Supporting Improved Practice for Special Education Teachers

The Importance of Learner-Centered Professional Development

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- The limited use of evidence-based practices has led to increased interest in forms of professional development that improve teacher practice and student outcomes.
- Traditional forms of expert-centered professional development have been demonstrated to have little impact on teacher practices or student outcomes.
- Newer forms of learner-centered professional development have been demonstrated to be an effective approach to changing the practice of many general and special education teachers and improving student outcomes.
- In spite of these research findings, the predominant form of professional development for general and special education teachers continues to be expert-centered professional development.
- Administrators play a critical role in providing high quality professional development for all of their teachers, but especially beginning teachers in both general and special education. Critical roles include resource acquisition, providing time for collaborative planning and implementation, supporting peer coaching activities, and evaluating the effectiveness of professional development.

Professional Development and Improved Teacher Practice

There are many purposes for conducting professional development (Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lang & Fox, 2003). For example, professional development may be conducted to raise the awareness of or provide knowledge to participants regarding a new law (e.g., No Child Left Behind, or NCLB), procedural issues (e.g., implementing a new Individualized Education Program, or IEP), or a new practice (e.g., Response to Intervention, or RII). A second purpose of professional development is to address beliefs or understandings of participants about critical educational issues. This type of professional development can address teacher understandings about students from different cultural backgrounds or beliefs regarding students with disabilities and inclusion. A third purpose of professional development is to provide participants with new skills or strategies for instruction (e.g., strategies for teaching phonemic awareness).

This article focuses on professional development that is designed to provide teachers with new skills and strategies that are used in classroom practice. This focus is taken because improving teacher practice has been shown to improve student outcomes (Englert & Rozendal, 2004; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001) and increase the retention of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004). Initially, a review of approaches to professional development that have typically been used in the past and continue to be widely used today is provided, even though they rarely lead to changes in teacher practice. A summary of the general education literature regarding new forms of professional development that result in teacher use of practices in the classroom follows. Next, a review and discussion of research from special education that has addressed the use of professional development to facilitate teachers’ use of new strategies in their classrooms or schools is provided. Finally, considerations for administrators in developing and supporting effective professional development will be explored.
Expert-Centered Professional Development

The predominant form of professional development that is provided to general and special education teachers is based on an expert-centered model (Choy, Chen, & Bugarin, 2006). Within this framework, professional development takes the form of disseminating knowledge to teachers. To achieve this goal, an outside expert who is familiar with an innovative practice presents information to teachers using written material, lectures, demonstrations, and/or practice over a relatively short period of time. There is typically little follow up once a professional development session is completed. In this approach, teachers are viewed as passive recipients of knowledge and are expected to implement instructional strategies exactly as they are presented, with few or no adaptations to account for teacher preferences, or the context of the classroom and school (Duffy & Kear, 2007). This ensures fidelity of implementation and the effectiveness of the practice. If teachers do not implement an innovative practice precisely as presented by an expert, they are viewed as resistant and perhaps recalcitrant (Richardson & Placier, 2001).

Butler and colleagues (2004) suggest that expert-centered professional development fails because it results in shallow, surface level knowledge of instructional strategies that promotes little sustained use of these practices.

Much evidence indicates that the expert-centered approach to professional development has not been effective in changing classroom practice (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selling, & Beckingham, 2004; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). For example, in a review of research on professional development, Joyce and Showers (2002) found that short-term knowledge dissemination ("sit and get") types of professional development result in knowledge and skill development for some teachers, especially when demonstrations and opportunities to practice instructional strategies are used, but this information is rarely used in the classroom.

Butler and colleagues (2004) suggest that expert-centered professional development fails because it results in shallow, surface level knowledge of instructional strategies that promotes little sustained use of these practices. Expert-centered forms of professional development are also based on faulty assumptions regarding the nature of professional knowledge, and how to bridge the research-to-practice gap (Butler, et al., 2004; McLeskey & Waldron, 2004; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). For example, these models of professional development tend to be built on the assumption that formal knowledge (e.g., evidence based practices) is the purview of outside experts (often researchers), while the role of teachers is to listen to the experts and implement these practices; however, "an alternative view is that both teachers and researchers bring combinations of formalized and practical knowledge to classrooms as they seek to make instructional change" (Butler et al., 2004, p. 437). This suggests the need to combine the expertise of researchers and teachers in developing and implementing innovative classroom practices (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004).

