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**COLLABORATING WITH COLLEAGUES TO  
IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative action research study examined the experiences of teachers while involved in a professional learning community. The research process used a study group format as a professional development strategy that fostered the utilization of reflective teaching and thinking as a tool to engage teachers in evaluating their philosophy of teaching and learning, and their effectiveness as teachers. Seven teachers participated in this study. The teachers appreciated the opportunity to learn more about educational topics and to work with colleagues in designing effective teaching strategies in a format that promoted trust, collegiality, and collaboration. The study focused on such topics as Guided Reading, reading and writing strategies, and methods to improve sustained reading among students. Analysis of the data revealed that study group sessions encouraged teachers to reflect on current teaching practices and supported any necessary adjustments to better serve the needs of their students. Data findings suggested that study groups, as a professional development initiative, can foster a structure that promotes collaboration, collegiality, and meaningful change in teaching practices.

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have been worth it. I consider myself blessed to have been able to walk this path side by side with you, Kelly. To be her peer, her friend and her Mother during this experience has been priceless and so very rewarding.

***“I may forget what you said but I will never forget how you made me feel!”***

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## **RESEARCHER STANCE**

Remember the teachers who made your educational experience not just an intellectual one, but a personal transformation, and who changed the way you look at the world and how you live? In my opinion, they are what I call the “Great Teachers.” Each of us, if we are lucky, had a few Great Teachers in our lives. I have been blessed to have known several. Certain special characteristics make a few teachers stand out as Great Ones. Each of my Great Teachers had a contagious passion for learning and a need to instill that passion in others; each of them related to me personally, not only as a student, but as a unique human being. All used their special interest and expertise not just to impart knowledge of their particular discipline, but as a vehicle to teach larger lessons on how to think and how to live. And all of them profoundly changed my life, not only by providing me with individual stock, but by instilling the confidence to take chances, a sense of self-worth, a good set of values, and a social ethic.

I frequently think back on what I learned from my Great Teachers as a guide to how I can most effectively teach others. When I was teaching, my first and foremost responsibility each year was to convince students that the subject we were studying was indeed important, so they would want to learn. We would have constant discourse on how the subject affected our world, in what ways we used it in everyday life, what was the larger lesson, and how learning it was going to make them a better person. I promoted experiential and exploratory learning by pointing them toward the resources they needed and guided them in how to use those resources, rather than by telling them

exactly what to do. I encouraged them to stick their necks out, to use their intuition to project the answer to a problem first, and then to subject it to careful analysis.

After more than twenty years as an elementary classroom teacher and six more as the district's Title I Coordinator, I still feel one of the most difficult skills to "teach" is the ability to think critically. And more and more I also realize that this difficult skill of "critically thinking" is not a topic foreign to just students. As a classroom teacher I realized that, however well prepared I felt when I began my day, due to the wide range of student needs and the diversity of their life experiences, I needed yet more knowledge and skills to enable my students to succeed. Instead of being cautious of change, I found myself grabbing for new ideas. As often as I could, I made my way into my colleagues' classrooms, asking questions and running ideas by them. Over time I realized I just was not satisfied meeting that mysterious "efficient teaching routine" that I could use with students time after time. Eventually, through classroom experience, I began to take pride in the fact that my teaching practices were definitely not the norm. To support my belief in what I was doing, I once again reflected back on my own educational process, seeking any answer I could that would enhance, yet support my own teaching practices. As Dewey tells in *Experience and Education* (1997), by understanding the continuity of individuals' experiences and the situation and community in which they find themselves, educators design experiences that lead to growth.

This reflection demonstrated for me that while no universal approach applies to everyone and to every discipline, a common denominator did appear among my Great

Teachers. It was their personal engagement. These Great Teachers showed me that critical thinking may begin in the classroom, but really it is the relationships that are formed outside the formal lesson, the one-on-one, or one-on-few, that have the greatest impact on the overall development of students. It needs an environment where an array of information resources exists with easy access; where learning is an ubiquitous activity engaged in by everyone, everywhere, all the time; and where standards are high and people expect their ideas to be challenged. Most importantly, it requires plenty of opportunity for students and teachers, to interact personally with their peers. Central to my understanding was learning about teacher development through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I experienced the power of personal reflection first hand, appreciated the importance of creating safe spaces in which people can negotiate meaning individually and collaboratively, and learned to foster strong collaborative relationships with my students and peers. As a result, reflection and community building drove all my classroom practice and service in teacher education.

Unfortunately in my current position, I still see pockets of isolation within teachers' work. I believe this isolation within which contemporary teachers work, is so common as to be almost transparent. Isolated from other professionals, teachers and their practice are embedded within a hierarchical system in which day-to-day activities are governed to external forces: administrative mandates, parent requests, and currently, legislative directives. The teachers, the ones with the most knowledge about the specifics of the contexts in which they work, may feel the least empowered to engage in

innovative practices that could enhance the lives of their students in important ways. Teachers often feel separated from each other. The stress of busy schedules, course loads, and additional duties makes it difficult for teachers to make the time for collegiality. I firmly believe teachers need opportunities to talk and collaborate with each other to best serve their students, to make their work more meaningful, and to transform schooling in a way that keeps it vibrant and relevant. Granted, there are an increasing number of teacher learning initiatives centered on teachers carefully examining their practice, either directly or through classroom artifacts and case materials. This trend reflects the fact that today many are convinced that embedding teachers' learning in their everyday work, or that of their colleagues, increases the likelihood that this learning will be meaningful. Nevertheless, in my experience, I think we still lack clarity about how to best design initiatives that involve the examination of practices and data.

Resulting from my brief research study completed in the fall of 2003 on the power of study groups amongst teachers, the need to offer professional support and opportunities for professional sharing became very evident. The study was conducted in a school that was identified as being "in need of improvement" for the third straight year under the No Child Left Behind mandates. The participants reported that in the span of the ten day study group they began to see the value of collaboration and its relationship to enhanced student achievement. Through research-based literature and the discourse that evolved as a result of those readings, these teachers realized that in order to assure

increased academic performances of their students, they must first look within themselves and their teaching practices for any gaps that may have contributed to low student achievement. The group met an hour before the start of the regular school day.

Unfortunately, shortly after the completion of the study, an hour was extended onto the instructional day for all students and staff, causing a hardship for the study group to continue, thus ending a chance for these teachers to collaborate on teaching practices and their students' needs.

Current research has indicated the value of collaboration in building powerful learning communities (Holland, 2002). In order for students to meet the state core curriculum content standards, they need to learn more material and new skills at a much faster pace. In order for teachers to be prepared to teach every student successfully, there needs to be opportunities available to improve teachers' expertise and make permanent changes in their teaching practices. There is value in analyzing data of all types to know where we have been to help guide the direction in which we are going (Hubbard & Power, 2003). Drawing from my past experiences, I wondered what it would be like to work in an environment that encourages teacher collaboration, support, and personal growth. Those experiences drew me to further investigate the idea of professional learning communities among teachers, with the need to develop this activity from a different direction. This time it was important that the study be scheduled within the course of the workday. Being built right into their weekly schedule, the current teachers would realize they not only have the support from the building administrator who sees the

value in this initiative, but more importantly, the teachers would begin to see the importance of coming together toward success in their teaching and their student learning. With these weekly collaboration sessions embedded into the teachers' schedules, there would no longer exist conflicts of schedules before or after school hours. It would establish a routine that provides the necessary time for the staff to grow professionally and to learn to work together to reach shared goals. These values could have a chance to become embedded in the day-to-day lives of these teachers. The learning community format could engage and develop the commitment and talents of all individuals resulting in learning of high intellectual quality. These new values, then, could create the norms of self-awareness, self-critical reflection, and increasingly effective professional organization, utilizing this commitment of its members to seek ongoing renewal and improvements. I know that together we can break the chains of tradition and forge a new way of doing business, because when one learns alone, the learner is the sole source of new information and ideas, but when new ideas are processed in interaction with others, multiple sources of knowledge and expertise expand and test the new concepts as part of the learning experience. Research supports the value of collaboration and community building in the workplace as a factor in de-isolation, enhanced professionalism, professional growth and continuous learning (Holland, 2002).

Change in instruction begins with learning new ideas, followed by planning, trying out new strategies, getting feedback, and reflecting together with other teachers to learn from experience and refine practices. Intrigued by the possibilities of teachers

working together regularly and systemically, and determined to establish a program that would continue to improve instruction to address student and teacher needs long after implementation, I began researching ways to develop, establish, support, and document a process of teacher collaboration. I decided the collaborative teacher groups I plan to study in this identified school should be called “learning communities” for two simple reasons: (a) Teachers’ and students’ learning are at the heart of my process, and (b) Communities are groups of people who share a common goal and work together to achieve that goal.

This issue is very important, not only to myself, but to the school community as a whole, and it is because of this, that I am fully prepared to offer encouragement and support to my teachers as they engage in the hardest task anyone could possibly ask of them – the task of changing their teaching practice in the middle of the daily brushfires that erupt in their classrooms, and the status-quo mentality that often permeates our school and school system. These dedicated teachers know of course that the real winners here will be their students. I want to transform these professionals into “Great Teachers” who connect with eager students’ eye-to-eye, brain-to-brain, and heart-to-heart.

Teacher education, with its grounding in the belief that education proceeds from the individual in his/her social context (Dewey, 1997), offers a framework for teacher educators to study their experiences in order to better enable teachers to harness their personal professional knowledge.

Therefore, after exploring many different avenues to achieve this goal, my research question is: What would be the observed and reported experiences when teachers are involved in small, mentored learning communities?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The elementary school classroom is a laboratory in which students learn about themselves, about others, and about the world beyond the classroom door. Here they develop attitudes and habits about literacy and learning that will last a lifetime. Students in grades 3-4-5 experience both the frustration and the joys of their evolving journey into full fledged adult literacy. Our work as teachers then is quite challenging.

In every grade level there is great diversity among the students. The range of reading ability tends to become wider in each successive grade as a result of the students' varied experiences. Classroom instruction then becomes a critical component of the educational system, and for meaningful learning to be an outcome of instruction, teachers must clearly understand how to adjust and refine their practices to address students' needs (Littie, 2003).

### **School Reform**

The national systemic school reform with the focus on creating and aligning policy and instruments, such as curriculum frameworks, standards, and assessments, has assumed that sending clear and consistent signals to teachers, students, and parents about what is important to teach and learn, is an essential element of school improvement (Lasiter, 1996). There is little evidence to suggest that recent policy reforms focused on improving instruction have had any significant impact on teachers' actual classroom performance (Comer, 2005).

Although teachers are making instructional decisions in a more fluid context, the very multiplicity and diversity of messages about improving classroom practice confounds the decision making process for teachers (Gimbert, 2000). Teachers interpret these messages in very different ways depending on their experiences, beliefs, students, and school culture. Thus, the way a particular idea is implemented will vary greatly from teacher to teacher and may be quite different from the expectations of the educational leaders.

In the current classroom, teachers have little time and less guidance to learn – or rethink and relearn – how learning takes place or how their instruction can be modified to take learners needs into consideration. Many teachers make instructional decisions based simply on their immediate needs to comply, survive, conform, or meet a time constraint. It is easier for them to rely on external sources of authority, such as curricular documents, assessments, textbooks, and teacher's guides to provide the guiding vision of their instruction, than to rethink and reform that practice (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). Reliance on external materials, designed for use across a large number of classrooms, by a diverse group of teachers with some typical students, can promote teaching that is routine and unthinking. Good and Weaver (2003) stated that teaching which is routine and unthinking sells students and teachers short, and learning to teach and sustaining professional development requires reflection which is closely linked to action. Good and Weaver (2003) argue that changing the structure of schooling will have

little impact on how and what students learn unless there are also changes in the “core” of educational practice. In other words, how teachers understand knowledge and learning, and how they operationalize their understandings, will be the force behind these changes.

### **Accountability**

Clearly within the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 raises the bar for schools and other educational entities to demonstrate yearly progress toward meeting the needs of all students. The NCLB establishes accountability requirements for measurable adequate yearly progress objectives for all students and subgroups. These student subgroups are based on socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, English Language Proficiency, and disability. Research conducted by Cowley and Meehan (2002) suggests that one method by which schools can improve and thus meet the needs of all students, including subgroups, is through the activation of school wide or professional learning communities.

### **Teaching Practices**

Collegial and collaborative conversation promotes reciprocal reflection that enables practitioners to make explicit old and new patterns of thinking and behaviors. Personal theories of practice are opened for examination through another set of lenses, encouraging teachers to consider alternative perspectives. Carroll (2001) reports that teachers, who felt supported in their own ongoing

learning and classroom practices, were more committed to making sure all their students' needs were successfully met.

