Professional Development and Closing the Achievement Gap

A significant challenge to schools is selecting the staff development approach that aligns most clearly with the assumptions and beliefs of staff members and produces the results desired for students. When beliefs are in alignment, change in behavior accelerates; when beliefs underlying a new staff development program contradict long-held beliefs of participants change can come much slower or not at all. To expedite the change process and successfully close the achievement gap, educators might begin the process by ensuring a thorough understanding of the assumptions and beliefs underlying staff development programs. According to Sparks (2003), effective professional development will deepen participant understanding, transform beliefs and assumptions, and create a stream of continuous actions that change habits and affect practice. Four powerful approaches advanced by four successful educators (Kati Haycock, Ron Ferguson, Jerry and Monique Sternin, and Glenn Singleton) focus toward this goal and are grounded in varying underlying guiding principles that offer educators substantive choices and direction for their work.

Closing the achievement gap by ensuring that all students achieve high levels of performance is a primary goal of No Child Left Behind, as well as state legislatures, local school boards, and school improvement councils. These same groups struggle to find the means to achieve their goals. According to research, no single ingredient has greater impact on student achievement than the quality of the teacher in the classroom (Haycock, 1998). However not all teachers are adequately prepared to meet the diverse needs of today’s students. And it is impossible to think about replacing every ineffective teacher with a more competent one. Instead attention must be given to finding strategies to assist less successful teachers to improve. Quality professional development employs these strategies, improves teaching, and closes achievement gaps.

Policymakers and educators strive to find the “right” professional development approach to ensuring that all teachers have the knowledge and skills essential to produce high levels of learning and performance for students. Countless staff de-
velopment providers claim to have the answer to their dilemmas. And while their solutions may have helped in certain situations, there is never any guarantee that others will experience similar success.

According to Sparks (2003), effective professional development will deepen participant understanding, transform beliefs and assumptions, and create a stream of continuous actions that change habits and affect practice. The National Staff Development Council (2001) asserted that professional development that improves student learning focuses on the results we want for adults and students, is aligned with standards that define quality practice, and is focused on the daily work of teaching. Schools make important decisions when it comes to professional development.

Assumptions and beliefs regarding how adults and students learn and the affect of new learning on their behaviors underlie most professional development designs. A significant challenge to schools is selecting the staff development approach that aligns most clearly with the assumptions and beliefs of staff members and produces the results desired for students. When beliefs are in alignment, change in behavior accelerates; when beliefs underlying a new staff development program contradict long-held beliefs of participants, change can come much slower or not at all. To expedite the change process and successfully close the achievement gap, educators might begin the process by ensuring a thorough understanding of the assumptions and beliefs of staff development programs. In their desire to close the achievement gap, four powerful approaches with varying underlying guiding principles can offer substantive choices and direction for the work.

Glenn Singleton, Kati Haycock, Ron Ferguson, and Jerry Sternin offer powerful approaches to professional development that improve teaching and learning. Each approach is based on some similar and some very different assumptions and processes. Careful consideration of these and other models by system and school leadership team members can offer valuable options for professional learning and potentially closing the achievement gap.

**Kati Haycock and Strengthening Teaching**

Kati Haycock is the executive director of the Education Trust, an advocacy organization for the rights of poor and minority students. Haycock believes that good teaching is characterized by teachers having the necessary knowledge and skills to assist all students to achieve at high levels. She is passionate about students, particularly poor and minority, having teachers who possess the knowledge and skills to facilitate their success. Haycock (1998) asserted that poor and minority children depend on their teachers like no others. In the hands of our best teachers, the effects of poverty and institutional racism melt away, allowing these students to soar to the same heights as young Americans from more advantaged homes. (p. 2)

The Education Trust’s approach to closing the achievement gap includes tapping teacher expertise inside the school, expanding the support structures at the system level, and bringing in selected expertise from outside the school. Attention is simultaneously placed on the development of beliefs and capacities of teachers. Through her leadership the Education Trust provides hands-on assistance to urban school districts and universities that work together to improve student achievement from kindergarten through college.

