

# 1 What Do Teachers Believe?

This chapter introduces three of the six key elements of effective staff development:

- Using a common framework for unbiased reflection on education
- Understanding the teachers' strengths and beliefs about teaching and learning
- Providing information and evidence that can influence those beliefs.

Josh,<sup>1</sup> an experienced sixth-grade social studies teacher, wanted to change his classroom. He and the other members of his team chose to work with me on differentiation as their team staff development plan for the year. Before we started, Josh told me,

I know my curriculum is too standard and quite boring, so all last year my kids were quite bored. Someday the kids will rebel or something . . . but I'm afraid that if I use other methods, chaos will be created and I won't be able to manage it, or I'll make mistakes and look dumb. Someone will find out that I'm not that great of a teacher or parents will get mad at me or test scores will go down or more students will fail.

Josh admitted that he never felt adequate as a teacher, at least not in the high-poverty school where he taught. Close to 20 percent of his students

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were English language learners, and an additional 15 percent had learning disabilities. Students of color, from diverse backgrounds, made up nearly two-thirds of the school's student body. "How do I differentiate for all *that*?" he lamented.

Despite his self-doubts, Josh articulated several key strengths that my observations of his classroom verified:

- He built relationships with his students, chatting during passing time and remembering who'd had a ball game the night before.
- He stressed organization. He helped students keep track of materials and provided detailed directions for assignments.
- His drama skills, which he used for reading aloud and classroom management, kept students focused.
- He'd developed solid methods for teaching basic skills such as outlining, note taking, text summarizing, and learning vocabulary words.

Josh put in long hours, too, organizing lessons and trying to correct papers overnight to give his students rapid feedback. Still, too many students—as many as 25 percent—failed his classes. "I want to help them be more successful," he said.

### A FAILURE TO COLLABORATE

At a team meeting, Josh asked for help planning his upcoming unit on ancient civilizations. "Usually I read aloud and give an open-note quiz every few days," he told us. "But I thought I'd start by having them journal on what would be the same and different about living a couple thousand years ago."

We all commented that his journal exercise would produce some fun responses. Then I asked what he'd do with students who preferred reading on their own, as I would have. Josh answered, "They still need to participate in class discussions, so they'll have to pay attention."

"What about letting them read from different sources, then report to the class on them?" the language arts teacher suggested.

"Or give enrichment activities," the science teacher added. "I always have extensions of experiments for students who finish first."

Josh didn't reply. I sensed that he was determined to stick to reading aloud, so I said, "What about concentrating on themes that catch student interest instead of sequential notes?" I added that providing something to manipulate, like note cards, might help some students keep listening.

Josh sighed. "They all need to be doing the same thing or too many of them will get lost." We brainstormed more ideas. Josh nodded politely, noncommittally.

Josh eventually differentiated for ability by making two separate packets, a "high" and a "low" one, for students to work on as he read aloud. The worksheet activities varied: short-answer questions, puzzles, basic vocabulary and note-taking drills, and a few what-if or connections questions. The result? Focus-group students reported that they loved the information he read to them. "I could almost see the Aztecs climbing up the temple steps," one student said. Still, over 30 percent of his students received D's or F's on the unit, and 15 percent never turned in their packets. The grades were comparable to results on similar large units the other teachers on his team experienced. Josh had hoped his structure would bring better results and was disappointed when that didn't happen.

Instead of judging how Josh taught the unit, we're going to examine *why* he taught it the way he did, then look to cognitive theories to understand the implications for coaching teachers for change.

## A TEACHER'S STRENGTHS AND BELIEFS

Here are several of Josh's beliefs about education, gathered through interviews and verified through classroom observation.

*Josh believed that for his particular students, reading aloud was essential for basic comprehension.* With so many English language learners and students with learning disabilities, he seldom had them read to themselves or aloud to each other, even in pairs. In a team meeting, someone mentioned "popcorn reading," where a student reads as much or as little as is comfortable and then calls the name of another student, who reads next.

Josh: I still don't get popcorn reading.

Team member: It's not round robin. They only have to read a sentence if they want to stop. Most of the kids love it. Even [a struggling student] read a whole page today.

Josh: Well, maybe for a novel, but they might miss something in an article if someone pronounces things wrong.