Collaborative inquiry, states Cushman (1999), can come in many forms, from teaching teams to curriculum study groups and even to task forces. In such groups, teachers commonly focus their work using two main techniques: examining student work together, and observing each other in the classroom. Each of these practices benefits from using a careful protocol that eases the anxieties of revealing the heart of one's practice to colleagues.

Participants in small learning communities often work in an interrelated fashion, resulting in support in not just one part of the whole, but more importantly, improvement in all parts. When all parts work together, there is greater student engagement and student achievement (Holland, 2002). Professional capacity highlights the importance of professional community, collegial trust, and relationships where the teaching environment is communal, resulting in an environment where teachers enjoy their work and experience high staff morale.

Emihovich and Battaglia (2000) state that collaboration provides teachers with a vehicle for sharing ideas, taking risks in the classroom, and reflecting critically on their classroom practices, all of which build a foundation for a common knowledge base and vision. Collaboration is not just about dealing with one to one interaction, but arises among different parties who share mutual

interests and goals coming together in a problem solving process. It demands time, flexibility, organization, energy, and a willingness to learn and trust among participants. According to Emihovich and Battaglia (2000), teachers are provoked to realize a deeper, broader, and richer understanding of what they do in their classrooms. More importantly, collaboration puts teachers in a position of recognizing and appreciating the diverse talents and strengths of their learning community as resources within their own school.

With collaborative learning communities, teachers have access to a wealth of ideas on how to instruct heterogeneous groups of students. Their expanded repertoire of classroom skills and strategies strengthens teachers' effectiveness. Teachers approach behavior and learning problems with more confidence and a renewed sense that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to handle each situation. Teachers also gain the knowledge that they are not alone in striving to find strategies for effective teaching. One of the most noticeable benefits of collaboration is teacher reflection (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000). By having the opportunity to interact with others, and learn about others' beliefs, knowledge and attitudes, teachers become more reflective practitioners. They construct new frameworks for teaching and extend these frameworks through conversation with their colleagues through small learning communities. In her article on looking collaboratively at student work Cushman (1996 p. 4) stated, "Reflecting on the 'authenticity' of a student's learning tasks is still another way to frame a

collaborative look at student work in a way that has usefulness both to the teacher and to the system.”

Spurred in part by a renewed vision of professional development, new attention is being focused on the practice of mentoring in the context of reform-oriented teachings. Preparing and supporting cooperating teachers and mentors so that they become excellent teachers of teachers in the educational process needs to be emphasized more today (Carroll, 2001). According to Carroll (2001), those who assume the practice of “educative mentoring” think about mentoring as a form of teaching, see fellow teachers as learners, and attend to how they think and what they believe. Educative mentoring also looks to their way of making sense of experiences, focusing attention on students’ thinking and making sense of it, and have a clear vision of good teaching.

### **Professional Development**

Transformative learning takes place when this process leads us to open up our frame of reference, discard a habit of mind, see alternatives, and thereby act differently in the world (Ebersole, 2003). When educators are led to examine their practice critically and thereby acquire alternative ways of understanding what they do, transformative learning about teaching takes place. If we do not consciously think about and reflect on our practice, we become nothing more than automatons following a dubious set of rules or principles that are unlikely to be relevant in the ever changing, complex context of teaching and learning. To build

leadership in the classroom, school leaders must also become authentic learners and integral players in the learning environment they endeavor to create. These educational leaders must provide teachers with opportunities to explore and question their own and others' interpretations, ideologies and practices, where the goal is understanding, articulating and ultimately altering practice and social relationships in order to bring about fundamental change in the classrooms (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000).

Some educators have cautioned that school improvement will only be achieved when there is greater clarity and coherence in the minds of the majority of teachers (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). Educational practice will change only when teachers have the support they need to make sense of new ideas and directives, bring them together in a meaningful way and construct a coherent practice. The success of school improvement thus rests squarely on teachers, and by association, on those responsible for supporting their professional growth (Carroll, 2001).

School improvement efforts over the last few decades require teachers not only to study, implement, and assess learner outcomes outlined by local, state and national educational standards, but also to provide meaningful, engaged learning for a very diverse student population. Teachers are expected to understand emerging standards and views of learning, and to change their roles and practice accordingly. Teachers who were prepared for their profession prior to the reform

movement may not be prepared for these new practices and roles. In working toward change, teachers need to be continually supported with professional development. A fundamental lesson learned in the past decade of school reform is that far more time is required for professional development and cooperative work, than is now available. In fact, time has emerged as the key issue in every analysis of school change appearing in the last decade (Collinson & Cook, 2000).

Teacher's professional development in a climate of educational reform must address the additional challenge of implementing educational standards, working with diverse populations, and changing forms of student assessments. Clearly, teachers need more time to work with colleagues, to critically examine the standards and to revise curriculum. According to Collinson and Cook (2000), teachers need opportunities to develop, master, and reflect on new approaches to working with children. The changes teachers must make to meet the goals of reform entail much more than learning new techniques; they go to the core of what it means to teach. Professional development can no longer be viewed as an event that occurs on a particular day of the school year; rather, it must become part of the daily work life of educators. Teachers and administrators need time to work in study groups or small learning communities, to conduct action research, to participate in seminars, coach one another, plan lessons together and meet for general collegiality building initiatives.

Lasiter (1996) states that successful schools share a number of attributes: good leadership, a common vision that makes a climate of learning the highest priority, teachers who use best practices, an effective accountability system, and parent involvement. An attribute according to Lasiter (1996) less frequently discussed is the manner in which the teachers and staff pursue their professional development. The well known quip attributed to Will Rogers, usually quoted incompletely as, “You can’t teach what you don’t know”, is often applied to teachers who teach content in which they are less than expert. The entire saying however, conveys a significantly different meaning. “You can’t teach what you don’t know about places you ain’t never been.” The full message refers to experiential knowledge rather than content knowledge. The pursuit of learning is not a piece of content that can be taught. It is a value that teachers model. Only teachers who are themselves avid, internally motivated learners can truly teach their students the joys of learning. Dewey (1997, p. 48) states, “Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history that is learned.” Comer (2005) adds that the frequently espoused goal of life long learning for our students is hallow rhetoric unless the school is also a learning community in which teachers demonstrate engagement in meaningful learning activities. Teachers who are not “turned on” to learning themselves are trying to teach about “places they ain’t never been.”

According to Van Manen (1995) teachers who think reflectively about their own teaching are better equipped to be lifelong learners; they are also in a more favorable position to initiate changes in their existing practice through personal awareness of their classroom and its culture. Understanding diversity is critical for teachers because what they say, perceive, believe, and teach, can either disable or empower students.

This practice of having to work together is one of the most promising professional development strategies in recent years (Good & Weaver, 2003). Working collaboratively in study groups helps teachers ultimately understand how state and local standards apply to their teaching practices and to student work. Teachers are able to think more deeply about their teaching and what students are learning. As they see what students produce in response to their assignment, they can see the successes as well as the situations where there are gaps. In exploring these gaps, teachers improve their practice in order to reach all students (Cowley & Meehan, 2002). One goal of reform is to provide appropriate learning environments for students. Teachers, too, need an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth. Sharing their personal practice contributes to creating such a setting.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Interest in the concept of a professional learning community stems from the belief that when teachers work collaboratively, the quality of learning and teaching in the classrooms improves tenfold (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). The notion of a “community” draws attention to the potential that a broad range of people based inside and outside a school could mutually enhance each other’s learning and school development. While student academic achievement would be the ultimate goal, a thriving professional learning community would offer school staff the opportunity of a rewarding and satisfying work environment, contributing to resolving issues of teacher recruitment and retention, as well as enhancing staff practice and leaders’ repertoires of responses for dealing with complex issues (Hipp, Stoll, Bolam, Wallace, McMahon, Thomas, & Huffman, 2003).

Emerging views of collegial coaching, collaborative inquiry, and professional development proffer that educators grow through a synergistic process embedded in “critical learning communities” (Gimbert, 2000, p. 4). Louis and Kruse (1995) describe the learning community in a school as a group of people from multiple constituencies at all levels who collaboratively and continuously work together, their collective efforts grounded in reflective dialogue. Within this community, educators commit themselves to the work of reshaping their thinking and actions so that schools become places where

informed voices and multiple perspectives infuse every dimension of teaching and learning.

Studies show that teacher learning communities provide opportunities for individual teachers to interact in common planning experiences where shared resources are the norm, and develop norms of collaboration, inquiry, and experimentation in designing affective instructional practices, thus fostering the establishment of a shared culture (Hord, 1998). Such groups are forums for practitioners to probe deeply into instructional practice, prying at the very core of professional and personal values and identities. According to Hord (1998), when experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its associated learning, the result was a body of wisdom about teaching that could be widely shared. Hord (1998) declared that when teachers engage in the process of generating knowledge about their own teaching, their teaching is transformed in important ways, and the process of developing educational leaders is begun.

The process of fostering learning communities in school organization and culture enhances and enriches the power of collaborative reflection and collegial supervision for professional growth and educational change. In recognizing that teacher work places are embryonic and scattered, Supovitz (2002) suggests educational institutions can restructure teachers' time in schools for participating in windows of professional growth.

There are several reasons why study groups could prove to be essential: first, they encourage reflection rather than replication, secondly, study groups afford teachers an active role in their own professional development. Finally, study groups play an important role in building learning communities and creating environments for meaningful change to develop.

### **Summary**

The small learning community process supports participants in actively setting their own agenda for discussion and in critically reflecting on and examining their practices and beliefs with other educators. A study group accommodates diversity in developing teachers' own paths to learning and transformations. In study groups, teachers function as learners and problem solvers, promoting lifelong learning and modeling for students. Study groups are a means to an end, and the desired end needs to be positive change in student learning, achievement, and the learning environment. When increased student success is the vision and guiding principle, study groups are motivated, work harder, and take responsibility for the learning process. "What is happening differently in my classroom and what will be the impact on student achievement as a result of study group activities?" should be the driving questions that guide study group participants through the process. A strong relationship between efficacy and collaboration will engage in meaningful professional discourse that will ultimately promote enhanced student achievement.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Setting**

The elementary level school where my study took place is located in rural New Jersey. It is currently home to approximately 300 third, fourth, and fifth grade students. According to the State Report Card, the first language spoken at home in order of frequency is English at over 90%, Spanish at 6%, with the remainder a combination of French, Russian, and Chinese. The student mobility rate for those students who enter and leave during the school year stands at 13%. The student/faculty ratio currently is 9:1. The staff consists of one building administrator, secretary, nurse, guidance counselor, social worker, several instructional aides, and a professional staff of one male teacher and 32 female teachers. There are five classes of each grade level, with 6 of the 15 containing both regular and special education students. This building also contains one self-contained multiple handicapped classroom. The percentage of faculty possessing a degree beyond a bachelor's level is 35%. The school is a one story all brick building in the shape of an H, with all classrooms centered off either the library or the all- purpose room. This site also has six trailers attached to help alleviate the crowded conditions. These trailers house two of the five fifth grades, special education pull out areas, guidance, and speech areas.

Currently, this school has a poverty rate of 65% with 140 students meeting the qualifications for Title I services. Four years ago, this school scored a 20% in

mathematics and 27% in Language Arts content areas on the State Assessment. Over the past several years the scores have risen dramatically in the area of Mathematics, but unfortunately, they still fall short of the 75% proficiency level in Language Arts as mandated by the New Jersey Department of Education. As a result, the 2004-2005 school year marked the first year this particular school was identified as “in need of improvement” under the sanctions set forth by the No Child Left Behind Education Act in the area of Language Arts/Literacy.

### **Participants**

The focus of my research study was the six Title I teachers and the Literacy Coach assigned to this identified school. All participants are female between the ages of 30 and 55, with various teaching experience ranging from 7 years to 30 years. All but three teachers have had previous experience as classroom teachers, providing appropriate knowledge of the demands, needs, and concerns present in most classrooms today. Only two of these seven participants hold an advanced degree, and no one is currently taking any graduate level courses.

All of the Title I teachers in this study work every day in two classrooms in small group settings. The Literacy Coach works in conjunction with all classroom teachers, but may only actually visit each classroom twice a week. This position offers additional support in planning lessons, providing supplemental materials as needed, and assuring proper pacing of curriculum.

These seven teachers have opportunities to influence and support every professional staff member in this at-risk school environment and therefore, can affect improved teaching practices quite effectively.

### **Design of Research**

My objective in the study was to document the reported and observed experiences of the teachers participating in a small learning community. My goal was to see if collegial discourse would promote increased confidence levels and improve teaching practices to help all students achieve to high standards of learning and development. I documented the dialogue, reflected on the dialogue, and interpreted the dialogue to evaluate the benefits and difficulties of working in a learning community. Two components were necessary to build a collaborative relationship among these participants: first, it needed to take place with an equal relationship among all parties, and secondly, all parties had to make a commitment to engage in dialogue and mutual inquiry with each participant having opportunities to experience each other's knowledge and expertise.