In spite of the widespread concerns regarding the limited effectiveness of expert-centered professional development, research has shown that many school districts and state departments continue to rely on this form of professional development.

Research findings in special education have been strikingly similar with regard to the use of expert-centered professional development and the failure to translate research based strategies into classroom practice (Klingner, 2004; Lang & Fox, 2003; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a). As Klingner notes, these "sit and get" professional development activities involve passive participation of teachers and are marginally successful at best. This has led to widespread concern in special education regarding the lack of research-based practices that are used in classrooms (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Cook & Schirmer, 2003; Gersten, Vaughn, Deshler, & Schiller, 1997; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003).

In spite of the widespread concerns regarding the limited effectiveness of expert-centered professional development, research has shown that many school districts and state departments continue to rely on
this form of professional development. For example, in a study using a national sample to examine professional development practices related to instruction in math and science, Porter and colleagues (2000) found that the quality of typical professional development offered nationwide was not high, and that over 75% of teachers only participated in short term professional development that did not offer active learning opportunities, and did not include the collaborative participation of peers. Choy and colleagues (2006) had similar results examining a national sample. These investigators found that most professional development was short term and did not reflect research on high quality professional development. Additional research is needed to better understand why these methods continue to be widely used, in spite of their limited effectiveness. Possible factors influencing this continued use include the relatively low cost and ease of administration of this form of professional development, as well as accountability requirements for state and local education agencies.

In sum, it has proven much more difficult than anticipated to provide teachers with professional development that influences classroom practice. Expert-centered forms of professional development have been largely ineffective in this regard, resulting in few changes in classroom practice. Thus, these forms of professional development seem to have limited utility in improving teacher practice to a level that both reduces teacher attrition and improves student outcomes. These poor outcomes have led to the development and study of new forms of professional development that are significantly more effective in facilitating change in teacher practice (Desimone, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lang & Fox, 2003; Richardson & Placier, 2001). Increasingly these new forms of professional development are being used in school districts across the U.S. (Choy et al., 2006; Desimone, 2009).

The Emergence of Learner-Centered Professional Development

Professional development that facilitates the use of innovative instructional approaches in the classroom reflects theoretical and practical perspectives that contrast sharply with the approach that underlies expert-centered professional development. This new form of professional development is based on the concepts of personal growth and collaboration, and assumes that teachers actively construct knowledge based on their past experience, the context of their classrooms, and the new instructional strategies they are considering (Desimone, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002). When this form of professional development is used, teachers are active participants in identifying, learning about, adapting, and using instructional strategies to improve classroom practice. With this approach, it is assumed that teachers have the power over change in their classrooms and may choose to share this power with collaborators (either other teachers or outsiders) who work with them to improve practice. Professional development then becomes a collaborative endeavor involving groups of teachers and other professionals who can contribute to teacher learning and improved practice.

Much research has been conducted on new forms of professional development that facilitate the use of innovative practices in the classroom and integrate the role of the researcher with that of the classroom teacher in improvement efforts. This research, which until recently had occurred almost entirely with general education teachers, has resulted in a consensus regarding a general approach to professional development that fosters the increased use of innovative practices in the classroom (Desimone, 2009; Elmore, 2002; Hawley & Valli, 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lawless & Pelligrino, 2007; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996). This type of professional development has been called learner-centered professional development (Hawley & Valli, 2000).

Components of a general approach to Learner-Centered Professional Development (LCPD). The general approach to learner-centered professional development (LCPD) includes the following components (Desimone, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002):

- A focus on knowledge that provides teachers with a deep understanding of an innovation, including a theory or framework underlying the innovation, a rationale for the use of the innovation, and how the innovation may be appropriately adapted to the needs of the teacher’s classroom and students. In addition, evidence related to teaching math and science reveals that a focus on both content and how students learn that content is a critical feature of professional development. Lectures, readings, and discussion are used as teachers initially explore this new information.
Along with a focus on knowledge, professional development activities should include demonstration or modeling of the innovation in a context that simulates the classroom. Videos of classroom instruction may be used to demonstrate or model a strategy, followed by discussion of the strategy. These activities facilitate gaining in-depth knowledge and understanding regarding the use of an innovation.

