



GRASSROOTS GROWTH

THE EVOLUTION OF A
TEACHER STUDY GROUP

By Dana Maloney, Terry Moore, and Monica Taylor

Four years ago, a group of teachers lingered after a district meeting, sharing a conversation about encouraging social responsibility in our affluent school district of Tenafly, N.J. That conversation led to the eventual formation of a teacher study group, a grassroots professional learning community that

has impacted its members and the school district. None of us knew how we would change as a result of our involvement in the teacher study group nor how our group would evolve, but all remark on what a difference the group has made in our professional lives. Participation breathed new life and energy into our careers, strengthened our commitment to social responsibility, and helped us grow as

leaders within and beyond our school district. The group members' experiences offer some lessons about organic professional development and the role of teacher leaders within and beyond traditional district roles.

HOW THE GROUP BEGAN

Dana Maloney, a high school English teacher with 18 years of experience, Terry Moore, a 3rd-grade teacher with 25 years of experience, and Julie DiGiacomo, a staff developer who recently joined the district, shared a common interest in social responsibility, along with a curiosity about the extent to which social responsibility could be encouraged through curriculum in our affluent, highly successful suburban district located just eight miles from Manhattan. Through our connections to the Montclair State University Network for Educational Renewal (MSUNER) we approached Monica Taylor from the Department of Curriculum and Teaching. Taylor agreed to work with our group because of her interest in teacher study groups and social justice. The MSUNER fosters a reciprocal partnership between 26 school districts in New Jersey and Montclair State University through which school members become clinical faculty and participate in an array of professional development. MSUNER offers 10 hours of consultation by a university faculty member as well as funding to organize and support an annual teacher study group.

Hoping to attract others in the district, we received funding from the Tenaflly administration as well as 10 hours of consultation from Taylor for a summer workshop on social responsibility. The summer workshop drew 20 participants, including classroom teachers from all levels as well as social workers, a school psychologist, a staff developer, a school nurse, a student assistance coordinator, and guidance counselors. Many of the participants had worked in the district for a decade or more but had never been in a cross-grade workshop, let alone one that included educators working in many different capacities.

Over two days, participants attempted to define social responsibility in a school district and heightened their awareness of it through discussions and exercises. As the workshop ended, participants sat in a circle and offered thoughts on how they might infuse social responsibility into their work during the coming school year. From this discussion came the idea of continuing to meet across the school year as a teacher study group.

TEACHER STUDY GROUPS

Teacher study groups address many of the challenges raised by traditional professional development. Some of these challenges include “the lack of long-term, continuing professional development that enables teachers to establish their own agenda” as well as “the deficit view of teachers

and change that underlies most efforts at curriculum reform and professional development” (Birchak et al., 1998). Most importantly, the research demonstrates that curriculum reform fails if teachers do not have the opportunity to define their own questions, construct knowledge, and renew themselves and their practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Fullan, 1993; Lieberman & Miller, 2004). Teachers need time to dialogue and reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices. MSUNER has had a long tradition of funding teacher study groups because of its understanding that true sustainable change and renewal come from within schools and classrooms by teachers, not from outside or above initiatives.

Involvement in a teacher study group allows opportunities for teachers to act as true teacher leaders in their schools and professional communities. They can act as “catalysts for change” who are “never content with the status quo but rather always looking for a better way” (Harrison & Killion, 2007; Larner, 2004). Additionally, in order to be effective teachers, they must participate in the process of learning. As Roland Barth writes, “In order to create communities of learners, teachers must model for students the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse — learning,” (Barth, 2001).

The structure of a teacher study group is unique. It is neither a staff meeting, where school policy and business are discussed, nor a workshop session, where an educator from the school or university shares theoretical and practical ideas. As Barb Birchak and others explain, a teacher study group “requires voluntary commitment; builds community and caring; challenges our thinking as educators; and integrates theory and practice” (Birchak et al., 1998).

