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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development of a teachers' book club as a form of professional development, based on the premise that teachers are leaders and can be responsible for their own professional development, if given a framework and opportunity to do so. Data sources included a survey and interviews with club members. Analysis of the success of the book club revealed four major contributing factors: (1) leadership style; (2) the environment in which the group held their discussions, including its physical space and the group climate; (3) the group members themselves, who included teachers of all grade levels and disciplines; and (4) integration of the book club into the teachers' daily routine. It was also felt that the club's success was due to the fact that teachers themselves selected the club as a professional development activity and made the commitment to it. The paper concludes that teacher conversations about teaching and learning should be promoted and links from theory to practice should be created. The reading list for the book club is appended, as well as a form for evaluating professional development activities. (JDD)

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# Professional Development Through A Teacher Book Club

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## ***Professional Development Through A Teacher Book Club***

" *The book club gave teachers an opportunity to read books that they would not normally read.*" Nancy Legan, Book club leader

### **Introduction**

I was a member of the professional development committee in 1987 when our school district first implemented a new model I had suggested for teacher professional development. The model was based on the premise that teachers were leaders and that they could in fact be responsible for their own professional development, if given a framework and opportunity to do so. Six early release days were already part of our district's calendar to provide time for professional development. In the past the program committee or administrators planned guest speakers or presentations. There wasn't any formal program design or long range plan and teachers were generally not involved, nor did many of them see the program as beneficial. The new model is still in operation and it does have a plan and specific objectives designed by teachers. The three main objectives of the new program are 1) choice - teachers could choose their form of professional development 2) follow-up - there would be more than one session for each topic (we called these sessions strands) and 3) collegiality - all strands would be open to teachers and administrators across grade levels.

This paper is about one of the strands, *The Teachers' Book Club*, which was offered first during the school year 1991 and repeated in 1992 with different books. The book club was suggested as an option for our strand program because we wanted something new and different from the

traditional inservice presentation format the teachers had experienced in the past. It was led by a sixth grade teacher named Nancy. I had suggested her to the committee because I knew she read professionally and liked to talk with others about her opinions. She agreed because she does enjoy reading and she thought the book club would be a forum for serious teacher discussions about important issues. She thought her skills from college debate courses might finally be useful.

I am a fifth grade teacher and currently the chairperson of the professional development committee. One of my duties in that position is to evaluate the programs we offer and make recommendations, with the help of the committee, regarding the continuation of the programs or "strands" as we call them. In this case the *Teachers' Book Club* was given positive evaluations and we recommended to continue offering it as a choice for the 1993 school year.

I wanted to know more about the dynamics of the book club because it *is* a different approach to teacher professional development in our school district. Teachers liked the club, but I wanted to know what in particular they liked and what contributed to the club's success.

My beginning question as a teacher researcher was, "What was Nancy's role as a teacher leader in the book club and how did it contribute to the success of the club." I quickly discovered after my first interview in the fall that there were other factors that impacted the success of the club. I revised my question to include more possibilities and it became, "What were the factors that made the Teachers' Book Club a success?"

This started out to be a paper about one teacher as a leader of a book club and I had intended to interview only Nancy. However, as I broadened my perspective of my question, I was curious to hear from another

member of the group to verify Nancy's ideas. I had several informal conversations with Kathy, a junior high teacher, who was also a member of the book club. After interviewing Kathy, I wanted to know what other members thought and I read their written evaluations and had informal conversations with two other teacher members. I discovered the "ripple" effect this book club had had on the other teachers in the group and the far reaching power of teacher conversations in schools.

## **Methodology**

The three interviews with Nancy were planned to take place throughout the school year, so we would have a complete picture of her experience as it was in process. She would meet with the club and then we would interview between sessions. We talked in the fall, the winter, and the early spring. When I asked Nancy if she would agree to video-taped interviews, she consented without being nervous. I video-taped the first two interviews and audio-taped the last because the taping equipment was not available. In the first interview she was a bit nervous, but quickly gained her confidence and articulated her points extremely well. I didn't really notice a difference between her conversation whether audio or video taped.

One of the video tapes was used in a graduate course at Harvard , where 14 members of my class on staff development assisted me in analyzing Nancy's comments more carefully.

I also had several informal conversations and one interview with Kathy the junior high teacher member. The interview took place after the other three interviews with Nancy were completed and I focused on

questions that directly related to Nancy's leadership style and any other factors that Kathy felt contributed to the success or problems of the group.

A written evaluation was designed as part of the formal evaluation process for the whole professional development program and it included a section that pertained to the book club. Four out of the seven members responded and their responses are integrated into this paper.