- Teachers should practice the innovation under simulated conditions (e.g., using peer teaching), approximating the workplace as closely as possible to facilitate use of the practice in the classroom.
- The focus of professional development should be consistent with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs, as well as with policies related to school reforms, standards, and accountability that influence the local school context.
- Professional development should be of sufficient duration to ensure that teachers gain deep knowledge of the innovation.
- Teachers should collectively participate in professional development with other professionals who share similar interests and knowledge. This could include collaborative groups who meet and support teachers as they implement an innovation by providing in-depth information regarding a particular instructional strategy or innovation; modeling the use of the innovation; discussing adaptations that may be appropriate; and engaging in observation, problem solving, and feedback (i.e., coaching) as the teacher uses the innovation in her classroom. These activities provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on and learn about when and how to use the innovative practice in ways that benefit their students. A widely used collective approach to professional development is peer coaching, which provides on-going, classroom support for teachers as they implement innovations.

In their review of research on different approaches to professional development, Joyce and Showers (2002) found that using a focus on knowledge only in a professional development activity resulted in a small number of teachers who gained thorough or deep knowledge regarding an innovation. This number of teachers with deep knowledge regarding an innovation increased significantly when demonstration and practice were added to the professional development activity. Finally, Joyce and Showers found that adding peer coaching to these professional development activities again significantly increased the number of teachers with deep knowledge of an innovation.

The findings of Joyce and Showers (2002) revealed that the first three components of professional development (i.e., knowledge, demonstration, and practice) result in very limited use of the innovation in the classroom, while adding peer coaching significantly increased the number of teachers who used an innovative practice.

Joyce and Showers (2002) also addressed the extent to which these components of professional development resulted in the use of an innovative practice in the classroom. These findings revealed that the first three components (i.e., knowledge, demonstration, and practice) result in very limited use of the innovation to the classroom, while adding peer coaching significantly increased the number of teachers who used an innovative practice.

Other reviews of research have reached similar conclusions (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Desimone, 2009; Richardson & Placier, 2001; Sprinthall et al., 1996), noting that while knowledge, demonstration, and practice are needed to gain deep knowledge of an innovative practice, in-class coaching significantly increases the use of a practice in the classroom (Sprinthall, et al., 1996). Finally, while Richardson and Placier (2001) found that learner-centered professional development was effective in facilitating the classroom use of new practices for many teachers, they offer the caveat that this approach does not always work with all teachers. More specifically, at times some teachers prefer to learn about practices that they may immediately use in their classrooms, rather than being offered the option of reflecting on practices and developing alternatives.

As was noted previously, research in general education has provided strong support for learner-centered professional development that facilitates the use of innovative practices in the classroom. In recent years, working with both general and special education teachers, special educators have begun to investigate these issues and address the use of innovative practices that are widely supported as
effective in the special education professional literature. The findings of this research are considered in the following section.

**Professional Development Research in Special Education**

Over the last decade, professional development that addresses the use of innovative practices in the classroom has become a topic of significant interest to special education researchers (Klingner, 2004; Lang & Fox, 2003; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a). This interest seems to have been precipitated primarily because research-based practices are used infrequently in classrooms (Cook & Schirmer, 2003). This problem seems to be pervasive across disability categories and age levels (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003), and has been characterized as a research-to-practice gap (Gersten et al., 1997) or the lack of sustainability of research based practices (Klingner, Vaughn, Hughes, & Arguelles, 1999).

Recently, special educators have recognized that expert-centered professional development does not facilitate the use of innovative practices in the classroom (Klingner, 2004; Lang & Fox, 2003; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a, 2002b, 2006). For example, Klingner (2004) noted that the majority of professional development activities in special education involve passive, "sit and get" types of formats, and are marginally successful at best. McLeskey and Waldron (2002a) concur with this perspective and go on to note that professional development in special education is often ineffective because of a failure to take into account the complexity of the classroom and the culture of the school. Finally, Lang and Fox (2003) note that typical professional development in special education involves the dissemination of information with little follow-up as teachers implement these new practices. They go on to suggest that these activities are often piecemeal, addressing a series of disconnected topics, and lack the necessary in-depth focus on specific topics to ensure that teachers gain deep knowledge of practices.

