Transforming Education from the Inside-Out:
Positive Deviance to Enhance Learning and Student Retention

Arvind Singhal
*Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Professor*
Department of Communication
The University of Texas at El Paso
asinghal@utep.edu
also appointed as courtesy
*William J. Clinton Distinguished Fellow*
Clinton School of Public Service
University of Arkansas


**Acknowledgement:** This chapter benefits greatly from the help and support provided by Jerry and Monique Sternin, Randa Wilkinson (who provided helpful suggestions for revisions), Jon Lloyd and Mark Munger (who provided inputs to the Merced PD case), and my UTEP PD collaborators -- Lucia Dura, Davi Kallman, Patricia Ayala, and Alejandra Diaz.

**Author Bio:** Arvind Singhal, Ph.D. ([asinghal@utep.edu](mailto:asinghal@utep.edu)) is the Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Endowed Professor of Communication at the University of Texas at El Paso, and Director, Social Justice Initiative. He is also appointed as the William J. Clinton Distinguished Fellow at the Clinton School of Public Service, Little Rock, Arkansas. Singhal teaches and conducts research in the diffusion of innovations, the positive deviance approach, organizing for social change, liberating pedagogies, and the entertainment-education strategy. Singhal is co-author or editor of 12 books, including *Global Health Communication in the 21st Century* (2013), *Inviting Everyone: Healing Healthcare through Positive Deviance* (2010); *Protecting Children from Exploitation and Trafficking: Using the Positive Deviance Approach* (2009); *Communication of Innovations* (2006); *Organizing for Social Change* (2006); *Entertainment-Education Worldwide* (2004); *Combating AIDS* (2003); *India’s Communication Revolution* (2001); *Entertainment-Education* (1999); and *India’s Information Revolution* (1989). He has authored over 150 peer-reviewed essays, including several on the positive deviance approach to social change. For more: [http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal](http://utminers.utep.edu/asinghal)
Abstract

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach to organizational, social, and behavioral change is premised on the belief that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing worse challenges. In this chapter, we describe the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to social and organizational change, including its key conceptual tenets and principles, by analyzing its historical origins in Vietnam to combat endemic malnutrition. We then analyze how PD principles and concepts have been applied in the field of education and learning to especially empower minority and at-risk students. Through our analysis and investigation of these cases, we conclude that the positive deviance approach holds important implications for educational scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers, including those interested in adult learning and education.

“Positive Deviance is much more radical than even its practitioners imagine. Radical in the best sense, it is joining a new field of inquiry, which might be called communal transformation.”

Block (2010, p. vii).

“The faraway stick does not kill the snake....PD is about discovering the closest stick and using it.”

What enables a handful of elementary schools in Argentina’s Misiones Province to have a graduation rate of 75 percent or more, without access to any special resources, when the provincial completion rate is a dismal 50 percent?

What enables some African-American men to enroll in U.S. universities and graduate with academic honors when we know that two-thirds of their Black male peers will drop out and never finish college?

What enables some young, poor, minority, and at-risk students in Merced, California, Clairton, Pennsylvania, and El Paso, Texas to successfully complete high school when we know that most of their peers who face similar challenges will drop out?

What enables school Districts in Brazosport, Texas and Mason, Ohio to have significantly higher student achievement scores than their peer Districts without any extra support or resources?

How are the above results possible? The simple answer is that certain elementary schools in Misiones, Argentina; certain African-American men in U.S. colleges; certain at-risk students in high schools of Merced, Clarion, and El Paso; and certain school districts in Texas and Ohio are “Positive Deviants” among peers. They are “deviants” or outliers in their peer group as they do not represent the norm. They are “positive” because they demonstrate more effective, desirable educational outcomes. And, they are worthy of investigation because they achieve demonstrably effective outcomes without access to any extra resources.

In this chapter, we describe the Positive Deviance (PD) approach to social and organizational change, including its key tenets and principles, by analyzing its historical origins
in Vietnam to combat endemic malnutrition. The various points of conceptual departure between conventional organizational, social, and behavioral change approaches and the PD approach are emphasized. We then analyze how these PD principles and concepts have been applied in the field of education and learning in Argentina and in the U.S. to especially empower minority and at-risk students. Through our analysis and investigation of these cases, we conclude that the positive deviance approach holds important implications for educational scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers, including those interested in adult learning and education.