### **Factors Contributing to the Success of the Book Club**

My findings show four major factors that contributed to the success of the book club. They are 1) Nancy's leadership style 2) the environment in which the group discussed 3) the group members themselves and 4) the integration of the book club into the teachers' daily routine.

#### ***Nancy's Leadership Style***

Nancy has been teaching sixth grade for 19 years at the same elementary school in southeastern, Massachusetts. She graduated from a local college with a major in communication and later became certified as an elementary teacher. She has presented workshops for student teachers, participated actively in her teachers' association, and worked on several school related committees. In addition, she is pursuing her principal's certification as part of masters' program. Nancy describes herself as outspoken and willing to speak up publicly, although she feels she is strongly opinionated she still thinks she is a good listener and that she can be swayed by a good argument. She was a member of the debate team in college and she feels these skills can be useful in schools. Nancy

feels there isn't enough time or any opportunity for adult conversations about important issues during the school day.

Nancy never used the word leader to describe herself. Instead she described herself as a facilitator. In fact at one point she said, "I'm really just like a participant. I do what the group does. They are my colleagues." Yet in a later interview she did acknowledge that she wasn't *exactly* like a participant, because she couldn't really fully participate in the discussions. Two of her reasons were because she was always conscious of time and she was "checking" to make sure the group didn't get too far off the focus. She also felt she would talk a lot more in a group like this if she wasn't the leader.

Nancy describes her leadership role as fairly easy, although she admitted she still gets a bit nervous before each group meeting. She enjoys preparing for the meetings and looks forward to designing the focus questions, even though the group doesn't always use them.

It's just like running a discussion. I am the facilitator. These are my colleagues. I don't feel like I am in charge. I really feel like the group runs it. I just prepare the questions.

Nancy felt it was extremely important to be flexible as the group leader and that,

Working with adults is more difficult than working with children. They are less likely to go where you want them to and more likely to go where they want to go."

Yet, Nancy never felt disappointed if the group didn't answer all the questions she planned. She looked at her preparation as preparing "prompts" and part of her plan was to let the teachers go where they wanted to with the discussion. She encouraged teachers to speak and

relate the books to their own classroom experiences.

In response to a question about what would be the worse thing that could happen to her as a group leader, she replied laughingly, " My biggest nightmare would be that no one would talk!" It has never happened. In fact the teachers want to talk so much that Nancy finds she has to be sensitive to the domination in the group by one or two teachers. She is very aware of the quiet people and she makes an effort to include them whenever possible.

Nancy continually acknowledged the commitment her group had to make to participate in this strand. Often when she was asked about herself as a leader she referred to the group and included them as part of her leadership. For example, in response to one interview question she described her leadership role as being more active (that she had to do more than they did) than if she were just a participant in the group. But then she switched her line of thinking to talk about the group itself and how they actually did the same things, she as a leader had to do. She said,

They had to do extra things that other people who participated in strands didn't have to do. They had to read for homework. Many of them took notes on things that came up for them as they were reading and brought them to class. They did the same things I did. Yes, I was more active, but they had to do what I was doing to participate. They couldn't just show up

Kathy described Nancy's leadership style as an important factor in the group's success. She described Nancy's role as one where she initially pointed the group in the right direction. Kathy thought it was a crucial factor in running the group and getting each session going.

She (Nancy) had to create a framework to stimulate discussion. It only took a few questions to get us going. It takes a certain kind of person to do this. It is not easy to bring a group together.

Kathy also acknowledged the group tended to spin off on discussions and she liked that. She also felt it was important to be able to bring the group back and she noticed Nancy was able to do this. "She gave us choices about what we wanted to talk about and the freedom to talk about them." Kathy viewed Nancy in the leadership style Nancy intended.

She lead the group unlike someone who had to take all the power and control. She had the good ideas to start with, but then she let us talk and compare our lives to the theories in the books.

From the interviews, I could see that Nancy's view of herself as a leader was at least on target with one member of the group. Her leadership was a factor in making the group run smoothly.

There was only one instance in the interviews where I saw a different perception. Nancy's handling of the dominate speakers and her willingness to include quiet people was not always seen as a positive leadership strategy by other members of the group. Kathy said she wasn't bothered by this (she said she wasn't bothered because she didn't feel like she was a quiet teacher), but she knew that some other quiet teachers didn't like to be called on by Nancy when they were not speaking. They felt like students when she did that and did not apparently realize Nancy's motive to balance the discussion or if they did, did not want to be called on anyway. When Nancy would say, Sue ( not a real name) what do you think? Sue felt put on the spot. However, this was the only instance that surfaced about Nancy's leadership that was different from what she already said about herself.

