

# Teacher Research

**Editor: Barbara Beyerbach**  
**SUNY Oswego**

Teacher research has been recommended as a strategy for empowering teachers to construct their own knowledge base of teaching, as a powerful means of professional development, and as a means of teachers finding answers to their questions. Each of the articles in this section describes a school-university partnership to support school and university based educators in inquiry into teaching to improve practice. Though unique in design and structure, each partnership exemplifies the following features:

1. Results-driven programs seek to improve student learning through examining data on student performance.
2. Teachers assume ownership over the research questions and process.
3. Partners are engaged in self-study of their process as they inquire into teaching.
4. Administrative support is demonstrated.
5. Participants provide descriptions of their process which could help others replicate.

These efforts, though early in their development, provide a powerful alternative to traditional forms of professional development and offer promise in developing alternative models that demonstrate results in terms of enhanced student learning.

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## Supporting Teacher Inquiry Through Study Groups

Nancy E. Dubetz  
Lehman College, CUNY

Inquiry in Professional Development Schools is characterized as enterprising and immediately relevant to teacher practice (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Berry and Boles, 1998; Boudah and Knight, 1999; Holmes Group, 1995). One model of inquiry that reflects these qualities is the teacher study groups. Such groups are referred to in the literature under several names: teacher study groups or support groups (Clair, 1998; Clark, 2001; Trueba, 1989), work groups (Biagetti, 2001) professional development and inquiry groups (Clark, 2001). These groups share four characteristics. First, they are learning oriented. The purposes of the discussions that take place are driven by the concerns of the participants. Typically, these groups focus on inquiry into issues around teaching practice and student learning. As such they serve as a mechanism for building knowledge, providing emotional support, and enhancing problem solving skills. Second, they are voluntary and structured for community building among the participants. Third, it is the participants who set the agenda. Fourth, study groups are ongoing and meet regularly. These four qualities make study groups fertile places for undertaking long-term inquiry into teaching practice. Although the literature on teacher study groups provide detailed descriptions of this work, evidence of the impact of study groups on teachers' practice and student learning is anecdotal and primarily derived from self reports.

The work described here is part of a three year research project that is designed to document both the inquiry process and the impact on teaching and learning.

Lehman College began developing a network of urban PDS partnerships in 1999. After a year-long selection process, three urban schools were chosen to begin the PDS network: two elementary and one middle school. One of the commitments that each site made to the partnership was to develop opportunities for student and teacher learning. This paper provides a case study of how a study group at one of the elementary schools is structured to support teacher inquiry and meet the goals of a professional development school. Participants are focusing their inquiry on improving instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs), who comprised approximately one third of the student population and had been the least successful in meeting state learning standards.

### Membership in the Study Group

Members of the PDS staff who work with English Language Learners are invited to attend the study group. Because virtually all ELLs in grades K-3 are in a transitional bilingual program, the participants who regularly attend the study group include six bilingual classroom teachers, one bilingual staff developer, one Title VII coordinator, one monolingual literacy staff developer; two bilingual paraprofessionals, and the college liaison. Two school administrators and one ESL teacher attend some of the sessions. The study group is also attended by preservice teacher candidates from the college who were student teaching in bilingual classrooms.

### Allocating Time and Resources to a PDS Study Group:

In its first year, the study group met twice monthly to discuss issues raised by the participants. To support ongoing conversations among the bilingual program staff, the liaison created a weekly, common preparation period for bilingual teachers and allocated additional meeting time during a city-wide staff development day. In addition to receiving a reduced teaching load to work with preservice students, the PDS liaison receives release time from the college to facilitate professional development opportunities for all of the staff, and was responsible for facilitating the study group meetings and preparing any materials that the participants wanted to share during these meetings. The liaison also met regularly with the teachers in their classrooms as a follow up to the study group meetings. The college liaison was responsible for typing an agenda for each meeting. The PDS liaison was also expected to provide resources on language acquisition when they apply to a particular concern that is being discussed in the study group.

### Creating a Process that Focuses on Teachers' Questions

The study group is organized around teachers' questions as lines of inquiry. Several steps are taken to ensure that the study group focuses on these questions and concerns. First, the initial meeting of the study group was structured as a brainstorming session in which teachers generated lists of questions and concerns. A list was then distributed to teachers and they prioritized the concerns on the list. Second, the college PDS liaison met with teachers to identify specific concerns that may or may not have been addressed in study group discussions. Third, study group discussions were conducted using samples of children's work or samples of texts that teachers were using to teach the various subjects.

### The Focus of the Inquiry

During the first year, two lines of inquiry emerged: (1) assessing students to inform grouping practices for instruction, and (2) planning for sheltered content-based ESL instruction. Each of these lines of inquiry were framed by specific questions and concerns that teachers discussed either during study group meetings or in individual meetings between a teacher and the college liaison. Specific questions that framed the first line of inquiry were: (1) how to meet the needs of children whose literacy skills are not at grade level in either Spanish or English; (2) when to introduce guided reading in English to ELLs; (2) how to help children transfer their literacy knowledge from the native language to the second language; and (3) what to do about children whose scores drop on formal reading assessments from one testing period to the next. Specific questions framing the second line of inquiry were: (1) how to teach social studies through ESL; (2) how to structure lessons to teach vocabulary, writing skills, and social studies at the same time; and (3) how to

serve those children who need basic ESL language and those who are ready for more challenging academic content in the second language in the same classroom.

Four forms of conversation served as mediums through which teachers explored the lines of inquiry during study group meetings.

- (1) *Descriptions of current practices.* To provide a context for a question or concern, teachers often shared stories of their current practice.
- (2) *Analysis of children's learning.* For the first four months of study group meetings, the teachers discussed specific children at every study group meeting by analyzing samples of a child's work completed in the native and second languages.
- (3) *Explanations of learning by way of academic theories.* During study group meetings, explanations of learning sometimes focused on academic, or descriptive, theories of language development and literacy development. For example, the teachers applied Cummins' (1989) theory of a common underlying proficiency to discuss children's ability to transfer knowledge from one language to another.
- (4) *Analysis of curriculum.* Towards the end of the first year of the study group, the line of inquiry shifted from assessment of children to a focus on curriculum development due to potential programmatic changes in how Spanish and English would be allocated in teaching academic subjects in the coming year. The study group began looking at content-based ESL instruction. The discussion focused on social studies because a new district social studies curriculum had been designed and the principal was planning on engaging teacher in curriculum mapping in the coming year.

Findings from the first year of the study group offer several insights for those interested in implementing them. First, an effective study group must be responsive to both individual and organizational needs. Individually, teachers have been able to find answers to questions and concerns they brought with them directly from their classrooms. At the same time, the focus on improving instruction for ELLs has addressed an important organizational need. Because it is filling an important organizational need, the study group has received support from the college and the school to continue through the coming school year. Because it has fulfilled individual needs, all of this year's participants have volunteered to participate in the study group next year. Second, a study group is most effective if it is part of a larger, integrated model of professional development. At the end of each academic year, college and school members of the Professional Development School develop an inquiry and professional development agenda. This agenda is then used in making decisions about the kind of professional development to be supported and the resources to be allocated during the coming year. The study group has addressed multiple PDS goals by including monolingual and