

# Book Study Suggestions



**L**earning is frequently a social experience. Though sometimes we feel isolated as teachers, most of us know the benefits of taking time to engage with colleagues. It is in these conversations that we find our own ideas clarified and enriched. While there are many ways to structure a study group, it is most important to foster a climate in which teachers feel free and safe to exchange ideas. Of course, if you are reading this book on your own, the questions can still help you think through the implications for yourself. Here are some guidelines that can help make book study in a group more productive.

***Consider Group Size:*** With a large group, you may want to kick off discussion with a general question and then break into smaller clusters. Often the optimal number is four or five to ensure there is time for all to exchange ideas. The larger group can reassemble at the end to debrief.

***Use Study Questions:*** Some groups find it more comfortable to start with a few questions to get conversation going. There are various ways to use questions.

- Put three or four questions in an envelope and randomly pull them out for discussion.
- Create a chart with two or three starter questions and ask the group to generate more, tapping their own personal interests and needs.

- Decide on three or four questions and divide the group by interest in the various topics. This allows for a more in-depth study.
- Make copies of the suggested questions for everyone and invite discussion without deciding where to start.

***Honor the Time Limits:*** Make sure you have planned a beginning and ending time and *always* honor those times. Teachers are busy, so knowing there will be a time to start and a time to end is important.

***Stay Focused on the Topic:*** Plan a procedure that is helpful without being authoritarian. You might start by deciding on a signal to use when people feel the discussion is drifting and then making a commitment that everyone will help the group to stay focused. Someone other than the facilitator could be appointed to note gently when the conversation begins to get off-topic.

***Include Everyone:*** Keep groups small enough so that even the quietest member is encouraged to speak. Active listening on everyone's part will help. Remember that periods of silence should be expected when people are thinking.

***Share Leadership:*** Rotate group facilitation. Identify several "duties" for the facilitator. Examples might include providing a discussion format, suggesting a big idea from a chapter or group of chapters, and synthesizing or summarizing at the end. Remember that in a study group *everyone* is a learner. This isn't the place for an "expert"!

***Create a List of Norms:*** Simple expectations that are transparent often help study groups function with greater ease and increase potential for success. These can be simple and might include ways to invite a tentative member into the conversation, expectations about listening, time limits if some individual comments begin to go on too long, start and stop times, and a procedure for refocusing.

***Set Dates for the Next Meeting:*** Always leave knowing when you will meet again and who will facilitate.

***Engage in Reflection:*** Stop from time-to-time to reflect on what you are learning and how you might make your group's interactions more productive.

**Celebrate Learning:** Make sure you take time to enjoy one another and celebrate your learning.

The following questions relate to the content in each chapter. Of course there's plenty more to talk about in each chapter as well. Enjoy!

## Introduction: Leadership as Everyday Participation in Your School's Professional Community

1. Give yourself two minutes to describe all of the words or phrases you associate with *teacher power* or *teacher leadership*. Discuss your reactions as a group.
2. Consider the experiences with leadership in schools that you have had. What are some of the models to follow or avoid, as you consider possible roles in the school community for yourself?
3. What are some informal leadership actions that have taken place in your school? Examples could include mentoring a colleague or jointly working on a unit, proposing a new idea in a committee, leading an initiative, and planning an all-school event. Who exercises them? Which ones have been particularly constructive? Have any been negative?
4. What are some of the informal leadership actions that you yourself have taken—perhaps ones that you weren't even fully aware of? How can you and your fellow teachers help each other be more intentional about these?
5. How much influence do you have over the curriculum design outside of your classroom—for example, in a team, grade level, or the school? Would you want more? Why or why not?
6. What do you think of a career and pay ladder that would move you from beginning to master teacher based on criteria other than seniority or graduate coursework? What might be the criteria, and who should decide on them?
7. Informal leadership usually needs the support of the principal, but should not be seen by fellow teachers as merely carrying out the principal's bidding. What steps might a teacher take to balance these needs?

