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The Shadowed Face of Staff Development: Rural Schools

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In the Spring of 1988, a study was conducted to determine the use of 38 research-based staff development practices in rural schools in Oklahoma. These practices are arranged in five sequential, cyclical stages—Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation and Maintenance. This study examines the degree to which the principals', teachers' and staff development chairs' indicated the 38 practices were implemented in the rural districts and the degree to which they valued the practices.

INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 1980's has become one of controversy and open questioning of public schools and their effectiveness. In response, many state legislatures have instituted more rigorous programs of preservice training and staff development for teachers and administrators. The initiation and study of these programs has resulted in the compilation of a large body of research and has begun to help educators identify effective staff development practices. Research has shed much needed light on the previously shadowed face of staff development.

But wait, one segment of the educational community has been neglected in the research on staff development. The bulk of the research has focused on urban and suburban schools. Little research has been completed to determine effective practices for use in rural schools. In fact, research on staff development in rural schools has almost been ignored. Although the great majority of districts nationwide are rural districts, Wood and Kleine [1] found that of the 197 staff development studies listed in a recent A.A.C.T.E. [2] Clearing House of Teacher Education's Resource Review, only four appear to have been conducted in rural settings. In the same review, these researchers pointed out that most studies conducted were poorly designed and added little to our understanding of how to plan and conduct staff development in rural settings.

There have been a number of studies conducted to identify effective practices for staff development. The work of Wood, Thompson and McQuarrie has focused on examining the appropriateness of a set of 38 research-based staff development practices which define the Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation and Maintenance (RPTIM) stages of staff development. Their studies have shown that educators in Pennsylvania [3] and Puerto Rico [4] and Members of the National Staff Development Council and the Council of Professors of Instructional Supervision [5, 6] strongly support the use of the 38 RPTIM practices and the five staff development stages they define [7]. However, like most of the previous staff development studies, these researchers failed to focus on rural schools.

THE STUDY

In the Spring of 1988, a study was conducted to determine the use of these same 38 staff development practices in rural schools in Oklahoma. Oklahoma was selected as the site for the study for several reasons. First, it is primarily a rural, agrarian state composed of 613 school districts. Of these districts, only 50 have a student population in excess of 2000 students, 61 districts have a population of 1000–2000 students, 101 have between 501–1000 students and 401 have fewer than 500 students.

In addition, while Oklahoma is dominated by smaller rural districts, it was also one of the first states to enact legislation that specifically required and funded staff development for all school personnel. In 1980, House Bill 1706, or the Teacher Education Reform Act, mandated more stringent preservice teacher education programs, higher minimum salaries and continuing professional development activities for all public school educators. The legislation required each district to establish a committee to prepare and submit a yearly staff development plan. This same legislation directly linked the professional development provisions with more stringent preservice teacher education programs and higher minimum salaries.

Other legislation has made its mark on Oklahoma staff development. For example, House Bill 1466

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established minimum criteria for teacher evaluation, mandated testing for students in grades 3, 7, and 10 and, in particular, required all districts to submit a five-year school improvement plan. These school improvement plans have provided an excellent vehicle for developing long-range, instructionally-oriented staff development plans.

Given these conditions related to effective staff development, Oklahoma was an ideal site to examine the degree to which selected the RPTIM staff development practices were being implemented and were valued by practitioners. The 38 RPTIM Model practices used in this study were developed by [7] and were identical to those examined in the studies noted earlier. The validity and reliability for "The Survey of Effective Staff Development Practices," the survey instrument used to collect the data for this study, had been established by Thompson [3].

These practices are arranged in five sequential, cyclical stages—Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation, and Maintenance (See Table 1 for the actual practices). The following is a brief description of each stage:

> Stage I, Readiness, emphasizes selection and understanding of, and commitment to, new behaviors by a school staff or group of educators. In Stage II, Planning, the specific plans for an inservice program (to be implemented over three to five years) are developed to achieve the desired changes or professional practices selected in Stage I. In the Training Stage, Stage III, the plans are translated into practice. The Implementation Stage, Stage IV, focuses on insuring professional behavior of teachers and administrators in their own work setting. Stage V, Maintenance, begins as new behaviors are integrated into daily practice. The aim of this final stage is to ensure that once a change in performance is operational, it will continue over time [7].