Josh dismissed *all* of the different reading techniques we discussed for mixed-ability classrooms. Remember, dramatic reading was one of Josh's core strengths. Further, the students loved it. One said, "I like when he does

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that 'cause it lets you get into stuff more. He changes his voice for different people." His ability to keep the students' interest while he read kept him from questioning the practice despite its obvious flaw: Students need to read materials themselves to develop decoding and comprehension skills.

*Josh believed that his students learned best in a structured environment.* Note that again it was one of Josh's strengths. Further, sixth grade was the first year his students had multiple teachers. Many in fact did misread directions or forget deadlines.

Josh himself recognized drawbacks in his emphasis on organization, yet he continued to teach through this strength.

I think that I'm good at trying to make sure that everybody "gets it," that everybody understands, but again that turns into a weakness when the people who've already gotten it, they're bored. But I want to make sure that the low kids get it.

*Josh believed that the path to differentiation was to provide more individual help.* Despite his attempts to build relationships, he didn't think it was possible to know the needs of 110 students. Further, he fully expected class sizes to increase because of budget cuts. He admitted that he didn't know how to differentiate.

I wish that I could just work with a group of four or five, especially the English language learners or the low-level kids who just don't have the skills. But then I don't know what to do with the kids who need challenge . . . You know what would be nice, if I could have the super high level kids go work on a project in the library, but then who's going to baby-sit them and make sure that they don't do anything wrong?

*Josh believed that he needed to emphasize basic skills practice.* He'd thrived as a student on such instruction and sought teacher training on content area reading and other basic skills. Again, he wasn't wrong; Bloom's taxonomy lists knowledge and comprehension, emphasized in Josh's ancient civilization packets, as the first two categories of educational objectives. Many of Josh's students needed practice in these areas.

### INEFFECTIVE BELIEFS

However, Josh's emphasis failed to help the very students he was trying to reach, as evidenced by the number of students who never completed the

basic skills-oriented packets. Students in focus groups complained that they received far too many similar packets in other classes as well.

Student 1: Another project that I didn't like? In social studies we had to do a big old packet.

[Groans all around]

Jane: How many of you liked learning about the pyramids and Aztec temples, just out of curiosity?

[All hands went up]

Student 2: The stuff was awesome.

Student 3: He always has to do those packets, though. I hate packets.

Student 1: Especially that pink organization packet.

Student 3: He called my house and I had to do it, so . . . Them packets, you get them and you lose them and they take a long time to finish them and it's just like, you want to be finished with them fast.

Two of the above students failed the packet; it didn't help them learn basic skills. Further, the packet in general didn't engage students in learning. When I observed Josh's classroom as he reviewed the pages with students, barely 25 percent followed along, despite his attempts to generate discussion. Most students stared at the wrong page or at blank pages; they hadn't done the work and didn't bother to fill in answers.

Josh's practices were not simply the result of laziness or bad habits—the long hours he put in attested to his dedication. Instead, his beliefs and strengths, the core of how he saw himself as a teacher, drove his classroom practices. Later, he confessed that he should have tried something new.

My problem was I had about six different resources to teach the unit, and I had a page I liked from this one and that page from another, and so I decided to copy them all off and put them in a packet, and . . . I've done that before and that bombed and you'd think I'd learn.

That's how tightly, though, all of us hold to our habits and beliefs. That's why coaching teachers for change is so difficult. I've seen similar patterns with most of the teachers I work with, not just Josh.

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### WHERE THOSE INGRAINED HABITS COME FROM

Habits, beliefs, opinions . . . where do they come from? For educators, many are the result of our own school experiences, as was Josh's affinity for the structured learning activities that had helped him thrive in school.

Other beliefs come from the environment in which we teach. Josh told me that the looming high-stakes state basic skills tests lessened how creative he was willing to be.

Sometimes we can't articulate exactly how we formed such beliefs because they are simply a part of us, "The way things are."

John Dewey (1910) recognized our general habit of unconsciously forming beliefs almost a hundred years ago; he described how the ideas and images in our minds are actually invisible powers that govern us. These fixed beliefs can entrap us, keeping us from freely entertaining new beliefs. He recognized that without discipline and effort, we struggle to distinguish between good and false conclusions.