In an interview with Dennis Sparks (2000), executive editor of the *Journal of Staff Development*, Haycock said,

At the Education Trust, we argue that if you create strong support structures for teachers, instruction in the school will inch upward because, even in the lowest performing schools, you typically find a few teachers who are quite good. If you create a vehicle for them to help their colleagues, you will see improvement over time. (p. 38)

However, she added “The process of improvement is too slow unless you also introduce expertise from the outside. Schools can vastly accelerate the improvement of instruction if they draw on
both the better teachers within the school and outside expertise” (p. 38).

Haycock and her colleagues contend that teachers do not have appetites for hard work unless they believe that their effort will produce better results for students. As a result, a key component of working with schools is referred to as “exploding the myth.” The Education Trust provides their schools with data from more successful schools whose demographics and challenges are similar.

Haycock contends that schools must work on beliefs and practice simultaneously. She commented in her interview with Sparks (2000) that

One of the most serious mistakes made by people who care deeply about the education of poor and minority kids is addressing beliefs separate from skills. Schools that provide workshops on diversity and expectations that do not simultaneously equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to succeed end up with raised expectations but no improvement in results. Unless teachers see evidence of kids learning at higher levels, schools can’t sustain the effort over time. (p. 39)

Haycock’s view of effective professional development engages teachers in many discussion about what they are teaching, how they are teaching, and about the results they are getting with students and how to improve them. There are regular times during the school day for teachers to meet and examine student work, evaluate it against standards, and determine strategies for getting better results. There is a constant quest for improvement of results (Sparks, 2000). Haycock told Sparks (2000) that, “When schools create that kind of support structure during the regular school day, they bring about dramatic improvements both in the quality of teaching and in student achievement” (p. 38).

Haycock recognizes the value of standards-based teaching, regular assessments, and accountability for results. She believes that building the capacity of teachers to teach the standards and to assess progress accordingly are key in achieving the results desired for students. From her point of view, any system that ignores this part of the improvement formula will fail. “That means that the single most important role for school and district leaders is to organize supports for teachers so that every available resource is directed at improving teacher knowledge and skill,” said Haycock (Sparks, 2000, p. 40).

**Glenn Singleton and Courageous Conversations**

Glenn Singleton holds another view regarding what is essential to close the achievement gap. Singleton is president and founder of Pacific Educational Group, an organization that strives to advise districts in ways to meet the needs of underserved populations of students, primarily those of color, and address systemic educational inequities.

Singleton believes that the purpose of education is to prepare students to thrive in a multicultural multiethnic democracy, to not only understand their own culture, but also to have the ability to negotiate unfamiliar cultures. As a result, good teaching that closes achievement gaps offers a multicultural perspective and provides students with the skills for negotiating various cultures. According to Singleton, teachers must be able to accomplish both for students to achieve success in their classrooms (Sparks, 2002).

Singleton said that the first step that districts and schools can take to producing this kind of teaching is by entering into what he calls “courageous conversations.” Singleton told Sparks (2002) that “a courageous conversation is an essential prerequisite for addressing the very significant and difficult challenges we face in closing the racial achievement gap. These conversations also help educators become more passionate learners themselves and more productive in their work” (p. 62).

**Courageous conversations involve asking participants to**

Stay engaged.
Speak our truth.
Experience discomfort.
Expect/accept nonclosure. (Sparks, 2002)

When schools engage in courageous conversations they are committing to change the culture...
and practices of teaching in the school. Singleton described the situation to Sparks (2002):

When courageous conversations become the classroom norm, a student of color can say how distant he or she feels from the a white text or from an activity, thus offering a teacher information that might challenge her initial perspective that the student is purposely disengaged or perhaps simply lazy. ... Through curriculum and instructional choices, teachers must communicate that their students’ experiences matter to them and that those experiences are valid. (p. 64, 63)

In addition, Singleton claims that there is only one rule that is necessary in schools, and that is the rule of respect. Respect may look and feel different across races. He offered to Sparks (2002) the following definition

To effectively show me respect, you must understand what my experience is all about. As my teacher, I need you to understand that, as I come to the school each morning I go through a number of racial tests. If you don’t understand where I’m coming from, I will feel less safe in your classroom and in my relationship with you. And if I feel distant I will distant myself from the tasks you as my teacher want me to perform. (p. 63)

Singleton summarized for Sparks (2002) the following: “It is courageous just to get in touch with your own perspective and to express it. You then have to be even more courageous to listen carefully to the viewpoint of another and allow that perspective to deeply influence your own” (p. 63). Singleton does not claim that hosting courageous conversations is the single answer to closing the achievement gap, but he would propose that schools that fail to deal directly with issues of race would fail their children (Singleton & Noli, 2001).