## Chapter 1. Start with Yourself

1. The first suggestion in this chapter is to start with your passions. So what are yours, whether in school or outside it (excluding significant others, of course)? How do they compare with others' among your colleagues or in your group? What might you need to do to carve out a little more time for at least one of them? How might they be connected with your school and your classroom in some way (if they aren't already)?
2. What is an area of your profession that you'd like to learn more about? Are there colleagues in your school who share this interest and might want to join you in your exploration?
3. If you have not done so, what would it take to organize a group to walk or exercise together during lunch or after school?
4. How does leadership manifest itself among your students (since it's always there in one form or another)? How might you support this, help it to be positive, and expand it among a wide range of students?
5. Some principals explicitly work to support teachers' leadership development (not the same as identifying pets, however). What steps might you propose, to encourage or help to strengthen this approach?

## Chapter 2. Shadow a Student

1. If you haven't yet tried shadowing a student, what do you expect you might see? If you are studying this in a group, compare people's expectations.
2. What do you think you'll need to do to mentally take more of a kid's perspective instead of a teacher's view of what's happening in a classroom?
3. If you (and others) have already tried shadowing, what aspects of the student's experience stood out to you? What are some implications for your teaching?
4. How do you think students could benefit from shadowing other students? What would you hope for them to learn?
5. If your school has a student internship program, what do the students learn from shadowing and working with adults? If it doesn't have this kind of program, do you think one would be useful? How?

## Chapter 3. Look Inside the Black Box

1. In what ways, either formal or informal, do you already use research to solve classroom questions and make decisions about what and how you teach?
2. What would you especially appreciate understanding more clearly about your students and their learning? How does your interest relate to that of others in your school or your study group?
3. In many schools, teachers meet in teams or departments to go over student work and discuss their expectations. If you do this with colleagues, what is your experience of the process? If you haven't tried it, what do you think might be the benefits? How might you go about trying to initiate this process?
4. How could you share what you would be learning with other teachers in your school in a way that would gain their interest and consideration? What team-, department-, or school-wide issues could be addressed, using evidence you could collect?
5. What topics would most readily engage your students for in-depth inquiry? How might you learn about their interests? If you haven't tried larger inquiry projects with your students, what concerns would need to be addressed in order to do this?

## Chapter 4. Open the Classroom Door

1. To what extent do teachers in your school co-teach or work on planning together? What would entice you or others to do more of this kind of work together?
2. If teachers tend to work in isolation in your school, how might you begin to open things up a bit? With whom might you start? How would you approach him or her? If you are discussing this in a group, what would it take to build trust so you could begin visiting each others' classrooms?
3. If observing other classrooms is regularly practiced in your school, what kinds of benefits have come from it? What challenges have arisen?
4. Reflect on any experiences you've had mentoring and being mentored—whether formally or informally. What do you think are the most important

elements of an effective mentor-mentee relationship? If your school does not have this kind of a program, what steps might be involved in helping to start one?

5. Art Costa's "Cognitive Coaching" is described in this chapter as a constructive approach for observations and mentoring. Have you tried the practice of letting the observed teacher do most of the talking? If so, what does it take to be a good listener? If you haven't tried this yet, what do you think it will take to be one?

## ■ Chapter 5. Build Bridges

1. How do teachers at your school get along with each other? Do some feel excluded? Are there divisions of one kind or another? What actions might bridge these divisions? What would make this a worthwhile goal?
2. Think of a time when you saw things very differently from—and perhaps even clashed with—another teacher. Did this relationship (or others like it) ever become less hostile and more productive? If so, how and why did that shift occur? How might you approach such a person in order to have a more positive one-on-one discussion with him or her?
3. Sometimes learning about someone's background experiences completely shifts the way you see that person. Think about any times that has happened to you or to a friend. How did that work for you?
4. Some teachers may initially feel that holding a one-on-one meeting is too "touchy-feely" until they've actually seen a demonstration or tried it. What are some ways you might allay this resistance?
5. How do you handle conflicts between students in your classroom? What are the factors that can make it hard to repair the relationships, rather than just halting the action? What would you like to learn from other teachers about turning conflicts (or at least some of them!) into teachable moments?

## ■ Chapter 6. Go Meta

1. What are your own strategies for finding time and focus to reflect on your teaching? How do these compare with approaches used by fellow teachers? What are the advantages, for you, of alone time for reflection versus conversation with colleagues?

