DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 253 SP 038 997

AUTHOR Finley, Sandra
TITLE Restoring Meaning to Teaching. Promoting Instructional Coherence.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, TX.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 1999-12-00
NOTE 17p.; Prepared with Glenda Copeland, Chris Ferguson, Stephen Marble, and Martha Boethel.
CONTRACT RJ9600681
AVAILABLE FROM Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East Seventh Street, Austin, TX 78701. Tel: 512-476-6861; Web site: http://www.sedl.org.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; Learner Controlled Instruction; *Reflective Teaching; *Teacher Collaboration; Teacher Improvement; Teachers; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS Reflective Thinking; *Study Groups

ABSTRACT

This paper shares ideas from a research project involving more than 75 teachers in five states. The teachers participated in groups of 12-18. They received support as part of the research project. The groups met with a facilitator every 2-3 weeks to have conversations about teaching and learning. They learned from and with each other as they explored their beliefs and assumptions about teaching, tried new approaches in their classrooms, read articles, wrote in their journals, and visited each other's classrooms. This paper focuses on three key strategies that can guide efforts to improving student learning and making teaching more meaningful and satisfying: shifting the focus from what is being taught to what students are learning; talking with colleagues about educational issues and ideas; and reflecting and being thoughtful when making choices in practice. It offers thoughts from the study group teachers on each of the topics. By participating in these study groups, teachers reported that they built support networks, engaged in meaningful dialogue, learned more about themselves as teachers, reflected upon their understanding of learning, used this understanding to make better decisions about teaching, and improved student learning. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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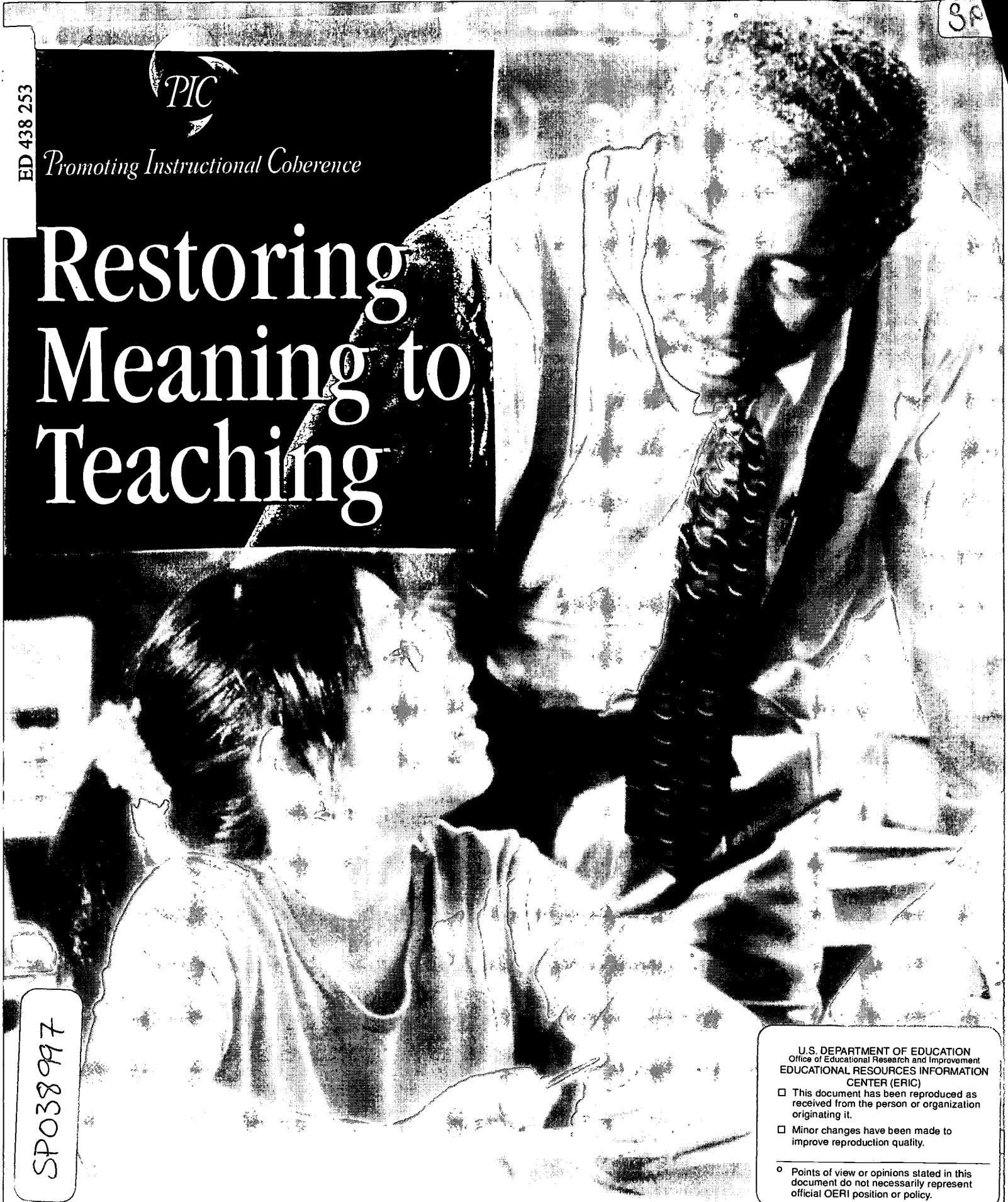
Promoting Instructional Coherence

