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CHAPTER 9

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Positive Deviance to Enhance Learning and Student Retention

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*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 . . . Positive Deviance is
about discovering the stick and using it.*

—Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010, p. 7

INTRODUCTION

What enables a handful of elementary schools in Argentina's Misiones Province to have a graduation rate of 75% or more, without access to any special resources, when the provincial completion rate is a dismal 50%? What enables some African-American men to enroll in U.S. universities and graduate with academic honors when two-thirds of their Black male peers will drop out or 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 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 Merced, Clarion, and El Paso, high schools, 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 in nature because they demonstrate more effective, desirable educational outcomes. They also are worthy of investigation because they achieve demonstrably effective outcomes without access to any extra resources.

In this chapter, I 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 and social change approaches and the PD approach are emphasized. I then analyze how these PD principles and concepts have been applied in the field of education and learning in Argentina and the United States to especially empower minority and at-risk students. Through my analysis and investigation of these cases, I 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 and social 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 PD approach presents an alternative conceptualization of organizational and social change praxis, which turns the classical expert-driven approaches on their head. The PD approach believes in unearthing the wisdom that lies hidden within the most marginalized and vulnerable, even 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 and social change praxis.

Over the past two decades, PD has been employed in over 40 countries to address a wide variety of intractable and complex social problems such as the following: solving endemic malnutrition in Vietnam; decreasing neonatal and maternal mortality in Pakistan; reducing school dropouts in Argentina and in the U.S.; reintegrating returned child soldiers in northern Uganda; and 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, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010).

PD 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 even worse challenges (Pascale et al., 2010; Singhal et al., 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 change enables communities to self-discover the positive deviant behaviors amidst them and then find ways to act on and amplify them (Shafique, Sternin, & Singhal, 2010; Singhal, Buscell, & McCandless, 2009; Singhal & Dura, 2009; Singhal, Sternin, & Dura, 2009).

To help the reader understand the PD approach, including its key conceptual tenets and principles, in this chapter I analyze the historic origins of this approach beginning in the rice fields of Vietnam. I then show how these principles and concepts apply to the field of education and learning. I conclude by discussing several important implications for the universe of adult and lifelong learners.

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 non-governmental organization (NGO). Their mission was to implement a large-scale program for combating 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, developed 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 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 a 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 in designing a field-based nutrition intervention. In essence, 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 card 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 poor families?* The response they found was this: Yes, indeed, there were some children from very poor families who were healthy! They were few in number, but they did exist.

The poor families in Thanh Hoa who 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. It was believed that if the community self-discovered the solution, it was more likely to be widely implemented in the future. 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.
- PD mothers were feeding their children smaller meals three to four times a day, rather than the two big meals twice a day that were customary.
- 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 this resistance be overcome? One evening as the discussion was winding down, a skeptical village elder observed the following: "A thousand hearings isn't worth one seeing, and a thousand seeings 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 that 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, crabs, and green shoots from sweet potato fields. In the company of positive deviants, 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 that 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 et al., 2010, p. 42). Malnutrition, assessed by growth charts of children, decreased by an amazing 85% in the first 14 PD communities. The program was scaled up by making those original 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 two local communities. These two neighborhood communities then served as the living universities for further local expansion of the PD program (Pascale et al., 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 that successive generations of 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 were 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. For example, much 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. I 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 only a three-in-four chance of getting to third grade and one in two chance of making it past the sixth 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 within the local agriculture that supported family livelihoods. School-going children dropped out of school to help plant the branches on which cassava, a staple food in Northeastern Argentina, grows; they also 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, their children's school attendance 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, such as the school where teacher Ramon Garcia was an active community citizen. After school hours, Mr. Garcia could often be seen at his students' homes, 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 approach in combating school dropouts rates, Jerry Sternin was invited to Misiones. 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 Vietnam. However, the relevance of the PD approach in addressing the problem of school dropouts in Misiones was unclear, and his ideas were met with skepticism and resistance.

"*Señor, 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 señor, 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. "*Señora, lo que usted dice es absolutamente verdad!*" [Madam, what you have said is absolutely true], Jerry replied. "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, Señor, 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?" asked Jerry, "at *every* school?" "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 such 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 teachers' 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 contributions. The parents discussed their own experiences in overcoming hardships to keep

their children in school, and identified ways that their neighbors had been able to do so. Thus began the process of self-discovery. Jerry knew that self-discovery is critical to community ownership of a PD program, significantly increasing the probability of adopting any 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 then identified these schools and ranked them accordingly for retention rates. After calculating such rates for all 63 schools, 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 then selected as PD schools (Dura & Singhal, 2009).

Several teams, comprised 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 or headmistress and observed classes in session. Parent team members also interviewed parents from PD schools at their homes. The teacher-parent teams also made 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 or 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 respect for students was 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, the way classes were taught and assessed, how the

community was involved, and how children's nutrition schedules were constructed (See Table 9.1).

Upon conclusion of the 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, a PD program was designed and implemented, building upon a 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 four percent of all undergraduate students in U.S. universities, and of those enrolled only one in three will graduate, 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 succeed in college despite overwhelming odds. Shaun R. Harper, professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania, an African-American himself, has led the charge to analyze those factors that influence the success of Black men in college (Harper 2009, 2012; Harper

TABLE 9.1 A Comparison of Common and PD Practices in Schools

Area of Impact	Common Practices	PD Practices
School-Family Relations	Parents with little or no formal education are not given opportunities to contribute to the educational process.	All parents contribute to the school. Parents hold skills workshops (such as sewing and woodworking). They also help maintain the school building (such as mending fences) and arrange student games or parades.
Teaching Methodology	The whole class is given the same assignment to work on, regardless of ability or age.	The class is broken up into groups. Assignments are modified to reflect the abilities of students in each group.
Degree of Community Involvement	There is little communication between the school and community leaders.	Schools identify community leaders (such as priests) and discuss problems with them. Community leaders are actively involved in increasing retention.
Nutrition	Children are provided with one meal at school (lunch).	Schools recognize that hungry children have difficulty learning. The school provides breakfast instead of lunch.