**Ron Ferguson and the Tripod Project**

Ron Ferguson is a lecturer in public policy at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and a senior research associate at the Wiener Center for Social Policy. His research for the past few years has focused on racial achievement gaps. His most recent research was completed for the Minority Student Achievement Network, an association of 15 school districts interested in studying their minority students, their achievement orientations, the types of peer support or lack thereof students were experiencing, and how that might vary by race and ethnicity (Sparks, 2003). As a result he has begun work with districts committed to taking action in response to his findings and his theories about conditions that facilitate minority student achievement.

In contrast to Haycock and Singleton, Ferguson believes that the quality of relationships and the levels of encouragement that occur between teachers and students influence minority student achievement. Ferguson told Sparks (2003) that

From the student perspective, teachers who encourage students combine emotional support and instrumental assistance. For example, students say they find it encouraging when a teacher really spends time helping them understand instead of giving quick, incomplete answers that leave them still confused. The teacher may meet with the student after school and not seem in a big hurry to leave. It shows that the teacher really wants them to understand, and it gives them hope. (p. 45)

Successful teacher–student relationships progress through three stages: First, affirmation of the student’s ability to complete the task; second, sincere offer of assistance and support; and third, visible pleasure by the teacher in the student’s success (Sparks, 2003).

Another aspect of teacher–student relationships surfaces in the development of boundaries that teachers’ place in the classroom. Some teachers believe that they have to lay down the law with students and sometimes threaten them to do the work. This view can lead to too many demands and not enough encouragement. Ferguson suggests that the goal is to find the right combination of the two and to help teachers see that it’s not an either–or proposition. In fact, the quality of teacher–student relationships can complement one another (Sparks, 2003).
In addition to describing effective relationships between teachers and students, Ferguson expresses his concern about teacher’s beliefs regarding the capacity of students to learn and their own capacity to teach them. Ferguson finds that some teachers’ beliefs regarding students’ capacity to learn are influenced by their own feelings of competence and capacity to teach them. As a result, Ferguson tells Sparks that he recognizes that there are those teachers capable of creating supportive classroom environments and relationships, who may still need the help with the “skills and knowledge” to successfully reach all students (Sparks, 2003).

Ferguson’s professional development work has evolved into an approach called the Tripod Project. The tripod symbolizes on the three things that Ferguson recognizes as essential for student success: content, pedagogy, and relationships (Ferguson, 2002). Special faculty sessions are structured around four goals:

1. Helping students feel trusted and engaged.
2. Striking a balance between teacher control and student autonomy.
3. Cultivating ambition rather than ambivalence toward achievement goals and success.
4. Teaching for student understanding and industriousness and combating disengagement (Ferguson, 2002).

Through a series of meetings and other planned interactions, teachers leave their classrooms and look at information they may never have previously considered—the perspective of students. And though the information can lead to tough conversations, the goal of the conversations is to build a professional community for sharing ideas, not a program to force compliance. In the end he works to create among the teachers the same kind of trust he is asking them to build with their students (Ferguson, 2002). Though work on the Tripod approach is just beginning, early results are promising.

Jerry Sternin and Positive Deviance

Jerry and Monique Sternin are co-directors of the Positive Deviance Institute at Tufts University. He is involved in Positive Deviance projects for the World Bank in Argentina and for USAID-funded development organizations in Indonesia.

Advocates for the positive deviance approach believe that solutions to problems in a community lie within the community. The positive deviants are typically practicing the solutions. The positive deviants are people who have access to the same resources as other members of the community, yet find solutions to the problems faced by others around them (Sternin & Choo, 1999).