Restoring Meaning to Teaching



Sandra Finley with Glenda Copeland, Chris Ferguson, Stephen Marble, and Martha Boethel

thwest Educational Development Laboratory

SEDL
Southwest Educational
Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 476-6861
http://www.sedl.org

This publication was produced wholly, or in part, with funds from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract #RJ9600681. The content herein does not necessarily reflect the views the Department of Education, any other agency of the U.S. Government, or any other source.

Restoring Meaning to Teaching is a product of the Promoting Instructional Coherence Project in the Program for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning. As a result of our work with the teachers quoted in this paper, the project produced *A Flashlight and Compass: A Collection of Resources to Promote Instructional Coherence* to assist other educators in constructing a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning. This collection of activities, tools, and strategies provides useful resources for facilitating groups of teachers in becoming more reflective about their practice, making instructional decisions based on student learning, and creating more coherent learning experiences for students. To contact the Promoting Instructional Coherence Project, please call us at 1-800-476-6861 or write to us at SEDL, 211 East Seventh Street, Austin, TX 78701. You may also send e-mail to Stephen Marble, Program Manager, smarble@sedl.org.

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Restoring Meaning to Teaching

By drawing on the stories, experiences, and feelings of teachers, we gain insight into the complex nature of teaching today. We read teacher stories about the challenges, dilemmas, and successes of teaching. We hear of their frustrations and their joys; we see their smiles and their frowns. They talk about their difficult students and their easy ones, their good days and their bad ones. They describe unimportant and irrelevant workshops—and others that led to some critical insight or skill. They speak about reforms and new curricula that might hold promise, but are pushing them to the limit with more paperwork and demands on their time. They are excited about some changes and overwhelmed by others. We see, however, that most teachers keep searching for what works despite the many challenges they face. Through this paper, we offer encouragement and guidance in that search.

We, the authors, are also educators who have felt overwhelmed and frustrated and have tried many educational solutions, but we, like you, have also had successes and felt satisfaction. Concern about effective teaching has driven our current work as researchers. We believe that there are ways to search for answers and insights to rejuvenate your practice that are often overlooked. In this paper, we share ideas that come from a research project that involved more than 75 teachers in five states. We invite you to carefully consider what we have learned and how it might help you find more satisfaction and joy in your teaching.

The teachers, whose words are quoted in italics in this paper, participated in study groups of 12-18 teachers that we supported as part of a research project. The teachers met with a facilitator every two to three weeks to have conversations about teaching and learning. They learned from and with each other as they explored their beliefs and assumptions about teaching, tried new approaches in their classrooms, read articles, wrote in their journals, and visited each other's classrooms. These were ordinary teachers from typical rural, suburban, and urban schools in the Southwest who set aside a few hours a month for group meetings after school, during early release time, or on weekends.

