2010-07-17

The Stories of Three High School English Teachers Involved in a Collaborative Study Group

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Collaborative Study Group

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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August 2010

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this action research study was to observe, participate in, and tell the story of teachers involved in a professional development experience. Professional development is an important tool to assist teachers in improving their teaching abilities. After a review of the literature on various forms of professional development and some personal experience with a variety of professional development activities, I created a collaborative study group (CSG) that included three teachers. Their work together was studied using a narrative approach to action research. The stories of these three teachers and their experiences with an informal professional development activity are shared in narrative prose that honors the voices of the participants. The data were analyzed through an iterative process that revealed the content and process of the professional development experience, and allowed me to evaluate the activity. Over the six-month study the participants explored a range of issues such as education challenges, students the teachers were working with, and the personal and professional lives of teachers. The teachers discussed educational issues related to helping students (*them*), the individual teachers (*me*), and the teachers' relationships with each other (*us*). The CSG was a unique and informal professional development experience that empowered the participants to take charge of their personal and professional growth as teachers. This study provides evidence that teachers do not need to rely on school or district initiatives for professional development activities, but can seek out other teachers to design meaningful and effective professional development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Roni Jo Draper, for challenging me to apply to graduate school. I would also like to thank Dr. Draper for her endless efforts as my thesis chair. I could not have accomplished all that I have in the last three years without her support, kindness and brilliance. People say that you never find the perfect thesis advisor but I did. I would also like to thank Dr. Sirpa Grierson and Dr. Erin Whiting who were members of my committee. Their insights, suggestions and continual work made this project possible.

I am also very thankful to all the wonderful professors I had at Brigham Young University. Each course was amazing and I learned more than I ever thought possible. Every course has influenced my thinking and assisted me in being a better teacher for my students. I would also like to thank every person in my program. Our cohort was the constant support and cheering section that I needed to not only survive our course load but to finish all my thesis work. I have learned from and loved all of you so much in the past two years.

There is no way that I could have accomplished my academic endeavors without the help and support of my husband and children. Tim, you are the love of my life. You must love me to have read so many drafts of my thesis. A special thank you to my family, my wonderful sisters, and my beautiful nieces, and very handsome nephews: I appreciate your patience, love and support during this time.

Last but not least, a very endless thank you to Rena Smithey and Ashleigh Smith. The collaborative study group would have never happened if it were not for your continual friendship and support. Thank you for all the wonderful stories and thank you for all that you have taught me over the years. I simply do not know what I would do without the two of you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Learning to be a good teacher is a complex process, but to become a great teacher, ongoing professional development is imperative. The problem is finding the best professional development activity to improve teaching (Slepkov, 2008). Learning how to manage a classroom and interact with students, parents, colleagues, and the community can be challenging. And knowing how to help diverse learners and finding the right materials to implement into curriculum design can seem overwhelming at times. Professional development activities can be effective tools in assisting teachers to become not only better teachers but also better professionals.

There are many different professional development activities for teachers to experience. A few different forms of professional development that I have experienced and researched have been workshops, professional learning communities (PLCs), higher education, school collaboration, and a collaborative study group. While each professional development experience caused me to learn to some degree, I have found that not all professional development experiences felt equally as effective. Some professional development activities I enjoyed and learned from, while other professional development experiences did not offer content that was useful to me. Some experiences left me feeling energized, while others left me feeling like I had just wasted my time or that I was a poor teacher. As a teacher I was interested in developing and participating in a professional development activity experience that would assist me and other participating teachers to grow both personally and professionally. To do this, and to study it, I chose action research. In this chapter I will describe the action research cycle and the purpose of this study.

Action Research Spiral

In my quest to find a professional development experience that would encourage growth,

I knew I was going to have to do some research. I would need a research method that would

allow me to look at the experiences I was having while participating in a professional

development activity. Kemmis (1982) outlines four steps for an action research spiral:

1. develop a *plan* of action to improve what is already happening;
2. *act* to implement the plan;
3. *observe* the effects of action in the context in which it occurs;
4. *reflect* on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and on, through a succession of cycles. (p. 7)

An action research spiral was perfect for my study. First, I would need to develop a plan for a

professional development experience that would assist teachers to grow both personally and

professionally. Second, I would act on that plan. Third, I would observe and reflect on the

professional development experience before, during, and after the professional development

activity. Fourth, I would reflect on the effects of the professional development experience. I

would make a judgment of the professional development experience and ask further questions to

lead to subsequent action and thought on the topic of professional development.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to observe, participate, and tell the story of teachers

involved in a professional development experience. My study is centered in collaborative action

research. Reason and Marshall's (2001) insights into action research suggest that action research

can assist many different people in a community; action research is for *them, me,* and *us*. Reason

and Marshall's (2001) ideas about action research were appropriate because they allowed me to

focus my professional development activity on my students (*them)*, while helping *me*

individually as a teacher, and other teachers (*us)* that I work with and are involved in my

students' lives. Each category *them, me,* and *us* represented a person in the educational community and those individuals were why I felt like professional development was so important, to assist various people in the educational community.

Again, the purpose of my study is to observe, participate in, and share the stories of teachers that are involved in a professional development experience organized by and for teachers. This study is important because it explores the experiences that teachers have as they are empowered to be in control of their professional development activities. In order to provide an accurate portrayal of the participants of the study and their experiences, a narrative approach was used to share the stories that were told by the participants. In addition to a non-traditional narrative prose to share the stories of the participants, the action research spiral will be followed to examine the professional development experience.

To accomplish the purpose of my study I followed the action research spiral. In chapter two I will review the literature that informed my plan for a professional development experience. Once I developed a plan, I implemented the plan and studied it. In chapter three I describe how I observed and studied the professional development experience. In chapter four, I share the experiences and stories of the professional development activity based on the data gathered during the professional development experience. Finally, in chapter five I reflect upon those stories and make a judgment about the professional development activity. While this varies somewhat from a traditional thesis, it is appropriate for an action research study.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In a traditional review of literature on professional development, there would be a review of professional development research in order to make a case for the current study. However, part of this study was creating a professional development activity specifically engineered to give teachers a voice in their own personal and professional growth. Therefore my review of the literature is an important part of the story of this study. My review of the literature describes various forms of professional development in which I have had first-hand experience and provides an assessment, based on the literature. The purpose of this review is to explore options that were available to me as I developed the professional development activity for my participants and myself. A review of the research on professional development and my own personal experiences, served as the material with which I worked to develop a non-traditional form of professional development. Along with reviewing the literature in this chapter I will also outline my action research plan for my own study on professional development. The first step is to assess various forms of professional development. Therefore, after a brief description of professional development, I will share the criteria for effective professional development, use those criteria to assess various forms of professional development, and share the details of the professional development that I organized with two other teachers.

Defending Professional Development

The United States government, recognizing the need for excellent teachers and the importance of assisting teachers in professional development, created the *Professional Development Resource Guide for Adult Educators* (Sherman, Kutner, Tibbetts & Weidler 2000). The Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) offers a concise definition of professional development. "*Professional development* is a term conveying

the concept that practitioners are (or should be) active partners in determining their own learning needs and in designing and implementing appropriate learning activities" (Sherman et al., 2000, p. 5). What was notable to me about this quote was the idea of teachers determining their own needs for professional development. Often times a principal or a district mandate will require a teacher to attend a professional development activity. However, according to the DAEL, teachers should have a voice in their own professional development activities.

Reviewing the professional development experiences in my own teaching, I realized that I have never had a choice in my activities. Usually I have a principal or a district person mandate where, when, and how I learn. Many of the environments for my professional learning activities consequently felt uncomfortable and unnatural to me in the sense that where and what I learned had little to do with the work that I was accomplishing in my own classroom. I thought that my desire for a natural-feeling professional development experience might be unrealistic until I read a definition of what professional development is. My insight into professional development comes from a definition that Day (1999) offers. He states,

> Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives. (p. 4)

This definition demonstrates how professional development can be both a naturally occurring but also a planned, conscious learning experience. It is natural for teachers to choose to get together on their own and reflect upon and improve their practice. Many times I have walked next door to a teacher in my building and told a story of frustration and had that teacher assist me with that problem. These small interactions between teachers in the faculty room or after school hours are

5

very natural real-time learning experiences for teachers. Planned conscious professional development activities like district trainings are also helpful learning for tools for teachers but don't always feel as natural. It has been my experience that I learn the most from my colleagues in those small, naturally occurring learning opportunities where a colleague helps me or I help a colleague.

In my quest to find a professional development experience that would assist my students (*them)*, while helping *me* individually as a teacher, and *us* other teachers that I work with and learn and grow from, I could not help but think of these two definitions. I wanted to find a professional development activity that teachers chose as the DAEL suggested, and I also wanted a professional development activity that was natural as Day (1999) had recommended. I asked myself what makes a professional development activity teacher-selected, natural, and effective.

Types of Effective Professional Development

There are many different professional development activities for teachers to participate in. As stated in chapter one, a few different forms of professional development that I have experienced and researched have been workshops, PLCs, higher education, school collaboration, and a collaborative study group. While I sought to develop a professional development activity that incorporated the best parts of planned and natural activities, I was also aware that the activities must adhere to the criteria that describe effective professional development activities. Thus I turned to the work of Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001).