Given the lack of success of expert-centered professional development in special education, many special educators have begun to examine the potential of different forms of professional development to facilitate the use of innovative practices in classrooms (Klingner, 2004; Lang & Fox, 2003; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002a). These efforts have primarily addressed the extent to which research-based practices can be implemented in general education classrooms and how this implementation can be sustained over time (e.g., Klingner et al., 1999).

For example, two investigations have been conducted that compare expert-centered professional development with new forms of professional development that include knowledge, demonstration, practice, and coaching (Boudah, Blair, & Mitchell, 2003; Little & Houston, 2003). These investigations addressed the use of learning strategies (Boudah et al., 2003) and evidence-based strategies related to phonemic awareness (Little & Houston, 2003). Both of these investigations revealed that substantially more teachers used practices in their classrooms when LCPD was used as compared to the use of expert-centered professional development.

These studies provide support for the components of professional development that are described by Joyce and Showers (2002) as important to ensuring the use of innovative strategies in the classroom, i.e., knowledge, demonstration, practice, and peer coaching. However, in both of these studies, the extent to which strategies were used in classrooms is based on teacher report and not on actual observation of teachers using the strategies. In the next section, research that included detailed studies of smaller groups of teachers and direct observation of teachers’ use of strategies is reviewed. These studies provide further insight into the effectiveness of learner-centered professional development in facilitating the classroom use of innovative instructional strategies.

**Case studies of LCPD.** Several investigations have been conducted using case studies to determine the effectiveness of LCPD in changing teacher practice (Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Greenwood, Tapia, Abbott, & Walton, 2003; Klingner et al., 1999; Vaughn, Hughes, Schum & Klingner, 1998). Across these studies, teachers have been shown to be more likely to change classroom practices when LCPD is used.

One of these investigations (Greenwood et al., 2003) provides an example of a well-designed case study that illustrates this change in classroom practice. Greenwood and colleagues worked with 16 teachers and the principal in one elementary school to facilitate the implementation of evidence based literacy practices. The researchers and teachers met to develop a common goal for this work, which addressed improving student learning, including the
rate of acquisition and mastery of academic skills. The authors provided LCPD activities regarding evidence-based practices (e.g., class-wide peer tutoring, partner reading), as well as in areas of individual interest to teachers (e.g., phonemic awareness instruction). The professional development consisted of providing a rationale and in-depth information, as well as modeling and practice of the strategies. Teachers were then provided with support in their classrooms as strategies were implemented and adapted to the particular needs of their classrooms.

By the end of their three-year project, teachers had successfully implemented 13 evidence-based practices in their classrooms. These practices included class-wide peer tutoring, partner reading, reciprocal teaching, writer’s workshop, and phonemic awareness. Student evaluation data revealed that these strategies significantly improved students’ reading comprehension but did not result in significant improvement in reading fluency.

While Greenwood et al. (2003) and other case studies (Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Klingner et al., 1999; Vaughn et al., 1998) have demonstrated that LCPD can be effective in changing teacher practices, one concern that has been raised with the use of teacher-researcher collaborative forms of professional development is the expense of this approach and the lack of feasibility of using this form of professional development in a wide range of schools (Abbott, Walton, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999). To address these issues, studies have been conducted (Abbott, Greenwood, Buzeugd, & Tapia, 2006; Vaughn & Coleman, 2004) using the train-the-trainer approach to professional development, which reduces the cost and seeks to make professional development more feasible in local schools.

For example, using a train-the-trainer approach, coupled with technology-based teacher support tools, Abbott et al., (2006) designed professional development to prepare teachers in five elementary schools to use Class-Wide Peer Tutoring (CWPT). Trainers were recruited who had previous experience using this strategy, and included teachers, principals, and graduate students. Teachers gathered in one location and were provided learner-centered professional development by the researchers that included in-depth coverage of a rationale for and use of CWPT, demonstrations, and hands-on practice. Local professional developers then provided on-site support and coaching in classrooms regarding the use of this strategy. The researchers also provided participants with a CD set that included supplementary instruction and training that teachers could use at any time, a manual for using CWPT, and a gallery of videos illustrating the use of this innovation. The CD also included a learner management system that provided the teacher with a “convenient way to create and deliver peer-tutored content, monitor student participation, and assess student performance and progress” (Abbott et al., 2006, p. 51).