### **Small Learning Communities and Collaborative Relationships**

Seven teachers worked together as interdependent colleagues and engaged in rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning as a result of the high level of collaboration. With this type of collaboration, the teachers worked on teaching and coordination of instructional practices. This small learning

community gave these participants a sense of responsibility for the success of each member and joint responsibility for the students they teach.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research aims to get a better understanding through first hand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of actual conversations (Hubbard & Power, 2003). It aims to understand how the participants derive meaning from their surroundings, and how their meaning influences their behavior. To achieve this desired result, the majority of data for this study were gained through participant observation. Field logs served as a recording of behaviors in this learning community environment, as well as in-depth descriptions of the social interaction between participants. Everything was noted as if it was happening for the first time, and everything was subject to inquiry. This method of data collection attempted to see the world from the participants' point of view and provided evidence that what the participants said and did was a product of how they saw and interpreted the environment in which they worked.

Other sources of data that provided evidence to support the findings were individual interviews (see Appendix A) and a pre and post Survey (see Appendix B). Both the survey and the interviews provided a valuable means of gathering social, emotional, and academic information. While offering the teachers an element of safety, the anonymous survey provided data regarding their feelings and understanding of learning communities and collaboration. The interviews,

conducted at the conclusion of the study, provided information on the relationships that developed between participants, the types of professional development activities that can foster growth and change, and the role this study group played in achieving growth and change.

### **Methodology**

My first step in the research process was to submit an application to Moravian College's Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB). This board reviewed my application to ensure that the study was to be conducted in an ethical manner. My research proposal was accepted before the research study began (see Appendix C). A critical element in professional learning communities is the continuous engagement of staff in inquiry directed toward improving the learning of students (Emihovich & Battaglia, 2000). Realizing this objective, all participants took part in 12 one-hour sessions that were scheduled within the course of the normal school day. The study group participants, in conjunction with their co-teachers, redesigned their Wednesday teaching schedule to free up the last hour of the day, allowing these teachers to participate without loss of student contact time. The art room in this building was free at the above mentioned time, and so it became the meeting room for the study. This is a full size classroom with a full wall of windows opposite the entry way. In the center of the room is a circular table that sat eight adults comfortably, and this was where the participants gathered each week. The room was very cheerful with its

wide range of colors, providing lots of space for student work samples to be displayed while offering an inviting atmosphere in which to work. By having this room within the main building, it allowed for easier access for the participants.

The cross-grade level teachers began the process of developing a community of learners, by completing a Pre Survey (see Appendix B) to help identify behaviors of collaboration for themselves and their colleagues. The objective for this session was to provide teachers with a research based rationale for working together in a small learning community. My planned procedure was to begin by building the foundation and enthusiasm for the professional learning participants. From there, the teacher participants would investigate standards for quality professional development, while examining their own teacher needs. This step was designed to help teachers think about the personal and professional needs of their school. Once the needs were identified, teachers would look at research studies to help them understand their needs and provide evidence that teacher collaboration is a researched and effective process for building teacher expertise. After much deliberation by all stakeholders, the learning community participants would define their expectations, and decide on a goal. Once the community established a clear goal, they would design a plan that will guide them on their journey. This plan for learning and action would help teachers reflect on current teaching practices and examine what these practices say about their beliefs, concerns, students, teaching, and learning. That was the plan, but, as you will

soon find out, sometimes, the best laid plans do not even come close to meeting the needs of the participants.

All participants had their own reasons for becoming part of this study group; most were modest goals of looking for answers to immediate questions. The study group sessions allowed us to hear many of our colleagues and to contemplate a variety of perspectives. The study group often addressed issues related to curriculum mandates within the school district, such as Guided Reading, Accountability, Reading and Writing Strategies, and Assessments; these mandates were ones that the teachers wanted to talk about with their colleagues. This decision was made by them.

### **Trustworthiness**

I ensured trustworthiness in my research by obtaining necessary permission from the teacher participants (see Appendix D) and the building administrator (see Appendix E). All seven teachers were given a letter explaining the research study and how the study would be incorporated within the course of the regular school day. This letter, also containing the participants' rights, was distributed on September 15, 2005. Seven teachers wishing to participate returned the signed letter indicating their understanding of the research study and their approval to participate.

My learning community format encouraged full participation of all those present in a risk free environment with participants knowing that what they said in

private remained private. This promoted trust and respect amongst the participants, while the sharing of and seeking of new ideas served as a vehicle that supported their teaching practices. The participants of my study were assured that their comments and contributions to this research project remained confidential, and that any feelings or concerns would not be used against them. These participants were also informed that identities would be preserved through pseudonyms on any document or examples found in the findings from this study. The consent forms were written in clear, concise language that informed the participants that at any time during this activity they could withdraw from the study without fear of negative consequences.

During the length of the research study, the teachers were encouraged to reflect on their practice, connecting fieldwork experiences, data analysis, and knowledge learned during the discussions. Immediately following each of the discussions, I noted my reflections to ensure that a high level of honesty, respect, fairness, and accuracy was maintained throughout my study. I also revisited the field logs and my reflection notes multiple times, looking for areas that needed to be extended or clarified for the purpose of enhancing fairness, relevancy, and accuracy.

One bias that I had to address was my personal pro-professional development stance. I believe that professional development can benefit all the stakeholders. It is my belief that the professional dialogue generated in a

community of learners enables new knowledge and understandings to be built by the participants, thus facilitating inquiry and professional growth. I had to be patient and allow these participants to develop those beliefs, at their own pace. My understandings were fueled by the notion that teachers are able to reflect.

## DATA ANALYSIS

In this qualitative research study, data analysis was an on-going process which took place both during and after the data collection period. In order to better understand the participants' experiences, a pre study survey was administered to help teachers identify behaviors of collaboration for themselves as well as their colleagues (see Appendix A). Data from both the pre and post survey were analyzed and coded (see Figure 3).

The heart of my study came from the field log notes taken during the 12 weekly sessions. Several techniques were used during this process, such as reading and rereading the transcriptions of the field logs and reflecting on those transcriptions that resulted in identified categories that emerged from within each meeting as a result of working with the data.

The initial list of categories changed as I worked the data and identified new categories to accommodate data that did not fit the existing labels. Main categories were broken into subcategories which allowed for greater discrimination and differentiation. This process continued until no new themes or subcategories were identified. Occasionally, sections of data fit into two or more categories, and reading and re-reading the text helped ensure that the data were correctly categorized.

The coding began the process of cutting away those notes and details that were not of any consequence in order to concentrate on what was important. To

help determine which categories appeared to carry more value, I counted the number of times a particular theme came up, or the number of times the participants referred to a certain theme. This count provided a rough estimate of relative importance, and revealed general patterns in the data.

Gradually I began to sense more clearly what was important and wrote analytical memos about the meaning of significant events, selecting them for further inquiry. I looked for similarities and differences and was able to then organize the codes into bins that provided meaningful tags to words, phrases, and situations, naming was what important about them and distinguishing them from the rest of the data.

The major bins and related codes that developed in response to my research were: accountability, emotional connections, enhanced student achievement, learning communities, professional development, strategies, and teaching practices. To conduct a more focused investigation, I organized these bins and codes into a graphic organizer (see Appendix F). These emerging categories and recurring themes formed the basis for analysis and interpretation of the data.

After gathering and collecting the data, I took another step to further analyze my findings by using the narrative forms of a vignette and Patai poem. These two forms were designed to bring to life what was hidden beneath the literal interpretation of the story. Both the vignette and Patai poem provide the

VOICE that shows the visible changes in how teachers saw themselves, their students, and their roles as teachers.

While collecting and analyzing my data, I was also engaged in reflective dialogue with John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Lev Vygotsky, and Lisa Delpit. After reading the varying perspectives of these philosophers, and to better organize my thoughts and data, I wrote reflective memos exploring multiple quotes from these authors, and the connection of their intended meaning, to the relationship of my data. For example, as John Dewey noted in *Experience and Education* (1997), by understanding the continuity of individuals' experiences and the situation and community in which they found themselves, these teachers designed experiences that led to their growth. Their growth was powered in part by interpreting the learners' statements and actions in order to shape productive experiences for their students. As evidenced through analyzing field log data, this study provided these teachers support that promoted teaching in ways that connected with their students, while developing an understanding of differences that arose from cultures, family experiences, developed intelligences, and varied approaches to learning.

To read the above mentioned educational leaders while collecting and analyzing my data provided much needed emotional and academic support. Though each brought his or her own beliefs to the table, the underlying theme to all of these philosophers was that teacher education, with its grounding belief that

education proceeds from the individual in his/her social context, offers a framework for teacher educators to study their experiences in order to better enable teachers to harness their personal professional knowledge. As Dewey (1997, p. 50) stated, “Education as growth or maturity should be an ever present process.”

## **MY STORY**

### **The Birth of Ownership**

The day finally arrived for my study to begin, but I was a nervous wreck because I so wanted to provide these teachers an experience that would enhance their teaching practices while assuring increased academic performances for their students. I began by explaining that the focus of my study was to observe and report the effect a small learning community would have on increased student achievement. I described sessions where we would be analyzing student data and teaching practices, discuss research based literature on key topics, and use a Blog to allow our discussions to continue long past our allotted time.

“No offense to you Margie, but the morale in this building right now is lower than dirt, all of us already have more work than we can successfully handle, so I am not reading any more articles.” This was a response that interrupted not only my planned introduction but before I had any chance to respond to it, the other teachers nodded in agreement with this declaration. It literally stopped me in my tracks. What was I going to do? What seemed like from far off in the distance, I heard Courtney continue with, “The biggest problem around here is the lack of communication. No one ever talks, so if we are going to discuss things, we need to do it here, so that everyone gets to hear the same thing and there is less chance of misinterpretation of the printed words.” That did not sound too badly; it was certainly something I could work around. So just when I began to breathe a

little easier, the other shoe fell to the ground. Apparently Courtney became the spokesperson for this group when she stated, “I NEED – WE NEED this time to be about OUR needs. We will participate in this study, ONLY, if we can decide what topics we need to meet about. This is an issue that cannot be negotiated. We need to take control of this study group.”

Within fifteen minutes, all the work I had previously prepared went right out the window. With my head spinning I recalled the words of Paulo Freire (2005), that as an educator, I can never start with my own agenda, but rather, must always start from the participants’ own definition of their needs. With Freire’s guidance, I knew immediately that the decision to forego my own agenda was the correct one. These teachers were desperately seeking support, and I was bound and determined to allow this learning community format to provide what they needed to raise their confidence levels, their sense of ownership, and their sense of collegiality. And once the decision was made to focus on the participants’ needs, the thick level of tension that so permeated the room all but disappeared. The stage was set for these teachers to begin the task of looking within themselves for the answers to their concerns.

### **“Nothing Will Happen if We Allow Nothing to Happen”**

The DRA literacy assessment became the first hurdle brought to the table. This tool is used as a pre and post assessment and is administered to every enrolled student and as a result, plays a vital role in the development of

instruction. The issues of inconsistency in the administration of this piece, the lack of a writing component in the grade 3 kit, compared to the extensive writing component in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade kit, and the huge amount of time it took to administer the test, were some of the issues that generated the greatest amount of dialogue. According to Abby, “I just love the data this test gives us, but there is absolutely no time to sit with our peers and analyze the data, collaborate, and then, design a plan that best addresses the needs of our students. Maybe we should all look at our schedules to see if we can free up some time.” Only into the second session, the realization of the value of meeting together in this small learning community hit home with this statement from Courtney. “Guys, this is exactly what Margie is trying to do for us. This study group gives us time to collaborate, to do collegial thinking and planning. Remember last week when Margie agreed to drop her agenda for us so that we could take responsibility for our learning, and our issues? Well it is now up to us to make something of this opportunity.” With this statement, I realized that the best way to help these teachers regain control of what takes place in their teaching, was to step back and allow these teachers to do exactly what Courtney suggested. By my talking less, I allowed these educators the opportunity to step up and take ownership. This sense of community, which was already developing among them, allowed them to see that together, they could begin to make a difference. I am convinced that for the first time in a long while, they felt that they had a VOICE and what they had to

say was being heard. They did not always have to agree with each other, but they decided, as a group, that all members had a voice that deserved to be heard. And so as a group, they decided that the third grade schedule needed to be refigured in order to better serve the needs of their students. With all of these teachers reflecting on what was needed to provide sustained amounts of time with their most at-risk students, they designed a schedule that met success from all stakeholders. These teachers saw a problem, they took ownership of the problem, and they stuck with the problem until there was a solution. When I commented on the progress I had witnessed concerning their methods of collaboration and community building, Erin simply stated, “Nothing will happen if we allow nothing to happen.” These teachers were no longer willing to allow “nothing” to happen.