In Josh's case, his beliefs matched his strengths and were so ingrained that he overlooked contradictory information, which trapped him in his classroom style. Dewey (1932/1985) points out the problem of habit:

Habit gives facility, and there is always a tendency to rest on our oars, to fall back on what we have already achieved. For that is the easy course; we are at home and feel comfortable in lines of action that run the tracks of habits already established and mastered. Hence, the old, the habitual self, is likely to be treated as if it were *the* self; as if new conditions and new demands were something foreign and hostile. (pp. 306–307)

Asking teachers to change their practices often means asking them to do things that sound absolutely hostile to them. Josh only showed human nature when he taught his usual way. His team's suggestions seemed threatening. It shouldn't surprise us that he stuck with what he knew, given that his classroom was under control and his results were no worse than other teachers'. The real surprise is that so many teachers, or people in any other profession, are actually willing to try innovations.

### HABITS AND MENTAL MODELS

Dewey's concept of habit parallels current writings on mental models. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) describe mental models as "the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world. Like a

pane of glass framing and subtly distorting our vision, mental models determine what we see" (p. 235). Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2000), Duffy (2003), and others point out that because people are often unaware of how their mental models control their actions, these models can block change unless we purposely unearth, examine, and challenge them.

Similarly, Costa and Garmston (1994) point out that

While the traditional model of clinical supervision addresses overt teaching behaviors, we believe that these overt behaviors of teaching are the products and artifacts of *inner thought processes* and intellectual functions. To change the overt behaviors of instruction requires the alteration and rearrangement of the inner and invisible cognitive behaviors of instruction. (p. 16)

However, *all* of us, not just teachers, operate from mental models. In working toward school change, we need to examine our own beliefs about why teachers aren't changing. Do our own mental models trap us? Do we really understand the magnitude of the changes we are asking teachers to make?

## IDENTIFYING TEACHER BELIEFS

For teacher-centered staff development, the starting point is four essential questions:

1. *What are the teachers' beliefs about how students learn?* Watch a classroom and you can discern the beliefs of any dedicated teacher. A social studies teacher I know has artwork and objects on display from many different cultures; she believes in a culturally relevant curriculum. Another teacher starts each morning advisory period with a game; she believes school should be fun. A science teacher has students building dragsters, robots, and rockets; he believes students need hands-on activities to learn science concepts.

Before designing any staff development effort, consider these four essential questions:

1. What are the teachers' beliefs about how students learn?
2. How tightly are teachers' beliefs tied to their own strengths as educators?
3. What are the teachers' beliefs about their roles in student success?
4. What else keeps teachers from trying new practices?

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These are all valid beliefs. However, unexamined beliefs can have unintended consequences. For example, if the science teacher doesn't follow the hands-on activities with other kinds of learning activities, the students may remember how to use a band saw rather than the laws of force and motion. And the energetic, game-playing morning meetings, if not run within safe boundaries, may alienate some quiet students.

More important for staff development, though, is understanding that change initiatives often require changing these ingrained, habitual beliefs, which is no easy task.

### 2. *How tightly are teachers' beliefs tied to their own strengths as educators?*

Other factors influence teacher beliefs, such as a strong mentor with a different strength, or a deliberate effort to work on a developmental need, or observation of another teacher who effectively uses a different skill. However, for the teachers I've worked with, the relationship between strengths and beliefs is very close.

Listen to a teacher's explanation of his teaching philosophy:

I set up an experience and the students take it from there. An administrator once told me that when he observed a teacher, he wasn't looking for what the teacher was doing but for what the students were doing. And that told him how good the teacher was . . . it's really a belief of mine.

This teacher excels at designing engaging, hands-on projects. Is it any wonder that he believes it's the best way to run a classroom?

Another teacher loves creative activities and integrates drama, sewing, beadwork, sculpting, and other arts into her curriculum. She tries to leave room in her assignments for students to express themselves as individuals. Is it any wonder that she resists providing too much structure in her directions for fear that she'll stifle creativity?

Successful people in any field work out of their strengths, not their weaknesses. Michael Jordan wasn't a jockey. Cesar Chavez didn't remain behind the scenes, helping individuals in quiet ways. Further, we need to use our strengths; being forced to overuse our weaknesses often leads to fatigue, illness, and stress (Quenk, 1993). Teachers' classroom practices and educational beliefs *should* correlate with their strengths.

