

## **ALEXIS DE TOQUEVILLE AND THE DILEMMAS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.<sup>1</sup>**

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I have been engaged in Professional Development and research on this process for a number of years. The growing body of research on this topic has provided us with consistent guidelines for planning and implementing staff development that may lead to reform and improvement of practice.

I have been intrigued, concerned, and frustrated by the fact that while we have had research evidence on characteristics of effective staff development programs for some time, these features are not commonly in practice. When I say a number of years, I am talking about almost twenty years. Most of the staff development that is conducted with K–12 teachers corresponds with the short-term transmission model, with no concern for what is already going on in a particular classroom, school or school district, little opportunity for participants to become involved in the conversation, and no follow-up. We have been engaged in this form of staff development for years, knowing full well that this approach is not particularly successful.

Table 1 lists some of the research-based characteristics of professional development that we know may lead to reform. We have known about the first six characteristics for some time, and the last three are more current. There may not be complete agreement around the eighth characteristic, the need for an outside facilitator/staff developer, because there is not yet enough research on this point to suggest that this should or should not be an essential condition. The research does suggest, however, that a facilitator might be helpful (LeFevre & Richardson, In press).

### **TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT<sup>2</sup>**

1. Schoolwide

To develop school culture of improvement

Context Specific (more or less)

2. Long-term with followup

3. Process should encourage collegiality

Learning Communities

Dialogue within groups

4. Agreement on goals/vision

5. A supportive administration

6. Adequate funds for materials, outside speakers, substitute teachers, etc.

7. Buy-in from participants
8. An outside facilitator/staff developer (different role)
9. Should acknowledge participants' existing beliefs and practices.

One form of professional development that employs these characteristics is the inquiry approach (Richardson, 1994b), and this will be discussed in further depth later. In this approach, the participants determine their individual and/or collective goals, experiment with practices, and engage in open and trusting dialogue with colleagues and outside facilitators that focus on teaching and learning.

So why are these characteristics not standard practice in school districts? Actually, I think their use is increasing, but the overall approach still is not what we would consider standard. For some time I have thought of the following reasons: 1) this approach is expensive; and 2) it takes a long time. Should the particular professional development process of interest be an inquiry approach, there are two possible additional reasons that it is not standard practice: 3) it is hard for a school district to figure out how to support an inquiry approach, and even harder to figure out how to mandate it; and this is even more of a challenge at the state and national levels; and 4) the decisions made by the participants as to what the goals are and what should be changed may be unacceptable; therefore it may be best to determine and standardize the goals ahead of time. This latter issue is one that is faced by teachers and professional developers at all levels who are involved in inquiry/constructivist processes.

But I am not completely satisfied with these reasons. There may be a cultural norm that works against the use of this model and that operates at a quite different level of analysis than the four reasons listed above. I would like to explore this, and then come back to the issue of what this means for professional development—and particularly professional development in reading and language arts. I am leading toward a discussion of the development of a form of professional development that brings teachers together around a problem that requires their joint effort, and yet maintains a sense of autonomy, expertise and self-efficacy in the individual teachers. But first, a side-bar.

Of interest, here, is Alexis de Tocqueville's description of the American way of life, and in particular, a sort of psyche or character that relates to living in a democracy (Tocqueville, 1956). When Tocqueville, a 25-year-old French nobleman, came to the United States in 1831, he was more interested in studying democracy than he was in the U.S.—actually he was interested in America as a test case of the “great democratic revolution” that, he felt, was “universal and irresistible” and destined to transform the world. He traveled around the country for only 9 months, but in that period of time, he saw more perceptively into American institutions and the American character than anyone before or since. Over a century and a half later, his famous work still tells us much about the American systems and its people.