POPULATION

The population for this study consisted of the teachers, principals and the staff development chairs for the 537 Oklahoma rural school districts. The definition used for rural districts was those districts with fewer than 2000 students which were not located in or near a metropolitan area. This sample population included representatives from independent districts (offering Pre-K or K through grade 12 instructional programs) and dependent districts (offering only Pre-K or K through grade 8 instructional programs).

The 537 rural districts were then stratified into groups based upon student enrollment; *i.e.*, 1-500, 501-1000, 1001-1500, and 1501-2000 students. Next, a random sampling process was used to select a proportional number of districts from each strata to reach the desired sample of 200 districts.

The superintendent or a designee from each of the 200 sample districts was contacted by phone to discuss the study. Points discussed during the phone contact included the background of the study and how the data would be collected and reported. Then a packet containing a copy of "The Survey of Effective Staff Development Practices Questionnaire" and a cover letter was mailed to a district contact person for the representative teacher, principal and the staff development chair. The letter described the random selection process that was to be used in each district to select a representative teacher and principal; the third person selected was the district's staff development chair. Three weeks after the original mailing a follow-up letter and a duplicate questionnaire were mailed to those individuals who had not responded. Completed questionnaires were received from 153 teachers (76%), 161 principals (80.5%) and 159 staff development chairs (79%).

THE RESULTS

This study examined the degree to which the principals', teachers' and staff development chairs' indicated the 38 practices were implemented in the rural districts, and the degree to which they valued the practices. Similarities and differences between the three groups were also tested. The findings are reported below.

Existence of the Practices

The existence of the practices in the Oklahoma rural schools varied from practice to practice and stage to stage. (See Table 1 for the Practices). The questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate whether the practices were implemented "almost always," "often," "sometimes" or "almost never." Consistently, the three groups indicated that the level of implementation of these practices was higher in the Readiness and the Planning Stages than in the Training, Implementation and the Maintenance Stages.

With the exceptions of four practices [5, 26, 30 and 36] the principals indicated higher implementation of the practices than did the teachers. The disagreement concerning the degree to which the practices were being used was greater between the principals and teachers than between either the principals and the staff development chairs or the teachers and the staff development chairs.

In order to examine the differences in the perceptions of the existence of the practices between and among the principals, staff development chairs and teachers, analyses of variance and the Ryan-Einot-Gabriel-Welsch Multiple Range follow-up test were completed. The procedure identified significant between-group differences (.05 level) for five of the 38 practices. These differences included:

- The principals' and the staff development chairs' perceptions of the level to which information regarding the participants' learning styles were used in planning staff development activities (Practice 11) and to which specific objectives are written for the staff development

TABLE 1
RPTIM Staff Development Practice and
What Is and What Should Be Percentages

	R	WHAT IS PERCENT*	SHOULD BE PERCENT*
Readiness Stage Practices			
1. A positive school climate is developed before other staff development efforts are attempted.	P	80	99
	S	76	99
	T	69	99
	All	75	99
2. Goals for school improvement are written collaboratively by teachers, parents, building administrators, and central office administrators.	P	67	99
	S	67	97
	T	60	95
	All	65	96
3. The school has a written list of goals for the improvement of school programs during the next three to five years.	P	92	99
	S	90	99
	T	86	99
	All	89	99
4. The school staff adopts and supports goals for the improvement of school programs.	P	81	97
	S	82	98
	T	79	99
	All	80	98
5. Current school practices are examined to determine which ones are congruent with the school's goals for improvement before staff development activities are planned.	P	68	97
	S	74	98
	T	73	96
	All	71	97
6. Current educational practices not yet found in the school are examined to determine which ones are congruent with the school's goals for improvement before staff development activities are planned.	P	56	95
	S	60	93
	T	55	96
	All	57	95
7. The school staff identifies specific plans to achieve the school's goals for improvement.	P	79	97
	S	75	99
	T	69	97
	All	75	98
8. Leadership and support during the initial stage of staff development activity are the responsibility of the principal and central office staff.	P	64	84
	S	51	74
	T	52	72
	All	56	77
Planning Stage Practices			
9. Differences between desired and actual practices in the school are examined to identify the inservice needs of the staff.	P	70	96
	S	70	95
	T	64	98
	All	68	96