**Positive Deviance Approach: Flipping the Dominant Paradigm**

Rarely has organizational or social change practice been truly of, by, and for the people; rarely have the marginalized and vulnerable populations been looked upon as reservoirs of wisdom and agency; and rarely have all members of communities been invited to listen, dialogue, reflect, and self-discover the wisdom that lurks among them. Even rarer are instances where invitation, dialogue, and self-discovery lead to community actions, guided by data that the community collects, processes, and uses for monitoring progress and goals (Singhal, 2010; Singhal & Dura, 2012).

In the past several decades, scholars and practitioners of organizational, social, and behavioral change have advocated increasingly for participatory, culture-centered, and community-driven approaches (Dutta, 2008). However, in reality, most change practice continues to be rooted in the tenets of the dominant paradigm, shaped by narrowly-focused donor-driven agendas, led by expert-centered knowledge, and treating individuals, not their webs of interconnections, as the locus of change (Zoller & Dutta, 2008). New ideas, products,
and practices continue to be pushed “outside-in” by experts and knowledgeable change agents using persuasive communication strategies to plug existing knowledge-attitude-practice (KAP) gaps among “beneficiaries” (Singhal, 2010).

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach presents an alternative conceptualization of organizational, social, and behavioral change praxis, which turns the classical expert-driven approaches on their head. The PD approach believes in unearthing the wisdom that lies hidden with the most marginalized and vulnerable “unusual suspects,” and amplifying it in a process that leads to sustainable organizational and community transformation. The stock of the PD approach is rising rapidly in organizational, social, and behavioral change praxis.

Over the past two decades, the PD approach has been employed in over 40 countries to address a wide variety of intractable and complex social problems, including solving endemic malnutrition in Vietnam, decreasing neo-natal and maternal mortality in Pakistan, reducing school dropouts in Argentina and in the U.S.; reintegrating returned child soldiers in northern Uganda; drastically cutting down the spread of hospital-acquired infections in U.S. healthcare institutions (Dura & Singhal, 2009; Pascale & Sternin, 2005; Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010; Singhal, 2010), and in addressing many other issues.

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach is premised on the belief that in every organization or community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing worse challenges (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010). However, these people are ordinarily invisible to others in the community, and especially to expert change agents. “Positive deviants,” against
overwhelming odds, find ways to solve problems in a more effective manner than their peers. The PD approach to social and behavior change enables communities to self-discover the positively deviant behaviors amidst them, and then find ways to act on the existing but uncommon behaviors to amplify them (see Shafique, Sternin, & Singhal, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & McCandless, 2009; Singhal & Dura, 2009; Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009).

To understand the PD approach, including its key conceptual tenets and principles, let us analyze the historic origins of this approach in the rice fields of Vietnam. We will then see how these principles and concepts apply to the field of education and learning.

Positive Deviance for Combating Malnutrition in Vietnam

In December 1990, Jerry Sternin and his wife Monique arrived in Hanoi to open an office for Save the Children, a U.S.-based NGO. Their mission: To implement a large-scale program to combat childhood malnutrition in a country where 65% of all children under the age of five were malnourished (Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009).

The Vietnamese government had learned from experience that results achieved by traditional feeding programs were not sustainable. When the programs ended, the gains usually disappeared. The Sternins were challenged by Vietnamese officials to come up with an approach that enabled the community, without much outside help, to take control of children’s nutritional status. They were given six months to show results! As traditional methods of combating malnutrition do not yield quick and sustainable results, the Sternins wondered if the concept of positive deviance, validated a few years previously by Tufts University nutrition professor Marian Zeitlin might hold promise (Zeitlin, Ghassemi, & Mansour, 1990).
The concept of positive deviance was introduced in the nutrition literature in the 1960s and Professor Zeitlin explored the idea in some depth in the 1980s as she tried to understand why some children in poor households, without access to any special resources, were better nourished than others. What did they know and what were they doing those others were not? Might combating malnutrition take an assets-based approach? That is, identifying what’s going right in a community, and finding ways to amplify it, as opposed to the more traditional deficit-based approach -- focusing on what’s going wrong in a community and fixing it.

Positive deviance sounded good in theory but, to date, no one had used the concept to design a field-based nutrition intervention. There were no roadmaps or blueprints to consult. Childhood malnutrition rates were high in Quong Xuong District in Thanh Hoa Province, south of Hanoi, and the Sternins decided to begin there. After several days of trust-building and consultation with local officials, four village communities were selected for a nutrition baseline survey. Armed with six weighing scales and bicycles, health volunteers weighed some 2,000 children under the age of three in four villages in less than four days. Their locations were mapped and a growth chart for each child, with a plot of their age and weight, was compiled. Based on the growth charts, some 64% of the weighed children were found to be malnourished. The Sternins asked the quintessential PD question: Are there any well-nourished children who come from very, very poor families? The response: Yes, indeed, there are some children from very poor families who are healthy! They are few in numbers but they do exist.