The researchers followed up with teachers from each of the five schools to determine the extent to which they implemented CWPT and the Learner Management System (LMS) in their classrooms. They found that 57% of the teachers fully implemented CWPT and the LMS in their classrooms. The schools ranged from 100% implementation in two schools, to moderate rates of implementation in two schools (45% and 42%), to no implementation in one school.

The case study by Abbott and colleagues (2006), as well as other case studies (Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Greenwood et al., 2003; Klingner et al., 1999; Vaughn & Coleman, 2004; Vaughn et al., 1998) provide further support for the components of LCPD as important to ensuring the use of innovative practices in classrooms. Although not all teachers successfully used innovative practices, even with intensive support in the use of the strategy in their classrooms, these results indicate that the use of innovative practices occurs at substantially higher levels than when using expert-centered professional development. Studies of LCPD that have taken the form of teacher-researcher collaboration to develop and implement effective practices are reviewed in the next section.

**Teacher-researcher collaboration and LCPD.** Several teams of researchers have worked collaboratively with teachers over extended periods of time to gain a better understanding of how the use of innovative practices in classrooms is enhanced (Abbott et al., 1999; Baker, Gersten, Dimino, & Griffiths, 2004; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Englert & Rozendaal, 2004; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Fuchs, Fuchs, Bentz, Phillips, & Hamlett, 1994). These teams worked as professional learning communities to address mutually agreed upon goals for professional development, and used LCPD with follow up support in the classroom to address implementation of selected strategies. A brief overview of one of these investigations is subsequently provided.
Abbott et al. (1999) developed partnerships with eight elementary schools to evaluate the effectiveness of an approach to professional development designed to facilitate the use of research-based practices in the classroom. These researchers designed a model that allows researchers and teachers "to work together in a sustained problem-solving process leading to evaluation of problem solutions, redesign, solution validation, and wide-scale use across teachers and classrooms" (p. 343). Activities included a partnership between researchers and teachers to determine the focus of the work toward improving practice, consultation by researchers in ways that bring practices to teachers that "evolve teacher-researcher interactions and sustainable support for classroom application" (p. 343), and professional development using LCPD and support in the classroom.

This research thus suggests that the use of intensive, learner-centered professional development results in significantly increased levels of classroom use of innovative practices.

During the first two years of this project, Abbott and colleagues worked with 22 teachers. All of the teachers successfully implemented Class-Wide Peer Tutoring (Abbott et al., 2006) and Skills for Learning Independence in Developmentally Appropriate Environments (Carta, Renauer, Schiefelbusch, & Terry, 1998) in their classrooms. Evidence collected by the researchers indicated that the interventions accelerated academic responses and reduced inappropriate behaviors for students in first and second grades. Interviews with teachers also revealed a high level of satisfaction with this form of professional development and the interventions that they implemented in their classrooms.

Studies of teacher-researcher collaborations add further support for the use of LCPD to ensure that innovative practices are used in the classroom. In addition, these studies provide insight into how researchers and teachers may successfully work together to develop effective interventions that fit well into the realities of general education classrooms, thus enhancing the possibility that teachers will use the strategies in their classrooms (Gersten & Dimino, 2001).

**Summary of Research on LCPD**

Research on LCPD in special education reflects findings that are similar to those that have been reported previously for general education. That is, an LCPD approach results in substantially more teacher use of innovative practices in the classroom. These findings suggest that in contrast to expert-centered professional development with relatively large groups of teachers, which results in 5 to 10% of teachers who use innovative practices in the classroom (Boudah et al., 2003; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Little & Houston, 2003), LCPD results in classroom use of practices by 50 to 100% of participating teachers, although some teachers only implement the practice at limited levels, while others are frequent implementers (Boudah et al., 2003; Klingner et al., 1999; Klingner et al., 2003).

The central feature related to changing teacher practice seems to rest on the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) among teachers and other professionals (Fullan, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

This higher level of classroom use of innovative practices has been found across a range of studies, including those providing professional development for large groups of teachers (Boudah et al., 2003; Little & Houston, 2003), smaller groups of teachers in one or a few schools (Gersten & Dimino, 2001; Greenwood et al., 2003; Vaughn et al., 1998), and teachers who were provided with professional development as part of researcher-teacher collaborative activities (Abbott et al., 1999; Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001).