The more accepted assumption that contradicts this view is that, because the problems are so pervasive, the only acceptable solutions must be found outside the community. Evidence of our nation’s acceptance of this view can be seen in the federal government’s million-dollar investment in technical assistance programs and agencies to assist schools to close the achievement gap.

Through their work around the world to reduce malnutrition, illiteracy, and HIV in prostitutes, the Sternins honed the positive deviance approach. People learn best when they discover things for themselves. It is our own discoveries that change behavior. Knowledge is usually insufficient to change behavior. A basic belief of the Positive Deviance Approach is that, when someone from the outside provides the solution, those to whom it is directed may not believe it and do not have an investment in it. Once that person leaves, it is difficult to sustain the changes (Sternin & Choo, 1999).

The positive deviance approach requires that community members find the positive deviants in their community. The community is self-defined, and its members always share the same resource base. Though positive deviance has yet to be tested in schools, Sternin suggests that the same rules would apply. Sternin commented to Sparks (2004) that, “if teachers in a school feel that the school is a community, then it’s a community. If 10 schools in a district say that collectively they are a community, then they are a community” (p. 50). In addition to identifying and owning its problem, the community identifies the criteria it will accept for a solution.

The positive deviance approach is always used within the context of a specific problem. Closing
the achievement gap probably offers too broad a problem, so Sternin might suggest choosing a narrower aspect of the problem, for example math achievement scores or Algebra I enrollment. Solving one problem then allows the team to move its focus to another.

There are six concrete and simple steps in the positive deviance approach. They include the following:

Defining the problem.
Determining the positive deviants.
Discovering the practices of the deviants.
Designing the interventions.
Discerning the effectiveness.
Disseminating the results.

Sternin told Sparks (2004) that another significant feature of the approach is the focus on changing behavior.

In positive deviance work we say that is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting. … In the development world the conventional wisdom is that knowledge changes attitudes and attitudes change practice. Positive deviance reverses that. We start with changing practice. As people see that changes make a difference, their attitude changes and they internalize the knowledge. We can spend our lives learning about something, but that doesn’t necessarily change our behavior. (p. 49)

Four brilliant and dedicated educators advance strategies to enable teachers to develop knowledge and skills to close the achievement gap. Though each approach includes its unique interventions, all share some common features. All attend to those characteristics of powerful professional learning outlined by Sparks.

Deep understanding of selected content is a core component of each approach. Haycock makes subject matter content and related pedagogy the priority for teacher understanding. Ferguson and Singleton focus attention on issues of culture and relationships. Sternin lets the community choose its areas for study. The amount of actual attention to deep content understanding differs as one explores each model further. But all would agree that there is no substitute for teachers who possess their own deep understanding of the subjects they teach.

Each recognizes the important place that individual beliefs play in the improvement process. All concur that the most powerful professional development initiatives are effective at changing teachers at the belief level. A core strategy for surfacing assumptions and changing beliefs is the inclusion of conversations. Open and respectful conversations are a cornerstone of the process used by all four approaches. Though the content and sometimes the structures may differ, significant conversations are a priority of each approach.

Each model offers a detailed plan for introducing new content and practices and facilitating follow up action. Some are more thorough than others. Ferguson describes the content and process for sessions as well as the number. Singleton provides more direction about the content and goals of sessions. Haycock offers a framework but the framework adjusts according to the needs of the school. Sternin offers a process that can be repeated over and over as problems are solved and new ones surface.

We started with a question. What kinds of professional development are essential to close the achievement gap? I did not choose to offer a single prescription for improvement or outline the characteristics of effective professional development. Instead I asserted that effective professional development that will close the achievement gap will deepen participant understanding, transform beliefs and assumptions, and create a stream of continuous actions that change habits and affect practice (Sparks, 2003). Instead of describing only one model that addresses these characteristics, four very different models offered different paths to close the gap. I call upon school and system leadership teams to study the data and embrace the path that they believe offers the best option for closing the achievement gap.1

Notes

1. Additional information on the four sites discussed can be found at Kati Haycock, Education Trust.

References


Sparks, D. (September, 2003). How to use this e-newsletter. Transforming Professional Learning, 1, 1–2.