People have lots of reasons—some philosophical, some practical—for becoming teachers. Most of us, beginning and experienced teachers alike, envision and aspire to be the ideal teacher who is a nurturer, guide, facilitator, or maybe a performer. But on those frustrating days that come all too frequently in the real world—as real teachers in real schools with real children—many practicing teachers feel more like survivors, lion tamers, or control freaks, and they wonder what happened.

Do you ever ask yourself why you stay in teaching? As we began our work with the teachers, we heard that question in their voices.[1]

> *"We are on information overload—we never have enough time. The chore of being a teacher is overtaking the joy of teaching."*

We know that it is difficult to be a teacher these days. Expectations are higher, but time, tools, and resources remain scarce. Teachers' frustrations are real—we see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. We wonder if you, like so many teachers today, have found that the sense of purpose and promise with which you first entered this profession is draining away in the daily flood of tests, trainings, curriculum committees, evaluations, paperwork, troublesome parents, and troubled children?

A sense of purpose in your work is not something that someone else can give to you, but we think that you can find it again for yourself with persistence and support. Our experience working with teachers suggests that they hope to increase their successes and satisfaction but are unsure how to turn their hopes into reality. They stay in the profession because of the promise of having positive interactions with kids that lead to learning. A sixth-grade teacher, Carrie,[2] said,

> *"The main thing I try to do is focus on the positives that I have as a teacher. I vent about the negatives but don't dwell in them. If I were to get sucked into the negatives, I'd end up as a greeter at Wal-Mart instead of an educator. Luckily, a small token from just one student can make it worthwhile—when I see the discovery in their eyes. What other job offers that?"*

Some days, however, the negatives in the job blind teachers from looking for the light in the students' eyes. Through our work, we see a dilemma in teaching that causes the frustration and despair experienced by some teachers. Teachers feel compelled to serve so many masters[3] that they find it difficult to remember and pay attention to the fundamental reason for going into teaching—the children and learning. They become overwhelmed by new demands—standards, tests, checklists, or forms—and are left with "no time to care for or connect with their students. When this happens, teachers feel that their fundamental purposes have been lost—with catastrophic results for their commitment and effectiveness" (Hargreaves, 1997, p. ix).

In our work with teachers, we are discovering that the "solution" to this dilemma lies more in internal commitment and transformation than in external programs. Asking and answering the "hard" questions about teaching practice can spark this transformation. At one of our research sites, for example, a group of teachers was discussing how to be more purposeful and thoughtful in their teaching. They developed a set of questions to keep critical issues in the foreground as they planned lessons and made decisions. The voicing of questions for consideration pushed the teachers to examine their assumptions about teaching and learning in an open dialogue that gave voice to their feelings, beliefs, values, dilemmas, and tensions. We hope the questions we raise in this paper will likewise spark your interest and prompt your reflection on the decisions you make in your teaching practice.

Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach,* asks, "How can we who teach reclaim our hearts, for the sake of our students, ourselves, and educational reform?" (1998, p. 19). He believes that "when you love your

1 We are using the written and spoken words of participating teachers who were in various stages of self-reflection and inquiry.

2 We are using pseudonyms for the teachers' names.

3 State and national policies, district and campus rules and guidelines, professional society recommendations, community expectations, and so on.

work, the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in" (p. 2). Going deeper takes courage as you carefully and critically consider the teaching and learning that happens in your classroom. We have come to believe that three key strategies can guide your efforts to improve student learning and make your work more meaningful and satisfying:

- shifting your focus from what you are teaching to what students are learning,
- talking with colleagues about educational issues and ideas, and
- reflecting and being thoughtful as you make choices in your practice.

We offer ideas—not a map, but a flashlight and compass—to help you find your own path as a teacher through the maze of educational trails.

Field notes from a study group meeting.