Garet et al. (2001) looked at what made professional development effective and found three core features. First, effective professional development must focus on content. The concepts that a teacher learns at a professional development activity must be applicable to a teacher's student population, content area, and classroom. Second, a professional development

activity must promote active learning for teachers. Teachers must be engaged in the information that they are learning. Teachers must be able to ask questions, express opinions, and be able to be actively involved in their learning. Finally, an effective professional development must be coherent, meaning that teachers must be able to continue the conversations and relationships of a professional development activity well past the actual professional development experience.

When I read the research on professional development and thought back on my own professional development experiences, I agreed with the research. My best professional development activities have been ones that improve my content, allow me to be an active learner and are coherent in the way that I can carry on my learning and relationships that I form from the professional development experience and into their practice as teachers.

Next, I had to determine the form of professional development that would best fit my colleagues and me. I wanted an experience that teachers chose, that was natural but was also effective. I reviewed many different professional development activities: here is what I found.

Workshops. Workshops are usually one-to two-day events where a lecture-based experience is offered for teachers on various subjects such as classroom management, curriculum design, or content knowledge. The first workshop that I was involved with was a preservice workshop. This workshop was specifically set up for first-year teachers and interns. This workshop was offered and run by the school district and lasted two days. I was about a month away from beginning my first week of teaching and I had no idea what I was doing. I was hoping that I would get some great suggestions about how to make my first day or even week of teaching successful. However, I found the workshop rather disappointing.

The information given at this workshop was vast, but I had no experience to tie the provided information to. The workshop lacked content information that applied directly to my

classroom. I was not sure how each of the suggestions offered at the workshop would be tied into my classroom.

Another large part of this workshop was to demonstrate how teachers need to assist each other. We played various games that taught unity and collaboration. Most of the teachers that I worked with didn't work at my school and I would never see again. The grouping with these teachers lacked the coherence that Garet et al. (2001) suggest to make an effective professional development. It has been my experience that workshops have too many people and are not set up to individually assist teachers. The information that has been given at many of the workshops I have attended does not even pertain to my classroom.

The least favored form of professional development according to the research (Garet et al., 2001) and in my personal experience is the workshop. According to the research of what makes effective professional development, workshops fall short in all three of the categories: content, active learning, and coherence. The content of workshops does not always pertain to each of the participants involved in a workshop. Workshops are usually lecture-based and do not promote active learning. Workshops are historically detached from teachers' classrooms and teaching environments. Workshops do not promote professional growth. Workshops are more of a download of mass information to many different people.

Professional learning communities. The term "professional learning community" has become ambiguous since many educators are implementing PLCs in their schools. DuFour and DuFour (2006) define a PLC as having three key components. First, a PLC must be centered on student learning; second, the educators involved in the PLC must be continual learners; and third, PLCs are student data driven. A PLC is a form of professional development where a group of teachers (usually an entire school) work in small groups, sometimes divided by content area.

8

These small groups work on various issues and problems. The issues that a PLC addresses can vary from dropout rates to attendance issues. After these small groups work together they then report back to the larger group on what they have learned.

I have never been part of a formal PLC. However, my principal is currently running a modified PLC at my school. The modified PLC that my principal has formed at my school is based on the work of DuFour and DuFour (2009). On March 31, 2009, I attended a workshop with some colleagues from my school including my principal. DuFour and DuFour (2009) presented at Brigham Young University. As I sat there and listened to the presentation I thought there were many great ideas. However, I saw how some of the ideas, if they were to be implemented at my school, would not necessarily translate into my classroom. In particular, the grouping of teachers for the PLC would not work at my school. Each time that a concept was given, like a discussion on curriculum design, my principal would turn to me and say, "That would not work with our English department."

Bullough (2007) viewed the concept of PLCs and found a bit of optimism in PLCs when he said,

> Ours is a faithless time, when threats, punishments, and externally imposed mandates are thought necessary to produce desired reforms. Such approaches to fostering change misunderstand teachers and especially what inspires them to extraordinary levels of performance. Reforms driven by distrust cannot endure, nor can they produce sustainable quality programs. Able teachers flee from working under such conditions…PLCs seek to build teacher strength and to get motivation right. Insofar as they do, they represent a ray of hope for a brighter future. (p. 179)

Teachers' jobs are becoming increasingly difficult. Federal mandates are deterring many potential teachers from the profession. However, if teachers work collaboratively there is hope that teachers can combat any misguided local and federal mandates.

9

Graham (2007) did a study on PLCs, and one participant from that study commented on their experience in a PLC:

> My development in previous years was based on my own reflection and perceptions I only had myself. This year I can reflect through the eyes of four to nine other people . . . I have the opportunity to not only work with them and reflect with them, but to see things from their perspective as well as my own. (p. 8)

This statement emphasizes how teachers can be each other's greatest resources to learn from. One of the strengths of a PLC is that the number of participants is much smaller than that of a workshop. PLCs are also teacher-centered and run. PLCs that are set up and run well meet all the criteria of effective professional development. PLCs can be content centered, have active learning, and offer coherence. However, the groups of teachers for a PLC have much to be desired.

One downfall of a PLC is the way groupings are set up. The groupings can sometimes create more problems than solutions if teachers do not work well collectively. The English department in which I work would be an example of a group of teachers that spend more time bickering than we do getting work done. A lot of the literature for PLCs suggests that small groups of teachers should be formed, but the literature never specifically says how these groupings are supposed to interact. As a consequence, PLCs often have more of a top-down or mandated feeling to them rather than a sense of community.

Higher education. One form of professional development that has created the most change for me is higher education. Being part of the Center for Improvement of Teacher Education and Schooling (CITES) endorsement program has changed my classroom drastically. CITES offers a program where teachers can take a class one night a week for two and a half years to obtain a reading endorsement, a certification to teach reading classes.

Attending graduate school has been another form of professional development that I have experienced. While attending graduate school I have read more research and learned more about teaching than I ever thought possible. Both CITES and graduate school have been professional development activities that have been important for me but are two forms of professional development that might not be possible for every teacher. The time and money for higher education is a challenge for many teachers.

Hammond and Haselkorn (2009) had this to say about reforming teachers and higher education:

> Rather than our current counterproductive contest, which pits insufficient models against each other, the United States needs to pursue a higher standard-in the caliber of candidates entering teaching, the quality of programs that prepare them, and society's support for teachers across their careers. (p 3)

Hammond and Haselkorn go on and compare the United States to other countries and discuss how other countries spend money helping teachers prepare to enter the profession and also spend money to support teachers while they are teaching. The underlying theme is that teachers need help and support. Teachers need continued education but don't always have the time and money for higher education.

The positive part of higher education is that it meets all the criterion of effective professional development. The hard part of higher education as a form of professional development activity is the logistics of going to graduate school or earning a specialized endorsement such as my CITES endorsement. After teaching all day the hours left in the day to attend class and do homework are limited. Tuition for graduate school is also expensive. Teachers do not make substantial wages; particularly young teachers that are on the bottom of the pay scale do not make very much money. Therefore, higher education may be out of reach for many teachers.

Collaboration. Currently at my school students are released early every Wednesday. My school uses that time to have teacher collaboration where we have large faculty meetings to discuss issues facing the school. After our faculty meeting we then have break-out groups with a variety of activities. Sometimes we meet with our departments and discuss issues. At other times we have break-out groups where we learn a special skill, such as how to design a website.

The idea behind collaboration is, teachers learning from teachers. However, most of the teachers in my building come to collaboration grumbling and complaining. When we break off into our learning groups some of the teachers that run these break out groups do not place a lot of thought and effort into their presentations.

My principal has formed our collaboration around much of the research offered by the DuFour and DuFour (2009). While attending a conference at Brigham Young University, an interesting opportunity presented itself for me to discuss with my principal the pros and cons of the collaboration currently happening at my school. One conclusion that I came to was that though teachers may grumble about collaboration time, the idea of creating a time for teachers to get together to discuss and conduct informal research into their practice can support many teachers to improve their personal practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2008) stated:

> There is little disagreement that teachers who engage in self-directed inquiry about their own work in classrooms find the process intellectually satisfying, they testify to the power of their own research to help them understand and transform their teaching practice (p. 6).

Teachers need to create their own action research in their classrooms. But the step that makes that research powerful, are the steps of sharing research with others and being reflective with research. Collaboration time offered in schools creates time for teachers share their own personal research and gives teachers an opportunity to once again learn from other teachers.

12

Collaboration time meets all of the requirements of an effective professional development and is an inexpensive way for teachers to learn from one another. Collaboration has a sense of community where there is a space for professional improvement. The only downfall that I see with collaboration time is the hostile environments that can occur when teachers get together that do not work well together or do not share a similar vision. Hargreaves (1994) warns of contrived collaboration where teachers are arbitrarily placed together. Individuals in these groupings do not always work well together because there are so many different personalities in a faculty of teachers. I know that there are times when teachers can learn from different ways of thinking but when a hostile environment is created, teachers spend more time disagreeing than accomplishing productive goals.

