ECI 661: Administration and Supervision of Reading Programs

Chapter 10: Inservice Education

The following is a review of the major points concerning preparing for the presentation of a school inservice program. The comments are paraphrased from a text entitled, “The School Reading Program” by Wayne Otto, Dick Smith, et.al.

Inservice education, commonly referred to today as a form of professional development, is based on the knowledge that teachers, staff, administrators and others involved in the education of our students do not have all knowledge at the completion of their requirements to teach or govern but must continue to update themselves as societal demands and needs change.

Inservice education in reading becomes particularly important because teachers cannot develop sufficient skill in the teaching of reading in the short preservice years of preparation. Being graduated from a teacher preparation program does not certify a teacher as a finished product. In fact, the product is never finished. There is too much to know about children and how to teach them to be learned in such a short preparation time. Experience brings context to new learnings which aid the growth of a novice teacher into an effective master teacher.

The elementary teacher has a somewhat different experience with reading strategies and philosophies than does the secondary teacher. Parents are most concerned about their child’s development in reading than in any other area in the elementary years. In the secondary school, teachers are more concerned with teaching their content specialty and tend to feel that teaching of reading is not their area of concern at all. Many say that students do not read well and it is all the fault of the elementary school teachers who are not doing their jobs! Needless to say, inservice education on this topic can be valuable in understanding the role that reading plays in learning content and whose responsibility it is to help students deal with the printed word at any grade level.

Change

Change is what inservice education ultimately is all about. Growth is a change in teacher behavior and can be seen as a painful process to some. Reviewing our learnings on change can help explain why teachers may be resistant to inservice education; however, the quality of the inservice itself may also affect teacher attitudes toward attending planned inservice meetings.

Everything we have focused on in ECI 661 has prepared us for the final project which is the preparation of an inservice meeting. The following information should be helpful in putting the inservice together.

Identifying Needs

Teachers are more apt to indicate an interest in learning about a new instructional program or new reading strategies than admit to not being confident about their abilities to teach comprehension skills. Many inservices are planned without teacher input, so teachers are invited (or required) to attend a meeting for which they may see no need. Leadership must be provided to stimulate interest and identify significant needs, and that leadership many times will come from the reading supervisor or the reading specialist.
A needs assessment need not be a difficult activity and may consist of a simple questionnaire passed out at a faculty meeting. It may include a list of reading areas (word recognition, vocabulary, comprehension) or instructional programs or materials that the teachers may be asked to number in order of their preference for more information. A needs assessment may be two or three short open-ended questions about what areas teachers are more interested in learning more about. Secondary teachers may need a different type of needs assessment, one that relates more directly to helping students retain information from their content area texts. The items on this type of assessment must relate more specifically to those techniques that students can use independently, such as study guides and vocabulary strategies.

**Setting Goals and Objectives**

Goals are general statements which refer to a focus of learning, such as “Teachers will review instructional materials for new textbook adoption.” Objectives will be stated more specifically in terms of identifiable behaviors or performances the teachers will attempt, such as “Teachers will complete a materials evaluation form for each set of materials, compare the summaries and make a recommendation on the adoption of a series.”

Once the needs assessment has been tallied, the focus of the inservice should have no more than two-three goals for the short time period of two-three hours. The outcomes are stated in performance-based terms, describing what the learner (teacher) will know and be able to do at the conclusion of the meeting.

**Assess Resources and Assign Responsibilities**

In order for your inservice to be well planned and organized, an assessment of what resources will be needed and are available will need to be conducted. Do you need special equipment (Overhead? Manipulatives? Chart Stands? Tape? Etc.) or special arrangement of the chosen room. Is the room available and will it accommodate the number of people and the type of activities you plan to conduct? What will the budget impact be?

In assigning responsibilities, you must decide who will do what. Who is on the planning committee? Who are the presenters? Do you need to invite the superintendent or the principal or a board member to greet the audience? Are some of the more experienced teachers going to help facilitate some of the activities? They will all need specific information about what is expected of them, how long they will need to be in charge, and a timeline of the total inservice.

