

So much to learn, so little opportunity

How strange and ironic it is that teachers, who disseminate knowledge, have so little time and opportunity to acquire it. Undergraduate teacher education is justifiably criticized — even by its recipients — for its lack of academic content and rigor. Many students exit colleges and universities insufficiently equipped to teach a specific subject. In a survey that asked teachers whether they felt prepared to teach basic mathematics, for example, the majority said no. Fewer than 20% of elementary school teachers and half of middle school teachers said they felt prepared. In fact, only three-fourths of high school math teachers said they know enough about the subject to teach it well — and, presumably, they majored, or at least minored, in it. This may be one of the reasons why fewer than 30% of American students score at a proficient level or better on the math portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.



Ronald A. Wolk

The knowledge deficit that many teachers take to their first jobs is difficult to overcome.

Once they begin their careers, they rarely have an opportunity to engage in the kind of professional development that will increase knowledge of their discipline and improve their practice.

“Professional development” is one of those “blah blah” terms that is shorthand for something that’s actually very important: continuous learning that enriches one’s knowledge and improves one’s craft. Traditionally, it comprises college courses taken in the evenings or during the summer to move up the salary scale and the hit-and-run workshops schools hold once or twice a year, in which outside experts lecture to teachers. But these kinds of approaches do little, if anything, to improve teaching and, thus, student learning.

Research doesn’t tell us much about how to make the process more effective. But we do know that both the

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Excerpted from an article that first appeared in *Teacher Magazine*, November 2002. Reprinted with permission from the author. Online at www.teachermagazine.org/tmstory.cfm?slug=03persp.h14.

adults and their charges tend to benefit more when professional development tackles real issues, like building curricula or evaluating student work; when the focus is grade-specific, concentrating on the knowledge and skills teachers are expected to impart to their students; and when it takes place at the vital intersection where teacher-mentor, teacher, student, and curriculum meet: the classroom.

To be most effective, professional development needs to be integrated into the workday of the teacher and the culture of the school. That means finding more time for teachers to work together on problems, read and discuss relevant research, and analyze their practice. Finding time for those activities means reallocating (and probably increasing) funding, changing schedules, rethinking teacher roles, revising curricula, and even negotiating changes in union contracts.

States have invested heavily in standards-based reform, the nation’s de facto strategy for improving public education. They have established standards and put in place accountability systems to monitor student performance. But they have done little to prepare faculty members to teach students what they are expected to know and be able to do. Unless those states realize the crucial importance of effective professional development and move with some urgency to mandate and support it, standards-based reform will fail.

In “The Age of Social Transformation,” an article published in 1994, management guru Peter Drucker wrote: “The acquisition and distribution of formal knowledge may come to occupy the place in the politics of the knowledge society which the acquisition and distribution of property and income have occupied in our politics over the two or three centuries that we have come to call the Age of Capitalism.”

The acquisition and distribution of knowledge is what teaching is about.

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