The goals for our social responsibility study group are aligned with much of the current research on teacher study groups. We believe that participation in the group pushes all members to increase the ways in which they promote social responsibility in their lives, classrooms, and schools.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A TEACHER STUDY GROUP

- Begin with an interest that might be shared by others in a district — not just teachers.
- Put out a call to locate people who share this interest.
- Until you ask, you don't know who's out there with common interests. You also don't know who would be willing to commit.
- Begin with a summer workshop or perhaps time during a district professional day; a district could provide seed money to grow a study group.
- To sustain the study group, seek grants from supporting organizations, such as a district foundation or a partner university. These funds can pay for reading materials.
- Give members ownership; don't impose on the group.
- Take one step at a time and see where it goes. Allow for organic change. Some people will come and go; new members will join.

We hope that the group serves as a safe professional community where dialogue is not limited by the presence of administrators. We strive to create a space where members personally explore ideas, make connections between theory and practice, and create new curricula, and safely try and reflect on new instructional practices (Coia & Taylor, 2003, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lieberman, 1996) Ultimately, we hope that participation in the group results in an enhanced “sense of professionalism” (Birchak et al., 1998).

GROUP FORMAT AND PROCESS

For the past four years, the social responsibility study group has been an active, teacher-led learning community. This group includes teachers from all levels, as well as school social workers, guidance counselors, a school psychologist, and a student assistance coordinator. Once a month, the group members gather for an hour or more to share updates and discuss ideas related

to their inquiry. Our discussions are often based in and/or spring from shared readings. Between meetings, the facilitators communicate to members via e-mail.

Through our four-year process, the social responsibility study group realized that our students could potentially cultivate a commitment to social responsibility through a progressive continuum of engagements. These engagements could include fundraising, inquiry and research into a problem or issue, and personal, group, or legislative action. This continuum became a template for our professional and personal lives, and we aspired the following year to

not only teach our students through this series of engagements but to actually live them personally. We have moved through different stages of professional development. In the first year, we collected data to determine what we were already doing to promote social responsibility. In our second year, we refocused our lens inward to embark on a personal inquiry to discover what social responsibility means to us as individuals. In our third year, we are organizing larger endeavors that impact parents, curriculum, and policy in our district.

GROUP ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Our group has received grants from MSUNER each year.

During the 2007-08 school year, a large portion of funds were used to publish a newsletter; in more recent years, we purchased books and classroom posters for teachers and established a traveling library on social responsibility for district staff members. Some titles include Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Madeline Levine’s *The Price of Privilege*. We have presented on our work for the past four years at MSUNER summer conferences at Montclair State University, and in 2010 at the National Council of Teachers of English Convention. The study group has also developed a district presence, offering professional development and resources to district staff members. In 2010 we worked with community members to plan a reading of *The Price of Privilege*, where we engaged community members in questions about the role of social responsibility in students’ lives and in school curriculum.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Those who participated in the study group report have all felt its impact. Each member noted that the group was able to serve his or her needs, serving participants at different career stages with varying levels of prior involvement with social responsibility.

INITIATION

For some of the members, the social responsibility study group was their introduction to social responsibility. The group provided a safe way to begin to think about social responsibility and ways to promote it among students. Janet Gould, a substance abuse counselor who co-teaches two sections of a peer mediators class, says of the group: “More than anything, it has given me an awareness of issues that I might not have delved into and, although at times you don’t see the actual result right away, that awareness shapes everything you do and think.”

Other members remark that examining social responsibility as school faculty has led them to also examine their own personal commitments to social responsibility, which then translates to their work with students. School psychologist Nicole Levine explains: “Since joining the social responsibility study group, I have a greater consciousness of the things I can do to be more socially responsible in my own life and in working with students. Making a contribution, however small, enhances one’s sense of self and connects us with our community and the world at large. Remembering that even a seemingly small and simple action can make a difference in the world is important to me and I try to communicate this to the students I work with.”