**Select a Format**

The success of an inservice program will be determined by the marriage between the specific goals and objectives and the actual activity engaged in by the participants. Not unlike presenting new material to students, the manner in which the material is presented may determine the success of your meeting or have disastrous results. Consider the following questions:

- What main objective is the activity supposed to accomplish?
- Under what conditions does the activity actually work successfully?
- What undesirable things may the activity produce?
- What part of the activity is fixed and what can be modified to fit a particular situation?
Some of the basic formats commonly planned for an inservice include

- **Lecture:** Probably the most used and most misused inservice activity is the lecture. It is an excellent vehicle for providing one-way controlled dissemination of information, but it is relatively low on experience impact because the learner is usually passive. The chief value of the lecture is that it is an efficient, straight-forward and simple way to arrange for inservice participants to receive specific information: basic facts, definitions of terms, etc.

- **Demonstration:** In this basic activity, the participants witness a real or simulated teaching activity in a setting that is based on what could be expected to be found in a real setting. A demonstration is used to portray an active process being carried out. It provides teachers with models of specific behavior and helps to answer specific questions. The specificity necessary for a worthwhile demonstration calls for a relatively narrow topic. Tight planning and specificity may increase the clarity of the presentation, but they also create the most serious limitation of a demonstration activity. Because teachers realize that many reasonable alternatives actually exist, there is a tendency for them to reject modeling behavior. To counteract this tendency, immediate feedback in the follow-up activity should be planned to allow teachers to react. Another way to increase teacher acceptance is to limit demonstrations to situations where specific skills are to be copied, such as learning how to administer a standardized reading test or perform a specific technological operation.

- **Observation:** Observations provide participants with opportunities to view teaching activities in actual classroom situations. The rationale here is simply to show how to do something. Because observations are limited in experience impact, somewhat unpredictable in content, and often too brief, they are probably overused in the name of inservice activity. There will probably be little change in teaching behavior by observing a model reading program; however, if the observer were prepared in advance to seek definite ideas and to act on what they had seen, the experience could stimulate change or answer practical questions.

- **Interviewing:** In the personal interview activity, the intent is that the teacher will understand his or her own performance better, accept the partners viewpoints, and, if necessary, change behavior. The group interview consists of a situation where one person interviews several others. The intent is not to change personal behavior but to problem-solve because it allows several resource people to respond to the same concern in a structured manner.

- **Brainstorming:** Although inservice programs use brainstorming sessions to stimulate ideas, inform people of other ideas, suggest alternative solutions and enhance positive attitudes toward alternative solutions, this activity has essentially one narrow purpose: to allow ideas to surface. To obtain this result, special care must be taken to avoid criticism, analysis and discussion of ideas. Brainstorming can use a group leader and/or a recorder to record ideas. A white board, overhead projector or large sheets of paper are useful for writing down ideas. Follow-up activities such as group discussions or buzz sessions should analyze, criticize, edit, revise and suggest implementation procedures for all of the ideas.
- **Buzz Session:** In this basic, small group activity, temporary groups are formed to discuss a specific topic. The activity is characterized by a maximum of critical interaction and a minimum of structure. There is relatively high experience impact because participants are active, they contribute to the content and they make immediate voiced value judgments of other people’s ideas. Buzz sessions are designed to focus on a specific topic in order to promote verbal interaction among the participants. An example of the effective use of the buzz session would be an inservice program where the objective is to get junior high school teachers to teach reading in their content areas. Once the teachers agree that many students do not comprehend their textbooks very well, they could form buzz groups to seek solutions to this problem. The follow-up would be to organize and analyze solutions and to arrive at some tentative plans. This type of organization is easy to use and highly flexible, and it appears to be well suited to the needs of groups of teachers who need to engage in purposeful activity.

- **Group Discussion:** Small group activity usually centers on a problem and is intended to rely on organized interaction to arrive at either a common decision or a clearly defined disagreement. Groups share information, analyze alternatives, develop understandings of complex problems and arrive at carefully considered decisions. Groups must be large enough to carry out their work and small enough to allow considerable personal interaction. The optimal size usually ranges from seven to fifteen people. There is more to a group discussion than getting a group of people together. There must be a need, an objective, some careful planning and usually some result or follow-up activity.

- **Role Playing:** In this activity, one or more people assume roles and spontaneously act out a specified problem in an attempt to act and feel as they might in the real situation. The object is to understand the feelings of other people and to develop skill in spontaneous verbal interaction. The general procedure is to establish rapport, identify a situation, assign roles, adhere to the roles and stop at the appropriate time. The role playing should be directed to a very specific problem, and role assignments must be explicit so the participant knows what is expected. Follow-up activities must be carried out to seek the reactions of both the actors and the audience.