None of these forms of professional development had everything that I was looking for. I needed an experience that was going to be teacher selected, natural, and effective for, *them*, *me,* and *us*. Workshops, PLCs, higher education, and school collaboration all fell short in one way or another. Once I had assessed these various forms of professional development I needed to make a plan for a professional development activity that would assist both me and my colleagues.

Collaborative study groups. A collaborative study group (CSG) is a group of teachers that get together on their own and organize a group where educational issues can be addressed. In addition, a CSG is different than a PLC in the fact that a CSG does not use student test scores like a PLC does. A CSG group is teacher selected whereas a PLC's grouping is selected by someone other than teachers (the principal or district). A CSG has more of a natural feel to it where as a PLC is a more planned professional development activity. The CSG offered the perfect natural feeling professional development framework for my study.

As I stated earlier, although in my five years of teaching I have enjoyed many different forms of professional development I never found the ideal professional development experience. Ideally, I was looking for a professional development that was selected by teachers, felt natural to participants, and was effective. I wanted to learn for *them* my students, *me* individually as a teacher, and *us* the teachers that I work with and care so much about. However, I wanted that time to be useful and non burdensome to me and other teachers.

In my second semester of graduate school, my thesis advisor came across a study by Thibodeau (2008) and passed it on to me. When completing an ERIC search on collaborative study groups, Thibodeau's (2008) study was the only research on collaborative study groups. In this study eight people met together and formed their own professional development where they could learn and grow from one another. Their collaborative study group seemed to be just what I was looking for. This collaborative study group was effective but at the same time seemed natural.

Thibodeau's study opened my eyes to a new idea, a CSG. I became interested to see what would happen if I formed my own collaborative study group. I wondered if my classroom would change if I were involved in a CSG. I was curious to find out how my experience with my higher education classes be affected by the CSG. I was interested to see what the discussions would be like in a CSG. I wondered if other teachers would react to a CSG as I would. I wanted to experience forming a CSG. Ultimately I wanted to know if the teachers in a CSG, not principals or district personnel, could take control of their own professional development activity and still experience effective professional development. There were a million questions and thoughts in my mind after reading Thibodeau's study. I was determined to learn more about a CSG. The major difference between Thibodeau's work and the study that I wanted to do was positionality.

Thibodeau was an outside researcher looking in on participants. I wanted to not only be a researcher but be a participant as well. I am currently a practicing teacher and I wanted to experience the CSG as a form of professional development as well as observe and evaluate the CSG as a form of professional development.

My Plan: Collaborative Study Group (CSG)

As stated in chapter one, there is a four-step action research spiral suggested by Kemmis (1982). The first step is, "To develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening" (p. 7). My plan was to form a CSG and follow the other three steps on the action research spiral (act, observe, and reflect) to see if a CSG was truly an effective form of professional development as outlined in by Garet et al. (2001).

I wanted to find out if the CSG was the professional development that could assist *them* (my students), *me* (the individual teachers in the CSG), and *us* (the participants of the CSG which included two teachers and myself). I wanted to find out what the CSG had to offer.

A collaborative study group seemed to meet the criteria for an effective professional development activity. A collaborative study group was organized and offered by teachers has the potential to focus on content, promote active learning, and CSG be coherent. A CSG also focused on student learning. Collaborative study groups are a great form of professional development as they look at the entire educational community: the *them*, *me,* and *us* are all represented in a CSG.

My plan was to have myself and two other teachers meet twice a month and collaborate together to assist one another with both personally and professionally. I wanted a safe place for the participants to be actively engaged in their professional world. The CSG should be a place where anything goes and teachers can help one another to learn and to grow. The purpose of my

study was to observe, participate and share the stories of teachers that are involved in a professional development activity. The CSG was an experience that would yield many insightful stories for me to learn from.

I wanted the CSG to work but I knew that I would have to select the right participants. According to Day's (1999) research, I would need participants that I could naturally work with. In accordance with the Garet et al. (2001) research, part of the coherence of professional development activity is being able to carry on the conversations and the relationships of the professional development activity. I would need to find participants that I could see outside of the CSG so I could create coherence for the CSG.

Also in Thibodeau's (2008) study she pointed out that a common thread that her participants had is that they were all involved in a literacy professional development outside of their study group. The common learning experience that these teachers shared outside of their CSG, offered a universal discussion point for the group. This allowed the teachers to look outside their group for solutions to their problems. I needed participants that I could work well with and that also shared an outside learning experience with me. Finding the right participants might have seemed like a tall order but I had the perfect participants in mind.

Conclusion

Not only was I interested in finding out if Thibodeau's study transfers to my school, but I was also interested in seeing how my colleagues and I grew from learning from one another. I was fascinated to find out what might happen when each member of this study group is an equal participant and researcher (Bray, Lee, Smith & York, 2000). I hoped to see my students receive a better education because I was determined to improve my own teaching. As I began the study, I

was interested in what I would learn about teaching as I participated in the study and what I would learn about professional development as I studied the CSG.

Chapter 3: Methods

"The special attractiveness of story in contemporary research on teaching and teacher education is grounded in the notion that story represents a way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the issues with which we deal" (Carter, 1993, p.6). Carter explains one of the challenges of sharing, observing and understanding the experiences of a teacher. Without sharing a story it is very difficult for a teacher to express what is happening in his or her classroom. In this chapter not only will I discuss how the CSG and its stories will be studied, but I will also introduce the participants of my study.

My study is a form of collaborative action research involving other educators and me. As Carter explains, stories are the best way for teachers to share their lives with other people. These stories were shared by each participant in my study.

Participants

The basis of my research is a belief that teachers can learn and grow from one another. Thibodeau (2008) has done extensive research on professional development and how teachers can improve their practice. She described how the eight teachers in her study,

> . . . decided to take advantage of an opportunity to overcome the barriers of structure, time, and culture because they perceived that it would be in their own best interests and in the interests of their students to work collectively to accomplish mutual goals. (Thibodeau, 2008, p. 56)

It was brave for these participants to push themselves past their traditional professional development activities and try something new that would challenge both their previous thinking and their previous teaching styles.

Each of the teachers selected for my study have several common threads. Each teacher participating in the study group was involved in the CITES reading endorsement program offered through Brigham Young University and has received a reading endorsement. The CITES

reading endorsement program makes it possible for teachers to obtain a reading endorsement to add to their teaching license. Teachers meet for classes on Tuesday evenings during the academic school year, completing three courses each year. At the end of two and a half years, teachers have completed the seven courses required to earn a reading endorsement from the Utah State Office of Education. Another common link between each of these educators is that we all are Language Arts teachers. Despite our similarities, each of the teachers in this study is uniquely different and consequently contributed various insights to the group.

Along with careful selection of participants, my participants' identities are also important. Each of the participants not only agreed to be part of my study but after discussing using pseudonyms, each participant was also adamant about me using their actual names. Due to the design of my study, if I were to use pseudonyms for my participants I would be taking away part of their identity. I would not be giving these women the full credit for their contribution to my study if I were to hide their names. Voice is a crucial part of a story and if I were to hide the identity of these women I would be hiding their voice and not sharing a full true story. Pseudonyms will be used for all other characters and names of schools and districts in the story to protect their identities.

Each teacher in this study group has a unique story of becoming an educator and how and why she felt compelled to be part of this study group. It takes committed, smart, inquisitive teachers to create a collaborative study group. Their stories follow. The participants of my study chose to write their own stories to introduce themselves.

> **Marjorie Jo Ralph: Montgomery High School.** My name is Marjorie Jo Ralph. I have been teaching at Montgomery High School for five years. Montgomery High is a small school, with about 1000 students, located in rural Utah. I received my Bachelors of Science degree from Utah Valley University a mid- sized university of about 26,000 students, in 2005 with a Bachelors of Science degree in English Education.

My teaching career started with me accepting an internship at Montgomery High School teaching sophomore and senior English. My first year was very rewarding and very challenging. Along with teaching full time, I was also finishing my degree, graduating, and being the head coach for the boys and girls tennis teams. I learned a lot really fast, but one thing that became apparent that year was that I did not know enough. I did not have the knowledge base to be a good teacher.

In my undergraduate work I had learned a lot, but I did not learn things such as how to teach a seventeen year old child to read; or how to deal with the politics of keeping students, parents, colleagues, and a community all happy. I found out quickly that I did not know enough about curriculum design, classroom management, or literature in general. I needed to read more, I needed to learn more, and I needed more experience.

I thought my second year would be better than my first year. To some degree my second year did go a little smoother, but it was apparent that I needed more professional development. However, with the demand of tennis coaching, I once again found myself with no time to improve on my knowledge of teaching.

During my first and second year teaching, I was car pooling each day with Lorena Smithey. Lorena and I had completed our undergraduate work together. We had both done our internship year together at Montgomery High School. At the end of Lorena's first year she had been contracted to become the Read 180 teacher. She was enrolled in the CITES reading endorsement program which is the Center for Improvement of Teacher Education and Schooling program offered through Brigham Young University. CITES offers a program where teachers can take a class one night a week for two and half years to obtain a certification to teach reading classes.

Each day Ms. Smithey would tell me about what she learned in her Tuesday night class and how her classroom at Montgomery High would change. I started stealing ideas and implementing those ideas into my classroom. I found that my daily commute was turning into a valuable professional development activity. Just the little ideas that Lorena was giving me each morning were making huge improvements in many different aspects of my classroom.

