferences and hearing other describe their teaching philosophies and methods is yet another means of professional development that MRA supports. Designing and conducting educational research is also a legitimate means of professional development for *all* educators. Finally, in order to help students, teachers need learning opportunities which involve new technologies such as computers and the Internet, among others. Each of the professional development avenues described above embodies teacher inquiry and reflection on what matters in successful teaching and learning.

Legislative Awareness and Involvement

Though society is ultimately stronger than the individual, development is both individual and social. Tennant and Pogson (1995) explored the idea of adults' *development*, concluding that the term has meaning only within a cultural and historical framework. This assertion is based on their argument that development is a dialectical process consisting of constant interaction between person and social environment. In this view of learning, development moves individuals toward greater autonomy in proper relation to the conventions and rules of society. In acknowledgement of the importance of a cultural and historical framework, MRA encourages its members to apply their professional learning to society, not only in the classroom but also through public dialogue and debate. These social applications of professional development should feature legislative awareness and involvement. The entire education process depends upon responsible democratic governing — which educators share responsibility for along with all other citizens.

Conversely, society is responsible to support the growth of those individuals who educate youngsters. This is not merely a matter of an employer (specifically, the public) desiring to make workers (that is, educators) continuously more productive. Instead, considering the emergence of interactive and collaborative professional development (outlines above), it is the importance of the dialectical process between individual and social environment which has led MRA members to the following belief: Michigan policy makers uphold the democratic system when they provide time and funding for the professional

development of teachers and educational administrators.

Conclusion

MRA believes that professionals should debate about what counts as professional development, just as they should negotiate about other aspects of school. Fullan (1992) argued that we need to pay close attention to the link between teachers' personal development and institutional development (changes in schools as institutions that increase their capacity for improvement). We endorse groups of educators trying to grow collectively through interaction around school improvement visions; however, MRA does not expect that *all* professional development will be tied to school improvement or other direct reform efforts that require entire faculties or departments to collaborate. MRA supports individually-defined professional growth as long as it does not interfere with others' (especially students') growth. In sum, Michigan needs a system for balancing the valid needs prescribed by the educational community at large with the valid learning needs of individual professionals.

While the future is largely unknown, it is safe to predict that career-long learning awaits those who work — whether in industry, government, law, medicine or education. MRA pledges to support all educators who request professional development and hopes that state education officials, communities, and school systems will likewise support their professional staffs with balanced, future-looking educational opportunities.

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Michigan Reading Association Mission Statement

The Michigan Reading Association is a dynamic organization whose mission is to promote literacy by enabling varied communities of learners to become knowledgeable decision-makers and by providing opportunities to share common and diverse interests and beliefs.

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