& 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 an “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 (such as study abroad), and receiver of merit-based grants and academic awards.

Harper (2012) also found that the key influences of success include the following: (a) involved parents who have high expectations for their child and who actively seek out educational resources, such as tutoring, college preparation workshops, and summer camps; (b) an influential grade-school teacher who took a personal interest in the pupil and provided mentoring; (c) access to knowledge and networks for tapping into scholarships and financial support to pay for college; and (d) 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. Munger advised Merced High School teachers, administrators, and students on the PD approach. The PD program at Merced was funded through a grant by the Hewlett Foundation. Munger detailed the complexities, nuances, and subtleties: “It was not classical textbook PD. . . . [the] PD discovery [was] unconventional as there was no large scale community eureka discovery. Instead, [PD discovery was through] small group learning, and individual learning, by students and teachers” (M. Munger, personal communication, September 6 & 8, 2012). Munger added that there was “continuous tension between two very different views of assets” (those assets brought in from the outside such as tutors to help students, and those that resided inside such as resilience and perseverance of committed teachers and students). In terms of practicing PD behaviors, Munger noted the

following: “Rather less practice on the actual [discovered] PD behaviors. [There was] some role play and some informal practice.”

Regarding the low graduation rates, of 100 freshmen who entered ninth grade at Merced, only 56 could expect to graduate, 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 because many Merced High’s female students, especially the Vietnamese and Hmong, bore the burden of household tasks and caring for family members—time-consuming activities that diverted attention from classes and assignments (Po, 2011).

Munger 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 homogeneous 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 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 [others in] the gang, and [maintaining] loyalty and membership in the gang community” (personal communication, September 6, 2012). Many other students described 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.

Munger believes that the discoveries at Merced High School enabled students to learn from each other. Teachers invested time meeting 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.

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

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 U.S.–Mexico border. However, in some school districts in the city of El Paso, 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. In essence, they are positive deviants within their institution.

Ayala’s (2011) 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 were graduating in a timely manner. Ayala found that various communicative practices helped in the retaining and timely graduation of students, including the following: (a) regular, consistent, and positive messages initiated in the early grades from educators and parents to stay in school; (b) constant verbal affirmation from parents, educators, and mentors praising students for academic and other achievements; and (c) clear and repeated parental expectations to do things right. 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” helped students understand and grasp the consequences of dropping out of school.

Building on the work of Ayala, Kallman (2012) conducted a positive deviance study among learning-disabled students at the University of Texas at El Paso (under my guidance) who, again against overwhelming odds, find academic success. Nationally, about 30% 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 non-disabled students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Kallman identified learning disabled students who were registered with the university’s Center for Accommodations and Support Services, had regular household responsibilities, had a part-time job or work schedule that occupied them for at least ten hours a week, and 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 identified several communicative practices as being especially effective in the academic success and timely graduation of learning-disabled students. These included the following: (a) consistent self-affirmations and self-validations; (b) positive messages from parents, family members, friends, peers, teachers, and mentors praising their grit and determination to overcome obstacles; and (c) clear messages received from parents to not use their disability as a crutch. Affirming messages such as the following came 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”—they especially seemed to 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 the Clairton, Pennsylvania, City School District, 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; Positive Deviance Initiative, 2010). The program was initially developed to address the complex and intractable issue of gang violence and street crime, but it 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 fully awake, it was easier for them to not 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 children

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 subsequent 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 schools about a decade ago (Richardson, 2004). With funding from the Kellogg Foundation, six positive deviant school districts were investigated. These districts were achieving above-average student results without access to any additional resources. What explained their demonstrably successful outcomes?

Richardson reviewed several PD practices in the six schools, and we review some salient ones here. Mary Dunbar Barksdale, a third-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 high on a statewide test. When District Assistant Superintendent Pat Davenport went to the school 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 the Brazosport Independent School District receives reports on 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 each 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 what they have missed. Those students who need substantial help are tutored by instructional aides in learning labs.

Given that 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, a colleague 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 was a judicious use of tools such as review sheets, pacing charts, and common assessment protocols, to both infuse consistency into instruction and provide corresponding data on student performance. For instance, curriculum leaders for each subject in a Mason 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 such a 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 any problems.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

My review of the various cases in the previous section suggests that the positive deviance approach holds important implications for education and learning environments. My analysis suggests that the PD approach can be applied in addressing some highly intractable and complex problems that vulnerable and disadvantaged minority student populations face, such as absenteeism, gang violence, high dropout rates, street crime, and tardiness. The PD approach can also be used to amplify existing practices of school teachers, schools, and school districts that achieve demonstrably more 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 were 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. Hiemstra talks about this notion in his chapter for this book (Chapter 3). 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 individuals 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 other influencers who engage in certain practices that enable others to take more responsibility for their lives and for their learning? If so, what do they do? A PD inquiry might 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 it that they do? When positive deviants are identified at multiple levels, further research can involve digging 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 a problem lies with ordinary people, such as young and adult learners, teachers, mentors, or family members, who have found resilient ways to achieve better outcomes. The potential in utilizing the positive deviance approach to better understand adult learning and education is immense. However, not much of this potential has been realized thus far, so the possibilities abound.

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