THE MISSING PIECE OF THE STAFF-DEVELOPMENT PUZZLE:
Teacher Study Groups

BY RITA HENRIQUEZ-ROARK AND WILLIAM H. GREEN

One of the challenges that continues to face the Seventh-day Adventist educational system is providing practical, meaningful, ongoing staff development. Why has the teaching strategy that everyone was excited about at the beginning of the year faded from use by the end of the year? Have we become so jaded by the idea that what we have always done is the only way—and the right way, at that? How can we guarantee that teachers will practice new classroom strategies throughout the school year, not just during the few weeks immediately after the initial training?

Until recently, educational administrators have not been able to ensure that staff development was directly related to classroom change. Given the vast number of demands for reform, restructuring, and school improvement, finding an effective approach to staff development is vital for change to occur. Teacher study groups (see the sidebar, Innovation Configuration, on page 27 for an operational definition) can be the missing piece of the staff-development puzzle.

The authors have been studying,[1] writing about,[2] and using teacher study groups in their work for several years. These groups have been meeting as an

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integral part of the staff-development program in the Carolina Conference of Seventh-day Adventists church school system for four years, as well as for eight years in a large public school system with which the authors have studied and worked.

What we have discovered is exciting and potentially helpful to teachers everywhere. Because of the support and sharing that goes on in study groups, teachers continue to regularly use the strategies that they first learned some four to eight years earlier.

Why Do Study Groups Work?

Teacher study groups have become a powerful part of the staff-development process because they help teachers and administrators meet many of their personal and social needs, as well as their professional ones. Study groups create an environment, a structure, in which teachers build their own learning communities, practice cooperation, and establish a new culture that sustains change. Those "Three C's"—community, cooperation, and culture—are concepts, or recurring themes, that explain the successes we have seen and heard in visiting teacher study groups, both in public and Seventh-day Adventist schools.

A *community* is a group of people who hold a common goal, and typically live or work together. The members of the group must, at the very least, communicate regularly with one another. *Cooperation* indicates a sharing, trusting, we-are-all-in-this-together attitude toward other group members. And *culture* is the glue that holds the commu-

nity together. It is, in the words of one teacher, the "way we do things around here." It reflects the written and unwritten rules that establish the norms for how community members act toward one another.

Not Just Another Educational Fad

The need for and the power of the small group has a strong research and theoretical base. The extensive writings of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jacob Moreno, and Morton Deutsch have provided the formal academic foundations. More recently, David and Roger Johnson,[3] Robert Slavin,[4] and others[5] have applied these ideas to education and have conducted research on their own. To Seventh-day Adventists, the small-group concept should not sound foreign. The Bible is full of examples of the power of the use of small groups: Jesus and His disciples, and Paul and his companions are just two. And Ellen White made this clear comment about churches:

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort is a plan that has been presented before me by One who cannot err. If there is a large num-

> *Study groups are providing the social system that enables teachers to sustain long-term change.*

ber in the church, let the members be formed into small companies, to work not only for the church members but for unbelievers also.[6]

This principle can also apply to our schools.

In a presentation at the 1993 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association,[7] Short presented comments from public school teachers indicating that the most valued aspect of teacher study groups was the creation of a stronger sense of community within a particular school. Teachers

discussed the isolation that they experienced in their work, their lack of knowledge about other teachers' beliefs and practices, and the lack of trust between teachers, supporting the similar findings that Lortie[8] had made several years earlier. Brantley[9] reported similar findings among Seventh-day Adventist teachers.

Teachers React to Study Groups

Through study groups, teachers develop personal and professional relationships that give them a sense of community. According to teachers,

• Study groups "help teachers get to know each other so that the sharing of ideas and materials is easier."

• Study groups provide "a healthy working environment because you come in contact with other individuals you would not normally come into contact with."

• "[Because] we share information, there is a sense of cohesiveness that would otherwise not exist."[10]

Several teachers also commented on how helpful it was to listen to other teachers with similar problems and to exchange feelings about lessons and

