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Effects of support group participation on teachers

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EFFECTS OF SUPPORT GROUP PARTICIPATION ON TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Scott Flanegin

Effects of Support Group
Participation on Teachers
1999
Dr. Theodore Johnson
Supervision and Curriculum Development

The study observed, analyzed and evaluated the effects of support group participation on

the psychological, emotional, and professional needs of teachers. The study used a

qualitative research design to gather data on seven female high school teachers

participating in a professional development group. The research instruments used included

a pre- and postsurvey, a questionnaire, and journal entries. The survey recorded data

concerning each teacher's pattern of contacts with colleagues, level of job satisfaction,

resources for problem-solving used by the individual, and demographic information. Data

analysis tabulated and compared survey response percentages before and after the study.

The questionnaire and journal provided a narrative and anecdotal review for the survey

data. The study showed that participation in a support group with a professional problem

solving focus reduced job-related feelings of stress. Participants reported decreases in

feelings of anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and exhaustion. On the other hand, feelings of

satisfaction, support, productivity, confidence, competence, and energy increased.

Participation also appeared to motivate them to overcome feelings of isolation. There was

no apparent effect on teachers' preference for solving problems alone when possible.

MINI-ABSTRACT

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The purpose of the study was to observe, analyze and evaluate the effects of support

group participation on teachers. The study showed that participation reduced job-related

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isolation. There was no effect on teachers' preference for solving problems alone.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Focus of the Study:

The focus of this study is the impact of a teacher support group on participants'

feelings about their jobs and their approach to problem solving. When in-house school

counselors are used to lead a support group, Boytim and Dickel view it as a

cost-effective way to give relief to teachers experiencing burnout, and to prevent similar

problems from developing in other teachers (1988). According to Gold, personal and

psychological coping skills are important for new teachers as well, and need to be a part

of a stress reduction program. Without these skills, new teachers may not be able to

bring all their professional training into play, with an accompanying erosion of

self-confidence (1992).

A sense of isolation is a significant factor contributing to stress among teachers

generally (Boytim & Dickel). Teaching is a lonely job for adults because there is an

absence of contact with and feedback from other adults (Brock & Grady, 1997). Schools

are physically organized in a way that isolates teachers from each other, and

institutionally organized in a way that usually ignores the personal needs of teachers

(Boytim & Dickel; Harvey, 1982). Finally, teachers as a group are trained and socialized

in ways that do not encourage collegiality. Teachers refrain from discussing problems

with peers out of the desire to be perceived as a fully competent professional (Boytim &

Dickel).

A frequently cited benefit of teacher support groups is that they encourage collegiality and mutuality as aids to problem-solving. Kirk and Walter focus on the opportunities for productive behavior emanating from support groups. Groups provide a nonthreatening environment for positive feedback, constructive criticism, and encouragement by peers during the process of collaborative problem-solving. Members experience mutual support and sharing of successful experiences, with an accompanying boost to morale (1981). Collegiality and stress reduction appear to be related. Support groups reduce stress in part by providing constructive feedback to problems presented by individuals in the group. Job satisfaction increases because group members can present successes and strengths for acknowledgment and support (Ireland & Ireland, 1984).

Purpose of the Study

Several studies of teachers experiencing stressful situations have suggested a support group as a tool to deliver psychological and emotional support to both new and experienced teachers. In a study of new teachers, the needs that emerged from focus groups included a desire for interaction with other new teachers in a group setting, and trouble shooting assistance for work-related problems (Camp & Heath-Camp, 1991). The emotional and psychological support provided by a support group may be necessary for new teachers to avoid burnout and to maintain their professional effectiveness (Carter & Richardson, 1989; Gold; Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler). Experienced teachers have similar needs. In fact, support group participation may be necessary for the individual teacher under stress to recover fully (Ireland & Ireland). Support group participation has also been suggested as a way to prevent problems from developing among those within the school staff who are experiencing stress (Boytim & Dickel; Kirk & Walter).

Educational institutions may form support groups to provide professional support for teachers implementing new approaches to instruction. Teachers in a support group for this purpose were found to be more effective than nonparticipants in carrying out the innovation (Putnam & Barnes, 1984). The purpose of this study is to observe, analyze and evaluate the effects of support group participation on the psychological, emotional, and professional needs of a heterogeneous group of secondary school teachers.

