Working With Inservice Teachers: Suggestions for Teacher Educators

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Until recently, graduate coursework served as the traditional mechanism for upgrading the competencies of inservice teachers and, in turn, for improving the physical education programs in schools. Such courses provided a convenient framework for teacher educators to ply their trade. Starting with the assumption that they knew the needs of inservice teachers and school programs, teacher educators set course requirements designed to enhance the teachers' professional abilities. Held captive by these requirements, the teachers dutifully plodded through assignments and, upon completion, “exchanged” their reports for receipt of a grade on a transcript. The appropriate accumulation of such receipts yielded permanent certification and salary increments. While it is difficult to assess the probable impact of such coursework, in all probability some of the better courses that were particularly relevant to the teachers’ work not only bolstered teachers’ competence but eventually were translated into improved programming at the school level. Of course, on the other hand, many graduate courses were irrelevant or poorly conceived and had no influence on teachers or school programs. Regardless of their quality and ultimate impact, graduate courses provided a remarkably easy operating framework for teacher educators.

Today, the inservice teaching population is aging. Most of them have long since completed the graduate coursework needed for permanent certification and maximum salary increments. Understandably, they are not likely to be recaptured by unappealing or needless graduate courses. These harsh realities pose a serious problem for teacher educators, like myself, who want to continue to have an impact on physical education programs through our work with inservice teachers. Deprived of our graduate course requirements, how can we possibly get teachers to update their knowledge? To renew their spirit and commitment? To see the light? And so on.

Fortunately, a substantial number of alternative approaches to working with inservice teachers have emerged to supplant the functions previously served by graduate courses, including: inservice workshops, clinics, consultation services, special field-based projects, teacher centers, and school/college consortiums. Many of these activities provide opportunities for collaboration between inservice teachers and teacher educators. While the short-term consequences of such working relationships have been mixed and their impact is often short-lived (Berman, et al., 1975; McLaughlin and Marsh, 1978; Pankratz, et al., 1980), one fact is clear, the nature of the working relationship between inservice teachers and teacher educators (or other change agents) has a crucial bearing on the outcome of the effort. Furthermore, the convenient graduate courses model with its clearly assigned authoritative roles and coercive features does not apply in these new collaborative endeavors. A teacher educator, who tries to impose the old rules of the “teacher-student-course” game under one of these newer arrangements, will soon discover that other players either quit, or go off to play their own game without the teacher educator.
Inservice education is where the action will be in the foreseeable future—barring an immediate baby boom that swells the school population and produces a demand for new teachers. If teacher educators are to have a meaningful role in this effort, not only will they have to assist in the creation and maintenance of new formats for inservice education (workshops, special projects, etc.) they will need to devise new ways of working with inservice teachers that acknowledge the voluntary, collaborative and collegial nature of their relationships. Such relationships are not easily established, especially for those of us whose behavior patterns are rooted in the traditions of graduate courses.

A Program Development Center

For the past four years, a group of teacher educators have been working with inservice teachers in selected school districts to facilitate program development in physical education. Our work started as an informal project in one school district (Anderson, 1980) and later evolved into a Physical Education Program Development Center involving five school districts (Anderson, 1981). The organization and work of the Center, reported elsewhere (Anderson, 1982), has focused on program improvements such as: refined elective programming in high schools, competency-based instructional units in the elementary schools, experimental fitness units, expanded intramural programs, and improved teaching methods. In all instances, the work has been a collaborative effort involving the staff of the teacher education program in physical education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the voluntary participation of administrators and teachers in the affiliated school districts. We’ve used a sizable array of techniques to carry on the work: self evaluations, independent projects, workshops, curriculum writing, informal meetings, resource conferences, inter-visitations and district-wide program revision. The staff of the Center has learned some important lessons about working with inservice teachers in a collaborative/voluntary context during these four years. Although the lessons may be unique to our idiosyncrasies and to the particular characteristics of the staff and the people with whom we’ve worked, I thought they would be worth sharing at this time.

Focus on Program Development

When outsiders enter a school district with the intention of “upgrading” teacher competence or providing “inservice training,” the underlying assumption is that the teaching staff has deficiencies that need correcting. It’s not uncommon for teacher educators to start with this sort of assumption, since it usually permeates the teacher education programs in which they work. Needless to say, it’s not the kind of assumption that leads to healthy collaborative working relationships among professionals. Experienced inservice teachers are quick to sense the patronizing attitudes that emanate from this intent to “help them improve.” Not surprisingly, inservice teachers react with resentment (especially the better teachers) and put out a clear message “get lost.”

As a general rule, it’s much wiser to focus attention on program development (Lieberman and Miller, 1978). That is: How is the program going? and, What can we do to help make it better? Virtually every service teacher we’ve worked with can point to problem areas which need improvement. The sources of the problems they identify range from facilities, equipment and lack of administrative support to student behavior, excessive teaching load and their own need for new information. In addition, they are usually receptive to possible program improvements suggested by teacher educators—provided such suggestions don’t amount to a direct attack on their capabilities. With the program as the target for improvement, the search for alternative solutions can be undertaken in an atmosphere of mutual respect and openness. Perhaps the teachers will need some inservice training, perhaps...