In part II of *Democracy in America*<sup>3</sup>, he focuses on the remarkable independence and rugged individualistic nature of the life of an American. I think it is important to understand that there are countries and peoples in this world in which this foundational sense of independence and

individualism is not present to the degree it is here in the dominant culture. In fact, individualism, itself, is not a part of all cultures in the United States—such as in many American Indian cultures (Phillips, 1983). What I am talking about in relation to Alexis de Tocqueville is the dominant culture in the United States. Actually, mainstream Americans find it almost paradigmatically impossible to consider what it means to think in a communitarian or collective way—in which the person, as such, is thought of as only one interconnected part of the whole.

At the same time as describing individualism and independence, Tocqueville is concerned about individualism. He defines it as “a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows, and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself.” (Tocqueville, 1956, 193) He differentiates between selfishness and individualism: “Selfishness originates in blind instinct: individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in deficiencies of the mind as in perversity of heart.” (p. 193) He talks, then, about what operates in America to overcome individualism and bring people together in the understanding that they need each other. He describes “free institutions”, by which he is describing elections and political activities, as breaking through the individualistic aspects of American Democratic life:

Local freedom, then, which leads a great number of citizens to value the affection of their neighbors and of their kindred, perpetually brings men together, and forces them to help one another, in spite of the propensities which sever them (p. 196). He suggests that voluntary associations and intermediate institutions put America on the road to democratic liberty rather than a situation that he feared, the tyranny of the majority.

What, then, does this have to do with professional development? What indeed? The American psyche—culture that was described by Tocqueville strongly affects the way in which many Americans—teachers and other professionals—approach their work. In schools, it is the egg carton environment, and closing the classroom door. This view could be expressed in the following way by many classroom teachers:

This is my space, and I am responsible for it. It is mine, it is me. I am the teacher here.  
This classroom is unique, and is therefore unlike any other classroom because of my uniqueness and my particular group of students.

This psyche hangs over us like a very fine mist—it is in the air. We usually don’t realize that it is there—or what other ways of being would be like. As teachers, it affects the way we think about change, how we seek help for the improvement of practice, who we talk with about what we do in the classroom. In fact, this way of being makes it very difficult to import great ideas from, for example, Japan, and other places because the ways of life elsewhere are really quite different.

I am not suggesting a change in this way of life—that would be a monumental task, and there is plenty written about the problems with communitarian life (e.g., Noddings, 1996). And, in fact, there is research indicating that teachers who avoid involvement in school-wide or district-wide reform programs, and “tinker” in their own classrooms with change are much more satisfied with their careers later in life than were those who are heavily involved in such projects (Huberman,

1989). And David Hanson suggests that closing the classroom door is seen as one of the distinct advantages of the teaching profession. However, it is important to understand this way of life and its consequences whenever we are working with teachers in a change process.

Nonetheless, there are times when a collective sense of goals and instructional approaches are called for. I do feel that at the school level, it is important that there be some understanding of a school-wide reading program, if one is interested in following individual students throughout their school career, not just in one grade level or classroom. That is, it is probably important for some students at least—particularly those at the lower end of the achievement scale—to have consistency in program across grade levels, and, therefore, across teachers (Richardson, 1998). And the school is the ideal element of reform because it is the unit in which all parties can be involved in the decisions concerning reform (John Goodlad, 1983, pointed this out a number of years ago).

One of the interesting things about all of this is that most educational policies these days—at local but particularly state and national levels—function to break this individualist psyche, this way of life. These policies are pushing toward a standardization of curriculum and teachers' ways of thinking. It is felt that this standardization might reduce the incidence of poor teaching, and improve all teaching. This is happening through national standards and assessments—both of teachers and students, and now teacher educators. However, these policies are not pushing for collectivity—other than a sense that all teachers in a particular grade level with a particular subject matter are teaching the same curriculum with the same approach. So while these state and national policies are fighting the individualistic norms, they are not working toward a feasible alternative other than standardization—which I don't feel is viable. If not handled very carefully, this could become an example of what Tocqueville calls too much government in which “it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes and finally reduces the nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid . . . animals, of which the government is the shepherd” (p. 201).