2. If you haven't had much time to reflect, what is something you could give up or reduce or postpone (like having a clean house!) in order to find some time?
3. Many people extol journaling, but fewer of us get around to doing it regularly. If you've tried it for your professional work, describe what this was like. How was it useful to you? If you've tried it and stopped, why did you stop and how might you get restarted? If you haven't journaled, give it a try and then reflect on how it went.
4. List the benefits of any of the collaborative reflection activities in this chapter that you've been engaged in or that you'd like to try: for example, planning interdisciplinary projects, discussing books, or holding a "critical friends" discussion. What drawbacks or obstacles might need to be addressed for some of them to work?
5. What conferences, workshops, or presentations outside of school have energized you—or if this has not happened, investigate some promising possibilities (and report them to your group, if you are meeting with one).
6. How might you approach your principal to reserve some time during faculty meetings for broader reflection? Brainstorm some structures that could help insure this time is well used.

## Chapter 7. Speak Up

1. What is your particular style and attitude when it comes to speaking up in faculty meetings? Are you someone who naturally speaks up, or is it difficult for you? How do you compare yourself to your fellow teachers on this? What might this suggest you'd need to do to prepare yourself to speak up effectively?
2. Think of a time when you or a fellow teacher brought up a controversial or sensitive topic in a meeting. It may have gone well or badly—but what developments stand out in your memory that you think influenced the outcome? How do these relate to one or more of the steps described in the chapter?
3. Most people find it easier to speak up when working in smaller groups. What would be some factors that would help make expressing ideas in small group discussion safe? What would intimidate people and squelch

conversation? How could you encourage the former, either as a leader of a group or as a participant?

4. This chapter draws heavily on the strategies used by community organizers. Which steps are new to your way of thinking? Which are steps that you have found yourself taking?

## ■ Chapter 8. Deal with Committees

1. What experiences, good and/or bad, have you had working on school or district committees? What factors have you found that make the good ones good and/or the bad ones disappointing?
2. For your own development as a professional, what benefits do you see from being on a school-wide committee? What downsides? How do these balance out for you?
3. Some people tend to dominate a meeting and talk a lot, while others sit quietly by. Whether you are a committee chair or a participant, what norms or strategies might help to get the floor shared more equally? How could these be introduced so that people don't feel criticized or singled out?
4. Technology is used more and more in schools. In what ways is technology helpful and/or saving time for committee work in your school? If it is not prevalent where you work, what kinds of help, beyond just word processing, do you picture that it might provide? How could this be further promoted in your building?
5. This chapter stresses the role of the principal in setting up or guiding committees to work well. What would you want to say to your principal about this? (This could range from praise for his or her support to requests of various kinds.)

## ■ Chapter 9. Mount a Campaign

1. What broad change efforts have taken place at your school (or others where you've taught). What were teachers' roles in these efforts? What factors appear to have contributed to their success or failure? In what ways did they make your school or your job better or worse?



2. What kinds of time and resources were involved in the changes you considered in question one? What sorts of professional training and/or materials were provided? In what ways were they sufficient or not?
3. What are one or two big needs in your school that you strongly believe should be addressed more fully? How much agreement is there on this, among the faculty or within your study group? If numerous problems are identified, how might you (and the school) thoughtfully choose a first one to work on?
4. Of the various steps in a campaign described in the chapter, which do you think would be especially important to address in your school? Which might be particularly challenging? What, specifically, might be involved in carrying out that step?
5. Assume for a moment that your campaign on the challenge that you've identified is successful. What could be some meaningful kinds of evidence to show the progress and/or concerns as the new effort is carried out? How could the data be gathered in a way that is not too time-consuming or intrusive on teaching and learning?
6. Think of schools or other organizations (businesses, churches, units of government, clubs) that you know of that have made significant changes in how they operate. Big changes might have involved growth, or refocus, re-organization, or perhaps even a relocation. In what ways might they provide models to point the way to meaningful change?