* Combined percent of "Often" and "Almost Always" responses

TABLE 1—Continued

	R	WHAT IS PERCENT*	SHOULD BE PERCENT*
Planning Stage Practices—Continued			
10. Planning of staff development activities relies, in part, upon information gathered directly from school staff members.	P	87	97
	S	90	99
	T	77	98
	All	85	98
11. Inservice planners use information about the learning styles of participants when planning staff development activities.	P	47	90
	S	49	85
	T	32	80
	All	43	85
12. Staff development programs include objectives for inservice activities covering as much as five years.	P	53	82
	S	56	83
	T	51	80
	All	53	82
13. The resources (time, money, and materials) available for use in staff development are identified prior to planning inservice activities.	P	79	97
	S	85	97
	T	76	95
	All	80	97
14. Staff development programs include plans for activities to be conducted during the following three to five years.	P	61	90
	S	54	83
	T	51	81
	All	55	85
15. Specific objectives are written for staff development activities.	P	82	95
	S	85	97
	T	71	93
	All	80	95
16. Staff development objectives include objectives for attitude development (new outlooks and feelings).	P	61	93
	S	68	89
	T	60	89
	All	63	91
17. Staff development objectives include objectives for increased knowledge (new information and understanding).	P	88	96
	S	85	96
	T	83	98
	All	85	97
18. Staff development objectives include objectives for skill development (new work behaviors).	P	74	95
	S	74	94
	T	70	94
	All	73	94
19. Leadership during the planning of inservice programs is shared among teachers and administrators.	P	75	95
	S	68	97
	T	68	99
	All	71	97

* Combined percent of "Often" and "Almost Always" responses

TABLE 1—Continued

	R	WHAT IS PERCENT*	SHOULD BE PERCENT*
Training Stage Practices			
20. Staff development activities include the use of learning teams in which two to seven participants share and discuss learning experiences.	P	36	68
	S	25	66
	T	29	67
	All	30	67
21. Individual school staff members choose objectives for their own professional learning.	P	59	83
	S	52	75
	T	51	81
	All	54	79
22. Individual school staff members choose the staff development activities in which they participate.	P	73	85
	S	67	83
	T	58	83
	All	66	84
23. Staff development activities include experiential activities in which participants try out new behaviors and techniques.	P	40	73
	S	38	72
	T	31	65
	All	37	70
24. Peers help to teach one another by serving as inservice leaders.	P	36	73
	S	35	61
	T	32	66
	All	34	66
25. School principals participate in staff development activities with their staffs.	P	76	93
	S	75	95
	T	71	93
	All	74	93
26. Leaders of staff development activities are selected according to their expertise rather than their position.	P	67	96
	S	67	94
	T	70	93
	All	67	95
27. As participants in staff development activities become increasingly competent, leadership behavior becomes less directive or task-oriented.	P	60	82
	S	59	76
	T	57	85
	All	59	81
28. As participants in staff development activities become increasingly confident in their abilities, the leader transfers increasing responsibility to the participants.	P	62	87
	S	58	84
	T	61	87
	All	60	86
Implementation Stage Practices			
29. After participating in inservice activities participants have access to support services to help implement new behaviors as part of their regular work.	P	48	92
	S	51	91
	T	45	89
	All	48	90

* Combined percent of "Often" and "Almost Always" responses

TABLE 1—Continued

	R	WHAT IS PERCENT*	SHOULD BE PERCENT*
Implementation Stage Practices—Continued			
30. School staff members who attempt to implement new learnings are recognized and rewarded for their efforts.	P	30	89
	S	31	90
	T	32	91
	All	31	90
31. The leaders of staff development activities visit the job setting, when needed, to help the inservice participants refine or review previous learning.	P	29	76
	S	21	65
	T	23	66
	All	24	69
32. School staff members use peer supervision to assist one another in implementing new work behaviors.	P	39	75
	S	35	68
	T	34	69
	All	36	71
33. Resources (time, money, and materials) are allocated to support the implementation of new practices following staff development activities (funds to purchase new instructional materials, time for planning, etc.).	P	42	89
	S	30	85
	T	41	85
	All	38	87
34. The school principal actively supports efforts to implement changes in professional behavior.	P	82	97
	S	72	95
	T	70	94
	All	75	96
Maintenance Stage Practices			
35. A systematic program of instructional supervision is used to monitor new work behavior.	P	40	83
	S	31	78
	T	32	75
	All	35	79
36. School staff members utilize systematic techniques of self-monitoring to maintain new work behaviors.	P	40	80
	S	41	81
	T	40	78
	All	40	80
37. Student feedback is used to monitor new practices.	P	44	78
	S	46	77
	T	42	70
	All	44	75
38. Responsibility for the maintenance of new school practices is shared by both teachers and administrators.	P	70	90
	S	62	92
	T	66	91
	All	66	91

* Combined percent of "Often" and "Almost Always" responses

activities (Practice 15) were significantly higher than the teachers' perceptions.

