

Support for Teachers Studying Their Own Work

When teachers focus on their own concerns, they solve pressing problems without depending on the bureaucracy, and students benefit at once.

In the fall of 1984, I started the Educators' Forum in the Greater Boston area to help stimulate and guide teachers as they study their own practice. Based on the work of the Teacher-initiated Research Project (Evans et al. 1981), the forum supports teachers as they design and carry out investigations in their classrooms.

We believe that teaching is more intellectually challenging than is generally recognized and that, because the complexity of teaching is underestimated, there is too little assistance provided to teachers to help them observe, think through, and deeply understand their own practice. The forum encourages teachers to give serious attention to their own work and their questions concerning it and to learn to help their colleagues do the same. The intent of the forum is to help teachers better understand their own teaching and to draw attention to teachers' needs for accessible and informative research.

The forum's structure is simple. Every other week, to assist each other with their classroom investigations, the teachers hold a two-hour meeting complete with a discussion leader. Four or five people present their work to the group at each meeting. The other members serve as an advisory board to help each presenter at each phase of the work—selecting a topic, stating explicitly what he or she already knows and wants to know in relation to the topic, designing ways to gather more information and making



In the forum, teachers listen carefully to each other. They come tired at the end of the day, but leave invigorated by having their work respected and discussed—and inspired by the work of other members.

sense of what is learned. The teachers also assist each other in editing written reports of their projects and in preparing for presentations at conferences, inservice programs, college courses, and research meetings.

The Teachers and Their Topics

The teachers who participate in the forum are as varied as they can be. They work in urban or suburban public school systems and in private or parochial schools. They teach young children and high school students in regular and special needs classrooms.

The purpose of the forum is to help them gain a better understanding of their students, themselves, and their teaching; the forum does not assume they need to change or improve their practice. To initiate a study, the teachers

focus on something in their classroom they would like to learn more about. Some of them carry out projects that are satisfying to them and contribute to their professional knowledge, but may have no implications for specific or immediate modifications in their teaching. Others find that data collection itself is an intervention that can produce positive results. Still others use the forum as a support network for making and documenting change. The following examples illustrate what teachers have been able to do with the support and encouragement of the forum.

Cooperative science Scott Edleman is convinced that if his high school science students "learn how to learn," they can be successful in any course. But despite his best efforts, he has not always been able to achieve this goal with all his students. Some of them

remained passive, and even though they appeared to listen to his lectures, take notes, and try to learn, they did not do well on tests.

Last year Scott decided that his students might participate more if he implemented cooperative learning. He chose to try it in his chemistry class and then studied the results throughout the year. Because he wanted to know what was happening in each of the small groups he formed in the class, he invited Steve Smith, another member of the forum, to observe the class weekly. He kept a journal of his observations and thoughts about the class throughout the year and met regularly with the observer to discuss the observations and his journal notes.

After comparing test results with those of previous years and asking students to complete a questionnaire at the end of the year, he found that his students had become more involved and were indeed learning more. In that first year they scored higher on tests, helped each other, learned to work without being reminded or monitored, and completed more of the material in the textbook than had any previous class. He also found that a few students—those who were used to doing well independently—objected to cooperative learning and thought they were being slowed down in the groups.

Solid Start. Judy Ellenzweig is a special needs teacher in a suburban school system. For several years she wondered about the young children who were referred to her for special needs services. She suspected that many of them did not really have learning disabilities but were just having difficulties keeping up with the pace of the traditional 1st grade curriculum. To test this idea, she developed Solid Start, a project designed to produce "zero failure in 1st grade."

Because she was not authorized to modify the curriculum, Judy set up an intensive teaching laboratory, in collaboration with the remedial reading teacher and a group of volunteers, to provide more support to students. The program provides additional reading and writing practice for individuals and small groups. In this program, a

1st grade teacher may send any child for help. There is no delay for testing, and students don't have to experience failure before a teacher can secure remedial services. Judy teaches the volunteers to be positive, to help students focus on the print in their books, and, most important, to ask themselves if what they are reading makes sense.

Now in its fourth year, the program is a success, as indicated by student scores on the 1st grade reading tests, retention rates, teacher surveys, parent surveys, special needs service referral rates, and progress in later grades. First grade teachers report that their students learn more, and they also say that the most striking benefit of the program has been a decrease in anxiety for students, parents, and teachers.