<u>Definitions</u>

Stress is a normal condition of life. However, when individuals speak of experiencing some kind of stress, they are generally referring to something that impairs their ability to function in some way. Following this conception, Ireland and Ireland refer to stress as a response by the individual to external stimuli. These may be both pleasant and unpleasant. Stress includes "the body's physical, mental, and chemical reactions to situations that excite, confuse, frighten, endanger or irritate the individual" (1984). Typical reactions of teachers under significant stress for prolonged periods include feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of support (Kirk & Walter). This condition may lead to burnout, described as "some degree of physical, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion related to occupational stress" (1981). Sources of stress may be both on and off the job. For the purposes of this study, stress refers to job-related and professional concerns.

Teachers often work in environments that do not meet their emotional, psychological, or professional needs. Support groups can be thought of as "surrogate support systems that fill gaps in people's lives created by the absence, limitations, or dysfunctionality of their natural support systems" (Boytim & Dickel). Teacher support

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groups focus on professional and related personal problems, not therapy. Desirable outcomes include reduced feelings of isolation; positive feedback; and group problem solving (Kirk & Walter). Support group behaviors include mutual decision-making, and extending trust and understanding (Ireland & Ireland). A teacher support group is probably most successful when its members begin to apply behavior learned in the group to situations in their professional lives. In this study, the teacher support group is also referred to as a "professional development group."

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. It is confined to one building in a regional school district. Generalizing the findings to other buildings would be difficult. However, support groups may be set up anywhere there is sufficient interest, so that findings about the support group itself may be applied elsewhere with qualifications. A second limitation is that the participants are a heterogeneous group of high school teachers. They are mixed with regard to gender, race, age, experience, and subject and academic level taught. Findings will be generalizable to support groups with similar compositions, in similar schools. Because all of the participants in the study are high school teachers, it will not support findings regarding teachers in elementary and middle schools.

Setting of the Study

The study took place in a secondary school in a regional high school district in southern New Jersey. The district enrolls students from seven municipalities. There are two regional high schools; a nearby junior high school feeds each. There is also a regional day school for students with severe disabilities. Total district enrollment is

approximately 5000 students, served by a district staff of more than 700. Enrollment is growing, and has led to overcrowding of various degrees at the junior and high schools. According to the 1997 edition of the New Jersey School Report Card, the ratio of administrators to students in the district is below the state average, as is the ratio of administrators to faculty (Lower Camden County District). This is probably a reflection of the overcrowding in the district. Teachers are hired to maintain reasonable class sizes in the face of expanding enrollment, while administrative staffing remains at the same level.

The high school, opened in 1959, serves three of the district's sending communities, in a region that is a blend of rural and suburban areas. The administrative roster of seven includes the principal, four assistant principals, an athletic director, and an instructional supervisor. Besides the curriculum offerings described above, the high school offers a full program of athletics and extracurricular club activities for its students. Curriculum highlights include dual-credit courses with the local community college; advanced placement courses in Biology, Calculus, Chemistry, American History, and English; and a School-to-Work career path offered through the Business Department of each high school. The Gifted and Talented program has been recently revised so that it is a component of all honors courses, and is no longer a separate offering. The curriculum at the high school is aligned with course offerings at the sister high school on the other side of the district (1997).

The staff numbers about 120 at the high school that is the setting for the study. The staff is neither very young nor very old. There is a mix of new teachers, veterans, and those nearing retirement. District wide, the median level of experience for the faculty

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was 15 years for the 1996-1997 school year . The district attendance rate for the faculty has been slightly above the state average for the three school years up to 1997. The ratio of students to faculty in 1997 was 13.1 to 1, compared to a state average of 11.7 to 1. In the district, 28% of the faculty possesses masters' degrees, while 69% have a bachelor's degree (1997). A significant proportion of the staff at the school is from the surrounding communities; many of them graduated from the school as students. The faculty is active in after-school activities, providing the organization and direction for the many clubs and athletics. Attitudes toward education and discipline tend to be traditional.

About 1300 students attend the high school. The student attendance rate, according to the School Report Card, is slightly below the state average. The student mobility rate is 50% higher than the state average. Class sizes and the student/faculty ratio are slightly higher than the state average. For the three school years ending in 1997, in the Reading and Mathematics portions of the HSPT students performed above both the state average and the average for the school's District Factor Group (DFG), that is, other schools with student populations that are similar socioeconomically. On the other hand, the HSPT scores in writing, while close, finished below the state and DFG averages. SAT percentile scores for the school are generally comparable to its DFG in mathematics, and generally comparable to the higher state average in the verbal portion. Approximately 76% of graduates reported post secondary education plans, with 66% planning on a college or university. Roughly half the latter planned to attend a two-year school (1997). The educational attainments and aspirations of the students reflect the lower middle class and middle class composition of the sending communities.