At the end of my second year of teaching I decided that I needed to quit coaching and that I needed to become a better teacher. I enrolled in the CITES program at the beginning of my third year of teaching. The information given in the classes made me rethink my entire approach to teaching. I found myself making not large changes but small adjustments in my teaching and in my classroom. I found that these tiny changes made immense improvements in my students test scores and my enjoyment of teaching my students.

To my surprise I found that another teacher from Montgomery High was in my cohort at CITES. Ashleigh Smith was a Special Education English teacher from my building. We quickly became friends and started a ritual of going to dinner after class every Tuesday night. Our discussions at dinner each Tuesday night were filled with concepts,

20

philosophies, and insights that we had gained in class. Once again I found myself in an informal but yet, invaluable professional development activity.

In my second class of the CITES program one of the professors suggested that I apply to graduate school. I thought graduate school was a great idea to once again further my knowledge as an educator. In my teacher education classes really interesting questions were being posed. How do teachers learn? What is the best form of professional development? Can individuals who are not teachers teach teachers how to teach? Are Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) a good way for teachers to improve their classrooms? Are workshops the best way for districts to invest money? I felt all of these questions deserved some answers and if answers were not possible these questions deserve some serious time, discussion, and thought.

As I started to devote some time and thought to these questions of professional development I started to reflect on how my classroom had improved with the assistance of professional development. Some key factors I felt played into my teaching improvements were: The CITES program, and my informal professional conversations with Ashleigh Smith and Lorena Smithey.

Ashleigh Smith: Montgomery High School. My favorite thing about going to the doctor is when the aliment in which I have gets fixed (most of the time). You meet with the doctor, tell him/her your symptoms and tada . . . he/she gives you a prescription to fix what is wrong with you. If only teaching were that easy.

I became a teacher because I wanted to change the world, as a pre-service teacher I thought this would be an easy accomplishment; however, now as a sixth year teacher I realize this task of educating is very great.

I teach Special Education reading and English. My students' reading levels range from first to eighth grade. It was not long into my career that I realized I needed help. Lorena Lesue-Smithey started the Reading Endorsement a year before I did, at that time we shared a classroom for one period. Each day that I would come into her classroom, she would shower me with ideas that she had learned from the endorsement. I could tell that as a professional she was growing in ways that I also wanted to grow. The next year when the reading endorsement was offered, I jumped at the chance to be a part of this opportunity.

In my career I have had many opportunities to participate in professional development workshops. I have been very grateful for these experiences and while at the conference or workshop I have learned a lot; however, I had a problem applying the information that was learned to my everyday classroom. Many times the concepts were too great to filter into the curriculum that I already had developed, when I got back from the conferences I never had the time to implement the information. I was very hopeful that the reading endorsement would be different. It was. From the first day of the program, I gained knowledge that immediately influenced my teaching. I was able to take the bits of information gained and tweak and change curriculum that I have already developed. In

one class we had to write a unit plan. I took a unit that I had previously developed, but was unhappy with, and changed it for this assignment. Since that time, I have been asked to give presentations to other district Special Ed teachers sharing that unit. I have also had many positive compliments from other educators who are now using that unit. I don't feel I can take the credit, that unit would never have been developed in that way, had it not been for the instruction that I received through the reading endorsement.

I have been very grateful to be in the same reading endorsement cohort as Marjie Ralph, after class each Tuesday night we go to dinner. Much of the conversation is centered on ideas we have learned in the endorsement, or ideas that we are using in class. This extra collaboration time that I share with Marjie has helped in applying the ideas that we learn in the endorsement to my everyday teaching.

As Educators we know that there is not a "prescription" for teaching. Every student is very different and each aliment that they face is very unique from other students that have come before them. I am confident that it is through collaborating with other teachers, that we can truly find the best teaching practices, and when we become a collaborative profession, education will truly change the world.

Lorena Smithey: Roberts High School. One of the most rewarding things that I've done post undergraduate schooling was experience and complete the Reading Endorsement through BYU CITES. My journey in and out of the endorsement was fluid and worthwhile. Most of what I learned is applicable to everyday teaching, and I found many of my courses—while they introduced new material—often validated and reinforced the lectures and lessons throughout the entire program.

I started teaching as an intern back in August 2005 in Montgomery High, a small school in rural Utah. It was rough at first. Everyday was packed with preparations, lesson planning, grading, evaluations, and reflections. At home I was dealing with a one-year old daughter—my first, and my husband was still plugging away at his own degree and working part time. We hardly saw each other. By January, my twelve hour days and occasional panic attacks started to level off, and the daily routine seemed natural, no longer forced. By the end of the year, I felt more like a teacher, not a one-man band.

Around that time, I began job hunting, updating my resume and attending multiple interviews around the district. I really didn't know where I would be by the following school year. Thankfully, I was, offered a position at MHS as a reading teacher. You can imagine my relief when my uncertainty for the future was wiped out with that one job offer. Phew, I thought.

Then came the lengthy discussion of my new job description and qualifications needed for it. Can you believe that my BS in English Ed. was not enough to satisfy the district in order to teach this class? So there I was, a green college grad, nearly forced to start school *again*. Would my feet ever touch the ground again? Likely not.

I started my reading endorsement with little enthusiasm—except that I knew I'd need to pass to teach my READ 180 class. At first I found it inconvenient. Once a week I had to drive forty minutes from Montgomery to Lehi to take the courses. Then, I spent three hours listening and collaborating with my fellow classmates. The homework, which consisted of reading, writing, lesson plans, and collaborating, was time-consuming and exhausting. In the beginning, I don't know how I could have stuck it out if it weren't for my first captivating professor, Dr. Roni Jo Draper. She was a godsend, an entertaining, brilliant, teacher, my reason to show up.

The two and a half years of the program went by quickly, and was only mildly interrupted by hurricane Katrina—which destroyed my in-laws home—another baby, and the location of the endorsement moved ten-minutes closer in Orem. By the time I finished, I not only consumed and regurgitated the constant flow of teaching ideas into my own classroom, but I also gained the desire to keep going! Perhaps not start another endorsement yet, but to continue collaborating with teachers in my cohort or others from the endorsement. When Marjie Ralph approached me with her proposal to start a literacy study group, I was thrilled. Of course I would join. Of course I would contribute. I love the idea of collaborating so as not to forget the concepts and methods from the endorsement. As a regular refresher, I will be able to recall and reflect upon what has worked in the classroom and what still could work.

Co-Research/ Co-Participant: Insider to Education

Positionality was a large factor in my decision of selecting the participants for this study. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) explicate how teachers (who are insiders to education) have some of the best insight into education. However, a large portion of educational research has been done by outsiders (or people who are not educators).

Lack of significant teacher participation in codifying what we know about teaching, identifying research agendas, and creating new knowledge is problematic. Those who have daily access, extensive expertise, and a clear stake in improving classroom practice have no formal ways for their knowledge of classroom teaching and learning to become part of the literature on teaching. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p.5)

Therefore, for this study, not only has the professional development activity been chosen and planned by the participants, but the participants are also responsible for studying the experience.

Each participant in my study is an insider to education and can offer insight that an outsider could not offer. Furthermore, each of us is an active practitioner, willing to participate in a collaborative study group to improve her practice. Having an insider's perspective is

imperative to learning what can be gained from teacher collaboration experiences. "Insider researchers often collaborate with other insiders as a way to do research that not only might have a greater impact on the setting, but is also more democratic" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p.36). Teachers are the best experts when it comes to what is happening in their rooms. Individuals outside the profession and outside the classroom simply do not have the same depth of insight as practicing teachers. As experienced teachers, each participant of this study holds a valuable perception that would be impossible to gain coming from an outsider.

Bray, Lee, Smith, and Yorks (2000) view the humanistic side of the participants in a collaborative study. "These practices rest on the belief that when researchers engage in the experience under investigation, the result is a more valid understanding of the experience. Issues of power and control, as well as ethics, equally underlie this posture on how human inquiry should be conducted" (p. 7). The interesting part of a collaborative study group is how each participant is a "co-subject" and a "co-researcher." The positionality of the teachers in this study adds to the strength of the study and what can be learned from the CSG.

Design: How to Share the Stories of the CSG

"One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, p.2). The design of my study is a form of collaborative action research, which was shared with the academic community through narrative stories. Each educator in the study group shared what she learned through telling her own personal stories. Through sharing stories and participating in action research the participants of the study had an opportunity to learn much.

"Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p.3). Participatory action research

is perfect for this study of insiders to the education profession who wish to inquire into, not only their own practice, but also into how their practice relates to the various communities of their classroom (colleagues, students, and self perceptions). The issues facing education are complex and to observe those issues collaborative action research offers great insight. There are no other individuals better equipped to perform this type of research than these women, all of whom are insiders into their own experiences.

Stories are a powerful way to share information. Stories show not only what people are doing, but stories can show what people are thinking and feeling as well; stories are experience. As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) state,

> … The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storyteller and characters in their own and other's stories (p. 2)

When teachers get together the first thing that happens is the sharing of stories. Teachers love to tell stories from their classrooms. These stories can be used display what happens in the day and the life of an educator. These stories can not only help the people who are hearing stories but can help those who are telling the stories. Therefore, the stories created and shared in the CSG served both as a way for us to engage in dialogue about our teaching and as a way for us to create data that could be used to evaluate our work together. In this way, collaborative action research is a research that allows teachers to reflect on their own practice with the assistance of other capable professionals.