### ***Environment for Discussion***

The environment was described in the interviews in two ways 1) the physical space for the group and 2) the climate of the group so they could speak freely. Nancy described how important it was that the group had a table and that they sat in a circle in a place that wasn't a teacher's classroom. In fact after the first session the whole group decided to move the location for next time. Having a comfortable place was important to Nancy and to the group.

Creating a safe environment in which to speak freely was more difficult to describe. Nancy's desire to make everyone feel comfortable enough to talk was expressed in all of her interviews. Because the strand program allowed for multiple meetings the same group came together more than once. This is unusual for inservice programs in our district. The number of meetings allowed people to get to know each other and Nancy felt it helped to build the climate for sharing. She noticed the quieter people did share more as the year progressed. Nancy gave examples of discussions that had teachers in tears as they shared their own experiences or compared their lives to the teachers in the books. One special area teacher ( one who does not teach a full class load , but works with small groups of students who need extra help) felt safe enough to share her feelings of being devalued by her colleagues who had more students than she did. One of the themes in the book they were reading about talked about teachers feeling valued and this teacher felt humiliated when her own friends and colleagues came into her room and counted the number of students and said "Oh, you only have six." Nancy described the discussion as very emotional and that there was empathy and deep feeling for this teacher's sharing.

Kathy described the arguments teachers in the club had at times during the sessions. I asked her to explain the arguments and she said they weren't really arguments but rather discussions or debates. She liked the healthy way the group could disagree and make their points in a professional way. "There is not a feeling you will be attacked... if you say something. It is O.K. to disagree." Of course the group is using a book as a focus and not actually disagreeing with each others' ideas. Nancy felt this was extremely important to creating the safe environment. The book was the focus not the people in the group.

### ***The Group***

Nancy acknowledged the make-up of the group many times throughout the interviews. The group crossed all grade levels and disciplines. There was a music teacher, a special education teacher, and classroom teachers, including kindergarten and middle school. Nancy felt this contributed to the discussion and to the ability of the group to see other teachers' points of view. She often described the groups commitment as different from all the other strands and from typical inservice because the teachers had to do homework before each meeting. The multiple meetings for the book club throughout the year built relationships and allowed teachers to really get to know each other.

The group all read the same thing and this created a continuity and uniformity that Kathy particularly liked. Nancy also felt the group was more focused because they read the same things and were able to agree or disagree professionally. They all had the same starting point with the reading, but then the energy and personality of the group took the discussion wherever the group wanted. Nancy noticed the difference in

the first group and the second group's discussion style.

I had different teachers, from different grade levels the first year. and there was even a secondary teacher. It was good to hear what she thought. We don't have time during the school day to hear each other's opinions. The book club gave us this time. But I know every group is different and the book club would be different next year too with new teachers. They bring their lives to it.

The book club gave teachers an opportunity to share with other teachers and to listen to teachers they would not normally work with. This gave the group a much larger perspective of education and the role teachers play in a school system. This collegiality added a quality to the book club that Nancy found to be very powerful.

Kathy also enjoyed listening to other teachers and sharing during the club time. "There is lots of integration and discussion during the book club session and after the book club session. I've been in two of them over the past two years and I've read six books!" She also said,

The make-up of the group is important. Because we cross many grades and disciplines, we get to see the whole picture of a teacher in a school..from the elementary to the secondary... and the points of view and feelings of the special area teachers too ( I believe she was referring to the story shared earlier in this paper by the special area teacher). I have much more empathy for other levels after participating in the book club.

Both Nancy and Kathy in their separate interviews highlighted the composition of the group as a factor to having the group be a success.

### ***Integration of Learning***

Throughout the interviews with Nancy and Kathy and in the informal conversations with members of the book club, I noticed several ways in which the book club had impacted their daily routines or their lives as professionals.

First of all, Nancy on many occasions shared her use of the facilitation skills in her own classroom with her sixth grade students. She felt she was an "authoritative" teacher and a strong disciplinarian and with the work of the book club she found she was more open to having the students participate in discussions. She noticed she was transferring many of her skills with the adults to her students. In one example, she said a book they had read in the club encouraged open participation for teachers. She translated that idea to her classroom and started to try more open participation with her students. Nancy was questioning her practice and relating what she was reading in books to what she was actually doing in the classroom.

Kathy found herself listening to other teachers more and actually engaging in conversations about the books she had read. Since there were other teachers at her school who were in the club she found herself "checking in " with them to see how much of the book they had read. Some typical conversations she has had are..." Which chapter are you on?.. or Oh, I have already read that... or Wait until you get to this section..." Then she says she and the teacher have a conversation and agree or disagree about the issues. She has also noticed there has been much more theoretical talk in the teachers room. " Our book club conversations now even pull other teachers (who are not in the book club) into our conversation."

