A report from TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) raised eyebrows recently when it concluded that much of the professional development teachers receive does little to improve teaching quality. The report, provocatively titled *The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Professional Development*, examined the professional growth of some 10,000 teachers in three large urban districts and a charter school management organization, hoping to discover what distinguished the experiences and dispositions of the “improvers”—the roughly 30 percent who demonstrated year-over-year growth on performance evaluations—from those of the “non-improvers.” Finding few differences between the experiences of the two groups, TNTP reported that “despite enormous . . . investments of time and money, we are much further from [creating great teaching] than has been acknowledged, and the evidence base for what actually helps teachers improve is very thin” (TNTP, 2015, p. ii).

Notwithstanding the boldness of making such a broad-brush statement after examining just four school systems, it’s true that research supporting the effectiveness of professional development can seem like a vast desert where even seemingly effective practices fade as we get closer to them. For example, ever since Joyce and Showers (2002) found that simply introducing new ideas had little impact on professional practice, we’ve known that short-term professional development without follow-up doesn’t work. Even the addition of modeling and practice failed to move the needle on teaching practice; only when peer coaching was added did teacher practices actually change.

So are peer coaching and teacher collaboration the oasis we’re searching for in the otherwise bleak desert of professional development? Not exactly. As with most things, quality matters more than quantity.

Quality Trumps Quantity
As it turns out, many studies call into question the effectiveness of both coaching and teacher collaboration. Here are a few examples:

- A U.S. Department of Education study (Garet et al., 2011) measuring the comparative effects of adding teacher coaching to an eight-day reading institute found no difference in teacher practices or student achievement.
- Guskey and Yoon’s (2009) examination of nine rigorous studies of professional development found no instance of effective professional development programs employing peer coaching or other forms of school-based professional learning.
- The TNTP report found little difference in the amount of coaching and collaboration experienced by improvers versus non-improvers—improvers had 69 hours of formal collaboration and 13 hours of coaching over two years; non-improvers had 65 and 13 hours, respectively.

So is it possible that neither teacher collaboration nor peer coaching are effective? Again, not exactly; the reality is more nuanced. As with most things, quality matters more than quantity—something the TNTP study didn’t measure, as it counted only hours spent in collaboration without examining how those hours were spent.

A small study of a mathematics intervention (Murray, Ma, & Mazur, 2009) found that, although peer-coaching conversations were positive and supportive, they lacked depth; 100 percent of comments offered were positive with no critique. “Overall,” the researchers observed, “peer partners did not challenge or question one another’s classroom practices” (p. 209). In contrast, a more recent, small-scale, qualitative study in Canada (Jao, 2013) found that when teachers were given guiding questions for their collaborative conversations and protocols for observing classrooms,
peer coaching was more incisive and productive.

Guskey and Yoon’s (2009) synthesis of research also shows that teacher collaboration without the benefit of outside expertise falls flat: Teachers tend to merely share existing practices and stay in their comfort zones. Although no studies pointed to the effectiveness of teacher collaboration, the research did show that effective PD requires follow-up support focused not on adoption but rather on adaption—helping teachers apply better practices with their own students instead of bird-dogging program implementation.

So why is it so rare for these elements to merge to form an oasis of teacher growth? The answer may lie in how we think about these elements.

The Hidden Factor: Mental Frames

James Spillane (2000) examined reform efforts in nine districts in Michigan and found that, on the surface, many professional development approaches looked the same, but those similarities “camouflaged substantial differences in the underlying theories of teacher learning and change” (p. 23)—differences, he argued, that reflected behaviorist, situated, and cognitive views of change.

Of the 40 district leaders Spillane interviewed, 34 (85 percent) held views that reflected a behaviorist perspective; they sought to motivate teachers primarily through external rewards. For them, staff development consisted of transmitting information (from experts) to teachers, who had to be properly motivated and monitored to ensure adoption of new programs. Teacher coaches became central office confederates relaying information and ensuring compliance.

A handful of leaders (five) held views that reflected a situated perspective. They sought to motivate teacher learning through creating a collegial school culture. They tapped early adopters of new strategies to proselytize others in hopes of creating a tipping point in which all teachers felt socially persuaded to adopt a new strategy. Only one leader in Spillane’s study held views aligned with a cognitive perspective, seeing people as natural-born inquirers motivated by a need for self-actualization. This leader focused on teachers as individual learners; she observed them to understand their prior knowledge and beliefs, then tailored their learning to support their individual growth.

Effective PD requires follow-up support focused not on adoption but rather on adaption.

In practice, the lines between these perspectives are usually more dotted than solid. Consider your own reasons for reading this article: You may be seeking ways to advance your career (a behaviorist motivator); wanting to stay abreast of your profession (situated); and intrigued by human behavior (cognitive). Teachers are no different; effecting change in teaching practices appears to require balancing all three motivators—for example, using external experts to spark change (a behaviorist impulse); encouraging schoolwide professionalism (a situated response); and giving teachers freedom to adapt practices to their own students (a cognitive motivator)—while relying on standard protocols for observing and coaching (akin to a situated approach).

The challenge, however, may be that, as Spillane observed 16 years ago, the pressure of top-down accountability perpetuates a paradigm that seems to prompt leaders to align staff development with a behaviorist approach alone. The TNTP report itself, for example, seems to reflect a behaviorist view that teachers should adopt—not adapt—new practices; researchers asked teachers if they received follow-up support to “ensure I am implementing new instructional practices effectively” (p. 53).

In the end, how leaders think about change seems to be more than an abstract, academic matter: It influences not only what elements of professional development they employ, but also how they tune and align those elements with other approaches so that, together, they strike the right chord.

References


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