The poor families in Thanh Hoa that had managed to avoid malnutrition without access to any special resources would represent the positive deviants. What were these PD families doing that others were not? As part of self-discovery, community members visited six of the
poorest families with well-nourished children in each of the four villages. If the community self-discovered the solution, they were more likely to implement it. Their discovery process yielded the following key practices among poor households with well-nourished children:

* Family members collected tiny shrimps and crabs from paddy fields and added them to their children’s meals. These foods are rich in protein and minerals.

* Family members added greens of sweet potato plants to their children’s meals. These greens are rich in essential micronutrients.

Interestingly, these foods were accessible to everyone, but most community members believed they were inappropriate for young children. Further,

* PD mothers were feeding their children smaller meals three to four times a day, rather than the two big customary twice a day; and

* PD mothers were actively feeding their children, rather than placing food in front of them, making sure there was no food wasted.

With best practices discovered, the natural urge was to disseminate this knowledge. Such was done through household visits, attractive posters, and informational and educational sessions. However, such “best practice” solutions engendered resistance from most households as they did not fit with their established practices. How could one overcome this resistance? One evening as the discussion was winding down, a skeptical village elder said something like: A thousand hearings isn’t worth one seeing, and a thousand seeing isn’t worth one doing! On the car ride back to Hanoi, the Sternins talked about the sagacity of the elder’s remark. Could they help design a nutrition program which emphasized doing more than seeing or hearing?
A two-week nutrition program was designed in each of the four intervention villages. Mothers, whose children were malnourished, were asked to forage for shrimps, crabs, and sweet potato greens. Armed with small nets and containers, mothers waded into the paddy fields. The focus was on action, picking up the shrimps and crabs, and shoots from sweet potato fields. In the company of volunteer community health workers, mothers of malnourished children learned how to cook new recipes using the foraged ingredients. Again, the emphasis was on doing. An opportunity was created for people to practice the self-discovered behaviors that delivered better outcomes. Just knowing about them was not enough.

Before these mothers fed their children, they weighed them, and plotted the data points on their growth chart. The children’s hands were washed, and the mothers actively fed the children. No food was wasted. Some mothers noted their children seemed to eat more in the company of other children. When returning home, mothers were encouraged to give their children three or four small meals a day instead of the traditional two meals.

Such feeding and monitoring continued for two weeks. Mothers could visibly see their children becoming healthier. The scales were tipping!

From the original four communities in Thanh Hoa, the project was expanded to another 10 adjacent communities. In these communities, the Sternins insisted that the community members engage in a process of self-discovering the PD behaviors, as opposed to importing them from neighboring communities. They had realized that “the process of self-discovery was every bit as important as the actual behaviors uncovered” (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, p. 42). Malnutrition, assessed by growth charts of children, decreased by an amazing 85 percent in the first 14 PD communities. The program was scaled up by making these original 14 PD
communities “living universities,” sites where people could visit, learn, and experiment. Teams from other communities with high rates of malnutrition were invited to spend up to two weeks directly experiencing the essential elements of the PD process, so that they could go back and implement the PD nutrition program in at least two local neighboring communities. These two neighborhood communities would then serve as the “mini living universities” for further local expansion of the PD program (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010). Over the next several years, the PD intervention became a nationwide program in Vietnam, helping over 2.2 million people, including over 500,000 children improve their nutritional status. A later study showed successive generations of impoverished Vietnamese children in the program villages were well-nourished (Mackintosh, Marsh, & Schroeder, 2002).

Born out of necessity, this pioneering experience in Vietnam, with all its struggles and lessons, paved the way for other PD applications to follow. Skeptics argued that PD may have worked in the field of nutrition as it was a non-contentious issue (who would not want their children to be healthy), where programmatic ideas were easily tried out, and the results highly observable. Could the PD approach be applied to other issues where there existed deeply ingrained traditions and practices, and where prevailing beliefs and behaviors were closely connected to harsh physical and social realities of the local environment? The PD experience in educational and learning settings helps in providing some answers.