In our preservice education many years ago, the idea of large group, small group and individualized instruction was discussed as a way to vary a teacher’s presentation of instruction. As we can see, this organizational variety also applies to the activities we plan for an inservice program. We all know how we feel after attending an inservice. What are the variables that give us energy and spur us to act upon the information we have received? What can we identify as “turning us off” to trying anything that was presented? What made us think the inservice was a waste of time or so appropriate that we wanted to try it out in our classrooms as soon as we could? Try to identify those issues. When we plan our inservice, we will plan for success in impacting teacher behavior in a positive way.
Schedule Sessions

The matter of scheduling may seem mundane after a discussion of the objectives, resources, format and such, but this factor is an important one in the success of your inservice. Too often, the nature of our program is dictated by the time available. Otherwise well-planned inservice programs are hastily thrown in the day or two before school starts when most teachers prefer to be getting their rooms and their thoughts ready for the arrival of the students! Or they are tacked onto busy school days when the thoughts of even the most conscientious teachers are elsewhere.

When you think about it, there is not a really good time for scheduling an inservice. Many school districts now are realizing that inservice programs are essential for the implementation of new approaches to standards, assessment and standards-based learning. A significant number of districts have chosen reading as their major focus. For this reason, districts have scheduled a number of days when inservice meetings can take place without having classes for the students. Some districts choose several days a semester, others select a day or days every week or month when there is early release. This validation of the value of inservice demands that the actual inservice be a positive, focused experience which actually does move teachers to update their teaching expertise.

Schedule the formats and activities selected so there is a variety during the inservice time. Don’t back up a lecture (more passive activity) with a demonstration (another relatively passive activity). Select a format to follow a lecture which helps participants share their ideas in reaction to what was presented and create an active response to how that idea will be tried out in the classroom.

Remember that the work always expands to fill the available time. It is not very sensible to make the time available and then decide what to do (although this seems to be the more common way we do this). Figure out what needs to be done and how to do it, and then schedule the time. This would be the ideal. If you have a half day available, share the time with another activity if your presentation doesn’t need that much time. It is better to create a short, to-the-point inservice than to try and fill the time once the point is made.

Evaluate Results

The last step in the process is to evaluate results to ensure that inservice efforts are effective. In this age of accountability, there can be no accounting for the expenditure of time and money required for your inservice without an evaluation.

Objectives that are listed as performance indicators greatly facilitate evaluation by serving as the criterion referents in assessing the impact of the activities. Each activity can be evaluated in terms of the objectives that served to set it up in the first place. We are assessing our own teacher inservices in the same way that we assess student knowledge and performance of the learnings in the classroom! You can see that stating your objectives in performance and measurable terms cannot only set up the success of the inservice activities by providing an activities focus, it can also set up the evaluation process for the effectiveness of the activities. Research dealing with inservice programs involves the measured effectiveness of the program’s activities which is what inservice is all about. How effectively has the information been presented and what has the impact been on teacher behavior?
To measure the effectiveness of the activities, a simple short questionnaire can be used. This questionnaire can be a rating scale on the perception of the effectiveness and the long-term effect this activity might have on teacher behavior. Or, the questions asked can be open-ended with a short answer response. An example of this would be to ask participants to list the three most important ideas they have learned that day, to note what they would want to focus on next and to list those ideas they did not quite understand and would want more information on.

Participants could be asked to rate the inservice as a whole on a scale of 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest. What do you as the inservice planner want to know about how the inservice went? How do you want to tap the participants attitudes toward what was accomplished (or not accomplished)?

If you wish to measure long-term impact of the inservice activities, you will need to structure a way to measure this impact in the days following the inservice. Reviewing lesson plans, observing classes, interviewing those who attended to discuss attempts at implementation, and other such activities will serve as a measure of how teacher behavior has been impacted by the inservice.

There are books and guides available today which help us organize inservice and other professional development activities. In these guides, there are not only examples of a variety of formats and how to organize and handle them but actual prompts for small group analysis. In this, our first attempt to design an inservice meeting, we can use the above guidelines. For future use, you may want to check the catalogs of the major publishing houses for more detailed information.