Data Sources and Collection

The study group met together twice a month over a six month period, starting in September 2009 and continuing through February of 2010. As we left each study group, each teacher left with greater insight into their classroom practice and their importance as a member

of the educational community. Along with greater insight, each teacher left the group with new ideas to implement into their teaching classrooms. As each story was shared, there was information gained by each participant in the group. Data collected from my study occurred before, during, and after each of the CSG meetings.

I used three different data sources for this study: written personal stories (emailed responses to the writing prompts), transcribed recorded conversations, and a personal journal. Before each CSG meeting there was an email sent out to each member that contained a writing prompt. Each member emailed her response to the prompt back to the other members of the group. This prompt allowed everyone to think about the prompt and share stories both before and after each of our meetings. These prompts consisted of anything that the participants wanted to discuss or observe in the group. These stories consisted of experiences with students, individual learning, professional growth, frustration, or any other informative thoughts. We specifically focused on professional improvement, viewing how we individually are part of a larger community and profession. We shared stories of *them*, *me*, and *us*.

My second data source, the transcribed stories of our recorded conversations during our CSG meetings. These stories offered insight into each teacher's professional growth. As often happens when an individual begins to share a story, other participants cannot help but to join in with his or her stories as well. These conversations of what happens in our classrooms and our lives were shared and recorded at each of our bi-monthly meetings.

My third data source was a personal journal that I used after and between meetings of the CSG. I kept a journal of my reflections and thoughts. This journal was an important source of data as it contained the stories that were told and shared outside the collaborative study group meetings. This journal was a source for the data generated by us as teachers at school in the

break room or in my living room after a CSG meeting. As my personal journal, I thought it would originally be full with my thoughts and reflections which it was, but the journal also tells the stories of my participants outside of the CSG meeting. This journal allowed me to share a deeper and broader story of the CSG.

Analysis of Data: Observing and Reflecting on the CSG

Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the study. As stories were shared both orally and through writing I organized the order of each of these stories and then analyzed the data by placing the stories into three categories. First, stories about *them,* the students that we discussed. Second, stories of *me,* or stories that we shared about our own personal lives and learning. Third stories about *us,* the stories of how we worked together or developed our relationships as we participated as a CSG. Placing the stories into the *them, me*, and *us* categories comprised the first coding of the data.

The second code of the data emerged as I re-read the stories of *them, me*, and *us*. I looked to find common recurring stories or to get a sense of what it was we were actually discussing in our CSG meetings. The recurring themes I identified were (a) educational challenges, (b) students we were working with, and (c) the personal and professional lives of teachers. This code did not reveal itself until after all the data had been collected. Only then could I find recurring themes from the stories and fit them with my previous codes to select the best stories to share and to learn from.

Kemmis' (1982) process of action research does not end with simply analyzing data, but, in accordance with the action research spiral, my finding must further a discussion on professional development which leads me to my third and final code. After the first and second code I was looking for stories that produced more questions, and eventually the sharing of more

27

stories. I then used these themes to recreate stories. These stories or new narratives were created from all the three different data sources and were selected as the stories that I used to share our experience in Chapter Four. I looked to create stories that would challenge and further the current academic discussion on professional development. I was also looking for stories that would allow me to evaluate our experience and make me re-think professional development experiences for teachers. Therefore, I had to look for positive and negative stories. With Kemmis' (1982) work the story never ends but is continually challenged and a discussion can consequently occur to determine if the CSG was indeed an effective form of professional development that assisted the participants to grow both personally and professionally. My evaluation of the CSG will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Research Bias

"If a researcher is studying a program that is his or her 'baby,' then the tendency for self-promotion may be too great to overcome" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 33). The participants of this study are friends of mine that I have known for five years. We have worked together and gone through the reading endorsement together. My time spent in the CITES program has been a great time for me. My classroom has improved immensely while being involved in the CITES program. Simply stated, my biases in this study include the fact that I am studying an activity that I developed, my choice of the participants, and the strong belief that I have in the CITES program.

In such an intimate CSG group the opinions of each participant is highly valued. With small groups sharing opinions and or disagreeing with opinions can at times be a bit of a problem. Each individual of the study group came up with her own rich histories and bias. The

way that we sought to compensate for these issues was respect. With open discussion and respect for each participant, everyone worked to share their ideas openly and freely.

Meier (2002) discussed how professional development requires trust and respect. Teachers at times have a hard time critiquing each other and also have a hard time disagreeing. In a collaborative study group there must be an element of critiquing and there must be disagreement. But as Meier (2002) discusses, if teachers are dedicated to helping each other improve and if colleagues trust and respect each other, teachers can and do help each other improve.

Along with my bias of including my friends as participants in this study I also have a biased appreciation for the CITES program. As a whole I enjoyed my CITES experience. I loved the professors and the content of the CITES experience. This enjoyment of the CITES experience was my own and not a universal reaction to the same experience. Not everyone in the CITES program feels the same way that I do about our education received through this program. Having a differing in opinions about the quality and the effects of the CITES program will give depth to my study. This study allowed me to find out what other teachers saw and learn as they attend CITES.

Chapter 4: Results

A qualitative analysis of the collaborative study group (CSG) showed that over the course of the six-month study the participants explored a range of issues such as education, students, and the personal and professional lives of teachers. The purpose of the study was to share the stories of *them* (students), *me* (individual teachers), and *us* (the group as a whole) and as the discussions evolved, these stories reflected much more than three teachers getting together and chatting: this collaborative study group demonstrated how teachers can be reflective and active participants in their professional development. In this chapter, I will share the stories of the process of the CSG of how the members of the CSG worked together. I will also share stories the content of the meetings or the stories that reveal what we discussed (stories of *them, me* and *us).* As I explained in the previous chapter, the stories shared here are reconstructed stories using all three data sources (my personal journal, writing prompt emails, and CSG transcriptions). These reconstructed stories will be single spaced in the rest of the chapter for ease of reading.

Process: How We Worked Together in the CSG

The formation of the CSG. The story of the collaborative study group began with three teachers that became friends through a passion for education. We decided to meet on Thursday nights at my home to share stories, successes, and frustrations related to our teaching experiences. My home was chosen as the meeting place because it is a central location for all three of us. Each time Ashleigh and Rena entered my home they were greeted by the smell of fresh popped popcorn. We would sit at my kitchen table with a glass of peach crystal light in hand and discussed our current diet plan, how our families were, and what happened at school during the day. The collaborative study group had begun.

Using the writing prompts. Prior to every meeting each of us had time to think about what we were going to discuss at the meetings. We all had a writing assignment about the night's topic. The writing prompts were sent out via email to each CSG member before the group met for the discussions. This prompt allowed each member of the CSG to think, share and discuss before and after each collaborative study group meeting.

There was a natural flow in whose turn it was to create the prompt. As different members had different struggles at different times and needed various forms of support their need to discuss a problem or share a success produced the prompt. There were a total of twelve different topics ranging from what literature to use in our classrooms to a review of a district training meeting all three of us attended.

The writing prompts for the CSG were a major part of why the CSG was an effective form of professional development. Garet et al. (2001) argued that two of the three core factors to an effective professional development are coherence (continuing the conversation and relationships of a professional development activity) and active learning (teachers should be involved in the selecting and forming of the professional development activity). The writing prompt offered coherence enabling us to discuss the topics before and after the meetings. The writing prompt also offered active learning because we assumed control over our learning. We were actively engaged in our topics which came straight from our classrooms and our lives. Our topics were not predetermined or forced upon us by any outside influence. As the writing prompt led our discussions and kept us focused it became an important part of a typical CSG night.

A typical CSG night. Each night would start out with excited chatter about our personal lives. As we settled into our discussion the conversation turned from off topic (discussing our

lives outside of school like our favorite T.V. shows) to the topic at hand (what is happening at

school and the topic for the night). Here is one example of the start of a CSG:

> Rena walked into my living room and immediately complimented Ashleigh, "Ashleigh
> you look so good. Have you lost more weight?" With a great big smile on her face
> Ashleigh stood up from her chair to show off her new jeans and replied, "Yep, and if
> feels great. I love living the life." The life that Ashleigh was referring to was the name of
> the eating plan that she had implemented in her life to become healthier.
>
> Along with knowing how Ashleigh's eating plan was treating her, I also wanted to know
> how Ashleigh's classes for her graduate work were going. Ashleigh and I swapped war
> stories from classes. "Ashleigh, how are your classes right now?" With great exasperation
> Ashleigh reported some frustrations, "I have this class that I have. I really don't like how
> the professor teaches." I could completely commiserate with Ashleigh's frustrations.
>
> I said, "The thing about college professors is not all of them have taken classes on how to
> be a teacher or how to design the curriculum for their classes." I too had experiences with
> professors that were incredibly brilliant but not necessarily good teachers. I felt bad for
> Ashleigh. There is nothing worse than to pay expensive tuition dollars for a class that you
> do not enjoy attending.
>
> At the end of my bitter complaints about professors who are not trained educators
> Ashleigh was kind enough to bring us back to task, "Enough about my classes, let's get
> started. Let's chat about individual problems. Isn't that the prompt for tonight?"