**Positive Deviance in Education and Learning**

In recent years, the Positive Deviance approach has been increasingly applied to educational and learning settings. Most attention has been paid to the problem of drop-outs in schools and colleges, especially focusing on at-risk students who come from low socio-
economic strata, from first and second generation immigrant populations, and those with physical and learning disabilities. We detail some of these experiences here as they hold implications for the academic success of traditional school and college-going students as well as other non-traditional student groups, such as adult learners.

Reducing School Dropouts in Argentina

In 2000, a first grader in Argentina’s rural province of Misiones would have a 3 in 4 chance of getting to 3rd grade and 1 in 2 chance of making it past the 6th grade. What explained this sharp school dropout rate in Misiones? The answers lay in the deeply-ingrained traditional roles that young children in Misiones played in local agriculture which supported family livelihoods (Dura & Singhal, 2009). School-going children dropped out of school to help plant the branches on which cassava, a staple food in Northeastern Argentina, grows; and played a key role in harvesting tobacco which required squatting low to pluck tobacco leaves from the bottom (a task that children carried out with relative ease). For parents, school attendance for their children was a relatively low priority. Survival took precedence over education.

However, not every elementary school in Misiones had such high dropout rates. Some schools did better e.g. the school where teacher Ramon Garcia was an active community citizen. After school hours, Mr. Garcia could often be seen at his students’ home, sipping a cup of mate (a cultural practice in Argentina in which one shares an herbal infusion sipped with a metal straw from a hollow gourd). He might ask parents about the well-being of the family pig that appeared to be pregnant and about the gains made from the recent tobacco harvest. Mr. Garcia might encourage the parents of his student to continue sending their child to school.
The boys and girls in Mr. Garcia’s class, as well as their parents, knew that Mr. Garcia believed in their potential, and would go the extra mile to encourage their continued presence in school, even when they were absent. Mr. Garcia’s behaviors sounded like PD behaviors (Dura & Singhal, 2009). Perhaps the PD approach could help boost elementary graduation rates in Misiones?

To explore the potential of the PD approach in combating high rates of school dropouts, Jerry Sternin was invited to Misiones, Argentina. In a preliminary meeting with school board officials, he shared the story of how the positive deviance approach led to reduction in childhood malnutrition in Viet Nam. However, the relevance of the PD approach to addressing the problem of school drop outs in Misiones was unclear, and his ideas were met with skepticism and resistance.

“Senor, Argentina no es Vietnam [Sir, Argentina is not Vietnam]. Your positive deviance approach will not work here in Misiones! We, the teachers, haven’t been paid in months. The parents of these children who drop-out are worthless and disinterested. And you senor, you know nothing of our situation or problems,” bellowed a senior female teacher (Dura & Singhal, 2009, p. 2). Other teachers, with crossed arms and defiant looks, nodded in agreement.

“Senora, lo que usted dice es absolutamente verdad!” [Madam, what you have said is absolutely true], Jerry replied (Dura & Singhal, 2009, p. 2). “It is also true that some of you, sitting in this room at this very moment, have been able to retain over 85% of your students. So, yes, I know nothing about your situation. But I do know that the solution to your problem already lurks in this room” (p. 2).
An elder teacher noted, “Yes, Senor, that is correct.” She added, “but we are so often blamed for student drop-outs by both the parents and school administrators” (p. 2).

“Is that the case every time, at every school?” Jerry asked (p. 2). “PD is not a magic bullet,” Jerry noted with humility. “But by looking at elementary schools in Misiones that are able to retain and graduate more students without access to any special resources, we might get somewhere” (p. 2).

By the time the day ended, the tone of the meeting had changed dramatically. Some participants noted they looked forward to continuing the discussion the next day. “Most surprising of all, noted Jerry, “some teachers asked if they could invite parents of some school-going children” (Dura & Singhal, 2009, p. 3). Earlier in the day, the teachers had blamed the parents as being the cause of the drop-out problem. Now they felt that including parents in this workshop might bring them closer to a solution.

On the second day of the workshop, 22 parents joined the meeting. Suspicious of the teacher’s invitation, they looked palpably nervous. “We’re not sure what to expect,” one parent said. “I don’t know what we can contribute,” said another (Dura & Singhal, 2009, p. 3). As poor subsistence farmers, they were certainly not used to being asked for their opinion. Yet as happens in many iterations of the PD approach, the less likely contributors—in this case the parents—were full of ideas and wisdom. The parents discussed their own experiences in overcoming hardships to keep their children in school, and identifying ways that their neighbors had been able to do the same. And thus began the process of self-discovery. Jerry knew that self-discovery is critical to community ownership of the PD program, significantly increasing the probability of adopting the identified PD strategies. In Alem and San Pedro, two communities in
Misiones, self-discovery was introduced to the workshop participants, followed by a field-based PD Inquiry (Dura & Singhal, 2009).