These questions are the ones we should ask about our teaching:

- *How do I decide what to teach and why?*
- *In this lesson, what do I want my students to learn?*
- *Why is it important for these kids to learn this?*
- *How will I teach this concept so that my students can learn it?*
- *How will I know if they understand the concept?*

We need to go further. We are not just teachers. Other questions can help us think about our lives as teachers and people:

- *What can I do to keep my life in balance?*
- *How am I growing—personally and professionally?*
- *Whom am I doing this for?*
- *Where do I go for support?*
- *How can I be supportive of others?*

Making Student Learning Central to Teaching

Every dedicated teacher is concerned about student learning. However, the day-to-day pressures of teaching, much of the dialogue about educational ills and improvements, and professional training tend to push attention toward what *teachers* do rather than toward what *students* learn. We see that it is critically important to make student learning the central focus of instructional decision making. This involves a thoughtful examination of the process of learning. Carol, a seventh grade teacher, wrote in her journal,

It still amazes me when you think you have taught a concept so well and still a couple of kids bomb a test. Is it that they are just bad test-takers? That they don't seek assistance when they have no clue? That they are not developmentally ready to grasp the concept? That I am not really teaching what I think I am teaching? That they need more practice to really learn the concept? It could be all of the above. It depends on the student and the situation. Seeing their work and making them talk about their work and their understanding of the concept gives the teacher vital information as to what next step should be. . . . Teaching the same thing [over again] in the same way will not necessarily produce successful learning. I must target the specific problem.

Carol has begun to question the relationship between her teaching and her students' learning. However, teachers' views of *how* children learn often go unexamined. As Bruce Pirie, an English teacher and author, says,

> For most of us, our teaching has been formed by a few influential teachers from our own schooling, a handful of respected colleagues, readings from books or journals, and the push and pull of classroom realities. From this, we assemble a practice that keeps us going, but which has not always been scrutinized in its assumptions or challenged for inconsistencies. (1997, p. 6)

Most of us focus primarily on the methods of practice and pay less attention to the foundations and directions. Examined or not, those ideas that constitute the foundations (such as views of how children learn and the purposes of schooling) impact our decisions about instructional practice.

Examining beliefs about how children learn

Ten teachers[4] from two schools are sitting in an elementary classroom. They have recently begun meeting every couple of weeks to talk about teaching and learning. The following perspectives are from their dialogue about learning, a dialogue that occurred in their third two-hour meeting.

Beth: Learning involves repetition, lots of repetition—doing things over and over again—that's how kids learn. They have learned it if they can repeat it, answer the questions.

Jane: In learning, hands are doing and the learning comes from what they are doing. Learning is demonstrated by students' actions—we know that they have gotten it when they can do something.

Carrie: I picture learning as someone pouring stuff into your head from the pitcher of knowledge, feeding stimuli, helping you learn. Learning is taking in new things. I don't really know what it is, learning is this vast, vague thing. What is the difference between learning and regurgitating things?

Maureen: Well, students are not learning when the teacher is talking all of the time. That stuff just bounces off the kids. Learning is better when it is generated from the child's interests.

Lisa: I think that students have to construct their own knowledge and that is based on what they bring with them—their prior knowledge—and what experiences the teachers provide. Experiences have to be meaningful, hands-on, and connected to student lives.

To put learning at the center of instructional practice, it's necessary to understand learning. The teachers above are beginning to examine their personal ideas about *how* learning happens, ideas that come from their educational experiences as children, students, parents, and teachers. Our first ideas about learning come from our childhood interactions with our parents, teachers, other adults, as well as our peers. How did they teach us, motivate us, reward us, or punish us? What did we experience that helped us learn or that prevented us from learning? As adults, we modify, refine, or extend our beliefs about learning based on new experiences.

During preservice, most of us learned a lot about being a teacher and little about learning. Until the mid-1980s, education professors projected the view of learners as passive beings, blank slates, or empty vessels. They focused on the *teacher*, *teaching* processes, *teaching* materials, and *teaching* outcomes. Teachers were seen as the holders of knowledge and learners as passive receivers of information. A number of different views of learning persist and exert influence on teaching practice, although understanding about how learning happens has become more sophisticated over time.