This story demonstrates how we as group were connected not just by our profession but how we

are connected personally. There has to be a lot of trust among a group of friends to talk about

such personal topics as your eating plan.

Our friendship is another example of Garet et al.'s (2001) coherence in a professional

development. We as friends have both personal and professional lives that intertwine. Ashleigh

and I are both in graduate school and we help each other out not only when we are teaching but

also with our writing and research. Rena was the one who had us start the reading endorsement,

which was a large factor of our friendship, as it was the reading endorsement that brought us

together. Our lives overlap but that overlapping also left me with a concern about the CSG.

A concern about the CSG. One of the concerns I had for to the CSG was whether three friends could stay on topic and discuss the issues of our profession. Could we as a CSG mix both our professional and personal lives into our sessions or would our sessions turn into bitch fests? The purpose of my study is to share stories of professional development and specifically professional growth. Complaint sessions could detract from achieving any kind of development.

I wanted a place that was safe for teachers to share their world but I did not want the CSG to be a waste of anyone's time. I needed the CSG to strike a balance between sharing, reflecting, and challenging teachers with the natural frustrations that come with teaching. I wanted teachers to focus on what they could change not just simply complain about the ills of education.

My concerns about being off topic were unfounded, with each session no matter how far off topic we would get our conversations always turned back to the topic of the night and our discussions always turned back to our students. These moments where we as teachers share intimate details of our lives with each other may seem frivolous but as the purpose of my study was to observe and share various stories of the CSG, these stories play an important part in the story that shows how teachers' personal and professional lives weave together.

Along with each member staying on topic we as a group also challenged and pushed each other. There is a difference between commiseration and collaboration. I did not want the CSG to be a space where teachers got together and commiserated with each other. I wanted each member to challenge, reflect, and share with one another so we could help each other improve professionally. I wanted the CSG to be a safe place but also a place where we left each week being better than the week before. For that professional growth to happen we would have to help one another stay positive, and evaluate our current practice. We would need to challenge each other.

As a group we had many tools at our disposal to assist each other in growth and reflection. Because each member of the CSG was participating in other forms of professional development we not only had each other for information but we had insight from outside the group as well. Ashleigh's graduate work, Rena's work at another school, my work with my graduate program, and of course we had our shared knowledge from the CITES reading endorsement program were all various expertise that the participants brought to the group.

The meaning of collaboration: helping solve instruction issues. Each member of the CSG entered the group having much to gain and much to lose. The collaborative study group was a group of not only committed professionals but caring friends. If the CSG provided a positive environment our friendships would continue but if the CSG turned out to be a place of discontent, friendships could be lost. Each member of the group had previously worked together in the same building, we had shared lessons plans and given advice to each other but we had never worked this closely before. Each member of the group had never had an opportunity to collaborate with other teachers in the form of a CSG before. All three of us were in uncharted territory with the CSG.

True collaboration meant that we were committed to each other. We would need to support one another but we could not let each other off the hook. There would need to be a sense of accountability. As we would share frustrations we would have to actively assist one another in solving those problems. We couldn't simply just have "pity parties" for one another: we would need to help one another conquer our challenges. While the last story shared above demonstrated the organization of the CSG the following story demonstrates how true collaboration worked for the CSG.

The topic of this particular CSG was posed by Ashleigh. Ashleigh challenged each member of the group to come to the CSG with a specific problem they were having with their teaching. This prompt was a way for the group to help each member with immediate and specific problems in their teaching. This prompt allowed us to recognize that we all had problems in our classroom and most of the stories shared were stories of individual students that we wanted to better assist.

Ashleigh suggested the prompt for the night (individual problems) because she had a student that was giving her a difficult time and she needed some fresh perspectives on how to assist this student. Here is a glimpse into Ashleigh's thinking, "Marjie, I have this student and I don't know what to do with him. He does not understand consequences. I think I should tell his story at the CSG and see what you two say. I think maybe we should all talk about individual problems" (Taken from Personal Journal #5).

We all came to the table with our various stories on the topic of individual problems but the story that was most interesting from that night was a story Rena told of a girl with little self-confidence. This student would come to Rena and ask her questions that Rena knew the student already knew the answers to. Here is how Rena's story unfolded:

> Rena started this CSG chomping at the bit to tell her story. "I have a case." Rena proclaimed. With a deep breath Rena began to tell her story with much aggravation in her voice.

> "I don't know if this is something you can fix. I thought of this girl who bugs me. And it took me a long time to realize what bugs me about her. And it's that she has no self-confidence. She comes up to me to ask me a question about her assignment and the way she delivers her question is always so insecure. And I don't know if it is a personality trait. I would like to think there is a way to encourage her more. So I have been saying things like, "Be confident with your answers." Or "Go with your gut." Questions that she asks shock me. They are the questions where I am like, "You know the answer to this and I don't know why you are coming up here to ask me about it, because you do know the answer." In fact when you ask the question you are giving me the answer to the question in the form of a question. Does that make sense?"

35

As soon as Rena relayed this story I could see why Rena would be frustrated. Rena is a strong, smart, and competent woman. A student with little self confidence would create a large challenge for Rena. Needless to say, Rena was very frustrated by this student and was out of ideas of how to assist this particular student. She brought this story to the CSG looking for some suggestions, and the other members of the group complied.

 Each member of the CSG listened to the story intently and felt sympathy for Rena as we have all had students that we are not sure how to help. Rena received some suggestions and even brainstormed some ways to help this student. This was the brainstorming session. In this session each member offered suggestions but Rena also did some questioning of how she can help this student.

Rena started us off by offering a little more information into the background of this particular student. "The thing is she participates in class which surprises me. When she is insecure it is usually in a one on one situation, when she is just asking me a question. So I am wondering if she just needs validation?"

Ashleigh's kindness and deep conviction for students shows in her response to Rena's question. "I would start with validation. If she is like, what color is my dog, brown. I would be like, 'Yeah, you are absolutely right. See that is awesome.' You know, because she always needs to be able to ask you questions." Ashleigh is always sympathetic to students who don't believe in themselves. Ashleigh adds to her suggestion by stating, "I think she just needs some positive reinforcement."

I also offered an insight into why students sometimes act the way they do. "It is so hard with students sometimes because we don't know what their history is or why they have certain behaviors."

Rena tried to pinpoint a way to help herself assist this student, and told another story to demonstrate this student's challenges and show why it was so exasperating to interact with this particular student. "Hopefully I will be able to help her realize her possibilities like that, because she questions a lot. I don't know, sometimes multiple times in one project. It's like she is not comfortable committing to something until she knows that I know she is on the right track. What is frustrating is I gave her the guidelines and she should know what to do next. I don't know. I feel like the phrase there is no dumb questions is partially false, because I am dealing with an unsecure person."

I tried to offer some insight into this story by sharing an observation, "She isn't really looking for information she is looking for support."

Rena sat and listened to our ideas. Rena expressed some concerns that she was not used to dealing with, "this spectrum of problems" well. Rena asked one more time, "Any other ideas for this student?"

> As an English teacher who loves literature and knowing that books are one of Rena's strengths in her teaching, I offered one more suggestion for this young girl with no self-confidence. I said, "I always go back to literature. I always think that with someone who struggles with self esteem issues if you can get them to idolize a good strong feminist character you can really help a young girl's self-esteem."
>
> With a flicker in her eye Rena agreed with my suggestion. She added to my suggestion by sarcastically adding, "I better stay away from Bella."
>
> Ashleigh piped in with a suggestion of a new literary feminist character that she has recently fallen in love with. "Have her be like Katniss. She is strong."

This story demonstrates four tools of the CSG: reflection, active thinking, collaborative discussion, and content knowledge. Fist, this story shows how during the CSG Rena reflected on her practice to aid her student. Rena started out not liking this student and not thinking their low self-esteem could be helped as she stated at the beginning of her story. After the CSG conversation, Rena's challenge with this student turned into a manageable situation. Rena left that CSG meeting with some ideas of how to help this student.

It would have been very easy for Rena to come to the group with this student story and have the members simply say, "Yes, this girl is rather annoying." If the participants had done that they would not have been collaborating. They would instead have been commiserating. Ashleigh and I held Rena accountable. We assisted Rena in being reflective on how to assist her student. When Ashleigh offered some supportive self-esteem suggestions and when I when I suggested some content changes we were helping Rena assess this situation in a new way.

The second tool that the CSG used was active thinking. The CSG is not only a place to gain ideas, but also a place to challenge your own ideas. In this story we see that Rena does not just complain about this student. Rena also does not just sit and listen to Ashleigh and I. Rena tells her stories, offers her own insight, listens to some suggestions from the other CSG members and then she revaluates her own thinking after the discussion.

A third tool, illustrated in this story is a collaborative conversation. This conversation aids the CSG members to construct new knowledge, to build ideas off of each other. Ashleigh might have posed this question and we as a group did discuss Ashleigh's individual problem that night but as often happens in collaboration one person's problem can prompt another person's thinking. This story reveals how the initiator of the prompt is not the only person at the table with a problem.