First, the problem was defined. Workshop participants, comprising parents, teachers, and administrators, agreed on a definition of the problem: “Schools in Alem retain only 56% of students through grade three” (Dura & Singhal, 2009, p. 3). Next, participants agreed on a desired outcome: “Schools in Alem would achieve retention rates of 75% or higher” (p. 3).

Second, the group was charged with determining if Positive Deviant schools existed in Alem. To determine if there were schools with retention rates of 75% or higher, each group was given a calculator and a list of schools with data on the number of students enrolled in grades one to three from 1999 to 2001. They would then identify these schools and rank them accordingly. After calculating retention rates for all 63 schools in Alem, eight potential PD schools with retention rates ranging from 78% to 100% were identified. Two schools were eliminated as they had access to extra resources and six were narrowed as being PD schools (Dura & Singhal, 2009).

Several teams, comprising of teachers, parents, and school administrators, set out to discover uncommon practices by visiting the PD schools. The first day they carried out in-depth interviews with teachers and the headmaster/headmistress, and observed classes in session. Parent participants also interviewed parents from PD schools at their homes. The teacher-parent teams were to make general observations regarding the use of physical facilities, food distribution, general cleanliness, and condition and utilization of school materials (Sternin, 2003).
The process of self-discovery is not just about looking at what is going right. For example, several groups reported that teachers in the PD schools showed unusual respect for their students, rather than identifying the *specific uncommon behaviors/strategies* through which that respect could be observed. Sternin (2003) challenged the group to identify specific, verifiable practices that led to good outcomes. This PD Inquiry process helped the group arrive at a more nuanced description of uncommon practices; e.g. how was respect for students operationalized. In a PD school, for instance, teachers warmly greet parents whenever they visit the school. In turn, parents feel comfortable approaching the child’s teacher. Teachers also ask parents to RSVP to invitations for meetings, and when parents do not RSVP, teachers go out of their way to contact them. The PD inquiry yielded specific and verifiable practices in the way teachers and parents interacted with students, in the way classes were taught and assessed, in how the community was involved, and how children’s nutrition schedule was constructed (See Table 1).

**Table 1. A Comparison of Common and PD Practices in Schools of Misiones, Argentina**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Impact</th>
<th>Common Practices</th>
<th>PD Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School–Family Relations</td>
<td>Parents with little or no formal education are not given opportunities to contribute to the educational process.</td>
<td>All parents contribute to the school. Parents hold skills workshops (i.e. sewing, woodworking). They also help maintain the school building (i.e. mend fences) and arrange student games/parades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Methodology</td>
<td>The whole class is given the same assignment to work on, regardless of ability or age.</td>
<td>The class is broken up into groups. Assignments are modified to reflect the abilities of the students in the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Community Involvement</td>
<td>There is little communication between the school and community leaders.</td>
<td>Schools identify community leaders (i.e. priest)s and discuss problems with them. Community leaders are actively involved in increasing retention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>Children are provided with one meal at school (lunch).</td>
<td>Schools recognize that hungry children have difficulty learning. The school provides breakfast instead of lunch.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Upon conclusion of the PD school visits, and identification of common PD practices in schools with high retention rates, an action plan was developed by parents, teachers, and administrators. Next, the PD program was designed and implemented, building upon the foundation of making the local knowledge and solutions actionable. In subsequent years, school dropout rates in Misiones dropped significantly (Sternin, 2003).

**Graduation of African-American Men from U.S. Colleges**

What enables some African-American men to successfully graduate from college despite the towering odds stacked against them? Black men constitute only 4 percent of all undergraduate students in U.S. universities, and of those enrolled one in three will graduate from college, the lowest completion rate for any racial or ethnic group in the U.S. (Lederman, 2012).

While studies abound on why and how black men fail, only a handful focus on why some black men succeed in College despite overwhelming odds. Shaun R. Harper, professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, an African-American man himself, has led the charge to analyze the factors that influence the success of Black men in College (see Harper 2009; 2012; Harper & Griffin, 2011; Harper & Nichols, 2008). Harper (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with a cohort of 219 black men at several dozen U.S. universities who met the "achievers" criteria: a cumulative college grade-point average of 3.0 or more, an impressive and consistent record of participation in student leadership groups, campus enrichment experiences (e.g. study abroad), and receiver of merit-based grants and academic awards.