*However, here's the problem.* When I've asked teachers about the students they have the most trouble reaching or feel most helpless with, they describe students who don't share their strengths or fit the mold of their educational beliefs. Look at these comparisons:

<i>Teacher strength or belief</i>	<i>Type of student they describe as most difficult for them to teach</i>
Creating a classroom where students can express themselves as individuals. Teachers need to engage them in ways that help them grow.	"The apathetic ones. It's like, 'whatever' the whole time. They may not be saying it, but it's the way they sit, they turn away. I'm more effective with students who sometimes misbehave, even, than when they don't care."
"I'm very organized and that helps provide structure, which I think a lot of kids need."	"Extremely disorganized, like oh my Lord, especially this one. You know I made him a take-home folder and a bring-back folder . . . it didn't help."
Using hands-on projects to teach concepts, and then reinforcing them through reading and lecture. Most units are therefore several weeks long.	"Ones with short attention spans . . . When I get excited about something and they're not quite staying with me, I'm like, 'Come on, this is [laugh].'"
"I make math fun. Kids come to math scared and they've had some pretty awful math teachers. They leave here, like, 'Oh, that was really fun. This was math?'"	"The quiet, withdrawn student."

Teachers need to work out of their strengths, but understanding how those strengths drive their beliefs about what "should" happen in their classrooms is key to understanding how those beliefs might affect students who are very different from them.

3. *What are the teachers' beliefs about their roles in student success?* I've watched teachers avoid actively making students write down deadlines or use their planners for fear of making the students become dependent on the teacher rather than becoming responsible. The problem is that some of the students stop believing they need to do the work—or *can* do the work.

I've watched teachers give an assignment, yet only half the students in the room take out paper and pencil to complete it. The teachers tell me that students are making their own choices about whether or not they do their work and are choosing to fail. The problem comes when the teachers stop looking for strategies to help students make better choices.

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I've heard teachers say, "Those students don't care about education; they know they'll get promoted even if they fail my class." If teachers don't believe they can find ways to motivate students because of the effects of district policies, increasing class size, budget cuts, poverty, peer pressure, or home situations, they'll stop expecting students to engage in their classrooms. Staff development efforts will flounder from the start if they aren't designed to unearth, then change, such beliefs about student success.

4. *What else keeps teachers from trying new practices?* Besides the overall difficulty of change and the grasp that habits and beliefs have on us, consider what other factors might be present. For example, if previous efforts to change brought little or no positive results, teachers may be reluctant to sign on for the next one.

In urban settings, another factor that feeds reluctance to change is that teachers who can successfully manage their classrooms are fearful about the chaos new practices could bring. One teacher told me,

I have a lot of fear and that holds me back from taking risks and trying a lot of ideas that have been forming around in my head, which could be so cool, but I'm scared of trying them because I'm afraid they'll fail . . . maybe the ideas are ideal, but I'm not always so sure my students are the ideal ones to try them with.

Change is a lot of work. Why would you do it if your classroom is under control, the majority of your students are succeeding, you're aware of significant factors contributing to student failure that are outside your control, and the changes either don't fit with your beliefs about education or require that you operate out of weaknesses?

There's an old rule of thumb that it takes 30 days of constant, conscious effort to form a new habit. That's when someone *wants* to change—and becomes conscious of beliefs that need changing! If a habit is tightly tied to one's beliefs, then the approach to change needs to be respectful, deliberate, and gradual.

### **INCORPORATING KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHER STRENGTHS AND BELIEFS INTO STAFF DEVELOPMENT**

To understand this strengths-based, respectful approach to change, it helps to reframe the implementation by remembering that the teachers are now the students.

Dewey (1902) pointed out that the problem with traditional education, or one might say traditional staff development, is that "the center of gravity

is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere you please except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself" (p. 34). That's how many staff development efforts feel to teachers. The focus is test scores, curriculum, team structures, student learning—everything, it seems, but the teachers who have to do the changing.

Dewey (1902) added that in traditional schools, getting children to do things that didn't hold their interest required the traditional tools of discipline, which is all too often identified with force or drill, "and drill is conceived after the mechanical analogy of driving, by unremitting blows, a foreign substance into a resistant material" (p. 63). That's how much of the school change literature reads—how to get resisters on board, how to enforce district policies, how to monitor or supervise teachers.