There is much more high-powered thinking and comparing of notes. I notice other people's talk now and the jargon and I asked one teacher where she heard such and such, because it was like what I was reading in the book club, and she said she was taking a course. We then had a very interesting conversation.

Other teachers in the book club have shared with me that the book club has led them to continue reading professional books and magazines. They seem to be more interested in knowing what is "outside" of their classrooms. One teacher actually enrolled in a masters' program and she said the book club had stimulated her thinking so much that she just had to keep learning.

## **Implications of Using Teacher Book Clubs for Professional Development Programs**

"Part of good teaching is reflection and thinking about what you do and how you do it...thinking about new ways of teaching."

Nancy Legan

The book club is successful. So what? Why should this fact be so important? How does participation in a book club relate to the classroom? All the teachers who filled out the evaluation forms for the book club agreed the club should be continued and that, "Belonging to a group forced me to read books I wouldn't normally pick up." Another teacher said, "Belonging to a small group allows you to have a voice I would have all good intentions to read these books, but never get to it without this strand."

In response to the question, "How has involvement in this strand helped you as an educator?"

Four teachers said,

"It has made me more aware of other people's problems."

"It has encouraged or forced me to do some professional reading."

"Involvement has forced and encouraged me to think about education and the importance of keeping current."

"(The book club) allows me to hear how others perceive education."

These answers give examples of what educators should be doing. Listening to each other, reading current professional material, and sharing ideas across grade levels. Then why is the book club so unique? I think we can refer back to Nancy's original reason for wanting to participate. There isn't time during the school day to normally be together across grade levels and adult learning and conversations during the school day have not been honored as important contributions to education.

I think Nancy says it well. When I asked her how she could justify teachers spending their time in a book club instead of in a workshop that directly impacted their classroom practice, she said,

Part of good teaching is reflection and thinking about what you do and how you do it. And when we talk about new ways of teaching or new ways of doing anything in the classroom...sometimes that part (reflection) is left out (of a school's program). The book club creates an atmosphere for reflection. I think that the teachers (in the book club) get that opportunity and that is going to make their instruction stronger. And the fact that you are also sharing among your colleagues what's going on, that's important too. (Recognizing) that we do have a lot of different ideas and things to share. Just that reflection alone is enough for us to grow professionally.

Nancy went on to share that she thought there was also much secondary learning for teachers who participated in the book club. This mainly involved their ability to value other people's opinions and ideas. She believed the book club sharing was not like the talk in the teachers' room because it had more depth and the group helped each other by offering suggestions when a teacher brought an idea forward. Kathy had described the book club as a support group. She thought it was a bit like therapy and she always looked forward to attending.

The distinction was made between just reading professionally and sharing that reading with your colleagues when Nancy said,

If they don't have anyone to talk about it with it's not as powerful. It's not the same as doing a book report or just reading it alone. There is more power in the book by our discussion of how it relates to our classrooms.

The book club is part of a larger more complex professional development program in Middleboro. It is only one strand offered out of many. It could stand on its own and it actually was offered as an after school course in which approximately 10 teachers came together to earn inservice credit for professional reading and discussion.

The *Teachers' Book Club* highlights key issues that relate to teachers as adult learners within a school. Teachers have a lot to offer the system and to each other. They just need time and a focus to bring them together. This is one easy way to promote professional reading and updating while encouraging collegial relationships. The profession is known for its isolation. The book club is one way to impact that isolation because its main objective is to *promote* collegial discussion and debate.

## Conclusions

The four factors leading to the success of the book club in this case created a successful opportunity that before this time did not exist for teachers in Middleboro. Another factor that contributes to making this club work is that it is not mandated by the system. The professional development program in Middleboro honors teacher choice as an element in creating a positive learning environment. All the teachers in the book club want to be there. They selected the club. They took responsibility for it and made the commitment to it.

What I have learned as a researcher is that teachers are complex and there is a lot more to learn about how they learn. Opportunities to study teachers in collegial environments are rare. Teachers in leadership roles, other than becoming administrators, are rare. Schools are not currently designed for this type of adult interaction. Schools have established barriers and obstacles to make it difficult for teachers to share ideas. Another study in the future could specifically analyze the ways in which schools prevent their teachers from thinking and actively engaging in learning. Perhaps, teachers don't just need to be "trained" in new methods and "infused" with new *tricks* (Nancy's word for new strategies outside consultants bring into schools) Perhaps, opportunities where teachers can think about the ideas themselves, first hand, from the books is beneficial to teachers' thinking and reflection.