Harper (2012) found the key influences of success include: involved parents who have high expectations for their child and who actively seek out educational resources (e.g. tutoring,
college preparation workshops, and summer camps); an influential grade-school teacher who took a personal interest in the pupil, affirmed and mentored them; access to knowledge and networks to tap into scholarships and financial support to pay for college; and same-race peer-mentoring by juniors and seniors to connect them to key people and networks, and introduce them to campus enrichment activities.

While Harper’s work is deeply consistent with the positive deviance framework, including defining what success looks like, determining if some individuals meet the success criteria, and the discovery of what enables such people to succeed, Harper does not use the term “positive deviance” in his writings. He prefers, instead, to call it an “anti-deficit achievement framework” (Harper, 2012, p. 5). However, the similarities between Harper’s work and the PD Inquiry processes i.e. defining the problem, determining the presence of positive deviants, and discovering their demonstrably effective practices -- are highly uncanny.

**Stemming the Tide of School Dropouts in Merced, California**

In 2009, Merced High School in Merced, California engaged Positive Deviance practitioner and coach, Mark Munger, to address its low graduation rates. Of 100 freshmen who entered ninth grade at Merced, only 56 could expect to graduate high school, the lowest completion rate of any high school in the Merced Union High School District (Po, 2011).

Merced High’s low graduation rates were not totally surprising, given high levels of poverty (75 percent of its students were eligible for free and reduced-price meals), a high percentage of students whose first language was either Spanish or Hmong, and also because many of Merced High’s female students, especially the Vietnamese and Hmong, bore the
burden of household tasks and caring for family members – time-consuming activities which detracted attention from classes and assignments (Po, 2011).

Munger, who served as PD advisor for the school’s program, regularly visited Merced from 2009 to 2012 to provide guidance and advice to teachers. He soon realized that Merced was not going to be a classical textbook case for PD given that a high school is not one homogenous community, but rather a dynamic amalgam of many communities: teachers, students, administrators, and parents. Also, only a small percent of teachers and students participated in the PD project, and although their numbers increased over time, the “PD community” experienced both teacher and student turnover. However, those who stayed displayed extraordinary levels of commitment to identifying “what was working” for whom and under what contextual conditions.

Munger noted that students who voluntarily participated were those who were “falling off track -- [because of] absenteeism, suspension for fighting, gang participation, drug use, abuse at home, homelessness…. almost everyone had experienced a really difficult period, in which they ….experienced something close to hopelessness....” He added [email conversation, 2012, September 6] that students developed several strategies to get back on track: “For gang members, it meant walking away from a fight, while maintaining dignity and stature in the eyes of the other gang, and [maintaining] loyalty and membership in their own gang community.” Many others students talked about talking themselves out of engaging in actions that would put them in juvenile detention. Many girls had responsibilities to look after younger siblings and many others, both boys and girls, were obligated to contribute to their family income by working part-time after school.
Teachers who participated in the PD project in Merced invested time to meet among themselves to co-think and co-implement solutions for students who were in difficulty. They also met with these students individually, offering support, guidance, and mentoring. Enough trust was generated that the participating students felt comfortable disclosing problems to each other and to sympathetic teachers and administrators. Through such conversations, participating students at Merced learned what their successful peers were doing differently.

What gains have been made at Merced High? Munger proudly notes: “The school board has published data suggesting that the graduation rate has risen by twenty-five percent” (email conversation, 2012, September 6)

**Graduation of Minority and Disabled Students in El Paso, Texas**

Much like the case of students in Misiones, Argentina and Merced California, and akin to the odds stacked against male African-American college students, dropout rates among Hispanic populations and disabled students are very high on the US-Mexico border. Some 30 to 40 percent of enrolled students drop out, and do not complete their education. However, in some school districts in the city of El Paso (on the US-Mexico border where the present author is based) certain high schools are succeeding in retaining and graduating their students against all odds. These institutions are “positive deviants.” In such high schools one finds certain students, who against all odds graduate in a timely manner. They are positive deviants within their institution.