A fourth tool of the CSG illustrated in this story is that of content knowledge. In this discussion we talked about child development, texts for our class, and interpersonal relationships between teacher and student. These suggestions came from three thoughtful and educated teachers who have spent much time studying education and student behaviors. These suggestions come from three women who are always looking for ways to improve education.

The tools seen in this story are powerful tools that can assist teachers in their practice. While the previous stories give insight as to how the CSG functioned, the next three stories show how the CSG assisted the participants to conquer challenges. They specifically address *them* (students), *me* (individual teachers, and *us* (the CSG group).

Content: Stories of Them, Me and Us

When in our CSG discussions we would discuss challenges that we as teachers and group members found in our lives, we found strength in each other to conquer these challenges. On any given day teachers have conflicts with multiple individuals--students, other teachers, or even an inner struggle with ourselves. These conflicts do not feel so overwhelming when a teacher belongs to a group like the CSG where one can get help to solve problems in our day- to- day lives.

The CSG grappled with different types and degrees of conflict. There was conflict for us as teachers struggling with how to assist students (*them*). There was also the conflict of, me, teachers fighting internally with themselves. And lastly there was the conflict of us (the CSG members), conflict among the group members. I will begin with a story about students. Students were a big topic of discussion for the CSG.

The story of them: Marjie's troublesome class. One consistent source of conflict that teachers will always have will be their students. A teacher has no control over a student's choices nor over a student's upbringing. This year I taught a new class, a remedial reading class. This reading class focuses specifically on strengthening students reading abilities. This class had a student population that I had never taught before. There were about 20 students in the class, all of the students had really low reading skills and most of these students had some type of challenge like attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyper disorder, dyslexia or a combination of other learning disabilities. Over half of the class were English language learners. In addition to the other challenges stated, there were about three students in this class who had limited English proficiency.

Needless to say I had a very hard time with classroom management. I would think to myself, "I am a fifth year teacher, I have a reading endorsement, I am in graduate school. How can I not control this class?" As I would ponder about my inability to manage this classroom, I had an incident where a student placed some gum in another student's hair.

I needed the CSG's help. I remember one night being very frustrated and telling the CSG members that I was at my wit's end. Ashleigh quickly gave me some classroom management advice and Rena quickly pointed out that this was my first year teaching this reading class, so of course I would have some challenges. Both of these teachers had more experience with this

39

remedial reading class because they had both taught this class before, so I knew I could count on them to help. Here is the story of how the CSG helped my fourth period class:

> "I hate my remedial reading class. I can't get them to stay on task and I can't get them to shut up. I want to kill these students. It is one of those classes that you just dread going to" I said in complete irritation.

> Rena commiserated with me, "I have had remedial reading classes like that before." Rena offered some great management advice, "Don't do an anticipatory set. Just put the students in their rotations and put them to work. Don't give your class time to get out of control. While students are in rotations you can have a seating chart for each rotation so students aren't sitting by their friends." What a great idea, why I didn't think of it?

> Ashleigh also had a suggestion for the management of my challenging class. Ashleigh is a very positive person and always tries to find the best way to solve difficult problems and she always sees the good in people. Her suggestion for how to help my class was positive as always. "I have a friend who rewards her students by playing "Got ya." Every time she sees a student doing something good she will say, 'Got ya' and let them pick a prize out of a bag. Instead of saying to students, 'You lose a point for talking.' You say, "Got ya. Here is a prize." It will change the attitude in your class from negative to positive…"

> I am normally more of a punishment oriented teacher so Ashleigh's suggestion would have never occurred to me. Her idea was sound. I started to reward my students for good behavior and there certainly was a different feeling in my classroom. I was happier and my students were better behaved.

After implementing some suggestions from the CSG into my daily routine not only was I able to control my classroom but my students' weekly test scores went up. Once again the CSG helped students by helping teachers. In the fight of *them* (teacher vs. the students) the CSG was instrumental in helping gain some perspective and aiding me to improve student learning.

This story is a story that many teachers have told before. There always seems to be some class or student for each teacher that is challenging. What makes this story unique is the support that I received. Rather than being alone in this experience and at a loss as to what to do, the CSG offered me a place to find support. Indeed Rena's experience teaching the same course and Ashleigh's commitment to finding good in others were exactly the perspectives that I needed to

make positive changes in my classroom. With a collaborative study group teachers can face any challenge and get the help from other caring professionals. Teachers are each other's best tool when trying to solve challenges.

Once again this story reveals how the participants were will to challenge one another. It would have been really easy for Rena and Ashleigh who are both remedial reading teachers to simply comment, "Yes, remedial reading has the most challenging student population." And then move on to personal chatter. Yet we as a group did not digress from the issue that I had brought up. Ashleigh and Rena assisted me in seeing what I had control over. We discussed what I can change. And with the change my students and I could progress.

In addition to discussing issues related to our students, we also discussed issues related to our own lives. We would discuss our own personal challenges. Powerful professional development does not just look at students' progress but at teachers' professional growth as well. This next story tells of Rena's struggles for professional growth at a new school.

The story of me: the collaborative study group helps Rena. Rena was at a new school with an administration and a student body that she really liked but without her close friends Rena quickly became disenchanted with her new location. As Rena was expressing these concerns one night she said to me, "I love my new school but it would be the best if you were there with me. I just miss you and Ashleigh and all my other friends so much. I wish you all could have come with me. I would be so much happier if I had some good solid friends" (Personal Journal #8). Rena's stories throughout the entire CSG demonstrate that professional development can be more than teachers gaining new ideas for their classroom-- professional development activities can rejuvenate and uplift teachers. Professional development can strengthen collegiality.

Rena had no collegiality at her new school. This email expresses Rena's solitude and her frustration.

> I spend most of my time working through my lunches and not talking to anyone. I wish you had been transferred to my school. It makes teaching really lonely when you don't have your friends next door. I spend a lot of time thinking what a bad teacher I am, and you are not there to contradict me. I need a Marjie next door.

Rena's conflict did not come out in one night, or even with one singular response to the CSG prompt. The isolation that Rena was feeling was addressed in the CSG through the entire process of the CSG. This is what Rena had to say about the effect that the CSG had on her professionally:

> As a teacher it is usually just conferences, faculty meetings, collaboration, and DDD's (District Development Days) where I have the time to chat with my fellow teachers about the workplace. (And sometimes lunch inasmuch as I am usually working through it.) The point is that the personal interaction that teachers have with each other is minimal in comparison to other jobs. We have very little teamwork efforts since in a given day we may only see another teacher in passing. Conversation and working out issues verbally is too rare for teachers. Of course we lack camaraderie. (Email 2-11-2010)

Throughout the entire CSG experience Rena kept coming back to a need for friends to help her with her inner struggles of teaching. The fight of *me* (Rena vs. herself) is challenging and could be resolved through collegiality. As I have spoken with Rena about her perceptions of belonging to the CSG she refers to the CSG as a "life line" for her personal and professional world.

This insight leads into how important professional development is for teachers not just professionally but personally as well. When working with children the stakes are high. Teachers can feel isolated at times as Rena pointed out when she was seeking for camaraderie. If teachers don't have other teachers to pick them up when they feel "down," life can quickly get hard for a teacher as it did for Rena.

Rena's story illustrates the importance of collegiality in a teacher's professional life. Our next story offers insight into how the CSG is reflective about collegiately. Not only did the CSG

reflect upon our own practices with students and ourselves but we also reflected upon our professional development. As a group of teachers we are always looking to improve.

The story of us: building relationships with one another. Despite the fact that the three members of the CSG are friends and get along well, there were differences of opinions from time to time. One conflict among the group was the perspective of Montgomery High. Ashleigh and I were teaching at Montgomery High and Rena was teaching at Roberts High. As Ashleigh and I would tell good and bad stories from our high school, each member would become critical and share her opinion on what administration or teachers should have done. I thought this was appropriate until Ashleigh confessed a frustration with the collaborative study group after our last meeting. Here is the story of Ashleigh's confession/suggestion:

> The day after our last meeting Ashleigh and I were chatting in my classroom. We were discussing the CSG and we were talking about things that we would like to change to improve the CSG. In the sweetest, kindest way possible Ashleigh confessed, "I think last night was our best CSG ever. I am going to miss the CSG."
>
> I was so happy to hear that Ashleigh was happy with the outcome of the CSG that I quickly responded by making a statement and asking a question. "I'm so glad you liked it. I love the CSG. Is there anything that you would have changed?"
>
> With a very shy smile Ashleigh with her great kindness said, "I wish we would have set a norm (rule) that there was no Montgomery High bashing. I know that Rena does not like our principal and I know that Roberts High does things differently and maybe even better but I don't like to bash on the place where I work." Ashleigh, being the very classy women that she is, would never want anyone to say anything negative about anyone.
>
> Ashleigh went on to defend her "no bashing" norm by making an observation that I think is all too true. Ashleigh said, "I don't know Marjie, I just feel like in education we look at and point out the bad more than we point out the good. That is why I love the CSG night where we talked about 'really positive things.' I think all teachers need to take a little time and look at the good of our job. I think we need less bashing and more goodness."
>
> I thought a lot about Ashleigh's suggestion. I think that she is right. In the educational world we do spend a lot of time looking at the bad and not enough time looking at the good. But if there ever were a place for teachers to be able to bash, let loose, vent, and put all their dirty laundry on the table wouldn't it be the CSG? Isn't that the beautiful part of the CSG to be able to be who you are even if that is negative?

