

Study Groups: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Improving Schools

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Research has demonstrated that inquiry-based teacher study groups in K–12 schools are a promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement (DuFour and Eaker 1998; Lieberman 1996). School staffs who participate in such groups find that the groups contribute significantly to the achievement of school goals.

Murphy (1992) points out three main purposes of study groups: (1) they help educators implement curricular and instructional innovations; (2) they aid in collaboratively planning for school improvement; and (3) they guide educators in studying current research regarding teaching and learning. In fact, a representative of Lawrence Public Schools in Lawrence, Kansas, notes that “of all our initiatives, school-led study groups have had the greatest impact on changes in teacher behavior” (Crowther 1998). In inquiry-based study groups, educators can ask critical questions and build a collaborative framework for finding solutions. In other words, teachers can take control of their learning by actively participating in problem-centered discussions and activities.

A Design Example

A professional development school—in this case, a cooperative arrangement between a university education department and an elementary school (K–5)—developed and implemented a survey to identify the concerns of the school’s faculty members. The survey revealed that their most pressing concern was meeting the needs of at-risk students. Subsequently, a study group was formed to address this topic. Once a month, a group of fourteen teachers and two administrators met to discuss selected readings chosen by the facilitator

(a university faculty member) and teachers at the school. Articles and books were chosen that incorporated specific instructional strategies and addressed some of the social problems of the at-risk student.

A series of nine monthly meetings followed the same format. Each hour-long session was held in lieu of a faculty meeting, giving all teachers the opportunity to attend. The first fifteen minutes were spent in small groups discussing particular points teachers found most pertinent or interesting in the readings. The next twenty minutes were spent summarizing this information for the entire group. The remainder of the session (twenty-five minutes) emphasized ways to transform the information into specific teaching strategies. Techniques that teachers had successfully used in class were discussed. Unsuccessful strategies were also analyzed to determine what failed and how to adapt the strategies for more successful intervention. The sessions concluded with assignments for the next meeting. These assignments involved reading a new article or chapter in a book and implementing specific strategies discussed in the session.

Participation in the group was voluntary and remained high throughout the year. An added incentive included the opportunity for teachers to earn staff development points by participating (an excellent way to complement traditional staff development). Further, the principal and assistant principal were both active members of the study group, thereby validating the importance of the program. On many occasions parents also joined the group. At one session, an African American parent shared his perspective on African American at-risk students. His expertise and experience in this area (he runs the local community center where

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many of the children go after school) was invaluable and appreciated by the group.

Twice during the course of the year participants were asked to reflect on the experience by completing a short questionnaire (see figure 1). Teachers responded very favorably to the design of the study group. For instance, one teacher commented, "I liked this format. We were thinking and discovering, not just jumping hoops." Teachers enjoyed being able to discuss, implement, and reflect on current instructional practices.

Most of the participants tried to incorporate many of the strategies discussed during the study session in their classrooms and rated their efforts 3, 4 and 5, on a 1-5 scale, with 1 being *ineffective* and 5 being *very effective*. Many teachers also noted a change in student participation and self-esteem and commented on how the study group helped them grow professionally. Here are some of the teachers' comments:

I feel better equipped to identify and understand behaviors of my at-risk students.

I am more accepting of students who are not following the "hidden" rules of the middle class.

I have a better understanding of the background from which these children come and live.

More students participate in class discussions and feel successful.

Although the study group was led by a university faculty member, leadership of the group was soon shared by all participants. For example, a teacher at the school led the discussion one afternoon when the university member could not attend. As the discussions continued each month, a renewed enthusiasm for implementing new strategies emerged. Teachers felt supported, validated, and comfortable in being able to experiment with a variety of instructional strategies and all indicated they would be interested in joining other study groups.

Because one goal of staff development is to allow a faculty to create, develop, and take ownership for quality programs (Gaskins 1998), we have planned that a teacher and university professor will co-facilitate the study group the second year. These professionals will select readings and plan discussion topics and activities for the group, transferring more of the ownership to the school. During the third year, the study group will be self-directed by teachers and school staff in full leadership roles, with university faculty attending only as participants.

Guidelines for Success

This study group provided participants with ideas and information about how to best address the needs of at-risk students in their school. As experienced by members of other study groups, these teachers examined their beliefs, shared ideas, reflected on current practices, bridged theory and practice, and experimented with a variety of instructional strategies (Matlin and Short 1991). Murphy (1992) believes that study groups "turn all individuals into learners eager to assume responsibility for their own learning and that of colleagues and students." Sanacore (1993) outlines several other benefits of study groups: (a) study groups focus on what educators consider to be important; (b) study groups emphasize sharing, which usually stimulates educators to read professional literature; (c) study groups with a membership of both teachers and administrators provide unique opportunities for realizing various perspectives and concerns; (d) study group outcomes are usually discussed at grade-level, department, and whole-school faculty meetings; and (e) study groups support positive public relations.

Inquiry-based approaches in education do not necessarily produce answers. However, the process of

FIGURE 1 Reflections Questionnaire for Inquiry-Based Teacher Study Groups

MID-YEAR SURVEY

Please reflect on the following questions and record your thoughts and ideas.