<u>Significance of the Study</u>

There are several reasons why this study should be conducted. First, there appears to be a gap between what advocates of teacher support groups claim in the literature, and the findings supported by research. Although there are several studies that either suggest or examine the use of support groups for new teachers, there are practically none concerning their actual effects on experienced teachers. Articles on support groups for experienced teachers usually focus on guidelines for setting up and operating them, rather than critically examining their effectiveness in meeting the needs of the participants.

Second, when compared with alternatives, support groups are a relatively cost effective means of providing for the emotional, psychological, and professional needs of teachers (Boytim & Dickel; Putnam & Barnes). A support group deals with issues and problems specific to the site, uses available resources, and generally does not require significant investments in time. This is always a consideration when asking teachers for participation in anything beyond their teaching duties.

Finally, a teacher support group has potential benefits not only for its participants, but also for the school as an educational institution. Ireland and Ireland have observed that teachers under stress experience lower productivity, unhappiness, and physical problems that lower their classroom effectiveness. By lowering stress, participation in a support group results in a happier and healthier educator. This translates into a more productive teacher in the classroom (1984). Teachers also become more open to suggestion about solving problems and more determined to solve them (Putnam & Barnes). Learning the habits of mutual support and productive change that are part of

the support group process also boosts building morale as participants apply these lessons outside the group (Kirk & Walter).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in the following way. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on support groups for teachers for alleviating the stress they experience in the workplace. The design of the study is the focus of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents the research findings, followed by discussion in Chapter 5 of conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Beginning teachers face high levels of stress. The attrition rates of teachers new to the profession suggest the importance of the problem. Up to 50 percent of beginning teachers leave teaching within the first seven years, most of whom depart in the first two. Many of those who continue react so negatively to their early experiences that they never reach their full potential as teachers. Gordon reports those beginning teachers with adverse experiences may "develop a survival mentality, a set of restricted teaching methods, and a resistance to curricular and instructional change . . ." (1991). Sources of stress for beginning teachers may include their personal characteristics and circumstances, situational stressors common to teaching, and stressors specific to those new to the profession. Examples of the latter category are environmental difficulties and the changes required to adapt to the demands of teaching.

Personal characteristics typical among educators may contribute to the stress beginning teachers experience. The same dedication to service that leads them into teaching makes educators prone to sacrifice their security, social, and self-esteem needs to those of others. Lack of attention to those needs, unrealistic goal-setting and expectations, and dissatisfaction with personal performance are frequent stress-inducing problems for educators. Demands for change and growth of the educator may also be stressful (Ireland and Ireland, 1984).

Feelings of isolation are a common source of stress for teachers. The formal

structure of schools includes faculty meetings, department groups, and committees and task forces to meet institutional needs. However, the personal needs of the many teachers who experience isolation are given almost no support (Harvey, 1982). Teaching can be a lonely job for adults because of the from other adults discussed above. In their classrooms, teachers spend most of their working day with students, and experience little or no interaction with their peers (Brock and Grady, 1997; Camp and Heath-Camp, 1991).

Beyond contending with the problems affecting teachers generally, the beginning teacher faces significant personal adjustments. Many beginners are recent college graduates beginning their careers and taking on professional responsibilities for the first time. Beginning teachers are often at the "exploratory-trial stage" of young adults entering the working world for the first time. Individuals at this stage experience feelings of insecurity, false starts, and instability, without a comparable experience to fall back on. They will enter schools whose social organization and culture are unknown to them. They may experience feelings of loneliness and isolation and a sense of being overwhelmed by their new job. Paradoxically, the more academically successful a novice teacher was in college, the more vulnerable he or she may be to viewing the problems they encounter in their first year as personal failures. Accustomed to and expecting success in a school environment, these beginning teachers explain their setbacks by blaming themselves (Brock and Grady).