After this session, in a span of several days, my job responsibilities placed me in this school multiple times for various reasons, and each time I was there, I came across a participant from the study group engrossed in heavy dialogue with non-participating teachers. Conversations concerning curriculum decisions and analyzing, not just data, but teaching practices, were quite the norm. Even the teacher most reluctant to change, displayed a positive attitude towards the small changes that had occurred in her teaching as a result of the study. Changes in the schedule, changes in the administration of the DRA, slight changes to the

approach to Guided Reading, were all a result of the support and suggestions gained from the study group.

### **More Confidence = More Determination**

We were on a roll and met the next topic, fluency, with more confidence and determination. While all teachers had concerns, one teacher in particular needed assurance that students, even at this intermediate grade level, had issues that once addressed, could improve the comprehension and reading ability for even the most at-risk students. Through dialogue and some recent research on the value of fluency in building overall literacy proficiency, Anne still had a problem with the lack of time and space to explore methods of improving fluency rates. Anne's co-teacher liked her classroom to be quiet, and Anne knew that in order to develop fluency, she would need to relocate her small group of students. That unfortunately, was easier said than done. There was no other place outside the regular classroom in which to take her students. Fortunately, Anne was not willing to give up on this issue. She firmly believed that this strategy was important to the success of her students. Therefore, Anne requested she be given permission to take her small group of students into the hallway right outside the classroom to allow her students an opportunity to raise their voices in a Readers' Theater format that would assist in raising their individual fluency rates. This suggestion took me by surprise because it placed Anne, and her students, in one of the noisiest locations in this building, right outside the gym. To test her resolve, I

asked, “Do you know what research says about fluency, Anne?” Without skipping a beat she replied, “Yes, as a matter a fact I do. I believe in this that much that you told me a long time ago to turn to research to find evidence to support when we want to try something new. So I did. Research tells me that by increasing the fluency rate of readers, the comprehension levels will increase greatly. Isn’t that what we want? I can’t do it in the classroom, so I want the chance to try it here in the hallway.” Not only was she committed to the cause of her students, she researched the strategy to support evidence as to why she should do it. All I ever wanted for these teachers was to get them to incorporate reflective learning in their teaching practices to guide them in their instruction. I wanted them to turn to research based literature to support their beliefs. When Anne gave me all that I wanted, how could I not take a risk and grant her permission to try to test her theory about increased fluency rates. I placed the responsibility on her shoulders to be reflective, honest and conscious of what she was doing. With this small release of ownership on my part, Anne turned a corner that resulted in tremendous gains to her overall teaching practices, her confidence level, her sense of ownership, and ultimately, her students’ academic performances.

### **The Flip Side of Elation**

As high as we were the week before, the opposite was true for this next session. I walked into one frustrated teacher after another exhibiting pure confusion when it came to the new elementary level progress report. They came

into the room with one thing on their minds, and that was the lack of documents to support the grading of their students. “I am just so overwhelmed with the amount of paperwork with this whole progress report concept,” stated Bonnie. “The progress report is based on standards, they either get it or they don’t. What’s the issue?” This response by Erin single-handedly ignited an explosion of attitudes and frustrations, but also jump started some rich dialogue on the need to collaborate with their co-teachers on meaty issues such as rubrics and individual assessment pieces. Bonnie continued with, “But I also think we need a clear definition of Balance Literacy. We need to discuss our understanding of it and then come to a consensus of what we expect it to be. This decision cannot be made from the top down like everything else. Administrators need to start listening to the people who are in the classrooms working with this every day.” Abby commented that, “In my Guided Reading groups, basically all I have are my lesson plans and what I observed. I have no document piece to support anything!” As the dialogue continued covering extreme levels of confidence, confusion, and frustrations, I began to realize that while this experience allowed these teachers to sound off on something that they felt they had no real input on, unfortunately, I also think this level of frustration had somewhat fogged their vision to the real problems confronting them. At this point, I knew I had to make a decision to either allow the discussion to continue resulting in increased negativity and helplessness, or I could redirect the conversation to clear the way for them to look

at the problems facing them through researchers' eyes and, through effective dialogue, begin to discover potential solutions to those issues and concerns.

“Ladies, I know all of you are feeling quite frustrated and confused over this issue, but let's just stop and think about what has been said. All of you are commenting about the mechanics of the tool, but what are we forgetting?”

SILENCE. I purposely stretched the silence mood until it was almost too much to bear, to force them to think and to reflect on what they were complaining about, and the issues causing so much frustration. After what seemed like a lifetime Abby continued with, “I'm sorry, but I feel so frustrated, I have no time between classes and I can't remember from one class to the next what was accomplished. How am I ever going to provide adequate information to my classroom teachers? I am doing nothing that is of value to them!”

When her colleagues continued to sit there with eyes as big as saucers and wearing expressions that said they were at their breaking point, I continued with, “We're forgetting about the valuable information you are learning every day from your students during those small Guided Reading sessions. That information is what you are using to drive your instruction, isn't it?” I wanted them to reflect on the data they were gaining every day and through their fog of despair, begin making the connection, and so I paused slightly and continued. “Your piece to this whole puzzle is a very important piece. Your data may look different than the classroom teacher's, but that doesn't mean it is any less important. Abby, do you

think you could take the last minute of your group time and jot down some notes in the margin of your lessons plan? You won't need anything extra, the plan is right in front of you, and then those little notes could help you reflect about what you did at a later time." This statement was intended not just for Abby, but for all of them so that they could begin to believe that regardless of how things looked today in their minds, there was always a possible solution that could ease the way for them. I again paused deliberately to allow them time to look within themselves for a possible solution. Erin said, "A long time ago Margie, you suggested we start getting used to writing anecdotal notes and I guess we better start doing it if we want to have concrete evidence of where a student is academically." "I'm beginning to see that using data is much more valuable than just gathering it," added Courtney. By this time in the discussion, time had expired for the day, and even though the teachers were all in agreement with Courtney's declaration, I could tell from their expressions, that even though they felt like progress had been made, they also knew that the road that lay ahead would also be paved with frustrations and concerns of a different nature. But for today, great progress had been made. These teachers received a nudge in the right direction from me, and for the first time since the study began, they really looked to, and depended on each other for the answers to the concerns and issues that for so long had plagued their teaching practices.

As I was leaving the building on this particular day, I came across two of the participants discussing the session and how frustrated they still felt. Both of these teachers stated that it was the classroom teacher whom they felt sorry for the most, because at least they, the Title I teachers, had somewhere to go and vent. The classroom teachers had no one. I asked them what they thought they could do to help ease the problem confronting their co-teachers. They looked at each other and almost simultaneously agreed that they could offer their teachers the same support that they were getting from this study group. I told them that it was an excellent idea and by extending the benefits of the study group to the regular classroom teachers was a great way to build proficiency across the whole school. One of the teachers commented that even though they were feeling frustrated at that point, they really appreciated having someone listening to them and supporting them. I advised both of them that THEY had the power within themselves to make the necessary changes to improve their teaching practices and student achievement. I was only there to get them started.

### **Out of Despair and Frustration Comes Growth**

The next morning at a district level in-service, I approached Abby to find out how she was feeling after the last session, since she seemed to have been most frustrated and confused. Before I could ask her, Abby thanked me for the previous day's session. She stated that the session gave her the motivation to design a note taking system that would work well with her students. She stated she had worked

on it all night, but said she had to feel the highest level of frustration before she was moved to action. She commented that the study group provided her with the fuel that forced her to look at her practice and refine it. She believed that without this study group, she would have been very content to stay with the same old stuff that in her mind was not working any longer, but was a lot easier to deal with. Abby continued to say that she knew that what she designed may need to be tweaked from time to time, but that's OK, she now felt prepared to handle it.

WOW!

Due to the extreme level of emotions that governed the previous session, I wanted to take a couple of minutes so that the teachers could reflect on how they saw the study group process in relationship to their personal and professional lives. I wanted them to start to reflect on the many positive things that had occurred as a result of their hard work and effort in collaborative study. And was it not appropriate that the first teacher to speak up was the teacher who experienced the most frustration the week before. "I just have to say that after last week, I really felt upset and frustrated, but in reflecting back on it, it gave me the kick I needed to make some changes. And the best part is that what is happening here is affecting my classroom teachers as well in a very positive fashion," Abby stated. "This opportunity to meet every week serves many purposes, but even if nothing ever is changed, this is a tremendous help just to have a place to come to and vent, to share ideas, to collaborate on better ways to reach our students. We

really must figure out a way to keep this study group within our workday next year and there after,” added Courtney. Erin commented, “This study group is what is getting me through the day, but it is also a little upsetting because it is making it very clear the work that still needs to be done.” Abby summed up everyone’s feelings the best when she added, “I agree with you Erin, but for the first time in a long time, I NOW believe we CAN begin to make a difference.”

**That’s What I Believe!**

I’m confused!

Let me get this straight.

Yeah! We’ll see how it goes.

I think I need to make this work.

That is also my big beef!

So what do I do?

Maybe we need to look at refiguring our schedules.

It really is making a big difference already!

I am just now getting to know my students.

Maybe we need to seriously think about our teaching practices.

Well that will help and make a big difference for these kids.

We just need to be consistent.

How do you address this problem?

I guess I need to get a notebook or something where I can take notes.

I think I need to set up some peer visits.

The peer visit was absolutely wonderful!

I want accountability for these kids, but I realize I might have to tweak my teaching practice in order for this to happen.

Because of coming here, I got the kick I needed to make some changes.

Maybe we can begin to make a difference.

**That's what I believe.**

Figure 1. Patai poem that illustrated teachers' transformation.

After allowing the group a couple of minutes of digesting her statement, Abby stated she still needed to discuss the new progress report for a couple of minutes. She explained that all the indicators under the Language Arts/Literacy section were forcing her to spend too much time assessing her students. She asked for assistance in addressing this concern. Immediately, Erin gave her a very clear explanation for the need to have so many indicators, but also a way to address them when she said, "Not everything needs to be addressed this first time. Just leave them blank because they are just in the grade book to help you figure out what to look for under each standard." "Thanks Erin, but this new standards based report card system requires rubrics for everything, and I don't think I have the right rubrics for everything." With this statement, Erin pulled out the language arts curriculum that contained several forms of rubrics that Abby could adapt to meet the needs of her students. This helped to ease the confusion and frustration

in trying to design multiple forms of formative assessments not just for Abby, but also for the other participants as well. Finally with a sense of accomplishment, Abby stated, “This standards based progress report certainly is a lot more work for teachers, but I think it really gives the parent a clearer picture of where their children are in relation to the standards. I guess that makes it all worth it!”

To help ease the strain of paperwork for her peers, Bonnie commented that, “With Guided Reading groups, all our record keeping should be anecdotal notes. I am finally feeling competent using them and I can tell you first hand, they are much better than subjecting these kids to one assessment after another.” It seemed to me that this comment of anecdotal notes demonstrated that there was evidence to show that you do not need to be constantly testing these kids. There are tried and true alternatives that provide the same, if not more information on each child. It was great that someone among this group had attempted different things and felt competent enough to report if they worked or not. Even though I have used anecdotal notes in the past quite effectively, the message meant more coming from one of their own.

Courtney added, “Remember we have to compare these students to the state standards, so if our Guided Reading groups are doing below grade level work, we need to reflect that somewhere on this progress report. I have to be honest here, last year I thought my kids really were working hard, and so I thought I owed it to them to give them an A in reading. At the end of the year,

when we were comparing students' growth to the standards, only two of these kids even came close to meeting the standards. What a dis-service to those kids and what a false message to parents. We really have to think about the effects of these reports on students." I could not have said this better myself. Teachers are so used to comparing student to student, and now they must compare their mastery of a skill or concept to the standard. This new progress report forced people to look at and understand the standards, and for some, this was probably for the very first time to this degree. In reflecting on past experiences, Erin stated, "I think that has been one of our problems. We don't set the expectations high enough for these kids. We don't expose them to enough grade level material, and then we wonder why they can't pass the grade level assessment. We have to expose them to strategies that will support them in grade level work and these harder tasks." It seemed to me that finally, they saw the real issue facing them in their teaching practices. Time was up for this part of the day, but I certainly was interested in seeing how they intended to address this new revolution.

### **Discussion Board**

The elementary technology specialist arrived for the introduction to the Discussion Board. The teachers each had a computer from which they were able to follow the steps to complete to gain access to the forum. The technology specialist gave background experiences of various teacher groups and students across the district using a discussion board and the many advantages of

incorporating this format into our teaching practices. Time was limited, but each teacher was able to log into the program and reply to the welcoming message. From this short amount of time, it was hard to determine the exact level of engagement for these teachers, but they were willing to give it a try for the good of the group.

