

Study Groups in Schools

A Collegial Way to Improve Your Teaching

BY WILLIAM GREEN AND RITA HENRIQUEZ-ROARK

Do you sometimes struggle with problems in your classroom for which there does not seem to be an answer? Do you feel isolated and alone? Wouldn't it be great if other teachers would share their expertise and listen to your concerns? Would you like help in implementing new ideas and teaching strategies? Study groups offer a creative solution to all of these problems.

MacArthur Foundation fellow and educator Sara Lightfoot has pointed out that "Teaching is a very autonomous experience—but the flip side of autonomy is that teachers experience loneliness and isolation. Teachers tend to miss other adult company, collegiality, relationships, criticism, camaraderie, support, and intellectual stimulation." Lightfoot advocates "time and space in school days for teachers to come together to support one another, to respond critically to one another, and to develop plans together."¹

Recently a research team evaluated the use of study groups in public schools, and is currently adapting those results to the Seventh-day Adventist school setting. But what *are* study groups? What are their benefits? How are they used in public and private schools?

What Is a Study Group?

A study group is a team of three to six faculty who meet together to try innovative problem solving and to improve student achievement in their classrooms. The groups set up guidelines for instruction, plan lessons, share materials, and watch one another try the innovations. They emphasize working together to solve

problems and apply new strategies.

Study groups need to meet regularly for about one hour per week. They are most effective if they meet during the teachers' regular work hours. The group does need leadership, but anyone can serve as the leader. Everyone participates and shares power within the group.

Outcomes

Study groups are primarily concerned with classroom innovation. When well-chosen educational innovations are imple-

mented in classrooms, student achievement is substantially increased.² Study groups also enhance professional and personal growth and give teachers a sense of empowerment and mastery. Study group membership makes teachers feel more positive about their teaching.

Benefits of Study Groups

What have teachers gained from membership in study groups? First, they have become more open with their col-

leagues. In the words of one educator, "It used to be a closed door policy. . . . Now there aren't too many people who close their doors to teach anymore." Another agrees, "We are open with one another and are willing to share and brainstorm to solve problems."

Several mentioned having felt afraid to talk about their problems: "Now it's all right to say, 'I don't know; I need your help.'" "Teachers are beginning to make more decisions. . . . We have become problem solvers instead of problem makers."

The benefits go beyond professional expertise. One teacher

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Carolina Conference teacher study group in action.

told how much she cared personally about the members of her study group, and how they cared for her. She appreciated becoming close to her colleagues and their families. "We listen to each other," she said, "and we really like each other."

One told of the group sending her flowers and other things while her mother was in the hospital. "You get to know things about their home life that teachers don't usually get a chance to talk to anybody about." A personal bonding takes place in most veteran study groups that is very important to the teachers. As one teacher put it, "It's more of a family instead of just everybody by themselves."

Study groups are a source of new ideas. "You often can pick up unique ideas from the other members . . . and share the unique ideas you may have." Teachers believe they share a lot of curriculum ideas. One said, "If I read a good article, you know I'll share it with them." As a result of the sharing, she said, "I really feel like I'm growing that way, too."

Principals report both professional and personal benefits from participating in study groups. One says he began to

see teachers as unique individuals after working with them on study groups. He sees the group as a vehicle for teachers to develop and share leadership. They became experts in different areas as they studied and shared together. The teachers began to think of him as an expert also, and he began to change from a manager to an instructional leader.

One principal described herself as a virtual "zero" when it came to reading. Now she says she has become a "prolific reader." Clearly both principals and teachers have gained both personal and professional benefits from their participation in study groups.

At first, principals found that there was pressure from the central administration to implement specific teaching innovations. But study groups evolved. Eventually teachers would suggest changes they wanted to make and then decide how to go about making these changes. They have become experts at change, as well as in several instructional and curricular areas.

Benefits seem to abound. Teachers and principals have experienced personal and professional benefits. But the primary outcome has been the new educational strategies, which have resulted in increased student learning and improved classroom behavior.

Study Groups in Action

Five teachers sit in a tight circle at one side of a hallway while students file past them on their way to their classrooms. Although the teachers can't help but notice the activity around them, they seem to be lost in their own agenda. The conversation begins with announcements about school business: Christmas program, decorations, dinner, and PTA personnel. Members of the group intermittently ask questions and receive answers. The group discusses how the "Wee Deliver" (having to do with writing, processing, and delivering letters) program is working. Since this is the teachers' first involvement with the program, they talk about adjustments that they feel are needed.

Next, the group receives information about three upcoming conferences. The atmosphere is noisy, trusting, and informal, but focused. This study group, made up of second-grade teachers, has something to accomplish. The meeting continues with a question, "Do you all have your tiles?" While one teacher goes to get his, the teacher who is leading out explains that they are finishing a discussion on the use of math tiles. When the missing teacher returns, the presenter begins

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to share different ways to use the tiles in the classroom. The activities range from making simple numbers to developing specific patterns.

Since I'm a visitor, the teachers explain, "This is a way to involve all the students with a hands-on activity. It's simple, too. All you need are pieces of venetian blinds to make the tiles."

The teachers try several ideas. The presenter then asks if anyone has used tiles in the classroom. Two teachers say they have, adding that their children love to use them. These teachers are asked to share ideas for using the tiles. Several interject ideas and

make comments. The presenter inquires, "Do you have any more questions, concerns, or comments?" In the ensuing conversation, the teachers ask questions, share ideas, and make suggestions. Everyone participates.

The group agrees that meeting in the hallway isn't ideal, but the benefits of working together outweigh the inconvenience. They are using the training model initiated by Drs. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers.³ The teachers study, learn, plan, and have fun together, and share their joys and frustrations. One of the members says, "I now think teachers are teachers' best resources. We develop lessons together, and it's much faster and easier."