Dewey (1934) described good teaching (and we are teaching during staff development) as an art which takes place when "a human being cooperates with the product so that the outcome is an experience that is enjoyed because of its liberating and ordered properties" (p. 214). Teacher-centered staff development, then, has the goal of liberating teachers, not controlling them. Here's the big point:

The art of staff development is helping teachers understand where their strengths and beliefs lock them into practices that limit their freedom to help students succeed. It isn't freedom for teachers to do what they please, but freedom for them to entertain possibilities and stay open to new avenues for professional growth.

With this understanding of staff development, our goal changes from implementing a mandate to helping teachers develop their own sense of discipline. We want teachers to habitually examine their beliefs and practices and then move toward affirming, modifying, or changing them as necessary to help all students learn.

For staff development to do this, two elements need to be present: (1) a common framework for discussing teaching and learning and (2) an emphasis on experiences that can alter beliefs.

## A COMMON FRAMEWORK

I would not have made much progress in coaching Josh if I'd told him, "You can't read aloud. You can't be so structured." For one thing, he knew his classroom practices were effective for many students. For another, I'd be attacking his core beliefs, his identity as a teacher and as a human being.

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To engage in deep conversations in which we can honor different positions and acknowledge merits of diverse opinions, participants need a common framework that can help them unearth their beliefs.

In my work, personality type, popularized through the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tool (MBTI), serves as a common framework. As Josh's teaching team grew to understand our common framework, instead of talking about "good" and "bad" teaching practices, they discussed how different lessons or instruction helped or hindered students with different learning styles. The framework created an environment where teachers could safely examine their own beliefs and practices.

Part 2 of this book discusses developing an effective common framework, using personality type as an illustration. It will also give examples of how personality type relates to other frameworks, such as multiple intelligences. Other school reform models may meet the criteria if they have a learning styles component and help teachers understand their beliefs.

To be useful tools for creating this kind of environment, common frameworks need to meet several criteria:

- The model describes preferences for learning in a nonjudgmental way, encompassing both adult and student learning styles.
- The mental model should be strengths-based rather than describing the deficits of different styles. Effective coaching—and teaching—involves helping people use their strengths to compensate for weaknesses, not work on weaknesses. There's a difference.
- The model also needs to work within and honor different cultures. Some models are too linear, too logical, or based too directly in one culture to apply across the diverse student populations our schools now serve.

Using such a framework opens conversations about beliefs. Further, it reminds change agents of their *own* educational biases and how much they are asking teachers to change.

Once the teachers can use a common framework to identify their tightly held beliefs and habits, the next stage of the process begins: providing evidence to help them modify or change beliefs that don't fit with the reality of their students' needs.

## PROVIDING EVIDENCE THAT INFLUENCES BELIEFS

As Josh's ancient civilization unit drew to a close, he asked for coaching to plan a unit on Native Americans. When we met, he tossed a few books on the table, slumped into a chair, and said, "I brought a couple ideas, but these kids complain that everything is 'booring.'"

From his expression, I gathered that he was quite certain that none of my ideas would help him reach his students either. This would probably be my only chance to create an experience that might help Josh rethink his beliefs about teaching.

Dewey (1916) recognized the key role that experiences have in helping us grasp theories, processes, and ideas. He said,

An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory. (p. 144)

Because of this, creating *quality* experiences requires two emphases: making them initially engaging or instructive *and* ensuring that they positively influence beliefs.

When meeting with Josh, to create an engaging experience I had to remember that our learning styles are almost complete opposites. I used our common framework to position my reaction to the ancient civilizations unit, saying, "My learning style is so much more abstract that I *couldn't* have listened day after day."

Further, I enjoyed planning lessons, whereas Josh found it stressful. Despite his drive for organization, he complained, "I want everything to be perfect. I take it down to the last detail, but I never know about timing, so what difference does planning make?"

Josh started our meeting on the Native American unit by saying that the textbook had good information.

Josh: I looked for new ideas, but they all seem impossible. Here's one for making models of different artifacts, but what a mess.

Jane: Let's start with your normal approach. Remember you start with your own style, then adjust for your opposite.