### **Data Analysis Helps Build Sense of Community**

It was determined that the topic for this next session was to analyze students' writing samples, and then determine what the results meant to their current teaching practices. Teachers had time to read the samples, look at any comments added to the scoring sheet, and then discuss with a partner any strengths or weaknesses they noted. After a quick review of the scoring sheets, a teacher suggested they take careful note of the many Off Topic papers and to think about what they could do to improve the writing skills of those students. One major area of concern for these teachers was the high number of students scoring below grade level proficiency. When asked why, Erin immediately responded, "I think we do not do enough of 'writing on demand' during the course of the year and they just are not familiar with this format." Anne commented, "They also are not used to being timed." Unanimously, they all added, "Well, we need to incorporate more of that during our teaching then." Bonnie continued, "I think our students need the organization that brainstorming provides them." After much discussion on this point, Erin summed up the

dialogue with everyone agreeing to, “If we teach them the good strategies needed to write for all genres, then, maybe, that’s all they need. And if the assignment is ‘on demand’ type of writing, or response to literature writing, they will have the know how to succeed.” Courtney added, “It’s not that they don’t want to succeed, they just don’t know how to succeed.” Erin stated, “Then I guess we all have to do a lot more modeling for them. We keep on modeling and then build on what they have learned.” Callie commented, and they all agreed, “Now that’s a suggestion that could really make a difference in the writing development of these students.”

During this session great dialogue took place with the spirit of mutual respect and a strong sense of community. Even though not all the issues and concerns were resolved, from my perspective, these teachers gained a lot of confidence in the way they addressed the topic, analyzed the topic, and then put into action some of the issues that needed to be addressed immediately.

### **Community Building**

The next session began with a statement by Courtney declaring the value in transferring what they have gained from meeting together in the study group, back to their classroom co-teachers. She continued by explaining her conversation with her classroom teacher regarding dialogue generated around the students’ writing samples. Courtney stated that by sharing her understanding of the topics discussed, it had allowed for greater consistency in their teaching methods,

resulting in higher level thinking activities for their students. She continued by adding that if this study group can produce such changes within her teaching experiences, imagine the overall effect it could have if expanded to include all professional staff.

It was at this point that these teachers began looking at what they were doing through a broader lens. They knew they were making a difference within their own personal teaching practices, but with Courtney's revelation, they began to realize their actions and discussions were also having a direct impact on their peers.

After a minute or two to digest the importance of the knowledge just gleaned, Courtney, very confidently, asked her colleagues for their advice in solving this concern. "How can we get these kids to improve in their sustained reading time?" Bonnie chimed in with, "We don't have the time to make that happen. We'll never get them to 45 minutes of sustained reading." Abby suggested they set rules to help, such as no bathroom breaks and no roaming the room during the designated time. Another teacher commented that if they start with 15 minutes and then continue to build on that, eventually, the students will become comfortable with reading independently for long periods of time. "Maybe with these students who are never exposed to grade level texts, we should pull them aside and do read aloud," was a suggestion offered by Erin.

Modeling, accountability, strategies, choice, and peer visits were also a major part of the dialogue that took place on this particular day. And after much bantering back and forth on the above mentioned suggestions, Courtney so eloquently summed up their feelings with, “If we do nothing, they (students) will surely fail.” I am convinced that this truly amazing, yet simple statement placed the blame of not reaching the needs of all their students on THEM, and not on the students or any other outside source. This took a lot of courage for them to come to this realization and it indicated to me the level of support and mutual trust that had been building since the beginning of this study group.

The next scheduled session started a little late because some of the participants were involved in doing some individual assessments for the new progress report. However, when the other participants saw me enter the building, they immediately stated that they were glad it was study group day, because they had some important issues to discuss. This declaration by them not only made me feel very proud of their transformations, but more importantly, it demonstrated that these teachers saw the value in what they were doing in this learning community format.

### **Collaboration and Collegiality**

Abby set the stage for today’s direction with, “I don’t know about anyone else, but this year, for the first time in my career, I don’t know what I am doing. I question everything I do. I question if I am asking my students the right questions.

I question if I am covering the right material for the standards. I just feel so disjointed.” This teacher was transferred from the primary level to this intermediate grade level, and as a result of this study group, has begun to reflect on how and what she is doing to meet the academic needs of her students. This was an amazing leap of faith for this teacher, but she knew that her colleagues would not let her fall to the ground. And with the following statement, it also demonstrated that she is including her co-teachers in her collaborative group. “I don’t know about any type of training this level has received in the past since I am relatively new, but I have to tell all of you, that my co-teachers and I are in the process of revisiting our schedules yet again, to make sure that there is time for sustained reading. I don’t know how it will work out, but we’re trying. What we are planning on doing these next two weeks, is to try and take the last 10 minutes of the literacy block and devote it to some kind of word work activity since the students are so poor in this area. We’re going to do a test run to determine if we see any differences in student performances. I’ll tell you all about it after we analyze the results in two weeks.” It seemed to me that this statement clearly showed Abby’s enthusiasm with this whole collaboration and collegiality opportunity, but it also displayed her realization that she was truly a team player and her rapport with her co-teachers had improved tenfold since the start of this study group. Abby was sharing her ideas with her peers and then actually doing her own mini-study to determine the effectiveness those changes had to the

schedule and to increased student proficiency. She and her co-teachers were taking risks to seek improved teaching practices and enhance student achievement. This was an amazing example of taking control of the learning taking place in her classroom that she shared with her older, more experienced, study group colleagues.

Erin congratulated Abby on her risk taking imitative and added some advice to her plan when she stated, “We need to push these kids to read more because that’s where they will eventually pick up the skills you’re talking about Abby. So to help, the more they read, the better they will become in word study.” Sensing a huge increase in her self confidence, Abby continued with, “If we were to listen to all the research out there, it all states that we have to submerge these kids in books. It is through reading that kids develop vocabulary and correct spelling. And that brings us back to making sure we give these kids more time to do some sustained independent reading.” This was a great way Abby brought in research and a possible solution to the problem of word work. To continue the discussion even further, Erin added, “What these kids are missing, are the life experiences that would help them develop vocabulary. That’s what we need to provide for these kids, but how do you do it when we are only allowed one field trip a year? That will never make a difference for these kids. There is no time to extend the lessons into fun activities. That’s where the learning take place, but we are so bogged down with mandated materials that there is absolutely no time to do

anything fun. I used to cook a lot with my kids, they would learn through using recipes while learning life skills.” “Maybe we could get creative with scheduling to fit in some of these life experiences?” asked Bonnie. As you can see, the dialogue once again came back to schedules. Everything centered on TIME or the lack there of.

### **Accountability**

“Wait a minute,” yells Courtney, “I’m sorry, but if these kids have been in our system since they were three years old, why haven’t they yet mastered certain skills, like cutting and writing, by the time they reach us. You know what I think the problem is – we do NOT hold these kids accountable! Last week I had five kids refuse to do work of any kind. You know what happened to them – NOTHING! This is happening more and more because they know we won’t do anything to them. They know their parents won’t do anything. And I am sorry, some of these parents will NEVER become accountable, so we can’t count on them for any support. We are doing these kids a dis-service by not holding them accountable and I have had enough!”

Courtney said this with such emotion that it really forced everyone to give her their undivided attention. She described perfectly the underlying reason for a lot of the issues facing them today in their classrooms. One could feel her high level of frustration, yet she spoke with such determination that I knew she was not going to allow this concern to be ignored any longer. This problem however, is

much larger than just this building. Her willingness to take a risk to address it though, spoke volumes. This major concern has a ripple effect on overall academic performance and until it is addressed appropriately, all the in-service in the world will not change the status in this building. This took a lot of courage by this teacher to put this issue on the table and I was so very proud of her for taking that risk.

Bonnie commented with, “If you put a problem on the table, you have to also have some kind of solution.” This comment only added to Courtney’s determination as evidenced with, “If I had a solution, I would have done something about this a long time ago. This is what we need staff development in, not another in-service on language arts or math. Teachers know how to teach, but with all the discipline problems and emotionally disturbed students in their classrooms, the students who refuse to conform to anything are constantly interrupting their teaching. If a student is struggling academically, we can handle that. We bend over backwards to accommodate their needs, but when you have as many disruptive students in the classroom like we have – NO ONE is learning anything. This has to stop!” Bonnie came back with, “So what do you suggest we do about it?”

On a roll, Courtney continued with, “I have what I think could be a mini-solution to this problem. And that would be to set up an alternative type of classroom for the elementary level. We need to hit our SLC (Site Leadership

Council) full force so that they will light the fire under somebody to get this concept up and running. The change will not happen this year, but we really need to have something in place like the middle school. This system works well because they have a proper protocol for these disruptive students.” It seemed to me that this demonstrated that Courtney had been thinking about this issue in terms of a possible solution and immediately realized that was what this learning community was all about – looking for solutions to the problems that faced these teachers in their daily teaching practices.

Showing her lack of teaching at this level, Abby asked, “What has changed to allow these kids to just sit and not learn?” “Abby,” said Courtney, “when I first started teaching, students walked into OUR house. They listened and they obeyed the rules. They were there to learn. They didn’t throw tantrums because they knew that type of behavior was just not accepted by us. I am ANGRY at all the wasted time that exists in classroom today because no one will do anything about the problems that take up many of the seats in the rooms.” This was an excellent point made because it certainly plays a major role in why the test scores in this particular building are so low. Not letting the point die, Courtney continued with, “The problems that existed in our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms last year were in the middle school less than a month this year, and were placed in the alternative classroom. On our level, we have NO support from the district, yet we are still expected to meet the state cutoffs for proficiency. I have had enough. We

ALL have had enough!” I realized this statement was a plea for assistance, but unfortunately, it also was a realization for these teachers that none would be forthcoming any time soon.

Realizing her colleague was exhausted emotionally, Erin picked up the dialogue with, “I think the administrators and people in high places don’t believe a child of this age could be this bad. They blame us for not attending to their needs, and for some of these kids, we could be miracle workers and it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. Until people in high places come and see first hand the disruptive behavior that we have to deal with EVERYDAY, they will never support an alternative classroom for this level.” Having caught her breathe, Courtney chimed with, “The district has placed so many restrictions on us that we CAN’T get these kids the help they need, and as a result, we are forced to lower the expectations for all students because we have to deal with so many issues, besides the education of these students.”

While feeling the pain and the frustration level of these teachers, I also learned from their progression in this study group, that they would never move away from this topic, until they had taken a step towards finding a solution. And so I asked the following, “What is one thing that this group could do towards improving the situation?” I wanted these teachers to feel there was indeed something they could do to help themselves. I also wanted them to realize that there was a proper way to address this issue, but THEY needed to be the ones to

determine what that should be. I believed that by allowing them a risk free environment to express themselves in, doors opened for them to approach the problem with the support needed to reach some sort of resolution.

“I think the SLC needs to address this issue and address it now,” declared Courtney. “The next meeting for the SLC is planned for Monday,” added Erin. To show her support of the idea, Abby suggested, “Maybe all of us need to approach our grade level representative to the SLC so that they get the message loud and clear that this is something that needs immediate attention.” This comment supported the need for all stakeholders to approach the problem head on with equal share in the responsibility to get a resolution that was supported by all parties. And just to make sure that everyone understood the next step, Courtney explained, “We need to get this accomplished through the SLC to assure that it is consistent across the entire school. I think the protocol needs to be in place to meet the needs of everyone, because this issue affects everyone. We are not holding kids accountable, which means we are allowing them to fail. We are approaching our grade level representative to the SLC in hopes that something can be done to rectify this major concern.”

With such rich, deep dialogue taking place, before anyone realized it, the time was up for the day. And even though I felt their frustration, I believed these teachers also felt that they needed to stop side-stepping this major issue and

address it head on. They took a big risk here and I can only hope that some time soon, the risk will prove to have been worth it.

### **Discourse + Reflection = Action**

“Ladies, before we start today, I want to first review a list of topics that have been brought to the forum these past several weeks. I do this because I feel that you are now ready to start looking at solutions for these issues. After listening to the topics, you will still decide on the direction these sessions will take. In analyzing my data, it is amazing how many topics we have addressed and I thought you would be equally amazed by this list. Some of the topics were: flexible grouping, motivation for non-writers, balanced literacy, how to GUIDE students in Guided Reading groups, independent reading time, reading strategies, writing strategies, lesson extensions, and mini-lessons on writing. So where will you Ladies take us next?”

I wanted to start this session with a review of some of the topics to establish a framework for these teachers to look for possible solutions to their issues from within themselves. Not all issues could be easily resolved, but there had been many that with a little more dialogue and reflection, a solution could have been established. “I think we certainly need more comprehension techniques,” stated Courtney. Abby was quick to add, “It’s a shame we don’t have time to turn-key some of the strategies we have learned from this group, but there just isn’t enough time.” It seemed to me that this statement demonstrated that

these teachers have gained some insights that should be shared with their colleagues outside this study group. I knew that they were doing a lot of sharing within the group of teachers they co-taught with, but they also saw the need to expand that group to a whole group discussion, so that everyone was hearing and sharing the same message. Erin commented that, “I think our needy students still need Guided Reading five days a week to support their learning and for us to keep in touch with them.” “Maybe it’s just our way of thinking, maybe, we need to seriously think about our teaching practices,” stated Abby. The above mentioned topics supported the need to continue this study group format, while narrowing down the list of topics that could and should be addressed in future professional development situations.