## Chapter 10. Talk to the Man

1. What is your own principal like? How approachable? What special interests does he or she have? If this person's style is very different from yours, how do you think you might begin to bridge the gap? How could you show him respect in order to win him to your side without being hypocritical?
2. What about your own attitudes toward authority? How do these affect the way you relate to your principal? In what ways do they help or hinder the relationship?
3. List some issues on which you would like to express your thoughts to the principal. Then list issues your principal might be interested in hearing

about from you. In what ways do these lists overlap? Which ones might be best to start with?

4. What have administrators done that has helped your teaching? If you could be honest with them, what practices would you tell them to expand or change?
5. Communication between a teacher and his or her students mirrors that between teachers and administrators. What are some strategies you use or might think of to help your students learn how to communicate their needs constructively, with each other and/or with you?
6. How do you view your own communication style with your students? Consider with fellow teachers how you might obtain objective feedback on this by studying a book like *The Power of Our Words* and then pairing up to observe each other in the classroom.

## ■ Chapter 11. Reach Out to Parents

1. What strategies do you and fellow teachers use to connect with parents? What are some successes that have been achieved by you or other teachers in working with parents?
2. One of the hardest tasks when working with parents is learning to see their kids—and their world—from their point of view. Reflect on times when you may have tried to do this. What stands out to you, now, about the way you responded and started to build trust?
3. What are some strategies outlined in this chapter that you'd like to try? What might be involved in getting them started?
4. If you and/or fellow teachers have had to deal with demanding or critical parents, how did you handle this? What do you think it takes to respond in a constructive rather than a defensive way?
5. A big issue for parent involvement is how much time you should allot for this worthy but time-consuming goal. Reflect on which strategies described in this chapter you presently use or might want to adopt, which are most time-effective—and which ones you could only institute with the active support of your administration.

6. Relationships with parents are influenced not only by individual teachers but also by the whole school. What is the overall practice and tone of this in your school? If you'd like to see it improve, what steps might be helpful?

## Chapter 12. Get Grants

1. What are some of the grant opportunities in your area? If you don't have a lot of time to investigate this, how might you divide up the inquiry among some fellow teachers? Or whom do you know beyond your school who might be able to help with this search (reference librarians, for example, who research grant information)?
2. What are some projects that you'd love to try, that would require some extra resources, or some summer planning work, and that might be appealing to an outside donor? How might several teachers in your group or your school collaborate together on such an effort?
3. How might you approach your principal about ideas and help in seeking grants? Consider some of the strategies in Chapter 10 for communicating with principals. How might your request affect how she views your role in the school?
4. Who in your school or your community might help you write a proposal? Think of various people you know—socially, at your church, at the business where a family member works, or at a nearby university.

## Chapter 13. Forge Partnerships

1. Who in your community might be interested in getting involved with a special effort at your school? Don't be afraid of making a "cold call" or two to a few influential people in your community. Consider talking with professors at local universities who specialize in your area. If they don't work with schools like yours, ask whether they can point you toward organizations that do partner with schools. And as is true with grants, reference librarians are paid to help you find nonprofits and companies that have partnered with teachers and schools. You never know where you might find some real interest. As you investigate, develop a list of possible partner organizations.

2. What could be a special project that an outside partner would be attracted to? How would it relate to the big improvement goals at your school? How would it connect the interests of the partner with the needs of your students?
3. As you envision a partnership project, what steps might be required to insure that all parties are on the same page with what the project aims to accomplish and how it will be organized?

## The Bigger Picture

1. What is the overall attitude at your school toward shared leadership and school improvement? What factors do you think have helped it to be either positive or negative?
2. What are your own attitudes toward shared leadership and school improvement? Think about your hopes, skepticism, or frustrations about these issues.
3. What are some ways that you personally could benefit from improvements at your school? Given the talent pool at your school, what would teachers need to tackle first so that you and they could experience these improvements in your classrooms and work life?
4. Of the various steps outlined in this chapter toward a more collaborative culture and development process, which might need to be worked on at this time at your school? What steps—large or small, with the whole school or with a small group of fellow faculty—could you take to contribute to this effort?
5. Reflect on the strategies that you might use to get your principal to listen to your insights into whole-school change. Since school change often starts with collaborative time for teachers to compare notes and ideas, what are ways that you might persuade the principal to make more of this collaborative time available?