Phyllis Knight, a member of the Greenville, South Carolina, teacher study group, leads out in a cooperative actvity.
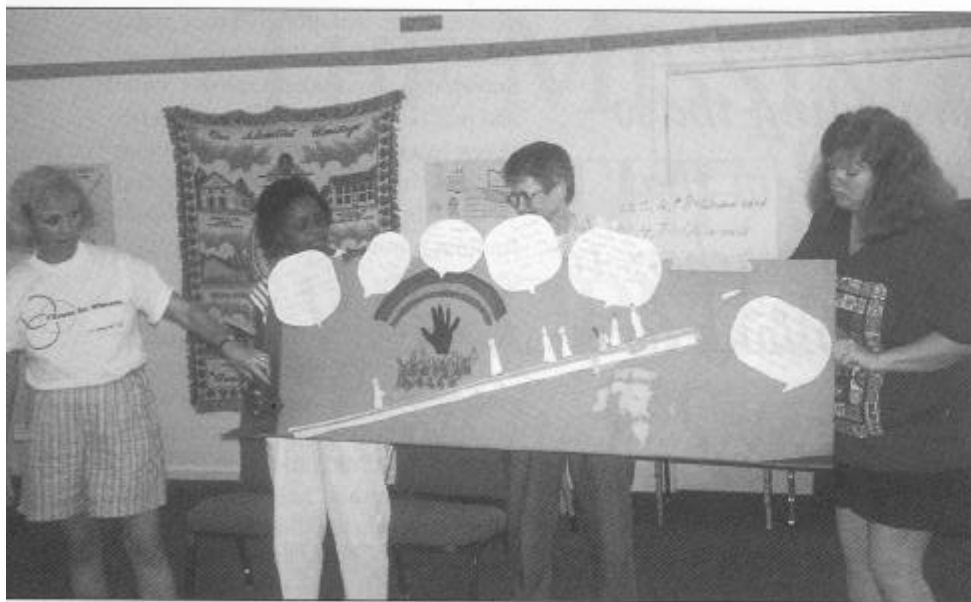
A Carolina Conference teacher study group makes a presentation on Ellen White's first vision.

their effectiveness or failures.[11] As a result, after taking part in a study group, teachers felt more comfortable and gained new friends, while the experience "made communication with each other easier."[12]

• One teacher shared this thought: "Many questions that first-time teachers may have are aired without fear and in a congenial atmosphere."[13]

• Another explained, "All teachers feel relaxed and comfortable about sharing ideas."[14]

• Another teacher states: "[Belonging to a study group] creates a bond with other teachers. I do not feel so isolated from the rest of the teachers." She believes that is especially important because "teachers have so little support."[15]

• Another teacher said, "[The study group] has helped me. I feel better about myself. . . . We feel good about ourselves because we can feel free to go to each other to solve problems. . . . Now we are more empowered to make decisions."[16]

This sense of community has become so important to some teachers in the Carolina Conference that they travel an hour and a half one way to attend the monthly four- to six-hour meetings.

Why Do Teachers Like Study Groups?

Let's use a real-life example to answer that question. The superintendent of the Carolina Conference, Gorden Klocko, has provided an environment that encourages collaborative efforts. For example, he has asked each school board to allow teachers time to meet during the school day. He has also supported the associate superintendent in organizing the teachers into groups of four to six.

The study groups have one common long-term focus—to implement instructional innovations that increase student achievement. At this time, because of this focus and the superintendent's support, almost every teacher in the Carolina Conference has joined one of the 11 study groups that meet regularly throughout the area.

But as we stated earlier, study groups address more than professional needs; they fulfill personal and social ones as well. Psychologist Abraham Maslow[17] believes that we are motivated by the drive to fulfill certain needs. Being sure of our survival and physical safety constitute the most essential needs, and, for most of us, the ones most easily met. Once these basic needs are met, however, we strive to fulfill our social needs for love, belonging, and self-esteem. Study groups provide a venue for these needs to be met.

William Glasser[18] gives additional insight to the power of teacher study groups. He asserts that everyone shares five basic psychological needs: the need for love, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Glasser's theory, as we can readily see, is compatible with Maslow's.

According to M. Scott Peck, our entire society is made up of lonely people. One of the antidotes Peck prescribes for this loneliness is the ability to share freely what we have in common: "our weaknesses, our incompleteness, our imperfections, our inadequacy . . . our lack of self-sufficiency."[19] Most people will not speak freely, however, unless they feel safe. He goes on to say that "it takes a great deal of work for a group of strangers to achieve the safety of true community," yet "once a group has achieved community, the single most common thing members express is: 'I feel safe here.'"[20]

Study groups are the ideal environment in which teachers can feel psychologically safe. In an atmosphere where collegiality not only flourishes but also inspires feelings of belonging, love, and fun, teachers can express their hopes, reservations, and failures with caring, empathetic colleagues. They become better acquainted, closer friends, and more aware of other teachers' points of view. And the resulting self-esteem, power, and freedom extend beyond the group setting as the teachers become recognized experts in their field. Carolina teachers, for example, have become the main presenters at staff-development programs, Pathfinder-leadership conventions, and teachers' conventions in and out of state. Indeed, in 1995, teachers from study groups and the associate superintendent who organized and maintained them presented four of the five tracks of the four-day Carolina Conference teachers' convention. Educators who attended the convention gave it top marks.

Cooperation or Competition

With all the self-esteem and power developed by teachers in study groups, some have worried that a spirit of competition might be fostered. However, this is where the second salient feature—cooperation—comes into play.

Rather than fostering competition, study groups provide the structure necessary for learning, practicing, and experiencing cooperation.

The theme of cooperation in human endeavors is mentioned early in written history. We read in the Bible, for example, that

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up! . . . Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, NIV).