So here we are again, in the midst of an educational dilemma. The need for some sense of community activity with common goals is apparent to us in education today. But we probably shouldn't have too much of it, and must always be careful of the tyranny of the majority—a situation that would certainly happen if we attempted to mandate a collectivity. We probably shouldn't attempt to break what Tocqueville described as the strong, independent, action-oriented culture that he found in Americans. These individualistic norms are the default condition of teaching or any other professional activity in a democratic America. If we feel it is necessary—and I do—to break through these individualistic norms to a more collective sense of teaching once in a while, we must first acknowledge this mist that surrounds us, and then create an environment and the structures to encourage the operation of voluntary collectivities—community goals and actions around important topics in instruction.

And this is where professional development comes in. What I would like to talk about is what we now know and how we think about teacher change, and then move to professional development

and consider how we can all work toward a sense of collectivity for some of our educational activities.

## **TEACHER CHANGE**

We have lived for a number of years with a model of change that suggests that teachers don't change, that they are recalcitrant. This view is changing, although we still hear this notion quite often. This recalcitrance model of change assumes that someone outside the classroom knows what the teacher should be doing. And, when told, or even trained or educated in this other method, curriculum, approach to students, way of thinking about the teacher/student relationship, the teacher doesn't implement it. Examples of "ways of thinking" are the process approach of teaching writing, or the introduction of a content area reading program in grade 2. Because some teachers don't implement these changes in their classrooms, a conclusion is reached that teachers don't like to change, and that they are recalcitrant.

On the other hand, there is considerable research that indicates that teachers change all the time. It may be a minor or even a major change. They reorganize their classrooms, try different activities and texts, change the order of topics in the curriculum, attempt different interpersonal skills, and so on—all on a voluntary basis. When teachers experiment with new activities in the classroom, the new practices are assessed on the basis of whether they "work". When these activities work, it means that they engage the students, do not violate the teacher's particular need for control, match the beliefs about teaching and learning held by the teacher, and help the teachers respond to system-determined demands such as high test scores. If they do work, they are internalized and absorbed into the teacher's repertoire of activities.

Our first step as professional developers is to try to operate within this naturalistic sense of teacher change. Since teachers change all the time, the strategy here, is to determine the ways in which they make these decisions to change, and provide input and help when they do so. The second feat is to help them see the usefulness of a collective approach to some change decisions and actions—but more on that later.

There is a popular and very effective way of working within this second model of change. It is called the inquiry approach. I have used this approach in a several staff development programs designed to help teachers examine and improve their teaching of reading and the language arts. It is grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, and this affects the process. When I talk about constructivist, I am referring to the learning theory that suggests that human knowledge is constructed within the minds of individuals and within social communities. The theory states that individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interactions of what they know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact. It is a descriptive theory—this is the way people do learn, not a normative theory—this is the way people should learn. It is strange to be describing constructivist theory at this point, because it is so much a part of our way of thinking about education these days—in our national standards, etc. that it may be thought of as our fundamental educational philosophy. However, it really was introduced into schools relatively recently.

An inquiry approach to staff development has a number of characteristics that go beyond constructivism. It suggests that teachers have expertise that they can articulate, develop, and share. They also have questions, problems, and dilemmas that they are continually confronting. These and other questions and problems never go away—because many of them are enduring dilemmas (Berlak & Berlak, 1981). Thus, an improvement orientation is desirable. This is not change for change sake even though there appears to be much in education that looks like that. Instead, this is an orientation to continually examining our practices, students, goals, achievements, and adjusting our practices to more closely meet our goals. The inquiry approach also asks teachers to engage in systematic inquiry beyond the inquiry that is normal in teaching, for purposes of addressing specific questions.

Those who have worked with an inquiry approach find that the participants may change their beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning, change their practices, and in some instances, research has been conducted that indicates that their students gain in achievement, or at least learn what it is the teachers intend to teach. And this approach does not differentiate among experienced and novice teachers, old or young, male or female. In the process that I engaged in, for example, teachers changed beliefs and practices, and their students gained in reading achievement (Richardson, 1994a).

