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Collaborative Professional Development: Book Clubs for Preservice and Inservice

Using book clubs as part of professional development allows teachers to interact with one another, to hear different perspectives, and to become a community of learners.

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Project Leadership Education and Development (LEAD), a partnership between the College of Education at Texas Tech University and Lubbock area middle schools, was designed to promote teacher leadership and address teacher satisfaction and retention. One goal of LEAD was to provide professional development opportunities for both inservice and preservice teachers, and one of the strategies we used was a series of collaborative book clubs.

Research has confirmed that book clubs can be an effective professional development strategy for educators. Roberts (2003) indicates that open dialogue in a book club not only helps each participant grow, but also benefits the group as a whole and enriches school culture. Welch (2000) described book club discussions as scholarly yet deeply personal, and the books as springboards for broader discussion related to the topic.

Although we chose a variety of titles and discussion formats (formal presentations followed by whole-group and small-group discussion; panel discussions facilitated by a group of three to four participants; and pairs of inservice and preservice teachers partnering to present self-selected chapters and facilitate participant activities), a continuous focus among the clubs was the exploration of the characteristics of successful middle-level schools. One book was chosen for each semester, and each club met for three to four 90-minute sessions. Titles included such influential works as *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* and *This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools*.

Tips for Book Club Facilitators

Our book clubs promoted a collaborative culture across

schools, districts, and the university. Within this setting, we found ways to nurture our learning community. The following suggestions are based on what we learned.

Cross boundary lines. Consider collaborating with other principals in the area or faculty from nearby universities to establish a community of learners. This brings divergent perspectives to the exercise that will benefit all concerned. Such collaborative endeavors motivate teachers to continue to grow as leaders in their own professional environments and encourage distributive leadership opportunities.

Establish a comfortable, positive environment. Book club settings should provide space for both large- and small-group discussions as well as access to technology. While we usually started with a whole-group discussion or presentation, using smaller groups afterward increased engagement and encouraged less talkative members to join in the conversation.

Our inservice teachers invited us into their schools and provided meeting space in classrooms and libraries. We found that while teachers from the host schools were enthusiastic about sharing their space, they also were eager to see other middle-level schools in the area. This exposure to different schools and different perspectives proved to be especially invigorating for first-year teachers.

Promote voluntary engagement. Participation should be voluntary because teachers who attend willingly are more likely to be committed. However, the choice of the book, a principal's commitment to teacher leadership, and a school culture that values continuing staff development also can have a huge effect on the willingness of teachers to participate. We found that

our membership grew as teachers encouraged others to join. The collegial interactions among the teachers fostered a social experience in which they built relationships and created a sense of community. The idea of being connected to the project and to each other became as important to our participants as the personal and practical knowledge they gained from participation.

Create a sense of ownership. Shared goals and shared responsibilities create ownership. Another way to encourage ownership is to provide a choice of books. You can introduce three or four titles and have participants choose one. When participants lead the discussions, they also may decide which topics or chapters will be discussed.

While our teachers valued this unique opportunity for their professional growth, they also came to recognize the power of their leadership abilities. In our book clubs, participants took turns facilitating the discussion, which provided a way for them to view educational issues through the eyes of others. The inservice teachers found that in this forum they were considered experts. Everyone's voices and experiences were valued, however, and the preservice teachers often offered fresh perspectives. The combination of experienced and novice teachers seemed to give the presentations and discussions energy, with mentorships developed that often lasted beyond the semester.

Consider a variety of response formats. Participants often shared their personal experiences, which were valuable contributions to the discussion. In fact, both inservice and preservice teachers referred to the sharing of "real world" classroom experiences as an impetus in making a connection between theory

and practice. We also encouraged participants to ask questions, even those for which there were no easy answers, and we suggested journal writing as a good method of reflection before and after discussion.

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A Network of Support

Using book clubs as part of professional development allows teachers to interact with one another, to hear different perspectives, and to become a community of learners. Participants in our project referred to the book clubs' "network of support," and they developed a genuine concern for one another in a safe venue where they could explore difficult issues involved in teaching.

References

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