- The principals' perception regarding individual staff members choosing their own staff development activities (Practice 22) were significantly higher than the teachers' perception.
- The principals' perceptions of the school principal's support of efforts to implement changes in professional behaviors (Practice 34) were significantly higher than the teachers' and the staff development chairs' perceptions.
- The principals' perceptions of the existence of systematic programs of instructional support to monitor new work behaviors were significantly higher than the staff development chairs' perceptions.

Commitment to the Practices

The respondents were also asked to indicate to what extent the practices should be employed when planning and implementing staff development. Consistently positive best describes the responses for this section. Over 90 percent of the respondents from the three groups indicated 18 of the practices should occur "often" or "almost always." Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated an additional 13 (for a total of 31) of the 38 practices should occur "often" or "almost always."

As was noted for the responses related to the current level of implementation of the practices, the level to which they should be implemented responses indicated that the Readiness and Planning Stages were valued the most by all three groups. For seven of the eight Readiness Stage practices over 90 percent of the respondents indicated these practices should occur "often" or "almost always." Practice 8 was the exception, and still over 70 percent of the respondents indicated this practice should occur "often" or "almost always." At least 90 percent of the respondent groups reported that seven of the 11 Planning Stage practices should be used "often" or "almost always" when designing inservice. The use of the remaining practices for this stage were highly valued by at least 80 percent of the respondents.

Even though the ratings were lower for the Training, Implementation and Maintenance Stages, the 19 practices which define the three stages were highly valued. For example, over 90 percent of the respondents indicated four of these practices should be used "often" or "almost always," when conducting staff development; between 80 and 89 percent valued the use of five additional practices; between 70 and 79 percent valued five more practices; and between 60 and 69 percent valued the remaining five practices.

The same statistical procedures were used to identify significant differences between the principals', staff development chairs' and teachers' responses to the what should occur section of the questionnaire. The following describes the six practices where significant differences were found.

- The principals' perceptions of the importance of the principal and central office staff being responsible for the leadership and support of staff development activities (Practice 8) were significantly higher than the staff development chairs' and teachers' perceptions.
- The principals' and staff development chairs' perceptions of the importance of using information gathered directly from the staff as part of the planning of staff development activities (Practice 10) were significantly higher than the teachers' perceptions.
- The principals' perceptions of the importance of using information regarding the participants' learning styles to plan staff development activities (Practice 11) were significantly higher than the staff development chairs' and teachers' perceptions.
- The principals' and staff development chairs' perceptions related to having specific written objectives for staff development activities (Practice 15) were significantly higher than the teachers' perceptions.
- The teachers' perceptions regarding the staff development leadership behaviors becoming less directive or task-oriented as the participants become more competent (Practice 27) were significantly higher than the staff development chairs' perceptions.
- The principals' perceptions of the importance of systematic programs of instructional supervision to monitor new work behaviors (Practice 35) were significantly higher than the teachers' perceptions.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The primary purpose of the study was to add to the body of knowledge related to staff development in rural schools. As with any state, Oklahoma has unique characteristics and programs which must be considered when examining the findings of this study; however, the information gained from the study should help individuals interested in improving staff development in rural schools.

The findings of this study allow us to focus on specific elements of staff development in rural schools. Based upon the results of this study, possible explanations for the findings and suggested topics for additional research seemed appropriate.

Responsibility for Staff Development

The results of the study indicate a feeling of general agreement between the three role groups regarding which practices are currently being used and which practices should be used when designing and implementing staff development in Oklahoma rural schools. One notable exception to this is the area of responsibility for planning and coordinating staff development efforts. During the initial phases of staff development principals indicate they and other administrators have a greater responsibility for providing leadership (See Practice 8); the Oklahoma teachers and staff development chairs rated this item significantly lower suggesting that the principals and central office administrators do not play as great of a role.