So why am I not just advocating the inquiry approach, and nothing else? There are two reasons for this. The first relates to the individualistic aspect of the inquiry approach—particularly the one that I worked with, and the second with a need for a mixed model of professional development. Let me start with the first issue. In the original inquiry project in which I was the staff developer, while we brought the teachers in a particular school together every two weeks to talk about issues of common interest, we also worked closely with individual teachers as they pursued their particular interests in their classroom. This included videotaping and something called practical arguments in which the staff developer and teacher examined the videotape together and talked about the premises behind the various decisions and actions made by the teacher. It is important to note that this staff development was not centered around a particular reading approach. However, there was considerable expertise to help teachers think about different approaches and classroom behaviors. As researchers, we were interested in helping teachers think about and experiment with changes in practice, and their justifications for doing so. The process fit within the norms of individualism and independence in the professional act of teaching.

The question then becomes, why would I advocate a more collective approach to a reading program in a school? The answer seems obvious: it is for the students. It is not good for all kids to move from one reading program to a very different program as they go from grade level to grade level. This is particularly the case for low achieving students. So while we solved the first problem of operating with teachers within an individualistic framework of change, there still is a second issue, and that relates to the development of a program that engages a group of teachers in solving a common problem that is best solved if they work together. An example is a group of teachers in a school coming up with a reading program that provides consistency for students as they travel from grade to grade.

Please note that such a process would be at the opposite end of the autonomy continuum from something like Success for All (Slavin, et al., 1996), which also achieves the goal of providing for all students in the school a consistent reading instruction program. After the teachers sign up for such a program (and there needs to be a strong buy-in from the teachers), they also buy into a particular and highly scripted program that leaves few decisions concerning the nature of the curriculum to the teachers. Is it possible to consider one in which the teachers have more autonomy in selecting their program and approach?

Recently King and Newman (King & Newman, 2000; King, 1999) examined the relationship between staff development and the building of school capacity. On the basis of some research on school reform and capacity building, King suggested that the inquiry approach would be effective for building capacity, and therefore examined such staff development in a number of high-capacity schools in low income settings. He decided that an inquiry approach had the following characteristics:

- Teachers have considerable control over process and content.
- Teachers critically discuss issues of school mission, curriculum, instruction, or student learning.
- Teachers draw on relevant data and research to inform deliberations.
- Teachers sustain a focus on a topic or problem, and reach a collective decision.

I am now engaged in just such a project at Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement at the University of Michigan, with Barbara Taylor and David Pearson and funded by the OERI, U.S. Department of Education<sup>4</sup>. Called the Instructional Change Study, this project is working in a number of schools across the country, trying, in a sense, to “scale up” the inquiry approach, but to ensure that the whole school is engaged in the effort.

There are a number of elements in this framework, and these are described in Table 2.

This framework is based on our examination of the school organizational and teacher change research literature. I think Tocqueville would be pleased. In a sense, we are working with a “free institution” in which a voluntary group of teachers see the need to improve early reading instruction in their schools, and in order to participate, are compelled to work together using each other’s expertise to build a reading program for the whole school.

#### **TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CIERA SCHOOL LEVEL INQUIRY PROCESS**

- 75% of the teachers in a given school must agree to participate.
- A school facilitator is hired to help teachers in the change process.
- The facilitator receives considerable training and support from the project.
- A change team within the school is appointed by the principal or selected by the other teachers.

- Much of the planning goes on in grade-level meetings, and a member of each grade-level team is a member of the change team.
- There are no specific “answers”. Teachers themselves determine what the changes will be in the school-side reading program.
- However, they are given some expert help and a number of choices to select among. These choices of research-based programs and considerable additional help in relation to the change process are provided on a web site devoted to this process.
- The project is data rich. Student test scores and results of classroom observations are meant to be used by the teachers in developing their plans, and by the researchers in assessing the success of the project.