“I think we enable these kids too much,” stated Becky. “As much as we want to guide our students, they need to become more independent in doing their work.” This key point had been discussed previously, but not to the point where the teachers now accepted full responsibility for the learning or lack of learning taking place in their classrooms. Courtney summed up her feelings, but also those of her peers with, “I just don’t want to fail them.” I am convinced that these teachers were no longer willing to allow failure to even be an option, and so they continued searching for ways to help meet those needs of their students while also raising the bar of expectations. “Maybe we need to integrate the Social Studies and Science contents into the language arts block to free up some time for

independent reading,” suggested Erin. “I know that is the best way to develop reading skills in these kids.” “Courtney, what you told me about your struggling student last week, needs to be said so everyone can benefit from it. Would you mind sharing it with everyone else?” asked Abby. This was Courtney’s story. “A couple of weeks ago, I gave one of my most struggling students, a more challenging book to read, yet, not expecting a whole lot. I felt like I needed to test this “raising the bar” theory. Well, this student produced much more than I ever could have imagined. It proved to me, that if we raise the bar, these kids WILL produce. It took a lot of time and hard work on both our parts. I modeled for a very long time what I expected her to accomplish on her own, and then I let her go. This was the hardest part for me because I felt she still needed me. It was amazing and best of all; she realized that she doesn’t have to settle for less and that she CAN be successful in school.” Not only did this story demonstrate that dialogue took place outside the framework of the study group, but more importantly, it awakened the knowledge in these teachers that they were indeed in a position that could affect the academic development of a child. How powerful that acknowledgment was, that by simply raising the bar, they were providing these kids with a future!

“I need help in my modeling techniques,” cited Abby. Courtney quickly offered her assistance with, “We should devote the entire month of September to modeling. I think it is important for kids to see the whole picture in order for them

to start and understand the process.” Callie added, “I would like some professional development on how to properly model for these kids since it is so important.” Erin further added, “We also must create an atmosphere in the building for reading.” “We need to build the stamina for these kids to read and the best way to do that I guess is to start with baby steps, like 15 minutes at first,” suggested Anne. Courtney once again sorted through all the underlying jargon when she said, “Building stamina is CRUCIAL for these kids to read and it is up to US to develop that.” Abby not quite sure of herself with this issue asked, “What type of follow-up do you do for independent reading then?” Erin offered the suggestion of using the independent reading time for conferencing with her students. This idea was warmly welcomed by Abby, and served as a reminder to the others to reflect upon that strategy in their own teaching practices. Bonnie commented with, “With my teachers, the morning reading time seems to be working very well. The kids know that they have to have decided on a book **before** school starts and during the morning read, they must be ready to read. Nothing else is accepted. It is up to US to set the stage for this, so that it doesn’t fail.” “And that, my friends, is a lesson to do it correctly,” added Courtney, “but it does pay off.”

“We talked about this over lunch the other day,” commented Abby, “and I still wonder how to address the issue when kids just stand there picking, and picking, and still not really picking out the book they want to read.” “Abby,”

Courtney said, “when you first start this process, you really need to have a set of hawk eyes and watch everything they do. It takes time to establish the routine, but with time and the proper modeling taking place, they will eventually get it. Just be patient with yourself.”

“I have a question maybe someone could help me with,” said Callie. “When your classroom teachers do shared reading and work on a skill for the week, do you, in your small groups, focus on that same skill, or do you do whatever your group needs? Do you gear your lessons to match what is taking place in the regular classroom?” This was a great question in my opinion, because it brought to attention the areas that needed to be addressed for this particular teacher to improve her teaching practice. And in all probability, if it affected one teacher, this question concerned all of them; they just didn’t realize it until this session. Courtney offered a suggestion with, “I focus my lessons on the needs of the group, but I certainly keep in mind the focus of the main teacher as well. What I have found that has worked extremely well, is introducing my students to many informational texts. It’s more comparable to the state assessment, and I am having huge success with them.” Bonnie added, “We also have to understand that a strategy is much more important to teach these kids than skills. If we teach them strategies, they can handle any task that we give them.”

Unfortunately, time was just about up for the day, but I wanted to see what exactly the teachers gained from this experience when I asked, “Ladies, who can

tell me one thing they can take away from today's discussion?" A much more confident Abby interjected, "I am happy to announce that the third grade group is moving towards providing more independent reading time for our students. We've realized the importance of this, and we are once again attempting to implement some changes next week. On a personal note, I am going to investigate and use more informational texts with my students." What a way to start the recap. I thought that this declaration showed the collaboration and collegiality that took place with this third grade group of teachers.

Bonnie added, "I just finished reading the book, *On Solid Ground*, which offers a lot of great suggestions on how to implement and manage independent reading times. At the beginning of the year, the author met with each child and asked them about their interests and what they liked to read, looking for sparks that might motivate them to read. She and the child then roamed the room and picked out the books that met the child's interests, and placed them in a personal bag for that individual child. The bag stayed with the child and contained several books that were available at any time for the child to pick up and read. I think that is something we could all do here and would help set up the independent reading time." This great offering provided a tangible tool they could immediately take away and implement.

"All of these are great suggestions," cited Abby, "but personally I want more accountability for my kids, so I think I might have to tweak something in

order to make it happen.” Bonnie continued with, “We complained earlier about these new progress reports, but after working with them, I really like the information they provide for us. And talk about accountability, when these parents come in and ask why their child is only getting a 1 in reading, we have proof that there is no parental support at home. That’s their accountability as well.”

“I have to say,” Erin commented, “the classroom libraries are really making a difference. All the money that went into this activity is paying off because I see books in the hands of students, and for some, it is the first time they have picked up a book without being told. That alone says it all for me!” What a perfect way to end a session. The session was productive in that it established some possible methods to help establish independent reading times in classrooms. There was wonderful support for Abby’s issues and questions and done in a way that Abby felt supported and willing to try some of these suggestions. There was also a lot of reflection taking place, along with quality discourse outside the confines of the learning community. Wonderful!

### **Teaching Practices**

During the next two weeks I was unable to schedule sessions due to other job related obligations, however, when we did come back together, I learned that these teachers had met on their own to continue discussions on such topics as Guided Reading, sustained independent reading times and literature circles. It was

also revealed that some of these teachers had designed a schedule where they could participate in peer visits. These teachers were so proud of themselves of the work they accomplished without me, not because they would not have been able to treat the issues the same way, but rather, because they felt empowered enough to want to continue the valuable work they had started. I knew these teachers had made tremendous growth in their professional development in the weeks that preceded, but it was at this point, that I knew these teachers had turned the corner and the idea of collaboration and collegiality had become ingrained in their daily work habits. In reflecting back on their animated conversation this particular day, I found myself at a loss for words because I knew there was nothing I could add to their own personal findings, and so I asked Abby how her peer visit had gone. In her usual excited manner, Abby commented, “The peer visit was absolutely WONDERFUL! The students were reading bibliographies during lit circles and it was simply amazing how all the students had jobs and they knew exactly what they were responsible for. They knew what was expected of them and they just did it. And best of all, ALL the students were reading! There was no roaming the classroom, they were reading. I still can’t get over that fact. In fact, while in the class, I overheard a conversation with a group where one child told another, “No! That’s not what a connector does. A connector connects text to text.” The dialogue taking place was really awesome!” Courtney commented, “I wish I could have visited during lit circle time. Are they finished yet?” Abby, who works in

this particular class, added, “We’re finished for this time, but we’ll be doing it another 2 or 3 more times before the end of the year. I’ll let you know when and you can schedule a peer visit at that time.” From the look on Courtney’s face, you would have thought she won the lottery. It seemed to me that all of these teachers were seeing first hand the value of including peer visits in their professional careers.

### **Enhanced Student Performance**

“As for increasing independent reading time,” Abby stated, “we have been trying real hard, but there always seems to be something that comes up that has to be addressed. I just don’t know how to make the time more productive. But I have to admit, the kids LOVE it. It’s just a time issue right now that we have to work through.” Erin asked, “Have you tried doing it during center time?” Bonnie added, “We’ve tried during Guided Reading time, but we weren’t real happy with that time slot. We still need that time to guide the students along, and unfortunately, that doesn’t allow them time to read independently. And center time didn’t really work that well either.” “I think just the idea of ‘centers’ is one area that offers too many varieties. We need to have a clearer definition and procedure for doing centers,” promoted Erin. “I think the behavior patterns of some of these 5<sup>th</sup> graders are just so bizarre, that to implement centers would be committing professional suicide,” added Courtney.

After much dialogue on the proper and best time to incorporate centers into their daily schedules and not really making any headway, I felt it was necessary to step in and offer some practical guidance. “Ladies, I do understand the problems facing all of you in trying to implement learning centers into your daily routine, however, I must tell you I used them religiously when I was in the classroom and they DO really work. It does involve proper groundwork to get them established, and it involves students being 100% certain of the expected behaviors, and above all, it MAY look completely different from your fellow teacher’s classroom. The development of the centers should focus on the needs of your students; therefore, your classroom should look differently than mine. Centers could be as simple as students working independently at their desks, or as complex as individual learning stages.” “I guess our centers should look differently than even first and second grade then,” stated Anne. “Absolutely,” chimed in Abby, “and I guess we better start thinking about how best to incorporate centers into our daily schedules because I think that may be the best time to get the independent reading time in.” Callie asked, “Do you think we could have some staff development on implementing centers where we get real concrete suggestions on what works at this grade level?” With this question I advised the teachers that staff development was indeed scheduled for the beginning of January on this very topic. I also suggested that they read the chapter on implementing centers in the resource book, *Guiding Readers and Writers:*

*Grades 3-6* in their library, and come to the in-service with a basic understanding and some questions they would like to explore with the consultant.

### **Daily Teaching Practices**

Becky decided to move on to the next topic of the day when she asked Abby how her mini-study went on incorporating word work into their daily teaching practices. Abby looked excited that someone remembered she was doing her own little research study but at the same time you could tell she wasn't happy with the results. "Well," she stated, "it all looked great on paper, but it didn't go so well in action. Having only 10 minutes is just not enough time to make connections for these students. They have no background to make the connections themselves, so by the time I did something to help establish a connection, the time was over. This TIME thing is a real problem, and I have a problem assuming these kids already know something. Based on what we learned from this mini-study, we are still working on revising our schedules and teaching practices, so I will continue to let all of you know how and when we start feeling we are making more of a difference."

"I have another question to ask everyone," stated Abby, "how are you getting your independent reading time in? We have tried every way we know, but it just doesn't seem like it's enough. I know a suggestion was just made about getting it in during center time, but how are you really doing it? From what we have already attempted, we can tell that the students love it; they are keeping up

their reading logs and even reading when ever there is a slight break in the action. So we want to continue incorporating it, but it's a struggle getting in all the other content areas when we do." Erin suggested, "Maybe you could try integrating more of the science and social studies into the literacy block to free up some time for them to just sit and read." Callie offered another suggestion when she said, "After recess each day, we have about 15 minutes that our kids are using to do reading. We know it's not a whole lot of time, but we are finding that if the students pick the right book, they try looking for time on their own to continue their reading. This way it helps to build the intrinsic motivation needed to sustain their reading."

Abby indicated she still had some issues with the integration idea when she stated, "When I have tried to integrate content areas, I felt like I was cheating these students if I didn't use a Guided Reading book." "Abby, we do a lot of science in our literacy block and we are finding that it really is OK even if all the kids are not on the same reading level. They are getting exposed to grade level material and because the interest level is high since they are mostly non-fictional books, they really are gaining grade level information and proficiency," informed Becky. "How do you approach the book then?" asked Abby. Becky guided her with, "The pre-reading then is VERY important because it establishes the background knowledge for these kids. Once you have established that connection, they really do get carried along with the group. If comprehension is there, they

will do great.” Anne offered this advice, “In our class, we do a lot of paired reading, and so far the kids love it and it seems to be helping. If you think about the Soar to Success model and do the same guided preview and summary before reading, you will be amazed at how well they do.” Abby ended the day by thanking everyone for their suggestions, support and wise advice, and indicated that she would indeed bring back these ideas to her co-teachers. She also advised her peers that she felt confident they would adapt one of the suggestions to help meet the needs of their students.

Aside from completing the post survey and participating in the closing interview segments, this concluded my official data gathering process. And while these teachers knew that my part of the study was completed, they informed me that they would be continuing this collaborative study group, and that I was invited to attend any time I was available. They informed me that this opportunity to come together to discuss strategies that were working with their students was much too valuable, not only to them, but also to their co-teachers and students. These teachers came to a consensus they just had to keep this study group going at all cost. They stated that their co-teachers also saw the value in this type of professional development and agreed to continue with the schedule as it stood, which provided time to accommodate the study group meetings.