This story is the only conflict that we as members of the CSG had. But it is through caring

suggestions like Ashleigh's that help teachers get over their differences and allows teachers who

might not see eye-to-eye to be able to work together.

I agree with Ashleigh that the CSG should be a place for people to feel safe but I

challenge Ashleigh's thinking by offering the idea that the CSG should not be necessarily

comfortable. As caring friends we should challenge each others' opinions. We should assist one

another in becoming better teachers and becoming better teachers is not always going to be a

comfortable experience. We must help each other see the less pleasant aspects of our jobs then

overcome that ugliness. Ashleigh was completely right, however, that it is important to have

hope in the work that we do.

Summary

As I observed, participated, and shared the stories of the CSG I found that the CSG was

not only a successful but also a wonderful experience. Never before in my professional career

had I had an opportunity to sit with other teachers and discuss education, students, my personal

life, and my professional life all in one sitting. Never before had I been so reflective about my

students (*them*), myself (*me*), or about professional development (*us*).

I have never been supported but challenged at the same time. I have never felt such

comfort and growth in one experience before. The collaborative study group was a professional

development that was new to me and this experience made it possible for me to grow in ways

that I could not conceive. The experience of the CSG created great professional growth for all

that were involved and was an effective form of professional development.

Along with feeling supported the participants challenged each other to stay focused on

our students instead of only discussing our personal lives. We as a group pushed each other to

make changes to curriculum and instruction that was grounded in sound educational theories. Each member brought in information and insights from other professional development activities that challenged one another's thinking. We focused on the most pressing concerns in our classrooms, rather than focusing on initiatives from outside our classrooms.

In accordance with the action research spiral I made a plan and I carried out that plan. The last two steps of the spiral are to observe and reflect upon the plan. In chapter five I will review the narrative stories shared and make a judgment to see if the CSG was indeed a successful professional development activity.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Reflection: Making a Judgment

In our collaborative study group we did not bring in a pile of test scores and focus each discussion on student learning. There was a natural feeling as to how we learned from one another in the CSG. Despite our lack of empirical student data, each one of our discussions always turned back to our students and their learning. As we shared stories we did not separate teachers and students; on the contrary, our stories of teachers and students seemed to be woven together. Our sessions were not trivial "bitch sessions." The CSG is a place for teachers to learn and grow, make mistakes, learn from mistakes, and assist each other. The CSG was a place for the three of us to talk about our students, our content, our jobs, our lives, and education as a whole.

I have been involved in many different forms of professional development but of all the professional development formats that I have been involved with, I liked the collaborative study group most. The CSG is one of the only professional development experiences that I have been involved with that address both teacher and student lives. The CSG is a professional development experience where I can reflect on, explore, and question all of the issues that arise in a common teaching day.

When I started this study there were a couple key research pieces that helped me shape my professional development plan. First, the authors of The Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy (Sherman, 2000) suggested that a professional development activity should be selected by teachers. Second, Day's (1999) work suggested that professional development activities can be both planned and natural. Finally Garet et al. (2001) offered the three criteria for effective professional development.

Ideally the CSG would be a professional development activity that was selected by teachers, felt natural to the participants, and adhered to the tenets of effective professional development. At the end of my study, to be in accordance with action research, I must state if my study did indeed accomplish all three of these tasks.

A teacher-selected professional development experience. The CSG is centered in teacher choice because we "called all the shots." The members of the CSG all agreed to work together. We selected each other to work within the CSG. We did not have an outside entity like the district, a principal or the luck of the draw to select our group, we did this for ourselves. We as teachers selected the time and place for our meetings and we were able to select a time and place that was convenient for each one of us. We also selected what we would discuss at those meetings. Our topics came from what we cared most about in our current teaching experiences. We had complete and total control over what happened at the CSG meetings.

"*Professional development* is a term conveying the concept that practitioners are (or should be) active partners in determining their own learning needs and in designing and implementing appropriate learning activities" (Sherman et al., 2000, p. 5). The CSG was not only a place where Ashleigh, Rena, and I served as active partners in determining our own learning, but required us to take full responsibility for our learning. According to the DEAL and Sherman and colleague's (2000) work the CSG reflects a professional development activity built on teacher choice.

A natural professional development experience. The CSG was a place that felt not only safe but also completely natural. As stated earlier, we selected what we would discuss at our meetings. But there were many times that in our discussions we would get off topic. We always discussed important issues that we faced either personally or professionally but the nature of our

47

collaboration allowed us the freedom to have natural discussions that deviated from the topic at hand. This freedom allowed Ashleigh, Rena and I to reflect upon our personal practice rather than following a scripted topic.

Due to the natural environment of the CSG, members were at ease as they expressed their opinions and concerns. Many times one of us would make a comment, and the next words out of our mouth were, "I would never say that anywhere else." In this way, the CSG provided a natural setting in which participants could consider solutions to problems they faced as teachers and was in accordance to Day's (1999) recommendations regarding professional development.

An effective professional development experience. Garet et al. (2001) suggest an effective professional development must focus on three core features: content (the content of the professional development must be applicable to the teacher's classrooms and lives), active learning for teachers (teachers must be active in their learning and not just sitting and listening to lectures), and coherence throughout the entire professional development (a teacher should be able to walk away from the professional development activity and still be able to carry on the learning and relationships from their experience).

The best example of how the CSG fulfilled the Garet et al. (2001) definition of an effective professional development experience is shared in this email that Rena sent me. Rena shared her reflections on the CSG.

> Professionally, the CSG has helped me immensely. It is a no-pressure safe environment where anything goes. We can discuss real issues from classroom management to crippling factions within the school. The dynamic that we share is a work of art. We bring different perspectives from different schools, curriculum, steps on the career path, educational goals, and our own personal experiences. Together we hash out issues, dissect them from different angles and collaborate on solution attempts. I personally love the unconventional time and place of the CSG. It is something to look forward to. I might change it to once a month if it were to be actually implemented by principals, but still, it was a wonderful rewarding experiment, and I'm sad that it's almost over. (Rena email #24)

When Rena says that we discuss "real issues," she indicates how the CSG offered a place for discussion on our content. One example of a discussion on content in the CSG was demonstrated when we discussed various content options for my Read 180 class. When Rena expresses how as we were "hashing out" issues, our lively discussions were part of us being active learners. This was clear in Rena's story where Ashleigh and I offered her two alternatives to dealing with a challenging student. Also, as Rena shares insight into our grouping she states, "The dynamic that we share is a work of art." This quote speaks to the coherence of the CSG. The groups' dynamic is what makes it possible for the members of the CSG to take what we learn as well as our friendships well past the actual professional development experience. The fact that Ashleigh, Rena and I were comfortable enough to share our mistakes and our successes from our classroom speaks to the positive dynamic of trust within our group.

The CSG experience has been one that offers a teacher selection, a natural learning environment and an effective professional development activity. I learned so much from our discussion and from observing and reflecting upon the experience of the CSG. I feel very fortunate to be able to have worked with the other members of the CSG and to have learned as much as I did. I feel that this collaboration has made me a more contented and effective teacher.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

While there is indication that the CSG provided a safe environment for the three of us to consider solutions to pressing problems, it is not clear whether this kind of professional development activity could be scaled up to school or district levels. Indeed, one of the things that seemed to make our collaboration work was our friendship and our commitment to our individual growth and the growth of the other members of the CSG. Without that, it is unclear whether another group would have similar positive outcomes. However, there may be ways that

planners of professional development activities can plan more opportunities for teacher control over their own development.

The participants of the CSG were asked what they would change about the CSG if they were to participate in the collaborative study group again. Ashleigh said that she would like to set some norms (some rules) particularly she would like a "no bashing" rule. Rena said that she would like to have the CSG meet once a month instead of twice a month. I would like to challenge teachers to go public perhaps on a blog or wiki in order to share with other teachers what they are doing and what they find works. I would be interested to see what the experiences would be if a CSG professional development format were to be implemented school-wide. I would be interested to see what the personal and professional improvement experiences would be for an entire school if each teacher were participating in a CSG.

The collaborative study group was a highly educative form of professional development for three good friends that taught together. However, it would be interesting to see what the CSG would look like if an entire school were to try to form collaborative study groups. It would be interesting to see what a CSG would look like if an entire district were to form a CSG.

One of the strengths of a CSG is that there is a natural flow and feeling to a collaborative study group. I would like to experience that natural flow in a school. The leadership in a school would need to be trained for a school wide collaborative study group. The grouping of teachers for a CSG would need to be organized. The data would be interesting to review. I suggest for future study a school-wide or a district-wide CSG professional development format. I propose that teachers are capable and committed professionals that they can be trusted with the design and study of their own professional development activities. I know that the CSG worked for three high school teachers. I want to know what experiences other teacher throughout an entire

school would have if every teacher were to participate in a CSG. There is more work to be done, more questions to be asked, more research to be conducted, and many more great stories to be shared.

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