Several other factors add to the stress experienced by beginning teachers when compared with their more experienced counterparts. Gordon identifies six environmental sources of stress specific to beginning teachers. They are: difficult work

assignments; unclear expectations; inadequate resources; isolation; role conflict; and reality shock. New teachers are often expected to deal with more challenging or difficult assignments at the same expert level as veteran teachers. Expectations from different groups about new teachers are often vague, unstated, informal, or in conflict. Instructional resources and materials may be missing or lacking, with the newcomer getting what no one else wants. Cultural factors may contribute to physical, emotional, social, and professional isolation. The beginning teacher often experiences role conflict between the demands of the teaching role and the demands of young adulthood, father- or motherhood, or new spousal responsibilities. Finally, shock may result from the realization of the differences between what beginning teachers imagined teaching to be, and their perception of the realities of the classroom (1991).

Beginning teachers often experience social isolation for several reasons that may be difficult for them to perceive. A school faculty may be reluctant to welcome newcomers because they do not have shared experiences, because they threaten the status of group members, or because there may be jealousy over a newcomer's talents. Veteran teachers often see the first year of teaching as a rite of passage to be experienced alone by the novice. The staff may believe that offering help is either interfering or the principal's job. The newcomer often contributes to this situation by refusing to ask for help out of a desire to be seen as a competent professional (Gordon; Brock and Grady).

The consequences of continued high levels of stress on any teacher can be severe. Teachers under stress generally experience lower productivity, unhappiness, and physical problems that lower their classroom effectiveness (Ireland & Ireland). Studies of novice teachers in particular show that they may resolve the psychological stresses they

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experience with negative effects, so that new teachers may become more controlling, authoritarian, rigid, and less child-centered (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler, 1990; Gordon). Beginning teachers may also suffer from a range of emotional, physical, attitudinal, and behavioral problems. Gordon reports that "[t]he beginner may suffer from insomnia or nightmares . . . leading to fatigue and physical exhaustion or a sense of failure and depression. . . . Outbursts of crying, loss of temper, and occasional vomiting are not uncommon. . . ." New teachers see themselves as becoming less confident about themselves and teaching, and becoming "more impulsive, less inspiring, louder, less responsive, more reserved, and [making] school more boring as a result of their early teaching experiences. . ." (1991).

Several studies have recommended establishing a peer support group to meet the needs of beginning teachers (Camp & Heath-Camp; Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler; Gold, 1992; Boytim & Dickel). Support groups in this context have several purposes. Groups for novice teachers generally reduce their professional isolation by giving them a forum to express frustrations and gain support for their ideas in an atmosphere of collaborative problem solving. The participants share thoughts and experiences about their professional demands within the group (Boytim & Dickel; Camp & Heath-Camp; Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler). The support group is also a way for beginning teachers to learn coping skills for dealing with stress, and is one way for new teachers to become more aware of their social needs (Gold). In coping with stress, peer support is at least as effective as support from superiors such as supervisors. The social support from peers that is part of the support group process determines an individual's ability to cope, not the level of stress itself (Brandt, 1987).

Support groups meet the psychological and emotional needs of beginning

teachers. Support group discussions of classroom management issues for example, help

prevent the "delusion of uniqueness," a situation in which the novice feels alone in

experiencing problems in the classroom and becomes unwilling to ask more experienced

colleagues for help. Discussions on classroom management issues also provide "spectator

therapy." Teachers observing other new teachers sharing and solving these problems are

encouraged to work toward solving their own classroom concerns. Excessive concerns

about formal evaluations and the perceptions of administrators may lead to

"perfectionistic thinking." Support groups provide an appropriate setting for confronting

and resolving these performance-hindering anxieties (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler).

Support groups may forestall negative or destructive adaptations to stressful

circumstances by giving members opportunities for peer interaction and understanding.

A support group enhances the functional ability of its members by providing a collegial

support system to encourage growth (Boytim & Dickel; Kirk & Walter, 1981). Job

satisfaction increases for group members because individuals can present successes and

failures for acknowledgment. This feedback is considered "essential for the recovery of

the individual in a stressful situation" (Ireland & Ireland). The ameliorative and

preventive function of support groups may also indirectly provide real benefits to those

children for whom the adults have responsibility (Boytim & Dickel).

Participation in a support group maximizes professional development for

beginning teachers. Researchers in developmental theory have observed that "a

supportive atmosphere is necessary if learners need to master new and complex thought

and action. Cognition and affect interact. A time of relaxed reflection is needed by

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novices in order to incorporate new ideas and skills" (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler). Social processing is essential for learning to take place. Without interaction by the learner with the group, higher cognitive development by the individual is not possible (Wesson, et al., 1996). Gold also suggests that the emotional and psychological support provided by support groups are necessary for the beginning teacher to be able to apply his or her professional skills in the face of what may feel like overwhelming stress. While professional concerns are important to a teacher's success, a program that ignores emotional and psychological needs of the beginning teacher will limit the success of that teacher (1992). The goal of the support group is to help beginning teachers shift from concerns about self to concerns about student learning (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler).