This research project was a unique opportunity for me, because I could delve into the "why" questions. Why did the book club work? What

made it successful? Why did teachers like it? As a classroom teacher myself I don't often take the time to think about the questions underlying the success of some event in a school. If teachers "like" an activity we just stop there. We're satisfied. There are no problems to solve. Schools don't often ask teachers the underlying questions because there usually isn't time and who cares why it works or what made it work?

Yet, it seems to me that the power of the book club was in the teachers voices and in their own learning. Teachers knew what they felt and what made the club work. Hearing their voices is an important factor if we want to replicate the concept of a book club. This paper provides some factors as to what would make a club successful.

Nancy learned from her participation as a leader and Kathy learned as a member of the group. The other group members also were pushed to new levels of learning. All of the teachers I interviewed stretched beyond the places they had started in September. The *Teachers' Book Club* had a ripple effect that impacted the professional lives of these teachers.

I have more questions now than when I started this project and I can see that professional development for teachers is a larger question that merits further study. But what I do know is that; 1) giving teachers choices about their development, 2) allowing them to meet more than once so there is some continuity and 3) creating small groups that cross grade levels are part of the design of this inservice program that has allowed the book club concept to flourish.

Finally, I can see the importance of teacher conversation, debate, leadership, and learning as an integral part of any school professional development program. Just sitting and "getting" new information isn't going to do it in the '90's. We need to listen to teachers' voices and make

more opportunities for teacher participation in schools. We need to continue to promote teacher conversations about teaching and learning and to create links from theory to practice. The teacher book club does this and its format should be encouraged in our school professional development programs.

**Reading List\* for *Teachers' Book Club*  
1991 Strand & 1992 Strand**

Barth, R. (1990). Improving Schools From Within: Teachers, parents, and principals can make a difference. Jossey-Bass.

Dichter, S.(1990). Teachers: Straight Talk From The Trenches. Lowell.

Glasser, W. (1992). The Quality School. Harper Collins.

Johnson, S. (1990). Teachers at Work: Achieving Success in Our Schools. Basic Books.

Kellerman, J. (1986). When the Bough Breaks. Dutton.

Perrone, V. (1991). A Letter to Teachers: Reflections on schooling and the art of teaching. Jossey-Bass.

\*Note: Articles from Educational Leadership are also used as reading material

Professional Development Evaluation  
January 13, 1993

Name of strand \_\_\_\_\_

### **PART I. 1992-1993 Strands**

1. Which session has been most valuable for you this school year? (identify by topic or date) Why?
  
2. What would you like to see accomplished in the last two sessions?
  
3. Should this strand be offered next year?    YES    NO
  
4. How has involvement in this strand helped you as an educator?

### **PART II. STRAND PROGRAM**

We have been working with a strand program for several years. The program is based on giving educators ;

1) **choices** of topics, 2) providing **continuous** workshops (6 sessions instead of one shot programs) 3) and involving **different grade levels** in workshops.

1. How would you rate the Professional Development Strand Program overall?            excellent      good      fair      poor
  
2. What is the most important quality of the program for you?
  
3. If you could change one aspect or add a component to the program what would it be?

more on back

### **PART III. Planning for Fall Professional Development Program**

1. Should the strand program be continued? YES NO
2. If yes, what would you like to see added as new strands?  
(list topics, possible presenters or your own name if you are willing!)
3. Are you interested in working on a "Design a Strand" to look at social studies curriculum (elementary through high school)? If yes, please list your name and school here  

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4. Do you have other ideas for improving the strands or the professional development inservice program?
5. Any ideas for courses?  
Are you seeking college credit?

### **PART IV. Outreach Grants**

Another program the PD Committee sponsors is the grant program.

1. Have you ever applied for a PD Outreach Grant? YES NO  
( The form is in your packet the first day of school PD folder - gives you \$50.00 towards a workshop or conference and pays for a substitute if needed. Must be approved by PD Committee and PSC)
2. Would you be interested in applying for one of these grants in the future? YES NO
3. How could the committee assist you in applying or learning more about the program?

### **PART V. Teacher Exchange Day**

Over the years many teachers have suggested we have a day where teachers swap grades or classrooms in the interest of learning more about our students. Other towns have done this and the PD Committee is considering sponsoring an event of this type.

1. Would you participate in a teacher exchange day if offered? YES NO
2. Would you prefer; \_\_\_ to pick your own teacher partner to switch with  
\_\_\_ to be matched ( you would pick a grade level)  
\_\_\_ doesn't matter