I mentioned that there was a second set of reasons that keeps me from recommending that all professional development be inquiry-oriented. An inquiry program leads to a particular form of change—it is useful for changing beliefs and understandings, for developing deeper understanding of classroom teaching and subject matter, and rethinking current instructional practice. It is also one that leads to an improvement orientation, and to significant reforms in instructional practice.

However, there are other goals for professional development. Here are several:

10. Increasing energy for the new school year. A kind of rah-rah, feel good process helps to increase energy for the task at hand. This is a legitimate goal, and is usually handled by a really good speaker, who can shift quickly from one topic to another, often accompanied by a multimedia presentation.
11. Learning a software program for use in instruction. Direct instruction is probably fine for this goal. I personally am not interested in delving deeply into the theory of computers nor the history of software of this type; and I don’t want to share deep understandings of computer usage with my colleagues. I just want to figure out how to make it work.
12. Obtaining a more in-depth understanding of the theoretical foundations of a process. For example, suppose I were interested in reconnecting with the cognitive theory that frames reading in the content area. so that I can begin to think through teaching reading in science and social studies in my grade 2 classroom. A lecture would do just fine.
13. Learning about a specific practice in a fellow teacher’s classroom. In this case, classroom observation would be an excellent professional development approach.

This suggests that the professional development approach must meet the specific goals of the institution or individual planning the process. While the inquiry approach is effective for goals that involve changing beliefs, understandings and practices, it may not be effective for all change goals.



## **BACK TO TOCQUEVILLE**

Let us first of all assume that it is important that there be some collective effort in the profession of teaching around the needs of students. And yet we have a strong “close the classroom door” mentality in our profession. Most of the writings that I see appear to blame the teacher or the institution for promoting if not causing this. What Tocqueville suggests is that it is not simply our institutions that push for an individualistic approach to teaching. It is a norm, a dominant culture that surrounds us—and all professions in our democratic America. It is in our heads, our bodies, our beings.

If that is the case, we must think carefully about whether we really want to change this norm, or at least alter it to allow for some collective action. Examination of this issue suggests that the individualistic norm is extremely important in American professional lives. There is a certain sense of expertise, autonomy in practice, and self-efficacy that accompanies this way of life. A communitarian approach to school district or school change has its downsides, particularly in relation the time that has to be devoted to meeting in groups and coming to agreements about goals and implementation strategies. And such approaches may also be difficult for those in the minority. As Noddings (1996, p. 254) points out: “In all strong communities, there is a significant measure of normocentricity. . . [which] can produce admirable or deplorable results.” At the same time, it is important that some collective activity within a school, school district, State take place: But probably not for all aspects of teaching. Individual teachers need to see that it is in their own best interest work together. A forced collectivity could lead to tyranny of the majority.

Thus a judicious approach to the maintenance of autonomy while bringing collectivities together on crucial decisions becomes a significant element of school reform through professional development. This certainly complicates the process of staff development. Most people just getting in to professional development probably think it is not particularly complex. All you need to do is to tell the teachers the right things to do, and make sure they do it. Those of us who have been in it for a number of years know better. Professional development is a complex enterprise—full of ethical, structural and cultural dilemmas. Foundational sources such as Tocqueville’s work can help us think about the nature of the society within which we are working to achieve significant and worthwhile school change through professional development.

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## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Works such as the following inform these finding: Anders & Richardson, 1991; Corcoran, 1991; Devaney & Thorn, 1975; Fullan, 1990; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991b; Griffin, 1983a; Joyce, 1990; Little, 1982; Little, 1991; Loucks-Horsley, et al., 1987; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Smylie, 1988; Ward, 1985.

<sup>3</sup>A number of editions have been published. For purposes of this paper, I used Heffner's abridged edition (Tocqueville, 1956). I also referred to Mayer's full edition (Tocqueville, 1969). An excellent website for the text is: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/home.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Information on this and other projects within CIERA may be found on the CIERA website: [www.ciera.org](http://www.ciera.org).