The instructional strategies we use today originate with theories of learning that were popular at different times in the past. Broadly speaking, we use drill and practice (behaviorism); information processing strategies such as selecting, organizing, integrating, and memorizing (the cognitive view of learning); and active learning strategies such as hands-on inquiries, collaborative work, reflection, and metacognition (constructivism). Constructivism is a complex theory of learning that emphasizes the active role of the learner and is currently accepted by many educators. However, our standard instructional practices most often place students in the role of passive receivers of expert knowledge. Even as we've tried to shed these representations, few of us have

4 In this paper, the dialogue excerpts are from one study group and are used to illustrate the kinds of conversations that occurred in all five of the study groups. Other quotes and examples are taken from the other four study groups.

taken time to consider what ideas and images, if any, have replaced them.

Our ideas about the learning process remain largely unexamined or unconscious, and yet they influence the instructional choices we make every day. Researchers Renate and Geoffrey Caine study contemporary learning theory in an attempt to link it to classroom practice. They conclude that one of the most fundamental issues in educational improvement "hinges on the understanding that [teachers] have about how human beings learn" (1997, p. 9). By exploring one's own beliefs about learning, rethinking these beliefs, and remaining open to new ideas, one can learn to be more thoughtful about which ideas and approaches are appropriate for different learning situations.

We can ask ourselves reflective questions to help focus attention on learning. Are my images of school about teaching or about learning? How am I thinking about learning? How do children learn? Looking at teaching practice through the lens of learning, we begin to see children in new ways.

Thinking of children as learners

Karen Gallas, a first grade teacher, researcher, and author, watches children, collects their artwork, notes, and doodles, and records their conversations. She shares her insights as stories of children. She tells of a homeless child, an immigrant child, and a typical "bad boy." The vignette used in this section illustrates her view of a child as a learner.

As we begin our weekly science talks, I am somewhat apprehensive about how the open-ended structure of the talks will work with Michael [the "bad boy"] as a participant. He still has great trouble censoring the words that come out of his mouth. The question under consideration for our first science talk is, How did animals begin? As the discussion begins, the children are extremely settled. Early on in the talk Michael gets up on his knees, and Anita [the aide] and I make eye contact. I know we are both wondering what that movement signals. (1994, p. 62)

A common tension for teachers is balancing the needs of the group with needs of the individual child. Gallas has chosen an instructional strategy that she believes is best for the group. She has some concern, however, about the reactions of Michael and so pays close attention to him.

> As I watch, it becomes clear that his erect posture mirrors an intellectual excitement that he can barely contain. Michael speaks frequently in the talk, maintaining an earnest and wide-eyed attitude. He shows an unusual interest in adopting parts of other children's thoughts, expanding them, and is effusive in his praise of others. (Gallas, 1994, p. 69)

Michael found the question interesting and was drawn into the learning situation *as a learner.* We generally think of the children in our classrooms as *students.* Schools create a picture of a "good student" based on exemplars of behavior, obedience, respect, and performance, but they do not tend to create a similar picture of a *learner.* We all remember a child who was a wonderful learner but not a very successful student. To know a child as a learner, we must talk with her, observe her, see what she understands, and examine how she understands. Focusing on learning involves finding out what your kids know, how they think, how they learn, what's important in their lives, and what experiences and stories they bring to school.

A second grade teacher learned to really listen to her students and draw out their ideas and understandings by using a problem-centered curriculum approach, small group collaboration, and large group discussions. She learned, for example, to "suspend her own adult knowledge about mathematics and to realize that children have their own way of thinking about mathematics" (Wood, Cobb, & Yackel, 1995, p. 417). She was amazed to find that her students' thinking was far more sophisticated than she had imagined. She said, "I never knew second graders knew so much about math" (p. 417). Gallas says that when we take the time to listen carefully to their stories, we gain insights into children's thinking and learning.