The problem solving function of support groups promotes professional development. Success in implementing new approaches to instruction was highest for teachers in a support group because it gave them regular opportunities to talk with peers about similar situations and problems during the transition to a new method. The presence of "empathic problem solving" allowed individuals in the group to see a problem from many different perspectives offered by the group. This encouraged teachers to be more open to suggestion about new ways to solve problems and to persist in their solution (Putnam & Barnes, 1984). Problem solving skills need to be part of any stress reduction plan (Gold). Support groups also reduce stress by providing constructive feedback to problems presented by individuals in the group (Ireland & Ireland). Seen from these perspectives, support groups for teachers provide components that not only facilitate professional development, but may be necessary for it to take place.

Studies of student teachers in support groups led by trained professionals

showed positive trends (Fuller, 1969; Herring, 1989). In one such study the participants "became less egocentric, less anxious, and more able to focus on the initial tasks of teaching" (Fuller). A study by Paisley (1987) of beginning teachers participating in both a support group led by a trained counselor and a relationship with a trained and experienced mentor teacher also showed developmental gains for the novice teachers. Journal entries of support group participants in a study of student teachers gave a sense of reduced tension, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Group discussions also showed a gradual refocusing by teachers from preoccupations with their own concerns to their professional effectiveness with their students (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler).

Successful groups have common characteristics. Group size should be large enough to stimulate discussion but not so large that some members become alienated or are overlooked. A group that is too large may also lose focus . Suggested sizes range from a minimum of five to a maximum of 12 individuals (Kirk & Walter; Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler). The benefits of smaller groups include scheduling flexibility, potentially higher individual participation, and generally higher group cohesion. The disadvantages of smaller groups include running out of discussion ideas; losing excitement, spontaneity, purpose and momentum; and becoming distracted by more therapeutic and intimate concerns. Larger groups, on the other hand, provide more personal resources and sharing, but individual time is limited and discussion is less personal. Support group goals should clearly relate to professional concerns about teaching. Membership should, if possible, avoid too much heterogeneity or homogeneity; the former requires too much time for adjustment, while the latter may limit discussion (Kirk & Walter).

Support groups led by school counselors have been proposed as a cost-effective

way to provide services to school staff when financial resources are limited (Boytim & Dickel; Putnam & Barnes). Although some type of mentoring program is the most common form of assistance program offered to the new teacher (Camp & Heath-Camp), beginning teachers would benefit from a counselor-led support group option if funds were not available for a more comprehensive program. Counselor-led support groups are most effective if the counselor is competent to provide both psychological and professional support for novices to work out their problems. A bimonthly schedule should be followed, with meetings lasting no more than 90 minutes. Participation in the program should be encouraged. If the program is led well, teachers will begin to attend because they want to, not because they have to. The support they receive will become its own incentive (Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler).

Research on change led to the development of the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) in the late 60s and early 70s. The CBAM is unusual in research on change because it focuses on the individual experiencing the change process, rather than the larger organization of which the individual is a part. Regarding the beginning teacher, "the change involved is the developmental process of becoming a teacher" (Barnes & Huling-Austin, 1984). The CBAM is based on the principles that "change is a process, not an event"; that change is experienced in stages; and that individuals and their needs must be the focus of services provided to facilitate the change. The CBAM concept of stages in the change process has been used to study educators and students, and individuals and groups in business settings, hospital emergency rooms, and human service organizations. Local districts, school boards, and state have used CBAM tools and federal agencies to assess training and programs (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

More recently, CBAM concepts have been used to evaluate computer technology innovation on educators (ERIC search).

The need to provide practical applications for the CBAM led to the Stages of Concern (SoC) concept. Originally theorized as four stages, the concept was elaborated into seven stages, each marked by a distinct set of concerns about change: awareness; informational; personal; management; consequence; collaboration; refocusing (Hall & Loucks, as cited by Thies-Sprinthall & Gerler). According to the SoC concept, individuals progress from initial concerns unrelated to teaching, to concerns about the management and consequences of their teaching, to a final stage where they focus involvement on improving their teaching based on their experience. The model expresses the dynamic relationship between individuals and the innovation they experience, in this case beginning teaching. A concerns "profile" represents the dominant stage of concern for an individual or a group, although there may be a variety of concerns at different stages. Research has confirmed the existence of predictable developmental stages experienced by people implementing change. The pace of movement through these steps varies with the individual (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer).

