

Developing Self-Directed Professional Growth

A white paper by Dr. John L. Tenny, developer of the Data-Based Observation Method and the eCOVE Classroom Observation Software, November, 2008

Quality staff development efforts are directed at improving teaching and learning in ways that will result in long-term change. The topics included in staff development come from national, state, district, and building standards; from benchmark test scores; from school board and superintendent directives; from research and scholarly journals; and from the teachers themselves. Programs include training on goal setting, action research, specific curriculum or behavior techniques, communication approaches, brain research, child psychology, and a nearly unlimited list of other topics; all of which have value and work to some degree.

However, there is a persistent level of frustration among staff developers around the resistance to new ideas, the difficulties in getting teacher buy-in and implementation, and the limited impact of staff development efforts. It is the premise of this paper that a more productive perspective is to focus on a more fundamental skill needed by professional educators — the skill of reflection.

Every educator has been involved in 'reflection' exercises, from college assignments to responding to the annual evaluation. While one would think that teachers are therefore skilled at reflecting on their teaching and their students' behavior and learning, there has been a significant missing link. The focus of reflections has, to date, been nearly always on something either abstract, outside the control or influence of the teacher, or in response to a judgment or opinion of

someone else.

For example, reflecting on the drop in 5th grade reading scores can only be done as an abstract exercise as the exact causes are not known. The number of variables affecting a change in scores is extensive, and the teacher does not have the data/information needed to 'reflect', let alone explain or develop an effective plan of action. Similarly, asking a teacher to reflect on observation reports with a list of met/not met or observed/not observed items, or worse yet, a low ranking on a likert scale, will nearly always result in a defensive or deflective response, accompanied frequently by anger, resentment, and hostility. A judgment of one's worth is always subject to suspicion of bias, and challenging that judgment is nearly always an adversarial exercise.

If reflecting, under current practices, is so difficult to accomplish in a meaningful way, how can staff development efforts increase that foundational skill? The answer lies in conducting objective, data-based observations on the behaviors of teacher and students. Providing the data to the teacher without judgment, praise, or criticism and asking a simple question, "Is this what you thought was happening in your classroom?", will result in the beginning of reflection on the activities within the classroom, the teacher's plans and goals, and other variables that would have an impact on the data. When a teacher is presented with the actual duration and/or frequency data rather than the observer's subjective evaluation there is a shift in the dynamic from defense and deflection to an empowering professional engagement with the results of the observation.

Most often when a person is engaged in teaching and classroom

management, it is not possible for them to see clearly the interaction between the lesson delivery, classroom materials, and student behaviors. When an observer gathers data on focused behaviors such as level of questions, teacher talk time, teacher response to misbehavior, etc., the teacher can become engaged in a non-defensive manner and move from pleasing the observer to objectively devising and testing research based approaches to classroom activities.

Until recently, the process of gathering this type of data has been daunting, and involved pencil, paper, stopwatches followed by time doing the calculations. An innovative program, eCOVE Software, has eliminated nearly all of the time consuming mechanics and has enhanced both the data collection and reporting process. eCOVE includes multiple specific data collection tools, and runs on both Macintosh and Windows computers and handheld devices such as PocketPC and iPhones. An observer can easily gather data by operating the timer and counter tools, and produce reports on both individual observations and/or behavior over time. Tools for tracking additional behaviors can be collaboratively developed using the tool creation templates.

When the data is shared in a non-judgmental manner, the teacher has a sound basis for reflection. Working through determining the meaning of the data and the possible need for change is an invigorating professional discussion. Following this process with tracking the implementation of a plan of action and the outcome in student behaviors through additional data collection further enriches the reflection process. The result is self-directed professional growth by the teacher and a collaborative relationship between the observer and teacher.