Learning from parents. In another forum project, Joan Warner, an experienced 3rd grade teacher in a suburban school system, expressed concerns about the behavior of the students in her class. She wondered if the parents' expectations for their children were similar to her own, so she decided to invite the parents to come in for interviews to find out. She found that parents were delighted to have the opportunity to describe their children to her, and she now conducts these interviews each fall. She learns about the parents' views of the child's strengths, any concerns they have, the child's relationships with siblings, how disagreements are handled in the family, what a typical family evening is like, and more. These early interviews allow her to establish positive relationships with parents and to be more knowledgeable about and sometimes more patient with her students. She tape-records the interviews and often listens to them before conducting her parent/teacher conferences to remind herself of parent views and concerns. Schools in her own system and in others have invited her to lead inservice workshops, and other teachers are now using and adapting her ideas.

Other topics of study chosen by teachers in the forum include clinical interviews (Duckworth 1987) to probe students' understanding of fractions, subtraction with borrowing, or poetry; the development of a conflict resolu-

tion curriculum for 2nd grade; a first-year teacher's study of her 3rd grade students' transition from picture books to longer books; the development of a heterogeneously grouped writing laboratory in a high school where most classes are tracked; and a structured intercultural discussion group for decreasing tension in an urban high school.

Keeping Focused and Productive

There are guidelines for forum discussions (developed the first year and reviewed, sometimes revised, each succeeding year) which help to assure that meetings are focused and productive. For example, participants agree not to discuss any topic at length or to propose investigations of topics they feel they have no influence over.

The participants also learn to assume that there is more than one way to be a good teacher and to avoid spending time trying to persuade others to one enlightened view. When someone is presenting an investigation, the other members try to see the issue from the presenter's viewpoint. They help the presenters figure out how to learn more about what *they* want to know, not what someone else thinks is most important.

To promote the development of a safe environment, all discussions and papers distributed in the group are kept confidential. This safeguard allows participants who are recognized as competent teachers in their own school systems the option to choose topics that are personally risky. They have a place to expose their vulnerabilities, difficulties, and worries. Perhaps equally important, a safe environment allows teachers to be enthusiastic when they share their successes in their teaching.

Emerging Leaders

The forum now has support from the Lilly Endowment and the Boston Globe Foundation and is in the first year of a three-year dissemination project. It has expanded from one group to several groups, including some outside the Boston area, and members have established a writers' exchange. The exchange disseminates

papers written by forum members and by members of other teacher research groups. In the summer of 1991, for the first time, we will provide a one-week summer program for participants and leaders of teacher-initiated research groups. In the next two years we plan to establish additional groups in other areas and to develop training materials for wider distribution.

Over the seven years the pioneering group has been meeting, a culture quite different from other professional meetings has developed. In the forum people listen carefully to each other. They come in tired at the end of the day, but leave energized, invigorated by having their work respected and discussed—and inspired by the work of other members. Participation in the forum has renewed their interest in their teaching, contributed to their increasing confidence, and helped them assume more leadership in their work lives.

As more teachers participate in forums like these, we believe the benefits of thinking deeply about teaching will influence many teachers, who, in turn, can help to make schools centers of inquiry for young people. □

References

- Duckworth, E. (1987). "Teaching as Research." In *The Haring of Wonderful Ideas*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Evans, C., M. Stubbs, E. Duckworth, and C. Davis. (1981). *Teacher-Initiated Research: Professional Development for Teachers and a Method for Designing Research Based on Practice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Technical Education Research Centers.

Author's note: To obtain information about the forum, the summer program, or the writers' exchange, write to: The Educators' Forum, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Longfellow Hall, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Claryce Evans is Director of the Educators' Forum, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Longfellow Hall, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138.



The non-ILS at a fraction of the cost.

MECC Management Master (MMM) is an educational software management system with many of the same characteristics of an integrated learning system (ILS)—pre-determined scope and sequence of software activities, performance reports, automatic record-keeping, and built-in help for extra reinforcement.

There are, however, some notable advantages. Unlike an ILS, *MMM* gives teachers the freedom to easily alter both the content of the software and the sequence of activities to suit their students' needs—whether they're special-education, at-risk, mainstream, or gifted. Teachers also have the option of specifying the level of mastery required before moving on to the next lesson. Then, when students are having difficulty, teachers are notified immediately so they can give students the one-on-one attention they need.

And *MMM* was developed specifically to correlate award-winning MECC math and reading software with textbook series. Or *MMM* can be used to easily integrate the software into the curriculum to meet a unique set of objectives not tied to textbook lessons.

For more information about how *MMM* can give teachers more time to teach, without an annual software license fee, talk to an *MMM* specialist.

MMM: A managed system for everybody.

Call 800/228-3504, ext. 549,
or 612/481-3500, ext. 549.

In Minnesota call 800/782-0032, ext. 549.

Or write to: MECC Network Consulting,
3490 Lexington Ave. N., St. Paul, MN 55126.

MECC
For the love of learning.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.