

Compliance or Adaptation:

WHAT IS THE REAL MESSAGE ABOUT RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES?

It's not whether teachers should use research-based practices, Mr. Duffy and Ms. Kear point out. Of course they should. The real question is whether teachers should feel free to adapt the practices they learn rather than comply strictly with expert guidance.

BY GERALD G. DUFFY AND KATHRYN KEAR

UPON LEARNING that the National Reading Panel recommended certain research-based practices,¹ a school district hired an expert to tell its teachers about those practices in a half-day professional development session. It then forced the teachers to comply by basing their year-end evaluations on whether they used the recommended practices. Does this sound familiar?

It should, because this scenario is not unusual. School

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districts arrange for these inservice sessions because they assume that test scores will rise if teachers use research-based practices and because influential educators such as Edward Kame'enui promote this use of professional development as "the logic model."² However, we argue that this model may send a counterproductive message to teachers.

FIGURING OUT WHAT COUNTS

Professional development is like any other form of teaching, in that learners always figure out what the teacher really wants. For instance, elementary students figure out what counts in classrooms by noting what teachers value.³ If

teachers value accurate completion of worksheets and tests, students learn to be good at doing worksheets and tests; if teachers value inquiry or problem solving, students learn to be good at inquiry or problem solving. The teacher need not state what counts; students construct the understanding for themselves by noting what the teacher values.

The same thing happens with teachers during professional development. Teachers figure out what counts by noting what the inservice speaker values. If the speaker values rigid implementation of research-based practices, teachers feel they should comply; if the speaker values adjusting research-based practices to students and situations, teachers feel they should be adaptive. The speaker need not state what counts; teachers construct the understanding for themselves by noting what the staff developer values.

So the issue is not whether teachers should use research-based practices. Of course they should. The issue is the underlying message we send. Do teachers conclude they should be adaptive? Or do they conclude they should comply?

WHAT DO THE MOST EFFECTIVE TEACHERS DO?

The goal of professional development is to help teachers be more effective. Early research on what helps teachers be effective emphasized time management and direct teaching,⁴ but recent research establishes that effective teachers are also adaptive.⁵ That is, in addition to being organized, efficient, and direct, effective teachers modify their practices as situations change. John Bransford and his colleagues call this “adaptive expertise,” and it is what Catherine Snow and her colleagues presumably admire when they say that the best teachers craft a special mix of instructional ingredients for every child.⁶

Developing effectiveness of this kind requires more than just telling teachers about research-based practices. It also requires that teachers understand that they must assume executive control of those practices. That is, when the needs of particular students or particular instructional situations require it, teachers must take charge, modifying practices to make them fit. Research on teaching provides many examples of adaptation, but two suffice here.

First, research shows that effective teachers adapt information from experts when they feel it is necessary. In one study, for instance, highly effective teachers were distinguished from less-effective teachers by their insistence on modifying researchers’ recommendations when, in their judgment, the research findings did not quite fit their classroom situations.⁷

Similarly, effective teachers often adapt the recommendations in teacher’s guides and sometimes even invent new

activities or projects. As both Gerald Duffy and Ruth Wharton-McDonald and her colleagues note, they do so to meet the needs and interests of students and, because they do, they make instruction more effective.⁸

The essential professional development task, therefore, is not to insist that teachers know and use research-based practices. Rather, it is a much more complex matter of putting teachers in a position to adapt research-based practices to their particular situations.

PROMOTING THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION OF RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES

The example cited at the beginning of this article is typical of the training model often employed in professional development sessions. That is, outside experts convey the expectation that teachers should comply with recommendations in prescribed ways, and compliance is subsequently enforced. The expert does not encourage teachers to adapt practices to students or to curricular situations. In fact, it sometimes seems the goal is to ensure that teachers do *not* engage in the adaptive thinking associated with the most effective teachers.

Recent research on adaptive aspects of effective teaching has spurred a move away from training models and toward “educative” models of professional development.⁹ In contrast to training models, educative models give teachers a voice and communicate that what counts is teacher ownership of instructional decision making.

Five characteristics of this “new” professional development encourage teachers to be adaptive in using research-based practices. First, adaptive teaching is promoted when inservice sessions help teachers develop a “moral compass” to guide them through whatever situations they might encounter.¹⁰ Effective teachers have goals and ideals that go beyond simply raising test scores. When, as inevitably happens, problematic situations arise in teaching, the most effective teachers make decisions based on these goals and ideals; they do not wait passively for directions from an outside authority. This active stance emerges when inservice speakers urge teachers to articulate their personal visions for students and to use them to decide how to deal with complex instructional problems: “You must have your own ideas about what you are trying to accomplish so you can decide what to do when recommended practices do not work.”

Second, the inservice speaker’s attitude promotes adaptive thinking. Instead of coming across as an authoritative expert, the speaker authorizes teachers to adapt information to their particular situations. Teachers thus conclude that what counts is exercise of independent teacher judg-

ment, not compliance with the dictates of authority figures.

Third, adaptive thinking is promoted when professional development is longitudinal, rather than a one-shot afternoon session. In-classroom coaching and concerted, consistent effort over long periods of time are essential. By "long periods of time," we mean months and sometimes years, because the process is complex and difficult, and progress is often erratic rather than steady.¹¹ Such a longitudinal view conveys a message to teachers that says, in effect, "This is difficult, but we will take the time to support you as you learn to be adaptive."

Fourth, adaptive thinking is promoted when professional development is "case-based" or "problem-based." That is, activities represent situations teachers are likely to encounter or are currently encountering.¹² When real-world activities are used, teachers discover that research findings can seldom be applied as "pat" answers but, instead, must often be adapted. Focusing professional development on such problem-based tasks conveys the message that teaching is not a matter of authoritative certainties but, rather, requires teachers to adapt to the tentative and problematic complexities of classroom life.

Finally, adaptive thinking is promoted through the use of school-based learning communities.¹³ While experts may initially present research findings and provide overall conceptual guidance, teachers subsequently work in groups, organized by grade level or other common elements, to resolve discrepancies between research findings and the

contextual realities of the classroom. By encouraging collaborative work, professional development conveys the message that research-based practices must be adjusted to the particular conditions of the classroom and school.

In sum, inservice sessions that simply dispense research-based findings can convey the counterproductive message that passive compliance is the key to effective practice. Instead, professional development must make it clear that research findings represent probability, not certainty, and that to be effective, teachers must adapt research-based practices to fit particular students and particular situations. Only when we emphasize that message will we achieve the success we seek.

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