

The Study Group as a Framework for Self guided Professional Development Within School Settings: A Think Piece

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In the early 1990's I was asked to develop and lead an Instructional Support Initiative for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. In exchange for revamping a failing project that had been wrought with political conflict and dissention I was given the rare opportunity to examine and act upon my ideals of educational leadership with a relatively free reign. Educational leadership according to my ideals is perhaps best described as "pedagogical and educative" rather than managerial. Therefore I have consistently considered one of my greatest challenges and responsibilities as to engage the project teachers with me in meaningful professional development pursuits. Though we have not named it as such, I believe that our team efforts in self guided professional development could be considered a "study group."

Within this think piece I briefly describe the nature of self guided professional development experiences within the context of this project, and I begin to lay out some thoughts about the kind of educational leadership that I believe must underpin such endeavors.

Features of the Project Study Group

Through the years our project team has consisted of 7-11 members including myself. At the beginning of each school year we meet as a group to identify common areas of professional development interest. Based upon these common interests we, as a group, decide upon a staff development theme for the year. These themes are purposefully very broad to allow for a variety of pursuits. One day a week is normally devoted to project planning and development. Each month we designate one half of these days to our professional development as a group. The days for the entire year are determined in September. Often our sessions take place off site in a place that serves lunch. Each member takes responsibility for organizing, planning, and leading one of the monthly sessions. We create an ongoing team portfolio of products that is presented at the end of the school year to the head of our department. After the formal presentation of our portfolio, our tradition has been to celebrate our growth with an end of the year luncheon.

Our study themes have included:

Group Dynamics (two years)

Team Building and Team Maintenance

Professional Collaboration

Issues Related to Gifted Education

Issues Related to Urban Education and what is referred to as the “achievement gap”

Computer Skill Development Graphic Programs

Computer Skill Development: Tasks we can do with Word, Excel, Data base,

The following are some thoughts that come to mind related to this “study group” experiences:

- ? Self Guided Professional development is truly valued by I, the “administrator,” who creates a space in the system for such an endeavor.
- ? By self guided I mean that the group study agenda is determined internally by the group rather than prescribed administratively
- ? Study group times are predetermined well in advance and are strictly adhered to by all no matter how many other time demands arise.
- ? All study group members participate as equals with no one person privileged as the overall expert or leader.
- ? Each member participates in decisions about what we will study in other words there is no predetermined study agenda.
- ? Everyone shares responsibility for organizing and leading ie forming the agenda, picking a location, bringing in outside speakers, articles etc.
- ? An ongoing difficulty is that the group makeup is predetermined. All of the participants would not necessarily choose one another as study cohorts.
- ? Since the group meets during work time participation is by and large mandatory. One year a project member who was having difficulty relating to team members elected half way through the year not to participate in the group dynamics study deeming it “a waste of time.” He was severely ostracized by the rest of the group.
- ? Negative dynamics that arise from “working together” tend to bleed over into “studying together.” Conversely, positive dynamics that stem from studying together can enhance working together.
- ? The creation of products in the form of a portfolio lends legitimacy within the system to our self directed professional development efforts.

- ? I think the change in location away from the work site, the formal group portfolio presentation, and the end of year celebration are all important rituals that enhance the “study group” nature of our experience

“Pedagogical/ Educative” Leadership

In a departure from a more traditional “managerial” framework the notion of “pedagogical”/“educative” leadership is described within critical discourses in educational administration literature. The point of departure for the educative/pedagogical approach to educational administration lies in the different view it espouses of school people. The American social philosopher Brian Fay (1977) has described educative leadership in the following way,

Rather than regarding them as untrustworthy and needing to be controlled by tight bureaucratic structures, an educative view of leadership starts from the presumption that people in schools are conscious of themselves as active deciding beings, bearing responsibility for their choices and able to explain them by referring to their own purposes, ideas, and beliefs. (Fay, 1977, p. 229)

While not new, this view of leadership is understandably at odds with the conventional view, which is more concerned with “influencing individuals and groups towards goal achievement (Smyth, 1989, p. 191).” Smyth who has explicated the notion of pedagogical”/“educative” leadership describes the difference as having to do with the democratic and participative formulation of goals versus the unquestioning acceptance and pursuit of prespecified goals (p. 191). Smyth’s views of educative/pedagogical leadership would seem to exemplify the kind of context within which study group can flourish. Some examples of his ideas are reflected in the following quotes:

(Smyth, 1989, p. 179)

If schools are to be the inquiring kinds of places we would want them to be, then the values espoused and the activities pursued will be as a consequence of dialogue about the nature of schooling and what is considered important in the development of children, and not as a result of bureaucratic or autocratic decree.

The idea presented in this chapter do not, therefore, conform with those generally addressed when matters of educational leadership are canvassed. ...There are no prescriptive indicators on how people in leadership positions should think or act in particular circumstances. What is presented instead is an argument about a way people in school settings might actively assist one another in uncovering meaning in what they do, while investing in them the capacity to change, improve and transform those practices

(Smyth, 1989, p. 187)

It is interesting to speculate on how it may be possible to redirect thinking away from a despondent view of teachers and their capabilities, towards more productive possibilities. One possibility lies in reconstruing the way those 'outside' schools are prepared to view the work of teachers. Elaz for one, claims that in official circles at least a relatively low value is placed on experiential knowledge which is such an important part of the teachers' status and value of their own knowledge, but they receive little in the way of encouragement to view themselves as originators of knowledge both culturally and socially. According to Ebaz (1981) the view of teachers as lacking in knowledge is, I believe, mistaken and misleading, and has maintained credibility partly because of conceptions of...teaching through which teachers have been viewed. Once these conceptions are suspended, a very different picture of teachers' knowledge comes to the fore. (p. 45)

Available evidence suggests that teachers do in fact have stable bodies of ideas about how and what to teach and that their ways of thinking and dialoguing about the issues are rational, at least in their terms.

(Smyth, 1989, p. 190)

Articulating a form of leadership that is more empowering of followers means moving considerably beyond the traits, characteristics and situations in which standard views of leadership are contingent. It entails a preparedness to incorporate all school participants in an active and inclusive process of questioning, challenging and theorizing about the social, political and cultural nature of the work of schools.

(Smyth, 1989, p. 191)

...leadership can spring from anywhere; it is not a quality that comes with an office or a person. Rather, it derives from the context and ideas of individuals who influence each other. Thus, a principal may at times be a leader and at other times, a follower. A teacher may be a leader, and the principal a follower. Leadership is an act bounded in space and time; it is an act that enables others and allows them, in turn to become enablers (p. 187)

It would seem that ideas such as these can provide a rationale for the Study Group as a framework for self guided professional development within school settings. For as Smyth observes, If leadership has little to do with hierarchical impositions, then it has a lot to do with enabling the 'best' ideas to emerge wherever they come from, through a process of informed and rational debate. (Smyth, 1989, p. 191)

References

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