My desire to transform these normal, everyday type of teachers into ‘Great Teachers and Learners’ became a reality with this declaration and as evidenced by

the following snippets taken over the course of the study, depicting the evolution of one of these Great Teachers.

### **The Making of A Great Teacher**

#### ***Day 1***

**No offense, but the morale in this building right now is lower than dirt, all of us already have more work than we can successfully handle, so I will tell you now, I am not reading any more articles. I just don't have the time and if I see one more article I am going to throw up.**

**I think the biggest problem we face is the lack of communication.**

**No one ever talks. We never have the time to sit and discuss our concerns or issues and I think we need to hash out things here where we all hear what is being said, we can comment immediately, and there is no chance of misinterpretation of the printed words.**

**I hope you can understand our problem here; right now we are so overwhelmed we are afraid to say anything for fear of getting screamed at.**

#### ***Day 2***

**Guys, this study group is exactly what we have been wanting for a long time. It gives us time to collaborate, to do collegial thinking and planning. It is up to us to make something of this opportunity.**

#### ***Day 3***

**We can at least give it a shot – couldn't hurt!**

**I can tell you right now where those reluctant readers stand as far as independent reading levels go and so I could just go down to the next level for the instructional level. So if I can wait until the middle of October to mark portfolios, I will really be able to pinpoint the level. Thanks.**

**I have a question regarding literature circles. Could I deviate from Guided Reading groups during the month of November and introduce literature circles without fear of getting this new teacher confused?**

#### ***Day 4***

**Your schedule allows you only a certain amount of time in each class, so I think you shouldn't really worry about those other things. Your goal is to get those kids the support they need during Guided Reading.**

**I can see now that using data is much more valuable than just gathering it.**

*Day 5*

**As I said that first week, this opportunity to meet serves many purposes, but even if nothing ever is changed, this is a tremendous help just to have a place to come to and vent, to share ideas, to collaborate on better ways to reach our students. We must really figure out a way to keep this study group within our workday next year and thereafter.**

*Day 6*

It isn't that our students don't want to succeed; they just don't know how to succeed.

*Day 7*

I think it is very important that we transfer what we gain from meeting together to our classroom teachers so that maybe we might have some consistency when it comes to rating students on the progress report.

How can we get these kids to improve in their sustained reading time?

If we do nothing, these poor kids will never persevere for the 90 minute block during the state assessment. If we do nothing, they will surely fail.

**Motivation is the key!**

Let me modify my form before I give it to you. After using it last year and trying it again this year, there is one thing I should change. But you are more than welcome to use it if you think it will improve your teaching.

*Day 8*

I have a mini-solution to the problem. We need to do some research and then design an alternative classroom for the elementary level student. The change won't happen this year, but we need to have something in place similar to the middle school model before the beginning of next year.

I think we need to take this initiative to the SLC (Site Leadership Counsel) to assure that it is consistent across the entire school. I think the protocol needs to be in place to meet the needs of our students.

We are not holding kids accountable, which means we are allowing them to fail. I just don't want to fail them.

*Day 9*

**A couple of weeks ago, I gave one of my most struggling students a more challenging book to read not expecting a whole lot but I felt like I needed to test the theory of raising the bar. This student produced much, much more than I ever imagined possible. It proved to me that if you raise the bar, these kids will produce. It took a lot of time and work. I modeled for a very long time what I expected her to accomplish on her own.**

*Day 10*

I wish I could have done a peer visit while you were doing lit circles.

Great! I'll look into a good time to set up a peer visit.

*Day 11*

This study group validates our concerns, yet we also know that not all concerns can be answered, but we can be heard!

In all my years of teaching this is truly the FIRST time that I have felt a sense of collegiality and collaboration with my peers. Collegiality and collaboration has all but disappeared except for this study group.

*Day 12*

**Coming together each week has provided a format that is like an internal assessment for us and our teaching. It has forced us to become more reflective which has greatly benefited our students.**

**It has gotten to the point that I can't afford to miss these sessions. It has been wonderful and so empowering.**

Figure 2. The transformation of one "good" teacher into one "great teacher."

## **FINDINGS**

### **Let the Data Do the Talking**

Through participating in the research study, I realized that before reading the transcripts from my field logs, I only superficially understood our experience. This research taught me the value of processing and that what one feels is happening while in the midst of an experience can be very different when considered in retrospect and removed from an emotional context. Discussions that were perceived to be rambling or negative by the participants, can, on reflection, be shown to be highly relevant and ultimately positive. By nature, conversations feel casual, but by looking back, I could see that our conversations had importance. I learned so much more about what was taking place by studying the transcripts than I did by just listening. I learned to value the growth in these teachers. I developed an appreciation for the study group as an effective means of staff development by looking at the changes teachers were making over time.

Participating in the learning community study group changed teachers' perspectives on their school and on their roles within their school. They began to notice how curricular changes influenced them in the school community. They also gained a different perspective on what had occurred in the study group. These teachers became much more articulate through the thinking and negotiating that occurred with each session. This awareness and experience changed their interactions within the study group environment. The participants became more

aware of group dynamics and ways that might facilitate what was occurring when the group became tense or unproductive.

This learning community format encouraged all these teachers to examine critical issues themselves and to look closely at what they were doing as educators. Initially, I believe these teachers held a technician's view of teaching and did not see themselves as creators of knowledge. Through their experiences in the study group, these teachers started asking their own questions and actively sought answers to those questions.

***Accountability: Teachers need to make a personal choice to rise above their circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for achieving desired results.***

Data from the weekly teacher dialogues, survey findings, and interviews revealed that improved staff interaction was, in and of itself, empowering for all members of the study. It eliminated the obstacle created by fear of what one's colleagues would think of one's ideas and actions. These teachers no longer wondered what their peers thought – they knew what they were thinking. Colleagues became sounding boards who helped to clarify ideas and make them more effective. Communication opened up opportunities for support from others outside the perimeters of the study group.

Within the context of the study group these teachers set their own agenda, had an equal voice, took ownership of their beliefs, and translated those beliefs

into action. “If we get a chance to discuss things and make some changes in our teaching from this, it will certainly affect not only us but our classroom teachers as well. I think we need to MAKE this study group thing work,” declared Abby. Respect conferred by colleagues’ enhanced personal respect and legitimized opinions. Several voices, unified and committed, had power and influenced situations ordinarily believed to be beyond their sphere of influence. This sense of empowerment and accountability was quite evident after a lengthy discussion concerning the lack of time to develop sustained reading ability in their students when Bonnie stated, “We all know that these kids need to be reading for 40-45 minutes every day, well if we don’t allow them to read for more than 10 minutes at a time, these kids will never get to 40 minutes. It’s up to US to make it happen.” Data supported evidence that this powerful moment forever changed the perception that the efforts of these teachers could indeed make a difference.

***Professional Development: The systematic maintenance, improvements, and broadening of knowledge and skills are qualities necessary for the execution of teachers’ professional duties.***

Evidence from the study group suggests that the value of professional learning communities comes from the staff being as deeply teacher-focused as they are student-focused. “I just read in *Reading Teacher Journal* that the kids who are good talkers are also the kids who are good writers. Research says that students HAVE to talk. How can I get them to talk?” asked Becky. One cannot

assume schools can transform themselves into productive and successful places of learning for students without first addressing the learning that must occur among teachers. In professional learning communities, teacher development and improvement are acknowledged as a critical component of bringing quality learning experiences to the classroom. Thus, when teachers are provided the support and development they need for their OWN learning to improve their classroom practices, significant value is placed on the effort continuous learning has on their work.

Now more than ever before I believe that the only way to improve the quality of teaching and learning is to improve teachers' skills and abilities. Thus I see professional development as the linchpin of school reform aimed at raising academic performance. No amount of standards, benchmarks, and high-stakes testing can bring about school improvement without attention to teacher quality. I believe teachers have to be active participants in their own professional development. "I would like some professional development on how to properly model for these kids," stated Callie. And we cannot expect that one-shot, one-size fits-all workshops directed by "expert" consultants can produce the kinds of changes in pedagogical practices that will support student learning. I believe that if we view professional development as an opportunity to cultivate transformative learning, it will give us a new perspective on our goals, what we do in our practice, and how we think about our work. This study demonstrated evidence to

support that professional development that is transformative in nature provides grounding for continued lifelong learning in our teaching staff.

***Emotions: The emotions or feelings of teachers can be strong enough to change their professional lives.***

“Talking to our colleagues about what we do and how we feel, unraveled the shroud of silence in which our teaching has been wrapped,” declared Erin. Courtney added, “Listening to my colleagues and then being able to VOICE my concerns has been most valuable for me.” All too often educators on all levels, ignore the value of listening, diminishing its importance. The need to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood, was of great significance for these teachers as they wrestled with shaping or reshaping their professional identity and developed respect for their own and other’s practice. During the sessions, these teachers seized opportunities to actively listen and be actively listened to. As a result, they recognized and valued the power of being heard.

***Teaching Practices: Monitoring of instructional quality and effectiveness, strategizing and experimenting with activities aimed at improvement, and the documentation of those activities and their measured results are all formative assessments of one’s teaching practices.***

Collegial support, a sense of professionalism, and collective thinking provided these teachers with a safety net, confidence, and the impetus to continue with their own individual professional growth beyond the study group. It invited

change with a rich pool of potential ideas, resources, and on-going tangible support over time for implementing new ideas. “Looking back,” Abby reflected, “I realize I was trying more ideas in various areas, at a greater pace, than at any other time in my career. I gave my students a more active role in their learning because I had a more active role in my learning.”

Anne was amazed the first time that someone in the group stated that she did not know much about a particular topic. “I was afraid to admit I didn’t know everything.” These teachers found it personally liberating to be part of a group where they could talk about problems and not have to be an expert on all topics. Their reputations as teachers had become tied to ‘knowing it all’ and the study group released them from those pretensions.

Courtney noted, “I changed my classroom practices to make learning more meaningful. Because I was changing my practices, I needed to talk about the process as I changed. The study group gave me the forum to have such conversations.”

Through these conversations in the group, Bonnie found that she became more articulate about her teaching and was able to talk more confidently and expressively with parents and educators about what she was doing and why. Abby agreed, saying, “The study group supported me thinking aloud to find ways to articulate what I was working through professionally.”

Erin commented, “It made me a better teacher. It helped me understand change process, and reinforced my idea to always challenge the status quo.” Erin went on to say that it served ‘as a reality check’ on individual perceptions. It helped clarify issues that emerged by looking at more than one perspective.

“Seeing others take risks – helping others take risks,” remarked Courtney, “was challenging and rewarding, and provided me with a sense of belonging to a community with common goals that I helped to formulate. It was greatly empowering because for the first time I believed that what I had to say was being heard, acted upon, and made a difference.”

Facilitation of this study group taught me to listen, to attend to the silent voices, to value people’s words, to suspend judgment, and to create bridges between participants and between thoughts, to create community. In this study group, all these teachers experienced personal empowerment, primarily because the changes that were made were a matter of choice, not mandates. Whatever they did, however they did it, in whatever time it took, their choices were respected.

***Learning Communities: Teachers need to intentionally restructure their time and learning experiences to build a sense of community and to foster more explicit connections among themselves as educators, and the teaching taking place in their classrooms.***

Inevitably, a study group has the ability to influence structures and relationships outside of its immediate arena of activity. The teacher participants in

this particular study group took care to create a nurturing, facilitative atmosphere where all members felt valued and respected. The influence of this group spread out far beyond the actual study group meetings and members to establish a sense of broader collegiality and professionalism in the school.

The themes of community building and school-wide professional growth were continuously repeated in my reflections on the broader influence of the study group in this school. Abby reflected that because of the inquiry in the study group, “It made it possible to visit classrooms and have a sense of what people were teaching without feeling as though I was intruding in someone’s ‘private’ classroom. In my opinion the school became more connected. I came away thinking that I did not have all the answers and that children learn in a wide variety of ways that can be supported through a variety of teaching strategies.”

Simply grouping teachers by grade level and encouraging discussion will not effect collaboration, although it may contribute to the parties beginning to build connections and conversations, necessary precursors to establishing collaborative relationships.

Callie remarked that, “People seemed to go out of their way to try and understand each other. If there was a problem or concern of one person, others seemed to rally behind her. There was more camaraderie among teachers.” Erin concurred, “Communication led to understanding, tolerance, and even appreciation of our differences. Once trust is established, teachers can safely

discuss compatibility of ideas, differing philosophies and teaching styles, while respecting each party's expertise and strengths. As we shared ideas and became aware of others' areas of expertise, competitive and critical attitudes seemed to self-eliminate. Networks of collaboration and communication became safer, more honest, and more open."