I ask for an example. She says, "We use learning centers in second grade. We plan all of our centers together so we don't have to develop them individually during the school year. Everyone brings materials they have on a topic, and we can put together 14 centers in one hour."

Study Groups in SDA Schools

The principle of working together is not new. Examples can be cited from the

Bible. "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10, NIV).

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But how can we adapt the study group structure to the Adventist school system? We have many small schools, and our teachers are so far apart geographically. Would teachers be willing to give of their own time? Would they see the advantage of becoming students again?

One SDA Effort

The Carolina Conference decided to establish study groups on a voluntary basis. The first group consisted of two teachers from a one-room school and four teachers from a larger school who met with the associate superintendent. Instead of meeting once a week, they met once a month on Sundays for four hours at a time. Two of the members had to drive more than two hours to the meeting. The study group lasted all year. Results were similar to those found in the public schools. Teachers became energized, excited, and more confident about what they were doing.

The second study group also has teachers who live more than two hours away. In December they chose to meet on a Saturday night from 6 to 10 p.m. because they did not want to miss a meeting. The meeting didn't conclude until 11 p.m.!

Many meetings follow the training model originated by Drs. Joyce and Showers.⁴ The study group selects an innovation; for example, models of teaching. They study the theory, watch and

perform demonstrations, develop and teach the lessons, and receive feedback and coaching. The teachers return to the classroom to practice. They wait eagerly to share results and the students' reactions. Typical responses have included the following:

"I felt like a first-year teacher; nervous, excited, and filled with anticipation!"

"The students remember the material so much better."

"Although I had to invest my time, the students thought it was fun."

"It's good to know I'm on the right track. So often I've felt like a failure."

How to Initiate a Study Group

1. Start with a group of three to six teachers.
2. Decide on the focus of the study group. The groups above organized their meetings around instructional strategies. However, you can use instructional or organizational change as the focus.
3. Someone in the group needs to have the training to discuss the theory, model the innovation, and provide practice, feedback, and coaching. An example is a teacher who has learned a new method such as cooperative learning, concept attainment, or integrated thematic instruction, etc. Remember, the goal is to implement an innovation that will increase student achievement. Ideally a group of teachers, with their administrators, attend training together.
4. Choose a regular time to meet. Depending on location, the group can meet once a week or once a month, but it must be consistent, ongoing, and sched-

uled for a minimum of three to four hours a month. It is important to decide on meeting times during your first yearly meeting. One study group, for example, plans meetings for September through April of each year.

5. Study groups need access to technical support. The original trainers or someone they have trained needs to be available by phone or fax, and at times, in person.

Figure 1 contains the agenda for a study group meeting at Columbia Junior Academy in Columbia, South Carolina.

Results

What are the results? Evaluation revealed that teachers are no longer just lecturing and passing out worksheets. There is obvious planning of instruction with students participating in cooperative learning, concept attainment, and inductive thinking—innovations that teachers have learned in their study groups. Teachers are better able to use a variety of strategies to meet the different needs of their students. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. From a conversation with Bill Moyers on his television program, "A World of Ideas." Cited by Susan Ohanian, *Garbage Pizza, Patchwork Quilts, and Math Magic* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1992), p. 137.

2. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, *Student Achievement Through Staff Development* (White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, Inc., 1988).

3. Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers, *Power in Staff Development Through Research and Training* (Alexandria, Va.): Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1983); Bruce Joyce, Marsha Weil, with Beverly Showers, *Models of Teaching* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992).

4. Ibid.

Things to Know About Study Groups

Study Groups are not

- a group discussing administrative matters—i.e. grades, recess, budgets, etc.
- individuals carrying out their own agendas (I close my door and do my thing).
- individual mentors.
- a supervisory or an evaluative group.
- a quality circle that focuses on a product.
- a temporary or terminal group.

Study groups are

- groups of three to six people working together to implement common training.
- focused on curriculum and instructional practices (teaching and learning).
- a place to practice innovation in a relatively risk-free environment.
- a group that provides companionship when learning something new.
- a regular, legitimate part of the school organization.
- a group that sets aside time during the regular workday to conduct its business.
- a group with participants of equal status; all share leadership and power.
- part of a schoolwide design that includes the principal.

Study groups are not complicated organizational structures. They are not an end in themselves but a means to an end. Their result is increased student learning through implementing classroom-oriented educational innovations.

Figure 1: SAMPLE AGENDA

1. Worship and Processing
Worship was a cooperative activity. Processing included a discussion of the group members' thinking and feelings before, during, and after the activity.
2. Introduction
The group discussed the research on training, stressing the value of using the different models of teaching to increase student learning.
3. Presentation
Two concept attainment lessons were demonstrated.
4. Lunch
5. Discussion of Concept Attainment
The phases of the concept attainment lessons were examined, questions were answered, and handouts were distributed to guide the teachers in preparing a concept attainment lesson. The teachers were to teach this lesson to their peers at the next meeting.
6. Future Meetings
The dates for the yearly meetings were set.
7. Journal Writing
The meeting concluded with each member starting a journal containing his or her reactions to the day.
8. Closing prayer

RESOURCES

Carlene Murphy, "Study Groups Foster Schoolwide Learning," *Educational Leadership* 50:3 (November 1992), pp. 71-74.

Bruce Joyce, Marsha Weil, with Beverly Showers, *Models of Teaching*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992).

The Department of Teaching and Learning in the School of Education at Andrews University has recently established a resource clearing house for models of teaching curriculum and related training materials. These materials include sample lessons, filmed demonstrations, and discussions of study groups.

Information regarding these resources is available from the Department of Teaching and Learning, School of Education, Andrews University, MI 49103 U.S.A. Telephone: (616) 471-3577, fax (616) 471-6374.