Similarly, Jamie Kagan-Heit, a high school social worker, discussed the dual nature of her investigation: “I have been positively impacted and influenced by the group. I am much more mindful of socially responsible things in my life as well as in my work with students. I find myself wanting to be more socially responsible and wanting to promote that in the school environment. I find now I work harder at doing more to give

LESSONS WE HAVE LEARNED

- The best professional development is not imposed; it is based on teacher interests and offers teachers ownership of their development. The organic quality of self-selected groups promotes choice, commitment, and peer collaboration.
- Don’t limit membership in study groups to educators working in a certain area or level. Study groups can bring unforeseen collaborations.
- Study groups can allow educators to take on leadership roles and to grow as leaders.

back. I also try to empower the students on these topics and point out all the good they are doing and what else they can do to be socially responsible.”

MOVING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Before the study group was formed, Moore had already been a social activist, both in and out of the classroom. From 2002 until his retirement in 2010, he was advisor to World Improvement by Tenafly Students, or WITS, a philanthropic/activist after-school club for students in grades 3-5, which was featured twice in fall and summer 2009 on “Classroom Close-Up,” a news segment on the New Jersey Network. He explains that the group helped him “decide to take it up a notch, both inside my classroom and outside with my after-school activist club.” For example, WITS learned of a bill in the New Jersey House, sponsored by Assemblywoman Valerie Vainieri Huttler, that would provide more substantial fines to toy manufacturers who produce unsafe toys. After further research into toys, WITS members reached out to other groups and took an active role in the legislative process, sending postcards to their representatives and visiting the State House in Trenton.

Despite his activist experience, Moore’s study group experience inspired him to take bigger roles in impacting curriculum and policy by working with DiGiacomo to fine-tune socially responsible curriculum and spread it across the district. He now offers professional development to teachers in other districts.

AT A PROFESSIONAL CROSSROADS

Maloney was reaching a critical point in her career when she teamed with Moore and DiGiacomo to start the group. Having spent a year in a central office teacher leadership position that had been cut from the budget, Maloney would be returning to the classroom and was concerned about how she could continue to grow professionally.

Maloney promised the group at the first summer workshop that she would try to integrate real-world problem solving into her teaching of a senior English course. She had no idea how she would accomplish this goal, but her participation in the summer workshop had only heightened her thinking that active social responsibility should be part of the 21st-century classroom. Maloney designed an inquiry-and-action model for real-world problem solving, one that uses works of literature as lenses into problems in the world. In their second semester, students design and implement action projects that allow them to use digital literacies to solve problems. In November 2008, Maloney shared this project at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention. She later published articles on the project and the student outcomes in *Educational Leadership* and, with Taylor as co-author, in *Talking Points*. She says, “If not for the study group, I probably wouldn’t have gone forward with figuring out how I could bring this idea to fruition. But I had made a commitment, so I had accountability

to the group.”

Her participation in the social responsibility study group has encouraged Maloney to become active in many areas outside of Tenafly, including NCTE and the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (NJCTE). Now in her 24th year of teaching, Maloney explains that the group helped her evolve as a teacher in ways she couldn’t have otherwise imagined. She reflects: “I think our study group allows all of us to be in touch with, and to go with, the organic currents of change taking place in our society in general, and in the field of education in particular. In this new world, technology allows us all to have access to knowledge; current thinking encourages collaboration and to view new systems for collaboration.”

Partnership with Moore and others has allowed her to make a developmental leap at a midpoint in her career, when the sources of professional development appeared to her to be dwindling.

RENEWAL AND A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Elementary guidance counselor Maria Casteline considered herself socially responsible before joining the social responsibility study group but finds that the group fuels her in ways she hadn’t anticipated. She says, “It re-energizes you to see that it’s not just you when you see others who share your vision.”

Similarly, Mary Fenzel, an experienced social worker who works with elementary students, refers to a Carol Pearson quote that a member had brought to the group: “We now have choices, in many areas of our lives, about what worlds we wish to inhabit. When we take our journeys so that we know who we are and what we think and feel, what our values and convictions are, we begin to put ourselves out there and be seen. When we do so, we attract to us people like ourselves who want to live in the same kind of transformed kingdom. We form mini-kingdoms, communities of like-minded people who experiment with new ways of being and growing in the world (Pearson, 1989).”

Of the quote, Fenzel says, “I just love the quote. It speaks loudly to my feelings about our group. Whenever I am able to attend meetings, I feel a renewal of spirit and energy.”

REFERENCES

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