1. Why did you join the study group?
2. Identify what you have learned in the study group and have implemented with your students.
3. Identify any student learning outcomes that you now have as a result of attending this group.
4. What would you like to see continued in the study group?
5. What would you like to see changed in the study group?
6. What would you like to see started in the study group?

YEAR-END SURVEY

Please reflect on the following questions and record your thoughts and ideas.

1. Identify specific strategies you learned in the study group that you have implemented with your students.
2. Rate the effectiveness of each strategy on a 1-5 scale with 1 being *ineffective* and 5 being *very effective*. Please give specific evidence that supports your belief that the strategy was effective.
3. Identify any student learning outcomes that you now have as a result of attending this group.
4. What would you have changed in the study group?
5. How does receiving inservice points in this manner compare to other types of inservice activities you have attended?
6. Would you be willing to participate in another study group?
7. What are your suggestions for topics for future study groups?

exploring questions and sharing solutions in a trusting and supportive environment paves the way for renewed teaching and learning and facilitates the development of professional learning communities. We encourage other educators to implement inquiry-based study groups and offer several planning guidelines below.

Allow participants to choose topics that are meaningful to them. We found that participation remained high in our study group because all participants cited the need to learn ways and methods of dealing with low-achieving students as the main reason for joining the group. Lingman (1995) describes a parent study group that was formed when a group of parents and educators became concerned about the transition of fifth and sixth graders to middle school. That study group used the book *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools*, the report of the State Superintendent's Middle Grade Task Force, as a guide and framework for discussions. Study groups can be centered around a set of questions to be explored, a series of readings on a particular theme or topic, or a single book. Using a case study methodology, study groups can also evolve around the examination of student work. Teachers can analyze student work and formulate teaching practices that link assessment with instructional practices. Further, there may be more than one study group taking place at the school at one time. In other words, a variety of groups could address different issues and then present findings to the faculty as a whole (DuFour 1997).

Allow participants to help select a variety of readings. In our group, participants were encouraged to share relevant articles with the facilitator, and every attempt was made to include those readings in group discussions. For example, several members who had taken graduate courses that included articles pertinent to the study group topic passed out those readings. The principal also selected several readings. As Gaskins (1998) notes, when teachers are engaged in studies to meet specific needs of their students, there is a sense of ownership of the programs and strategies they develop. We found this to be true with our study group.

Allow time for implementation and reflection. Applied inquiry designed to improve practice takes time. Teachers in our group remarked on how much they enjoyed discussing relevant literature that had direct implications for practice and having the opportunity to implement new ideas in their classrooms. As a way of showing support for each other, teachers offered suggestions on how to adapt strategies to teachers who had not been successful with particular practices. Thus, teachers were open to new techniques and

continually adjusted those techniques over a period of time.

Invite all individuals to participate voluntarily. Although the principal allowed the study group to meet in lieu of one faculty meeting per month, participation was voluntary. We observed that when teachers were actively identifying problems and working on implementing successful strategies they grew professionally and shared their enthusiasm with others in the school (Ross, Rolheiser, and Hogaboam-Gray 1999). That enthusiasm quickly spread from teacher to teacher and brought regular members back each month, along with a few new participants. Student interns assigned to the school from the university were also invited to participate with their supervising teachers.

Plan activities that encourage active participation. "Sharing has the effect of dignifying educators' experiences—the dullness of their work, which is often invisible to outsiders yet binds insiders together" (Lieberman 1996). Each session was designed to foster open communication among participants on focused topics. Individuals were encouraged to participate through sharing, discussion, reflection, and practice. Thus, each meeting intentionally included small and large group activities.

Provide incentives for joining and staying active (e.g., staff development points). Special recognition or incentives are wonderful ways of encouraging participation. In our study group, teachers were able to earn staff development points by attending the discussions, participating in activities, and documenting strategies used in their classes.

Encourage the principal to be a part of the group. Active participation by administrators clearly communicates the importance of study groups (Murphy 1992). As teachers redefine their tasks to include leadership roles, principals must also redefine their roles to include being "partners with teachers" (DuFour and Eaker 1998). This new leadership role for principals must "recognize that this task demands less command and control and more learning and leading, less dictating and more orchestrating" (DuFour and Eaker 1998). Thus, participating in a study group is a unique way for principals to become "partners with teachers."

Include a reasonable number of participants. Normally our study group consisted of fourteen teachers and two administrators from the school. The group was small enough for personal interaction and allowed all participants opportunities to contribute. Mohr (1998), in her work with principal study groups, recommends six to fifteen members for successful outcomes.

Ask for help if necessary to get started (contact a nearby university if support is needed or wanted). Our study group began through a professional development partnership. However, other groups have been started by educators who share a common interest or concern within a school. We learned that it only takes a few enthusiastic individuals to begin a study group program.

Have fun while learning. We found that many new friendships were formed as a result of our study group. Participants enjoyed the monthly gatherings and all expressed an interest in being part of other groups. In fact, we learned that study groups provide many expected as well as unexpected benefits.

Designing and implementing effective study group is one approach to authentic educational reform. A collegial and supportive study group can provide participants a renewed sense of professionalism and empower them to be change agents in their professional settings.

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