> By looking carefully at the stories of bad boys, I have been able to change my response to their actions. My response has moved from a purely visceral, defensive reaction toward a child who threatens my ability to control a class, to one of examining what that child is telling me about his needs as a learner and his view of the world. (Gallas, 1994, p. 70)

As we search for the history and logic that underlie "problematic" behaviors by looking "for the story the learner would tell if he could," we learn a great deal about the child as a learner (Greenleaf, Hull, & Reilly, 1994, p. 526). How do his background, experiences, and knowledge come into play in the classroom? How do classroom activities look from his point-of-view? As we learn about and from our students by facilitating more open-ended classroom discussions, for example, we can make better decisions about what is important and meaningful for them to learn.

Deciding what your students need to learn

We rejoin the study group teachers who have now been meeting for more than a semester. The following are highlights from their dialogue about teaching and what is important for students to learn.

Maureen: I really enjoy teaching from March through May because the test monster is not coming to bite off our heads and tell us how horrible we all are. The kids can learn a few things that they will remember and be able to use later.

Beth: Last year, I was trying to do everything I thought I was supposed to. Now I am thinking more about what is important, I know more where my focus is. There is less stuff, but more time spent on the important topics.

Lisa: It is difficult, but I am trying to figure out what is important for me to teach and for them to learn.

Jess: In the first-grade meeting, we decided what was fluff in our curriculum and what was important and then took out the fluff.

Pat: I was trying to rush through so many things in the past years that I didn't have time to sit down with them and look at what they were writing or see if they'd got the meaning of the story. But now I've even started to throw away some of the topics and activities—you just can't cover everything.

Ellen: I have been one in the past who taught one unit for only one week. All this does is expose the student to a subject. It does not allow time to learn. I am not doing that anymore.

The teachers are becoming more reflective about their decision making, asking themselves, *What do our students need to know?* Most of us believe that students need more than facts, formulas, and vocabulary; they need a grasp of larger concepts, as well as skills that can help them work through problems on their own. But what are those big concepts? What do students need in order to understand those concepts? How do students learn the necessary skills? When do they learn them? How can we help students link what they have encountered and will encounter in other classes and at other grade levels? These are difficult but important questions, questions that help establish and maintain a focus on student learning.

Teaching decisions are often based on the textbook, available activities, or favorite topics without real consideration of the concept to be learned. Jess, a first-grade teacher in the group above, struggled with the question, *Why do I teach bats?* She was perplexed at first, but she did come to an answer—she wants her students to understand the characteristics that all mammals, including unusual ones like bats, have in common—and she redesigned her unit to make this purpose clearer. She still "teaches bats," but now focuses her entire unit on her real reason for teaching about bats.

Splintered Vision, a recent report on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study of instruction and student outcomes in a number of countries, concluded that, "Our [U.S.] curricula, textbooks, and teaching all are a mile wide and an inch deep" (Schmidt,

McKnight, & Raizen, 1996). If you've had any exposure to recent reform ideas, you've no doubt heard the phrase, "less is more." This tricky but useful concept doesn't really mean that you *do* less in the classroom. Rather, you relinquish *breadth* of coverage for *depth* of coverage, introducing fewer topics, each of which is explored in greater depth and detail. Students investigate ideas and information in more meaningful ways, and teachers have time to discover what their students are actually understanding. After experimenting with this approach, one teacher told us,

> *"I'm coming to the idea that less really is more, but I am having difficulty in deciding where the less is."*

Deciding where the less is—determining where to cut and where to go deeper—is not always a simple task. The state or national standards provide guidelines that may help us decide what is important for students to learn. However, many of us don't have the experience needed to use these documents in any way other than as a list of topics "to cover." By taking the time to explore the rationale behind the development of the standards with colleagues and being thoughtful about what is truly important for students to learn, our choices may become clearer.

Pulling it together

After participating in the group for a year, the study group teachers are reflecting on changes they have made in their practice.

Beth: As we talked about being more thoughtful, I found it became easier to explain what I was doing in class to other people, I can say that this is what is important for these kids, instead of relying on what the book says.