Josh: Well, a game to introduce vocabulary words, then preview the text before I read it aloud.

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Jane: What about choosing topics like legends, archaeological sites, treaty rights, important leaders? We could get other resources from the library and do a station-based unit?

Josh: I don't know . . . what about the struggling readers?

Note that my ideas—chances for choice and independent work—come from my strengths as a learner. They were also in opposition to every single one of Josh's beliefs about education.

- I was asking him to let the students read materials independently instead of reading everything aloud.
- Instead of working on basic skills, the students would be researching from original source materials.
- Instead of whole-class instruction, students would work at their own pace.
- Instead of structured activities with clear directions, students would need to read directions on their own or ask for individual help.

Talk about a formula for creating stress for Josh!

Again, as a coach I needed to provide a positive, guiding experience. After deciding on topics the unit should cover, we went to the library together to look for resources. As we pored over books and brainstormed activities, Josh commented more than once, "You mean some students would enjoy doing that?" He shook his head in disbelief at suggestions for the learning style opposite his own concrete/sequential preferences.

Before leaving, I asked, "Are you sure you want to try this?"

I could see the doubt in his eyes even as he answered, with total lack of enthusiasm, "It can't go any worse than the last packet."

## EXPERIENCE INSURANCE

Two days later, Josh started the unit. When I observed his classroom, some students were working alone, some in groups of two or three, but everyone had resources open, pencils in hand—unlike my observation of the ancient civilization packets.

Josh complained, "It is so *noisy* in here. They're not getting anything done." I counted, then pointed out that 17 out of 21 students were on task. Yes, stations were noisier than whole-class instruction, but that didn't mean they weren't working. Remember that our beliefs are so powerful that we tend to note only information that reinforces them. If I didn't point

out the positive, Josh would continue to concentrate on the noise and the few students who were off task.

I looked over the shoulder of two girls I knew well. They'd finished one station and were chatting. Then I heard Josh say, "Remember you should complete at least one station today." The girls were doing just that, completing only one station. Josh needed more specific coaching.

- Because Josh was used to teaching from the front of the room, he seemed unsure of his role when students worked independently. I modeled "nagging," checking whether students were on task and helping two English language learners decipher a station. Josh then commented on how stations would allow him to give more individual help.
- I suggested several organizing strategies—posting sheets for students to check off which stations they'd completed, rating the stations on how long they should take, listing how many stations students needed to complete for an A, a B, or a C. Once I provided a few ideas, Josh's natural organizing strengths helped him improve on my suggestions.
- I e-mailed comments to Josh about the positive things I saw.
- I provided immediate feedback about the stations from the student focus groups that met with me. Their comments, which surprised Josh, included,
  - I think it's interesting, I think it's fun. We have all the different stations and it kinda makes you work faster and harder if you know that you have more stations done than somebody else. Or, if you have less than someone, you want to work more.
  - I think it was good 'cause he let us work with partners to do it. And because it's a lot funner than having to sit down and read a book and then write and then read a book and write.
  - What's good is you're getting an education. I'm going to do all 15 stations, get my A.

Still, Josh e-mailed me, "I just feel like I did this all wrong! We should be done with the stations by now, moving on to final projects. But the more time I give them, the longer it gets. They just keep socializing so much, or just sit there because they don't want to think and work." I e-mailed back, reminding him that urban students consider "nagging" a sign that the teacher cares about them (Wilson & Corbett, 2001), and added, "Everything they're doing is reading comprehension. The stations aren't more or less important than the final unit projects."

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### POINTING TO THE EVIDENCE

Josh needed constant help, like many of us would in a similar situation, to see what was going right—until he saw the grades for the unit. Here’s the comparison:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Ancient civilizations packet</i>	<i>Native American stations</i>
% of students who received an F	26%	8%
% of students who received >75%	58%	70%
% of students who received >85%	32%	55%
% of students who received >95%	9%	36%

Josh exclaimed, “Wow, look at all the A’s.” Together we looked at the data for each student subgroup. On the previous ancient civilization packets, 35 percent of the English language learner students had received F’s, and only 10 percent received A’s. On the Native American station work, 45 percent received A’s. None of them failed. Josh reflected, “With the stations, I had more time to help them individually since so many students were capable of working independently.”

