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Study Group in Professional Development School Investigates the State of New York's Grade 4 English Language Arts Assessment

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Two powerful educational innovations are transforming educators and their practice in Fulton, New York. Since the fall of 1999, J.E. Lanigan Elementary School has been designated a Professional Development School, or PDS. In November 2000, a learning community grown out of the PDS collaborative involving teachers and faculty from SUNY Oswego organized a study group to examine the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 4 performance

test.

Professional Development Schools are institutions formed through partnerships between professional education programs and P-12 schools. Their multifaceted mission encompasses professional preparation of candidates; faculty development; inquiry directed at the improvement of practice; and enhanced student learning (NCATE, 2001). School-based study groups, which bring educators together to learn, plan, and support each other, are an increasingly important approach to professional development.

Teacher study groups as an approach to professional development

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC, 2001), the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (Sullivan, 2001), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 1999), and the National Education Association (O'Mahar, 2001) have been implementing and sharing effective professional development guidelines and practices. Recently, the New York State Education Department (NYSED, 2000) has also played a significant role in bringing professional development to the forefront. Each district in New York is now required to develop a data driven Professional Development Plan (PDP) that reflects recent research on effective professional development practices. As the literature indicates, one such effective practice is participation in study groups.

"The foundation of the study group concept" is the core idea of teachers "rethinking traditional beliefs about how they teach and how students learn" (Cramer et al., 1996). Citing Reutzer & Cooter (1992), and Harste (1989), the authors point out that educational change often arises from grassroots movements that lead teachers to abandon isolation to join others in professional conversations and actions. A study group has two intrinsically related roles. From a cognitive perspective, it allows members to address problems in a safe environment, drawing on the richness of personal as well as of collective knowledge. From an affective point of view, a study group is likely to provide participants with a sense of belonging, and emotional nourishment and support.

This dual function, affective and cognitive, makes study groups a valuable setting for professional development (Cramer et al., 1996). They offer opportunity for teachers to learn within social settings that break isolation, grant support, and generate conversations and networks. In other words, study groups promote simultaneously the development of professional independence and interdependence.

Traditionally, staff development was designed and offered in a way that teachers "sit and get" information from "experts". Typically, this has been done in one day without any follow up or support offered to assist in its implementation. Surveys of teachers about their attitudes toward these types of inservice experiences indicate their dismay and frustration (Guskey, 1999). Study group participants, on the other hand, actively make decisions and take responsibility for individual and group learning. This

requires complete involvement by persons who typically are more motivated to change. They find in study groups attractive and safe places where new information can be learned without fear of being judged or penalized for "mistakes". They promote more immediate transference of new knowledge into classroom practice and clarify the connections between pedagogical inquiry, theory and practice.

Teacher study groups have been used for a variety of purposes, including: preparing for school restructuring (Garrot, 1995; Boggs, 1996); addressing changes in the curriculum such as in reading (Birchak et al, 1998; Matlin & Short, 1991), writing (Murphy, 1999), and mathematics (Gross, 1993); examining teacher assessment practices (Appalachia Educational Lab, 1992; Hange & Rolfe, 1994); general school-related issues—interpersonal relations, situational leadership, clinical supervision, models of collaboration, etc. (Fishbaugh & Hecimovic, 1994); and, implementation of computer technology in schools (Holbein & Jackson, 1999). At J.E. Lanigan Elementary PDS, the study group met to discuss what students need to know and need to be able to do to achieve success on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 4 performance test.

The J.E. Lanigan Elementary PDS Study Group

When J.E. Lanigan Elementary was established as a Professional Development School, a group of teachers started meeting informally outside of the school day to discuss work related issues. Because of interest and concern about state-mandated standardized testing, teachers decided to examine the previous year's Grade 4 NYS ELA Assessment. To assist with this work funds were secured through a grant sponsored by the local teacher center. The PDS coordinator brought a copy of the study group grant RFP to the Lanigan teachers and asked for volunteers to draft the application. A grade 5 teacher and a grade 2 teacher volunteered to complete the \$5000 grant application. The purpose of the group grant was to "provide for the support of a school based study group using NY State assessment results to improve teaching/learning or to meet needs as discussed in district professional development plans" (OCTC RFP, Fall 2000).

In addition, the PDS management team, a structure designed to monitor and strengthen the partnership, drafted a proposal to the Fulton City School District administration for study group participants to receive inservice credit. After negotiations with the Fulton City School District, the proposal was accepted as a pilot. This support was instrumental in bringing study groups from theory to practice.

The group was composed of nine teachers representing K, 1st, 4th, 5th and 6th grades, two student teachers, two faculty members from SUNY Oswego and the PDS coordinator, who acted as facilitator. It met in the Media Center about twice monthly, the second and fourth Tuesdays before school, 7:30-8:30 a.m., from November 2000 through June 2001. A

few of the meetings were cancelled due to snow days or school delays.

The Elementary ELA Study Group, had the following goals: (1) To understand what students are expected to know and be able to do to meet or exceed the elementary ELA standards as assessed by the Grade 4 performance test; (2) To develop shared responsibility and efficacy for supporting all students in reaching high standards; (3) To identify and close gaps in curriculum, instruction and assessment at the elementary level.

