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What Makes Professional Development Effective?



After an examination of 13 recent lists of characteristics of “effective professional development,” Mr. Guskey concludes that they vary widely and that the research that supports them is inconsistent and often contradictory. Nonetheless, he argues, we need to seek agreement on criteria for effectiveness, along with clear descriptions of contextual factors.

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

DO WE KNOW what makes professional development effective? Have researchers and practitioners reached consensus about what factors contribute to a successful professional development experience? Do we even agree on what criteria should be used to judge professional development’s effectiveness? A review of newly developed lists of the characteristics of effective professional development indicates that the answer to each of these questions is “Maybe not.”

Recently I analyzed 13 different lists of the characteristics of effective professional development, all published within the last decade. These lists were drawn from publications of the American Federation of Teachers, Association for Supervision and Curriculum

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Development, Education Development Center, Educational Research Service, Educational Testing Service, Eisenhower Professional Development Program, National Governors’ Association, National Institute for Science Education, National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, National Staff Development Council, and U.S. Department of Education. My goal was to find out the extent to which these various lists agreed. What I discovered is that they were derived in very different ways, used differ-

ent criteria to determine “effectiveness,” and varied widely in the characteristics they identified. I also found that the research evidence regarding most of the identified characteristics is inconsistent and sometimes contradictory.

In considering their development, I concluded that most of the lists could be described as “research-based.” But that research rarely includes rigorous investigations of the relationship between the noted characteristics and improvements in instructional practice or student learning outcomes. Instead, it typically involves surveys of the opinions of researchers and educators. In other words, researchers and practitioners generally favor these characteristics and believe they are important, despite the lack of verifying evidence. Only a National Institute for Science Education (NISE) analysis and an Educational Testing Service (ETS) study show a direct link between their identified characteristics and specific measures of student achievement.¹

Of the 21 characteristics distinguished in the lists, the most frequently cited was enhancement of teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge. Helping teachers to understand more deeply the content they teach and the ways students learn that content appears to be a vital dimension of effective professional development. At present, however, nearly all of the studies relating this characteristic to improvements in student learning focus on achievement in mathematics or science. Whether the same is true for achievement in language arts, social studies, or other subject areas has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

Most of the lists mention the provision of sufficient time and other resources as essential to effective professional development. Obviously, educators need time to deepen their understanding, analyze students’ work, and develop new approaches to instruction. But significant contrary evidence exists. The NISE analysis, for example, showed that differences in time spent in professional development activities were unrelated to improvements in student outcomes. Similarly, the ETS study found that the amount of time spent in professional development was unrelated to achievement. So while effective professional development surely requires time, it’s clear that the time must be well organized, carefully structured, and purposefully directed.

Another consistently noted characteristic is the promotion of collegiality and collaborative exchange. Educators at all levels value opportunities to work together, reflect on their practices, exchange ideas, and share strategies. But research on teachers shows that individ-

uals can collaborate to block change or inhibit progress just as easily as they can to enhance the process.² For collaboration to bring its intended benefits it, too, needs to be structured and purposeful, with efforts guided by clear goals for improving student learning.

Most of the lists stress the inclusion of evaluation procedures — an emphasis that probably stems from growing awareness of the need to gather regular formative information to guide improvement efforts. Most also emphasize the need for professional development activities to be aligned with other reform initiatives and to model high-quality instruction. These characteristics undoubtedly come from appreciation of the large-scale and systemic nature of most modern education reforms and increased awareness of similarities between the learning patterns of adults and children.

The majority of lists stress that professional development should be school- or site-based, even though significant research evidence suggests otherwise. A recent review by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, for example, found that when decisions about professional development were primarily school-based, staff members paid only lip service to research and were more interested in programs similar to what they were already doing than in those producing results.³ In such instances the decentralization of decision making appeared to be undermining the use of knowledge rather than promoting it. A carefully organized collaboration between site-based educators, who are keenly aware of critical contextual characteristics, and district-level personnel, who have broader perspectives on problems, seems essential to optimize the effectiveness of professional development.