Ayala’s (2011) PD study identified positive deviant students in an at-risk high school who were of Hispanic origin, were economically disadvantaged, had a GPA of 3.0 or above, were the first generation in their family to pursue a high school diploma, and who were graduating in a
Ayala (2011) found that various communicative practices helped in the retaining and timely graduation of students included: regular, consistent, and positive messages from educators and parents to “stay in school” from early grades; constant verbal affirmation from parents, educators, and mentors praising students for academic and other achievements; and clear and repeated parental expectations to attend school, complete homework, and obtain good grades. She also found that involvement in extracurricular activities helped students stay engaged in school, peer support groups among students helped them in prioritizing schoolwork over social activities, and parental messages such as “Don’t make the same mistakes I did” help students understand and grasp the consequences of dropping out of school.

Building on the work of Ayala (2011), Kallman (2012) conducted a positive deviance study among learning-disabled students at the University of Texas at El Paso (under the guidance of the present author), who against overwhelming odds find academic success. Nationally, about 30 percent of all disabled students (ages 14 and higher) drop out of high school, and the dropout rate for students with disabilities is approximately twice that of other non-disabled students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Kallman (2012) identified learning disabled students at UTEP who represented positive deviants. These were students who were registered with the university’s Center for Accommodations and Support Services, who had regular household responsibilities, a part-time job or work schedule that occupied them for at least ten hours a week, and who were still able to maintain a GPA of 3.0 or higher, graduate in a timely manner (in five years or less), and without the help of specialized tutors.
Kallman (2012) identified several communicative practices as being especially effective in the academic success and timely graduation of learning-disabled students. These included: consistent self-affirmations and self-validations; positive messages from parents, family members, friends, peers, teachers, and mentors praising their grit and determination to overcome obstacles; and receiving clear messages from parents to not use their disability as a crutch. Affirming messages from parents and mentors -- “you can do anything you put your mind to”, “don’t be afraid to ask for help”, and “surround yourself with a network of good people” – seemed to especially boost self-esteem and agency (Kallman, 2012, p. 83). Those who found the courage to accept their disability, embrace it, and ask others for accommodations and help when needed fared remarkably better. Being involved in on or off-campus jobs and extracurricular activities improved social skills and prepared them for real world experiences. Their faith and spirituality also helped them stay anchored and played a key role in addressing, and reversing, any embarrassment or shame associated with their disability.

Keeping Students in School, Out of Streets

Since August-2010, in Clairton City School District in the State of Pennsylvania, a positive deviance program has sought to reduce absenteeism among seventh, eighth, and ninth graders, as well as address late arrivals (or tardiness) and disruptive behavior in classrooms (Niederberger, 2011). The program was initially broached to address the complex and intractable issue of gang violence and street crime, but morphed into a school-based program when it became clear that keeping youth in school was one way of keeping them out of the streets. With the active engagement of a local church group, and the concern and support of a core group of parents, students, administrators, and teachers, a PD inquiry was conducted to
assess what enables some of the at-risk students to not miss school, arrive on time, and display no disruptive behavior.

Some of the effective PD practices that were discovered were astonishingly simple: Some students put their alarm clocks across the room so they had to get out of bed to turn them off. Once “up” and “awake”, it was harder for them to give in to the temptation of sleeping-in or missing school. Another group of students had an understanding that they would text each other to make sure they were all up and awake, and getting ready for school. The PD inquiry also showed how important parents’ involvement, support, and encouragement were in ensuring that their child did not miss school. Children of parents for whom school attendance was “non-negotiable” were unlikely to be tardy or absent.

An assessment of the PD program showed remarkable results (Niederberger, 2011): From 2009-2010 to 2010-2011, both in-school and out of school suspensions dropped by a whopping 50 percent, disruptive class behavior decreased by 57 percent (from 1,400 incidents to 600), and tardy arrivals dropped by 45 percent from 1,100 cases to 600 cases. The results also showed that parental involvement in school affairs, while slow to catch on, increased significantly over time.

**Positively Deviant Practices in U.S. School Districts**

The National Staff Development Council in the U.S. conducted a study of positive deviance in U.S. Schools about a decade ago (see Richardson, 2004). With funding from the Kellogg Foundation, six "positive deviant" school districts were investigated that were achieving above-average students’ results without access to any additional resources. What explained their demonstrably successful outcomes?
Richardson (2004) reviewed several such PD practices in the six school districts, and we review some salient ones here. Mary Dunbar Barksdale, a 3rd-grade teacher in Velasco Elementary School in the Brazosport, Texas Independent School District, seemed to be achieving spectacular results with her students. Although 94% of her students lived in poverty, all of her students scored highly on the Statewide Test. When District Assistant Superintendent Pat Davenport went to Barksdale to investigate what enabled Barksdale to achieve such laudable outcomes, she found that Barksdale’s homegrown instructional strategy was simple: She closely examined the results of her students’ tests, identified their problem areas, retaught the material to plug the gaps, and retested them until they achieved the desired level (Richardson, 2004). Over the next seven years, Barksdale’s process was shared widely across Brazosport schools, and further refined, honed, and standardized for implementation.