The Johnson brothers, in their review of the research of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning, observed the following phenomenon:

Working together to achieve a common goal produces higher achievement and greater productivity than does working alone is so well confirmed by so much research that it stands as one of the strongest principles of social and organizational psychology.[21]

If the process works with students, it should work with adults as well. More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that when teachers model expected behav-

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STUDY GROUP INNOVATION CONFIGURATION CHECKLIST

Component 1
a. A teacher study group consists of a group of four to six teachers.

b. A teacher study group consists of a group of three teachers.

c. A teacher study group consists of a group of two teachers or a group of more than six teachers.

Component 2
a. There is a long-term common focus and a common purpose.

b. There is a common focus and a common purpose.

c. There is no common focus or common purpose.

Component 3
a. The focus is to implement an innovation.

b. The focus is on sharing ideas without organized follow through.

c. The focus is on getting together and socializing.

Component 4
a. The innovation is focused on instruction, which results in increased student achievement.

b. The innovation is focused on instructional-related activities such as policies and management concerns.

c. The focus does not include innovation.

Component 5
a. Specific times are regularly scheduled for study groups to meet during the school day.

b. Meetings are regularly scheduled before or after school hours.

c. Meetings are sporadic and not regularly scheduled.

Component 6
a. There is an agenda, written or agreed upon, which is followed.

b. The agenda is developed at the beginning of each meeting.

c. There is no agenda.

Component 7
a. Leadership responsibilities are essential and predetermined. Roles can vary and may be rotated.

b. Leadership exists but is not always predetermined.

c. There is no organized leadeship.

Component 8
a. Assignments are given to participants and reported back as part of the study group process.

b. Assignments are given but not always completed.

c. There are no assignments given.

Component 9
a. Administrative personnel participate in study groups.

b. Administrative personnel are not directly involved but are supportive.

c. Administrative personnel are neither involved nor supportive.

Component 10
a. Work climate includes modeling, demonstrations, practice, feedback and coaching, with an emphasis on student results.

b. Work climate consists of sharing information but does not include actual practice.

c. Work climate does not include demonstrations, practice and feedback, or coaching.

Component 11
a. The work environment is relatively risk free and includes high levels of cooperation and collaboration.

b. Some collaboration and cooperation exist.

c. Collaboration and cooperation are not practiced.

Component 12
a. Initial training is given which provides a framework and gives direction to future follow-up training activities.

b. There is no connection between initial training and follow-up activities.

c. There is no initial training.

Component 13
a. Teacher study groups meet once a week for an hour or more. (There can be variations in weekly scheduling. Some teacher study groups meet bi-weekly for two hours, and others meet once a month for four hours.)

b. Teacher study groups meet less than an hour a week.

c. There is no formally scheduled meeting time.

Note: Component variations (a) are ideal. Component variations (b) are acceptable. Component variations (c) are unacceptable.

ior, this facilitates student learning. In his book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, Kohn makes extensive use of previous research to present a clear argument against competition. He refers to competition as the "number-one obsession" and the "common denominator of American life."[22] Typically, competition, not cooperation, is modeled at school, on the playground, at work, and at home. Kohn concludes that "the message that competition is appropriate, desirable, required, and even unavoidable is drummed into us from nursery school [through] graduate school; it is the subtext of every lesson."[23] It is not surprising, then, that teachers who have grown up in a competitive environment have a hard time implementing cooperation.

The study-team framework is an ideal place for teachers to acquire cooperative teaching skills and strategies. Members reported that through study groups they had learned "how to work cooperatively as a team to improve the workplace."[24] One teacher described it this way: "Teachers who work together as a team tend to establish a better rapport among each other and oftentimes learn from each other,"[25] including the learning of negotiation skills that are essential to working together.[26]

By participating in study groups, teachers become more open to suggestions, more willing to share ideas, and more patient with one another. As Kohn[27] states, cooperation builds bridges and fosters positive relationships. The cooperative group structure opens up lines of communication among teachers and among teachers and administrators. And as teachers and administrators think, practice, and learn together (cooperate), they gain the confidence and vision necessary to create a self-renewing organization in which school becomes a learning community for everyone.

How to Achieve Lasting Change

Some scholars believe that one of the reasons why lasting change has not occurred in education is because innovations have seldom affected the basic culture of schools.[28] In our observa-

tions of teacher study groups, we have been intrigued by the willingness of teachers to meet in the middle of school hallways, in busy libraries, and in other unlikely places. They are willing to drive long distances to meet with colleagues. What was even more remarkable was the fulfillment and accomplishment that teachers felt after the sessions ended.

As we continued to observe, we came to realize that this atmosphere existed because a subculture had been developed that promoted collegiality and simultaneously provided an environment in which basic human needs were met. New rules had been established, so making an admission like "I don't understand; will you help me?" became accepted, even expected. Teachers told us that before they had participated in study groups, they were hesitant to talk to other teachers or to administrators about their concerns and needs because they did not want to create the impression that they could not handle their jobs. As one teacher put it, "Prior to [participating in study groups], you felt like you were the only one with problems and were afraid to let people know that you had them."[29]

Conclusion

Thankfully, the norms are changing. Study groups are providing the social system that enables teachers to sustain long-term change. These groups truly have become the missing piece of the staff-development puzzle. ✐

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