This research thus suggests that the use of intensive, learner-centered professional development results in significantly increased levels of classroom use of innovative practices. This intensive professional development provides teachers with in-depth knowledge regarding an innovation, illustrates the use of the innovation with demonstrations in a context that simulates the classroom, provides opportunities for teachers to practice the use of the innovation, and uses peer coaching to support the teacher as the innovation is used in the classroom.
LCPD is also built on the assumption that innovations that are the focus of professional development should fit well into the classroom and thus will be more readily accepted by teachers.

LCPD offers an opportunity to more effectively bridge the research to practice gap and ensure that teachers are well prepared to use effective, research-based practices in their classrooms. However, there are several issues regarding this approach to professional development that need to be further investigated to provide insight into how more widespread use of LCPD might become a reality.

Limitations of the Research on Professional Development

While a consensus has emerged regarding the relative effectiveness of LCPD compared to expert-centered professional development in facilitating teacher use of innovative practices, this research should be interpreted with caution for several reasons, including:

- Most of this research has been done with general education teachers, with little mention of special educators.
- The research that has been conducted and reported in both the general and special education literature has seldom used rigorous experimental designs.
- Little is known about the effectiveness of individual components of LCPD, or how this approach may be delivered cost effectively.
- Additional research is needed regarding the roles of administrators in supporting the use of learner-centered professional development.

LCPD and Improved Teacher Practice—Considerations for Administrators

Any review of research on professional development leaves many questions for administrators and other professionals. Most importantly, this research makes it clear that LCPD can be effective in changing teacher practices, and expert-centered professional development is much less effective. However, in spite of these findings, expert-centered professional development continues to be the predominant approach to improving teacher practice. This could be because of the relative expense of using LCPD, while expert-centered professional development is much less expensive to deliver. That is, it is much simpler to disseminate information and assume that these good ideas will travel into teachers’ classrooms of their own volition (Fullan, 2007), in spite of the fact that extensive research and professional experience of most special and general educators indicates that this does not occur.

Given these findings, the role of administrators in supporting the use of LCPD to change teacher practice is critical. Key considerations in this regard include:

1. In many schools and school districts, much of the time allocated for teacher professional development is used to disseminate information regarding policies, local procedural practices, and so forth. Schools that are highly effective in improving teacher practice and student outcomes use inexpensive, electronic methods to disseminate information regarding policies and local practices. Furthermore, in these settings, teacher time is highly valued, and is used for collaborative planning and a range of LCPD (e.g., observing and coaching in classrooms, study groups) to improve practice. This includes the use of faculty meeting time and district wide meetings for this purpose, rather than using these meetings for “sit and get” information dissemination.

2. The successful use of LCPD is highly dependent on active administrative support (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Thus, it is important that administrators limit the use of teacher out-of-class time spent disseminating information to them, and ensure that teachers have sufficient time for LCPD. This includes time to engage in activities such as observation of highly effective methods in other teachers’ classrooms, and freeing up teachers to work as peer coaches to support peers in the development of new skills. Funds to support these activities may come from federal sources (e.g., IDEA, NCLB) or district funds for professional development.

3. It is also important that administrators engage teachers in shared decision making regarding topics for professional development, thus ensuring that the focus of these activities address issues that are important to the teacher. Other ways to engage and support teachers in this regard include providing opportunities for teachers to assume leadership roles, engaging teachers in shared decision making, and collaborating with teachers in data sharing and analysis (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).
4. The central feature related to changing teacher practice seems to rest on the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) among teachers and other professionals (Fullan, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). These communities offer a cost-effective means of delivering LCPD, as team members provide much of the support needed by teachers to gain deep knowledge regarding instructional strategies and implement these strategies in their classrooms with coaching support from colleagues. For more information on PLCs, see the article by Blanton and Perez in this issue.

5. Finally, it is especially important that administrators provide LCPD for beginning special education teachers in the early years of their teaching careers. Developing new skills is important to all special education teachers, but is especially important to new teachers and those who enter the classroom with limited preparation (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007). Providing LCPD provides the support these teachers need to gain new skills to be successful in their jobs, and increases the likelihood that they will remain in the profession (Billingsley, 2005).

References


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