One possible explanation for the significant difference between the teachers' and the staff development chairs' when compared with the principals' may be the fact that Oklahoma requires each district to have a staff development committee. This committee is comprised primarily of teachers and is responsible for the district staff development programs funded by state monies. A second explanation for this difference might be the current teacher empowerment movement across the country and the belief that the leadership for staff development readiness should be a shared responsibility.

Involvement of the Participant

These data suggest that staff development participants in the rural Oklahoma districts are passive rather than active participants in the planning and implementation of staff development activities. Throughout, the data indicate that teachers have little or no involvement in many aspects of staff development. Only one-third of the teachers indicate that learning styles are considered when staff development activities are planned (Practice 11) when 80 percent state they should be considered. Less than one-third (29 percent) of the teachers indicate learning teams are used during training when two-thirds think they should be (Practice 20).

Even though practices such as peer support (Practice 24), small group learning (Practice 20), experiential learning (Practice 23) have been shown to be effective [8, 9], two-thirds of the teachers indicate these practices are not currently employed in their staff development. Here again, over two-thirds of the teachers stated these practices should be used during staff development training. The staff development chairs rate the existence of these practices slightly higher; however, they concur that there should be greater efforts in incorporating these practices which have been neglected in staff development training.

Systematic Implementation and Maintenance

Over two-thirds, and in many cases three-fourths, of the three groups support the Implementation Stage and Planning Stage practices. However, for eight of the ten practices less than 50 percent of the respondents indicate the practices for these stages are currently being used with staff development. The exceptions to this are two practices which focus on the support of the principal to implement changes and the responsibility for the maintenance of new school practices (Practices 34 and 38). These data suggest that the leaders for staff development have not focused on the systematic implementation and maintenance of programs and activities identified during the Readiness, Planning and Training Stages.

Abstract Versus Concrete Steps

These data suggest that schools have long-range improvement goals to guide staff development (Practice 3). However, it appears that objectives have not been written (Pratice 12) and specific activities (Practice 14) have not been planned. This seems to suggest that districts are taking care of the long-range abstract steps related to staff development (establishing goals), but are not attending to the long-range concrete steps (writing specific objectives and planning specific activities). By doing this, these schools appear to be aborting their staff development efforts before there is a chance for success. This may explain the consistently low "what is" levels for the Implementation and Training Stages.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Staff development continues to be a vital component of school improvement efforts. Even though this study was conducted in Oklahoma, the conclusions and recommendations may be applicable to other rural settings. This study suggests:

- There is a strong support for research-based staff development practices in rural settings.
- The 38 RPTIM Staff Development Practices are viewed as appropriate for designing and implementing staff development in rural settings.
- Areas which require increased attention in rural schools staff development are the practices from the Implementation and Maintenance Stages Practices.
- While teachers, principals and staff development chairs all value the 38 RPTIM Practices, the principals are generally more supportive.
- Efforts should be made to increase the use of theory-based staff development practices; in particular, knowledge pertaining to adult learners should be used when planning and implementing staff development activities.
- Those responsible for staff development must go beyond the abstract steps of staff development (*e.g.*, goals setting) and attend to the concrete elements (*e.g.*, specific objectives and activities).

Based upon the findings of Wood and Kleine's [1] review of rural staff development research, one can assume that this study is one of the few systematic examinations of rural staff development that has been conducted in two decades. Clearly, additional research must be conducted to provide data that can assist those responsible for designing staff development for rural educators. Based upon the results reported here, researchers need to determine whether the findings are generalizable to other rural areas in the United States. In addition, they need to conduct experimental studies to determine:

- which of the RPTIM practices are most important to implementing staff development professional practices in rural settings,
- which inservice training practices have the greatest impact on attitudes, knowledge and behavior on rural teachers and administrators,
- whether the impact of the practices in the five stages of the RPTIM approach and staff development varies by size, location, expenditure per child and other

differences which exist among schools classified as rural,

- what are the reasons for the lack of attention to the practices in the Implementation and Maintenance Stages, and
- what specific strategies can be used effectively to promote transfer or learning from successful training into daily practice in rural schools.

These are only a few of the many important issues related to staff development in rural schools. The large number of such schools across our nation and the future of the students in these schools suggest that we cannot continue to ignore this need for information about how to provide more effective staff development programs for rural teachers and administrators. We must conduct research to answer questions about how to design and deliver more effective staff development for rural schools.

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