Lisa: There are so many ways of teaching, so many books, so much involved. . . . It is good to get together to talk about what we do, to learn to be thoughtful. I have thought deeply about the choices I make, about the big concepts my students need to learn. I have gained confidence that I can make good decisions about what I should be teaching and what the kids should be learning. I cover fewer topics, but I do it so that the students learn how to really use the math concepts—to really understand them.

Sue: It is quality not quantity. . . . I gave up a lot of structure and the students struggled with it, but the whole atmosphere in the classroom is better. Building a trust-based relationship with these students has taken from August to now. I know how hard I have worked, and I think they realize it.

Maureen: I have been thinking about what kids are going through in school, how they are thinking. I have really changed the way I do things in the classroom. I have changed my whole approach to teaching—I am giving choices, letting go of the control.

Jill: I have incorporated Montessori methods into my reading and my kids seem more enthusiastic. . . . I am looking at them in a new way, looking to see when they understand. If you had been in my classroom last year and then come in this year, you would see that I have changed everything I do. The kids want to come to my room. . . . Karen said I would be able to feel it when kids are concentrating, everyone learning, and I had that experience the other day. I had people observing in my room when it happened, and I wanted to say, "Did you feel it? Did you feel it?" And they did. I didn't really ask them, but they told me.

The teachers in the project questioned their decisions and evaluated their choices in terms of the needs of their students. Remember the dilemma mentioned earlier—of serving the many masters on the one hand while remaining true to personal beliefs about being a teacher on the other. With a clear focus on student learning, the teachers found it easier to deal with the problems created by this dilemma. By standing back, evaluating the problems, and asking, "What does this have to do with learning?" teachers were empowered to make choices that were good for kids. Maureen is less driven by the "test monster," Beth selects the important topics for her special education students to learn, and Lisa focuses on helping her students learn to use math concepts.

Knowing your colleagues

At the end of the project, the teachers talked about their experiences with their teacher study group.

Jill: We shared our individual successes and failures in an environment without judgment. Everyone was willing to help or offer suggestions, support, and new ideas.

Anna: I have really looked forward to these meetings. You always leave here with new ideas. It was rejuvenating.

Lynn: I realized I was not alone, that other people were having problems.

Lisa: We looked at how children learn and the relationship to our teaching, but without a rigid format. Flexibility and collegiality were really important.

Carrie: We never have a time to really be with other teachers. We need to be able to vent with colleagues on this level.

Maureen: We had interesting and deeper conversations. This was the first time I have ever met with a group of teachers where I was not afraid to say what I wanted. It was a safe place.

The teachers used the study group to explore ideas together, consider alternative viewpoints, and establish common ground. They found it meaningful to engage in a process that involved explicating and questioning their theories, beliefs, and assumptions about teaching and learning with colleagues. As they engaged in personal and group reflection, the teachers began to value and also question the knowledge and expertise that they brought to teaching. They also identified areas where they needed to improve. Even the least experienced among us has what Parker Palmer describes as "a teacher within," an inner voice that—if we attend to it—can help guide us to our best work. This inner voice "is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but of what is real for us, of what is true" (1998, p. 30).

Carrie, who started the project with the view of learning as "someone pouring stuff into your head," found that working with colleagues had a positive impact on her practice. She wrote,

I do a lot more analysis of myself as a teacher of children and as a part of an adult community of teachers. I find that I try much harder to really understand how kids learn. This group . . . allowed me to feel comfortable enough to share who I am as a teacher and as a person . . . . It gave me a great feeling of respect for my fellow teachers, and I, in turn, felt highly respected . . . . Also, I am trying much harder to make sure that what I teach my kids has a purpose and has meaning.

Teachers in the five study groups found answers and insights to rejuvenate their practice by becoming learners themselves. Jennifer talked about how she has changed her perception of herself and her profession.