Becky noted, "The study group set us on the road to unity in the sense that misunderstandings surfaced and were straightened out. Teaching children became more important than personal agendas and talk in the teachers' lounge began to focus once again on teaching strategies."

During the interviews with these teachers, I heard many express the perception that the talk in the hallways and the teachers' lounge changed. This in turn, influenced people who did not attend the study group because the talk in the building changed. They could listen in on these conversations even though they were not part of the group. Data from the pre and post survey also supported evidence of collaboration with the results reported in the following table.

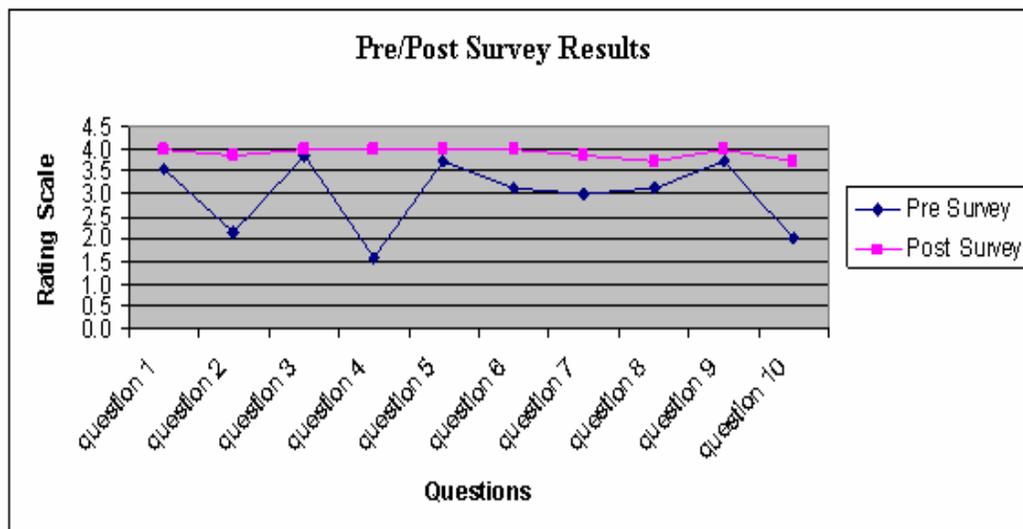


Figure 3. Pre/Post Survey

Within the context of the study group experience, the need for a more professional and effective language had arisen, a language that was facilitative and inquiring, rather than critical and assertive. The study group created a need for zeroing in on discussion that was meaningful, rather than focusing on personalities; it explored and evaluated theories, asking “how” and “why”.

In reviewing all the field log entries, it became quite evident that one factor organized all contexts within this professional learning community, and that was the shared purpose of improving student learning outcomes. All members of this community were invested in the learning and changing necessary to address the needs of all the students and help them to achieve high standards of learning. From this, I believe that to maintain professional learning communities,

it is often necessary to find innovative ways to create the necessary time and resources to allocate to whole staff learning, problem solving, and decision making. I also believe, more importantly, that creating supportive conditions is the KEY to maintaining the growth and development of a community of professional learners.

***Enhanced Student Achievement: Certain activities must be pursued by teachers to keep track of student learning for purposes of making instructional decisions and providing feedback to students on their progress.***

“This assessment tool gives so much valuable information on our students. It really helps me focus in on their needs allowing for more targeted learning to take place,” stated Bonnie.

Participants in this study group all agreed that their collaborative relationships had positive impact on student learning. “Using bookmarks is a great way to increase independent reading time while supporting the lower students. They love using them and their skills have developed creating higher level of thinking and deeper comprehension to take place,” declared Callie. Teachers felt that the students benefited from receiving increased instructional options, supporting well documented research that students learn in a multitude of different ways. Teachers began to recognize gaps and weaknesses in their own instructional practices through sharing information and beliefs with colleagues, resulting in new instructional approaches to better serve their students. This was

evident in statements such as this one made by Abby. “I think I need to set up some peer visits to see how some of you are doing your groups. All these ideas about bookmarks and independent reading sound great and I need to rethink what I am doing with my students to improve my teaching and their learning.” Upon reflection, these teachers further reported that they felt the intensity of their programs was improved as a direct result of the discussions and planning with their peers.

***Strategies:* There needs to be created structured opportunities for teachers to rethink, communicate, model, and learn from each other to capture, formalize and internalize knowledge.**

Threaded throughout the field log data was evidence supporting the need to create structured opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. After reflecting on a particular piece of data obtained from a language arts assessment tool, one participant stated, “Maybe we need to really look at the model we are using. Are we getting our desired results considering the length of time it takes to administer it?” Discussions between participants on the potential value of these data and then reflecting on their current practices, prompted these teachers to investigate ways they could restructure the program to be more effective. Abby declared that it was their responsibility to, “communicate not only with the members of the study group, but also with their co-teachers, to

collaborate on designing schedules that could accommodate the diversity of their teaching efficacy as well as students' performance levels.”

The sharing of ideas in this learning community served these teachers many opportunities to grow professionally, but it also shed some light on some short comings as Erin so clearly expressed when she stated, “This study group is what is getting me through the day, but it is also very upsetting because it is making it very clear the work that still needs to be done.”

Another example where professional growth resulted from the rich, deep dialogue that took place in the weekly sessions was when a decision was made to integrate science and social studies into the literacy block in order to provide more time for independent reading. The group determined they would all make the necessary adjustments to their teaching practices, document their findings for a couple of weeks, and then analyze those findings at a future session.

This learning community format also provided the support and guidance to share, model and learn new teaching practices using peer visits. This strategy proved to be most informative to one participant who was initially hesitant to venture into a colleague's classroom. “The peer visit was absolutely wonderful and so enlightening,” commented Courtney. “This is one strategy we should have been doing all along because these teachers in this building have so many exciting practices that really have the kids engaged. We have the potential to learn so

much from each other if we just step back and watch. I will certainly schedule more throughout the rest of the year!”

### **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The collaborative nature of online discussions enables participants to learn from each other by using clear, open-ended questions that tap into the higher-order thinking levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The intent was to develop a resource where teachers could be the facilitators of their own and others' learning. They would learn to use the Discussion Board to pose good questions and respond with clarity to help further their understanding and that of their peers. Due to the technical difficulties that existed during the research study period, there were not enough data to demonstrate the effectiveness in communicating via a Discussion Board format. As a result, another attempt will be made in the coming year to include use of a Discussion Board among the district-wide Title I teachers.

As stated earlier, after recognizing the critical need to improve their teaching practices, these teacher participants realized that professional development, if it is the right kind of professional learning, can have a major impact on student achievement. Therefore, they chose to continue using a learning community format that supports their collaborative learning throughout the course of the rest of this calendar year. These teachers hope to be able to continue embedding this type of professional development into their daily practices into the next school year as well.

Also as a result of the opportunity experienced through this action research study, one of the teacher participants has decided to conduct her own action research study on the effectiveness of raised fluency rates on overall student proficiency. This study will be conducted during the final three months of this current school term.

As research tells us that for professional development to be most effective, teachers should be actively engaged with their peers in learning communities about the curriculum they are teaching on a daily basis. Therefore, my personal goal would be to expand the learning community format to the other district area school with a demographic and academic profile similar to this school. My intent would be to expand the professional community throughout the district by developing enough teacher facilitators to allow study group activities to become embedded in their daily teaching practices.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

When, as teachers, we reach that place where we no longer understand the struggling student, when we hear ourselves saying, “I’ve tried everything” – or worse – “nothing is working,” it is then, that we need to take a step back and **listen**.

We need to listen to the student. We need to listen to the environment. We need to listen to ourselves. And then, we need to **reflect** on our practice. More than anything else, this action research study proved that while the simple act of reflection does not guarantee critical insight, it is, in my opinion, the place where it all begins.

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**APPENDIXES**

## APPENDIX A

### Pre/Post Survey

**Directions:** Please use the following scale to rate each statement in terms of how well you think it describes your knowledge and feelings about teacher collaboration.

4 – Strongly Agree	2 – Disagree
3 – Agree	1 – Strongly Disagree

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I am familiar with the concept of teachers collaborating on classroom instruction.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I know the basic procedures that make up structured learning team meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I feel that meeting regularly in teams to focus on increasing teachers' knowledge and expertise would be a valuable activity.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I prefer to work alone to learn and to increase my teaching expertise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I prefer to participate in regular meetings with colleagues to learn and increase my teaching expertise.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. When we work together on committees at this school, the atmosphere is collegial.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When teachers at my school work in groups, all members participate and share responsibilities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I regularly read professional journals and current research on teaching and learning.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I regularly look for different teaching strategies and adjust or change my teaching practices throughout the year.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I want to change the way I teach.

**APPENDIX B****INTERVIEW QUESTIONS  
CONDUCTED DECEMBER 14, 2005**

1. What part of the study group process do you feel has been most successful? Why?
2. What part of the study group process do you feel has been least successful? Why?
3. What part of this learning team needs to be adjusted? Why?
4. What additional support would you like to have?
5. What changes have occurred as a result of working together in this learning team? (individual, team, students, classroom teachers, school)
6. Do you think this time has been time well spent? Why or why not?
7. What new teaching methods are we trying in our classrooms?
8. Where do you want this team to be at the end of the year?
9. What areas would you like to see happen in professional development in the future?
10. What other comments would you like to make?

**APPENDIX C**

® MORAVIAN COLLEGE

August 25, 2005

Margie Markus  
3125 Winding Way  
Easton, PA 18045

Dear Margie Markus:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has reviewed your proposal: Collaborating with Colleagues to Improve Student Learning. Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Please note that if you intend on venturing into other topics than the ones indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB about what those topics will be.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

A hard copy of this letter will be sent to you through U.S. mail shortly. If you do not receive the letter by the time you need to begin gathering data, please do not hesitate to contact me. Also, please retain at least one copy of the approval letter for your files. Good luck with the rest of your research.

Debra Wetcher-Flendricks  
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board  
Moravian College  
610-861-1415 (voice)  
medwh02@moravian.edu

**APPENDIX D**

Teacher Informed Consent

September 21, 2005

Dear Marilyn,

Currently I am enrolled in the Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instruction Program at Moravian College. This program is designed around the philosophy of reflective teaching with a focus on action research. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct systematic studies. This semester, I am focusing my research on small learning communities among teachers. The title of my research is "Collaborating with Colleagues to Improve Student Learning". This practice of working together is one of the most promising professional development strategies in recent years.

As part of my study, you will be asked to build the productive relationships that allow them to collaborate, partner, reflect and act, to carry out teaching and learning opportunities. You will also be asked to complete surveys and specific activities all designed to improve instructional practices. At any time, you have a right to withdraw from participating in this study without fear of consequences.

These data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. Neither the name of any faculty member nor name of the school will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings.

I look forward to working with you to enhance the academic achievement of our students. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me directly at extension 2705, mmarkus@server.pburg.k12.nj.us , your building administrator, or my faculty advisor, Dr. Charlotte Zales, Education Department, Moravian College, 610-625-7958 or e-mail at crzales@moravian.edu.

I thank you in advance for all your support and once again, please feel free to contact me at any time regarding my study.

Sincerely,

Margie Markus

---

I attest I am a classroom teacher willing to participate in the research project of Margie Markus, the Title I Coordinator. I have read and understand this consent form, and I've received a copy.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX E**

Administrator Informed Consent

September 1, 2005

Dear Mrs. Jeanette Gilliland ,

Currently I am enrolled in the Master's of Education in Curriculum and Instruction Program at Moravian College. This program is designed around the philosophy of reflective teaching with a focus on action research. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct systematic studies. This semester, I am focusing my research on small learning communities among teachers. The title of my research is "Collaborating with Colleagues to Improve Student Learning". This practice of working together is one of the most promising professional development strategies in recent years. This study will be conducted from September 12, 2005 through December 15, 2005.

As part of my study, teachers will be asked to build the productive relationships that allow them to collaborate, partner, reflect and act, to carry out teaching and learning opportunities. Teachers will also be asked to complete surveys and specific activities all designed to improve instructional practices. At any time, the teachers will have a right to withdraw from participating in this study without fear of consequences.

These data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. Neither the name of any faculty member, name of the school, nor student will appear in any written report or publication of the study or its findings.

I thank you for granting me approval to conduct this study, and I look forward to working with you and your staff to enhance the academic achievement of our students. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me directly at extension 2705, mmarkus@server.pburg.k12.nj.us or my faculty advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh, Education Department, Moravian College, 610-861-1842 or e-mail at jshosh@moravian.edu.

I thank you in advance for all your support and once again, please feel free to contact me at any time regarding my study.

Sincerely,

Margie Markus

---

I am the building administrator and I understand the research project of Margie Markus, the Title I Coordinator. She has my permission to conduct her study as described. I have read and understand this consent form, and I've received a copy.

Building Administrator's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX F

