

# How Our Teacher Study Group Sparks Change

*At after-school gatherings, teachers share ideas about their district's new approach to reading instruction.*

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While new approaches to teaching are emphasizing that students must be active participants and problem solvers at the center of their learning, teachers often are not allowed to control their own inquiry. If a transmission model of learning is not appropriate for children, we felt, then that model is not suitable for teachers either. Therefore, when the Tucson Unified School District replaced its basal readers with a literature series, we proposed to pilot a study group approach to support long-term, innovative changes in the teaching of reading.

Begun in August 1990, our voluntary group meets biweekly for several hours after school. Although no added duty pay is available, two-thirds of the teachers from Warren Elementary School and several from another school have joined the group. Attendance has remained high.

The teachers set the agenda for every session, while we, as the principal and the facilitator, play support roles. The principal validates problem solving and change by being a visible member of the group. The facilitator, a university professor, supports change every step of the way. A colleague and a coach, she is available, at the request of teachers, to demonstrate lessons, team-teach, plan, and observe and critique their classrooms.

At first, teachers were hesitant about inviting the facilitator into their classrooms. Gradually, they began asking her to work with students as they observed. Over time, they asked for her help in planning and, eventually, braved team teaching and teaching in front of her. Her feedback is nonjudgmental,

extends what they already are doing, and focuses on student interactions as much as possible. Now the teachers see her as an integral part of the school team. Most have invited her to their classrooms; some have even asked other teachers into their rooms to observe.

Through the study group, teachers have identified conflicts within their own belief systems and within the district, especially between the new literacy curriculum and evaluation of student reading and writing. Formerly, these conflicts were accepted as "the way it is," but now teachers are developing acceptable alternative strategies.

As time goes on, teachers have addressed a variety of issues in the study groups, in addition to how to use literature effectively in their classrooms: thematic teaching, integrating literature into science and social studies, big books, shared reading experiences, process writing, using computers, and evaluating students' learning. As a result of their study of student evaluation, teachers learned to take field notes and are having their students develop portfolios. Not only will teachers use the portfolios to evaluate student learning, but the students themselves will use them to measure their own growth.

Ultimately, teachers have come to realize that making any change goes far beyond merely adding the new practice. As one teacher put it, "We're changing our basic ways of thinking, not just adding a new activity. This is the scariest and most exciting thinking I have ever done."

The study group has provided true staff development for the teachers and

principal at Warren Elementary School, a foundation from which to learn and plan together as a staff. Some teachers have attended courses at the university, others have presented at national conferences, and all have renewed their focus on teaching and learning. After seeing how powerful it is to be in charge of their own learning, they are making the same experience possible for their students. Even nonparticipants feel the impact.

Changes are evident in every classroom in the building. Students are learning about literature in new and meaningful ways. Teachers are looking at curriculum, learning, and evaluation as powerful collaborative experiences. They're taking responsibility for their own decision making, not simply accepting the words of "experts."

After attending a workshop by a well-known national speaker, a teacher told us, "For the first time in my life, I didn't accept everything the expert told me." She then elaborated on her own views of the topic, views formulated with her colleagues in the study group.

For the teachers, the study group is an opportunity to think through their own beliefs, share ideas, challenge current instructional practices, blend theory and practice, identify professional and personal needs—as well as develop literacy innovations for their classrooms. For us, as principal and facilitator, it's a strategy for empowering teachers to be active thinkers about their work and to accept change as a natural part of their daily experiences. □

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