> *"I followed the teacher's manuals faithfully. I figured that these people had done a lot of research and knew more than I did. Now, I have more confidence in me. Having the time to talk to other teachers and hear their views has helped me have the courage to try some different things. Now, my objective is for both my students and me to know what is important and what is expected. . . . Talking to other teachers has given me the time to reflect on exactly what I'm doing and how to make it better. . . . I trust teachers who are in the classroom daily. . . . I have renewed my joy in teaching."*

The teachers in the groups found some strategies helped them make better decisions that focused on student learning. Carol said she began to really observe what was going on in her class, and Camille said she started asking for input from her kids and involved them in classroom decisions. Elizabeth tied the group process to the overall improvement of her teaching.

> *"Just getting to know my fellow teachers as professionals has changed the way I teach. . . . [Now] I see my job as to help my students learn, help them learn how to learn, and help them assess their own growth and learning."*

In the teacher study groups, teachers examined their choices about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Together, they developed an understanding of learning and of students that could guide their instructional decision-making. They learned that each of them had knowledge of teaching that is valuable, and this was empowering for them.

In Conclusion

Improving teaching practice is an immense and unending process. There have been many major reform initiatives and programs, and yet they have resulted in fewer enduring improvements than expected. It has become clear that there are no easy answers, so we can assume that meaningful educational change will be difficult, complex, and even controversial. The encouraging news is that you have the ability to choose your own pathway to improve teaching and learning in your classroom. It is, after all, your thinking, your decisions, and your actions that impact your students and their learning. The study group teachers decided to join our project because they were concerned, for example, about how to help students who weren't successful learners, how to know if students understood concepts, how to teach science in elementary grades, or how to use new state standards. The teachers in our project found that thinking and talking with others about their concerns was a valuable first step. Then, through reading, inquiry, and dialogue, each teacher decided how to go about improving his or her practice.

The study group teachers said that participation in the facilitated teacher study group, with its focus on student learning, helped them find new meaning in their teaching practice. Specifically, they reported that, through this process, they

- built a support network of colleagues
- engaged in meaningful dialogue about educational issues, ideas, and practices
- came to understand more about themselves as the teachers they are and want to be
- examined, reflected on, and refined their understanding of learning
- used their understanding of learning to make better decisions about teaching
- improved student learning in their classrooms

The study group process and the time it requires are not generally supported by traditional school structures. However, there is a changing view of professional development that has led many administrators to creatively carve out the time for teachers to learn together in this way (Murphy, 1997). The teachers said that they felt that the process was so worthwhile that they were willing to find the time in their busy schedules. One teacher said,

> *"At first, I thought I had made a mistake. Was I crazy to try and do the study group when I was also taking a graduate course and going to the usual workshops, team meetings, and so on? In the end, I realized that I got more out of this group than out of all of the others—I should have dropped the graduate course!"*

The teachers came to see how placing learning at the center of their teaching could help them reach their ultimate goal of improved student learning. They would agree with teacher educator Andy Hargreaves, that effective school change requires both individual voices and a collective vision. He said, "A world of voice without vision is a world where there are no means for arbitrating between voices, reconciling them or drawing them together" (1994, p. 251). A project teacher observed,

> *"If we are to be at our best as a system, then we must share the vision, we must see, together, the end of the tunnel."*

There is a lot of interest currently in helping teachers build professional confidence and understanding so that they have the tools needed to improve teaching practice for the benefit of students. Researchers and teachers alike are finding that some professional development strategies are more successful than others in supporting teachers in their improvement efforts. We found that the use of study groups was a successful strategy, although there are undoubtedly other approaches that also promote teachers' professional growth. The ideas of teacher learning and sense making were key for us. Study groups provided teachers with the time, support, and structure to make sense of the impact of their choices on student learning and this opportunity for dialogue and reflection helped them to be more thoughtful in their choice-making. We have confidence in this process and invite and encourage you to join colleagues in reflective dialogue, guided activities, journal writing, and collaborative inquiry as members of a facilitated study group.

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5 Annotations of these references are available in the Promoting Instructional Coherence Annotated Bibliography, available on-line at http://www.sedl.org/pitl/pic/bib.html

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory
211 East Seventh Street
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 476-6861
http://www.sedl.org

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