Although standardized as a process, its implementation could still be localized according to ground-based needs and context.

Essentially, each teacher in Brazosport Independent School District receives reports for how students in their class are performing on tests. Teachers can note what questions students missed, what wrong answers they chose, and what remedial action needs to be taken for which specific student on which specific question (Richardson, 2004). When all students have met the required testing standard, the class moves forward. Students who need additional learning time are regrouped and retaught for what they have missed. Those students who need substantial help are tutored by instructional aides in learning labs.

Given several teachers in a school in Brazosport may be teaching the same class, if one teacher’s students do particularly well on a standardized exam, it allows other teachers to ask
what their colleague is doing differently. For instance, he or she may be passing out a weekly review sheet of the critical concepts covered in class, which serves as a study guide, aids with subject retention, and provides a way for a student to self-monitor and self-correct. Once identified, such PD practices can be shared and amplified.

Richardson’s (2004) analysis also found that the Mason School District in Ohio scored very high in student test scores and other outcomes. Their secret sauce was a judicious use of tools such as review sheets, pacing charts, and common assessment protocols -- to both infuse consistency into instruction and corresponding data on student performance.

For instance, curriculum leaders for each subject in a Mason District School come together to develop a pacing chart for each course. The purpose of the pacing chart is to ensure that “students taking the same course from different instructors get an equal amount of instruction in each topic” (Richardson, 2004, p. 85). Developing the pacing chart helps in breaking down the instructional walls between classrooms, and allows for implementing common in-time assessments across classrooms. Student performances on tests allow the curriculum leaders to determine what works, what does not, and what remedial actions need to be taken to address the problem.

**Discussion and Implications**

Our review of the various cases in the previous section suggests that the Positive Deviance approach holds important implications for education and learning environments. Our analysis suggests that PD approach can be applied to address some highly intractable and complex problems that vulnerable and disadvantaged minority student populations face: high dropout rates, absenteeism, tardiness, gang violence, and street crime. The PD process
enables communities to amplify existing practices of school teachers, schools, and school
districts that achieve more demonstrably effective outcomes than their peers, as illustrated by
the Barksdale teaching process in Brazosport, TX, and the use of review sheets, pacing charts,
and common assessment tools in Mason, Ohio.

The PD experiences that we analyzed in educational and learning environments also
hold important implications for the universe of adult and lifelong learners. Clearly, there are
young and adult learners who take increased responsibility for their own learning even when
engaging with an institutionally prescribed curriculum. In essence, these young and adult
learners are more self-directed than their peers. They are the ones who read beyond their
prescribed texts and outside their discipline, ferret out information in libraries (both physical
and virtual), and make connections between and among ideas, fields, and disciplines.

The Positive Deviance approach can allow us, for instance, to discern what enables
certain young and adult learners to take more responsibility for their own learning.

A PD inquiry may determine the presence of positive deviant youth and adult learners
who against all odds and with no access to any extra resources have found a way to self-
motivate and self-direct their learning. What do they do? Or what was done to them? For
instance, are they the ones, whose parents took them to the library when they were young?
Or read to them when they were children? Are they the ones whose curiosity was evoked by a
certain research assignment they conducted in middle or high school?

Similarly, are there parents, teachers, librarians, pastors, neighbors, and influencers who
engage in certain practices that enable others to take more responsibility for their lives, for
their learning? If so, what do they do?
A PD inquiry may also focus on institutions (e.g. the local chapter of AARP, a senior citizen center, a local church, a book club, or a community college) that are able to foster a climate of self-directed learning among youth and adult learners. If so, what is that they do?

Once positive deviants are identified at multiple levels, one can dig deeper to discern what enables, or leads to, more self-directed, life-long learning.

In conclusion, rarely does organizational, educational, and social change practice look at recipients and beneficiaries as holders of wisdom, agency, and solutions. The Positive Deviance approach is anchored on the belief that the wisdom to solve the problem lies with ordinary people (the young and adult learners, teachers, mentors, family members), who have found ways to achieve better outcomes. The potential to utilize the Positive Deviance approach to influence behaviors around adult learning and education are immense. However, not much of this potential has been realized thus far. Possibilities abound!
References