Study group activities and procedures

The central work of the study group included having all participants review booklet two of the Grade 4 NYS ELA performance test for the year 2000. This was the first time most of them had seen this test. Divided into small groups, they discussed one section of the test at each meeting. Observations were recorded on a prepared form listing knowledge and skills students need to have and what they need to do in order to be successful on each particular section of the test. One task in the elementary assessment requires students to analyze how a character changes from the beginning of a story to the end. Students are required to synthesize their conclusions in an extended response using details from the story to support them. As each item on the test was analyzed and discussed, teachers identified aspects of the curriculum that met the expectations, also noting the gaps and duplications at each level and across levels.

At each meeting, a teacher volunteered to complete a Study Group Log to provide an ongoing record of the process and information. It included: a brief summary of discussion and activities answering the question "What happened today?" and classroom application of what had been studied—"What are students learning and doing as a result of what you learning and doing? It also included answers to the questions "What are you ready to share with other colleagues?" and "What concerns or questions do you have for school leaders?"

The study group also encouraged the sharing of educational materials such as articles and books. While discussions often focused on testing (content, technical aspects of grading, standards, education policies and politics), they also covered many other related topics as well (teacher and student portfolios, specific instructional strategies in reading, writing, and listening, and work with preservice teachers.)

The culminating group activity was sharing the results of the study group investigation of the Grade 4 NYS ELA test with other teachers at J.E. Lanigan Elementary. Three meeting times before school were planned to allow most teachers to be reached. As incentive to attendance, the group decided to offer a small stipend equivalent to the earnings for teaching after school groups for one hour and access to money specifically targeted for ELA. Those present received a list of teaching strategies that took into consideration knowledge and skills that students need to be

successful on the Grade 4 ELA K-4 performance test.

Results

The final grant report, the meeting logs, and notes from conversations with participants provide some indicators of results achieved in the J.E. Lanigan PDS study group. According to the literature, participant teachers are more likely to transfer to the classroom what they learn in a study group approach rather than in more traditional staff development activities. After just four meetings teachers in the study group indicated that they had introduced changes in teaching focus and practices about following directions, reading and writing: "students are applying their ability to pick questions apart, read for information and answer in complete sentences in other areas of the curriculum (math, science, etc.)" (Study Group Log for 1/23/01). Upon reflection, grade 1 teachers realized that they were not providing enough opportunities for students to develop their listening skills. As a result they started having students respond to questions orally and in writing concerning daily morning announcements.

Informally during meetings teachers communicated new ideas put into practice, generating numerous conversations and identified research questions that made evident the connection between educational inquiry, theory and practice. An instance concerns the questions about the development of listening skills. Teachers talked about allowing or not students to take notes at the same time that a text was read to them aloud. They wanted to know at what grade level and how should note taking be taught (Study Group Log for 5/8/01).

A third outcome of the study group was the long-term effort in K-6 curriculum alignment. By identifying knowledge and skills that students needed to acquire by fourth grade, gaps in the curriculum emerged. It was possible to identify certain specific skills were not taught in any of the grades. Teachers then began planning the steps in curriculum and instruction necessary to close these gaps. Tests required that students write within a specified time frame. Not enough opportunities were given to students to learn and practice this time management skill, and teachers were then able to include this in writing activities on a more regular basis: Teachers also found that K-6 literature at Lanigan included mostly works of fiction. Realizing the importance of non-fiction reading, they sought to include more of these texts.

The three meetings conducted at the end of the year by study group members to share information about the analysis of the ELA performance test extended the conversation about classroom practices, educational inquiry and curriculum development to all the J.E. Lanigan faculty. This fulfilled important PDS goals, faculty development and dissemination of inquiry directed at the improvement of practice. The grant report concludes: "This proved to be an enlightening time for everyone. This kind of sharing of information, both horizontally and vertically rarely happens, mainly because

of the constraints of schedules. This was a valuable venue for sharing that we hope to do more of in the future."

The rich list of teaching strategies to enhance student learning and performance included the following suggestions: provide formal lessons to develop listening skills; practice timed writing; pay close attention to sequence of events; vary transition wording; use non-fiction materials frequently; apply critical thinking skill, calling attention to changes that occur in stories; move beyond the literal in a reading, identifying themes and symbolism; offer music and art with literacy components; analyze titles closely; rephrase questions and practice rephrasing orally and in writing; compare similarities and differences in the texts; develop independent readers.

In the last study group meeting, an informal self-assessment conversation took place. The group unanimously declared the process unfinished—there was no closure. The tone of the statement was positive. The process remained unfinished because there is still work to do concerning the understanding of testing of curriculum and its alignment, of best instructional practices that promote student learning and growth, and, bringing it to full circle, the understanding of authentic assessment. The study group has work to do: "We plan to continue this study group in the fall to follow up on our findings and curriculum writing. All members have been very dedicated to our task. It has been a meaningful learning experience for our staff members and a chance to share across grade levels" (grant report, 2001, p.3).

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