Despite the current emphasis on student performance, less than half the lists mention the importance of using analyses of student learning data to guide professional development activities. And amazingly, only four lists stress that professional development should be based on the best available research evidence. This is particularly striking given the long-standing criticism of professional development that focuses on fads and bandwagon movements rather than on solid evidence of what works with students. Other noted characteristics appear on only one or two lists.

This analysis led me to three related conclusions. First, there appears to be little agreement among professional development researchers or practitioners about the criteria for “effectiveness.” Some define it in terms of teachers’ self-reports of professional development features that increase their knowledge and lead to changes

in their instructional practices. Others look for consensus in the opinions of professional development writers and researchers. Such efforts, while informative, represent only a starting point.

To gain authentic evidence and make serious improvements, we need to push beyond this starting point and move toward professional development's ultimate goal: improvements in student learning outcomes. These outcomes should be broadly defined to include a variety of indicators of student achievement, such as assessment results, portfolio evaluations, marks or grades, or scores from standardized examinations. They might also include affective and behavioral outcomes, such as students' attitudes, attendance rates, dropout statistics, and participation in school activities. Significant advances in professional development will come only when both researchers and practitioners insist on this fundamental goal as the principal criterion of effectiveness.

Second, most of the currently identified characteristics of effective professional development seem best described as "yes, but . . ." statements. For example, *yes*, enhancing teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge is important, *but* existing research is limited mainly to investigations of mathematics and science instruction. *Yes*, professional development should provide sufficient time and resources, *but* such time and resources must be used wisely, focusing on activities that positively affect learning and learners. *Yes*, professional development should include procedures for evaluation, *but* evaluations that focus narrowly on educators' self-reported satisfaction with professional development activities offer inadequate guidance and direction to improvement efforts. And so on.

The problem with such "yes, but" statements is that they frustrate policy makers and practitioners who want simple answers to their questions about effective professional development. They also diminish the value of "research" evidence in the eyes of those seeking unambiguous statements about "best practices" in professional development. Nevertheless, they accurately represent the fact that nearly all professional development takes place in real-world contexts. The complexities of these varied contexts introduce a web of factors that influence whether or not a particular characteristic or practice will produce the desired results. These nuances of context are difficult to recognize and even more difficult to take into account within the confines of a single program. Thus programs that appear quite similar may produce different results for subtle and unanticipated reasons.

Take, for example, professional development specifically designed to enhance teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge. Schools in economically depressed areas that have trouble attracting and keeping well-qualified teachers and, as a result, have many teachers teaching subjects outside their area of certification, may benefit greatly from such programs. Schools in more affluent communities, on the other hand, that have sufficient resources to attract and retain well-qualified teachers with advanced training in the subject areas they teach may see little improvement from similar programs. These real-world contextual differences profoundly influence the effectiveness of professional development endeavors.

Third, these results show that while the promise of research-based decision making in professional development has been largely unfulfilled, it need not remain so. Analyses of student learning data typically show that greater variation exists between classrooms within a school than between schools or between districts.⁴ In other words, within the unique context of nearly every school there are teachers who have found ways to help students learn well. Identifying the practices and strategies of these teachers and sharing them with their colleagues might provide a basis for highly effective professional development within that context.

The characteristics that influence the effectiveness of professional development are multiple and highly complex. It may be unreasonable, therefore, to assume that a single list of characteristics leading to broad-brush policies and guidelines for effective professional development will ever emerge, regardless of the quality of professional development research. Still, by agreeing on the criteria for "effectiveness" and providing clear descriptions of important contextual elements, we can guarantee sure and steady progress in our efforts to improve the quality of professional development endeavors.

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2. Judith Warren Little, "The Persistence of Privacy: Autonomy and Initiative in Teachers' Professional Relations," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1989.

3. Thomas B. Corcoran, Susan H. Fuhrman, and Catherine L. Belcher, "The District Role in Instructional Improvement," *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2001, pp. 78-84.

4. Edward Kifer, *Large-Scale Assessment* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2001). 