Then, as students talked with him about their unit project choices, he *heard* how much knowledge they’d retained. These results helped Josh decide that there *were* alternatives to direct instruction.

Later we talked about the difficulty of change:

Josh: I’m afraid of trying something new because, you know, what if? That’s why it was nice with the stations, trying it with you there. I still have ideas in my head as to how to improve that. I should have spent more time planning it.

Jane: Could you have done any better without seeing what happened?

Josh: No . . . I mean, you have to have the experience to know what needs improving.

The trick is making that first experience, with something as foreign as stations were to Josh, positive enough to motivate a teacher to try them again.

Josh needed three kinds of evidence before his beliefs changed:

- Evidence that his own beliefs had failed. The results on the ancient civilization packet gave me a window of opportunity to convince him to try something else.

- Evidence that contradicted his beliefs. The focus-group comments and grades on the stations helped him believe that his students could learn in ways other than direct instruction.
- Evidence that helps form new beliefs. The experience helped Josh believe he could provide the individual help that many students needed.

On the final project for the Native American unit, Josh came up with 38 different ways students could show what they learned, differentiated for learning styles. Going from one assignment to 38 choices showed a major shift in what Josh thought his students could accomplish. Proof positive of the change in Josh's beliefs about reading aloud was his commitment to use literature circles the next year on historical novels rather than read one aloud to the class!

## THE GOAL OF EXPERIENCES

Again, the goal is to create experiences that cause teachers to question their beliefs and make them aware of avenues for further growth. In essence, with Josh I tried to design the kind of experiences that Dewey believed would move individuals toward true freedom: not the ability to do what one wants in the moment but the degree to which we understand our own possibilities for growth.

For teachers, that kind of freedom means believing that they can help more students be successful. It means being able to question their classroom practices without feeling threatened to the core of their being. It may mean that they need support in moving from habitual beliefs to the freedom to grow.

Do staff development efforts provide teachers with these kinds of experiences? Review a recent effort and ask specifically

- Did the experience provide knowledge, theoretical or practical, explicitly connected with the teachers' needs? If not, it may seem a waste of time. One teacher articulated the feelings of many others: "When you first started working with us, I thought, 'She's all excited because it's her life, but is this really going to work in a classroom?' And that's my bottom line . . . otherwise I don't want to hear about it."
- Did the teachers walk away with immediate applications for their classrooms? Often, workshops fill teachers with enthusiasm instead of ready-to-go activities to reinforce what they've learned. They place the new information aside with good intentions to use it, but weeks slip by.

## 22 Staff Development That Changes Classroom Practices

- Were the teachers fully engaged during the experience? And, did it help teachers develop the attitude that staff development is worth their time or something to be avoided? As I will discuss in Chapter 2, teachers have different needs for information and learning experiences. Classroom differentiation begins with modeling the process in staff development by meeting the learning needs of each teacher, especially when we are asking for significant change.

Coaching Josh for change involved six key elements for effective staff development:

- Use a common framework for unbiased reflection on education. This provides the platform for the other key elements.
- Understand the strengths and beliefs of the teachers, instead of relying on our own ingrained beliefs of why teachers resist change.
- Provide information and evidence to influence teachers' beliefs about how students learn.
- Meet the needs of individual teachers, often through coaching. Not all teachers would want a coach in their classrooms to the extent that Josh did. Chapter 2 covers how to differentiate for teacher needs.
- Focus on the problems teachers want to solve. Chapter 3 provides a thorough discussion of defining and working through problems.
- Encourage deep, reflective collaboration. Chapter 4 covers moving toward effective collaboration.

Although literature exists on all of the above elements, it says little about the critical role of a common framework, not just common goals, that lets people examine and discuss their educational beliefs without bias.

Further, the literature brushes aside the difficulty of change in general. Monitoring school reform efforts for uniform implementation is seldom effective because the teachers themselves are different. The changes affect them differently—they'll have different struggles, different successes, and different needs. Josh responded to differentiated, not just instructional, coaching, a process described in the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. Names and details have been changed. Parts of Josh's story are composites of several teachers.

2. Note that descriptions of assignments were altered to protect identities, making comparison of results difficult. However, about 25 percent of the students had been failing major projects in *every* class. The station assignment showed a significant departure from that pattern.