The Stages of Concern Questionnaire (SoCQ) was developed to assess concerns as individuals and groups progress through the hypothesized phases of an innovation (Hall, George, and Rutherford, 1979). The SoCQ consists of 35 items, each with a Likert scale for response to indicate the intensity of concern for each item. Five items represent each of the seven Stages of Concern distributed throughout the SoCQ. Higher scores show more intense concern; lower scores show less intense concern. The SoCQ has been described as "psychometrically rigorous and reliable enough to provide

meaningful research data and information for planning change strategies." The reliability is high enough to compare groups across time (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer).

A difficulty, however, is that while the items allow the individual to express what concerns are most important at a given point in the change process, the items do not specify what issues those concerns are about. The concerns may be about the change process under investigation, or about other, unrelated issues. Considerations of this problem with questionnaire validity have led researchers to recommend use of the Open-Ended Statement (OES) with the SoCQ. The OES asks for a response to the question, "When you think about [the innovation], what are you concerned about?" Responses to this prompt give information both about concerns overall and about specific issues of concern (Loucks-Horsley & Stiegelbauer; Shotsberger & Crawford). Using the OES alone as a research tool to gather data is not recommended (Newlove & Hall, 1976). However, the use of the OES and of teacher journals to gather qualitative information as a supplement to the SoCQ will increase confidence in the validity of data gathered by the questionnaire (Shotsberger & Crawford).

Stress may be an almost universal condition for teachers. Beginning teachers tend to be hardest hit for a variety of reasons. These range from environmental factors, such as inappropriate assignments, to more personal factors, such as unrealistic expectations. In common with novices, more experienced teachers struggle with feelings of isolation. Both groups also suffer from the consequences of chronic, unrelieved stress, such as reduced productivity, physical problems, and other negative adaptations. Participation in a support group has been suggested as an effective method of reducing stress for teachers of all levels of experience. Support group participation also enhances professional

development by allowing teachers to reflect on their experiences in a receptive collegial setting. Counselor-led groups of between five and twelve individuals meeting twice a month appears to be an optimal and cost-effective way to deliver stress reduction services to teachers.

Determining the effects of a support group on participating teachers appears to require triangulation, or "the use of multiple methods, data collection strategies, and/or data sources" to give a more thorough picture of events and individuals, and as a cross-check on either quantitative or qualitative information (Gay, 1996). For example, participants' journal entries may add depth and context to statistics developed from a survey. An expectation of using triangulation is that it will show an increase in the ability to cope with stress and its associated problems for teachers participating in a professionally-led support group.

Chapter 3

The Design of the Study

General Description of the Research Design

The study drew on qualitative research design because the characteristics of a

qualitative approach appeared to be most suitable for a field study in this case. A goal of

this study was to provide real-world data and information on the effects of participation

in a professional development group on secondary school teachers. To gather data, the

study used a multi method approach, or "triangulation." The aim was to create a fuller

picture of the subject under study, and to provide a way of cross-checking information

from one source against information from another to increase confidence in the validity of

the data (Gay, 1996).

Subjects for the study were secondary classroom teachers in a regional high

school serving lower middle and middle-class communities in southern New Jersey. The

teachers were those who responded favorably to a survey of the faculty to determine

interest in participating in a professional development group. Teachers responding

favorably were asked to attend four monthly group meetings. The school crisis counselor

facilitated each meeting by introducing activities and maintaining each meeting's focus.

The focus of the group was problem solving for professional issues, and other issues of

related concern for group members.

At the first meeting, participants completed a seven-part "Professional

Development Group Participating Teacher Survey" (Appendix). Participating teachers

were also asked to make journal entries about their thoughts on problem solving and professional issues in composition books provided to them. At the conclusion of the fourth group meeting, each participant received an envelope containing another copy of the teacher survey and a questionnaire with five items (Appendix). They were asked to return the completed questionnaire and survey along with their journals by the end of the following week.

Research Instruments

The instruments used included the survey, the questionnaire, and journal entries. The survey was developed to elicit data concerning the teacher's pattern of contacts with colleagues, his or her level of job satisfaction, resources for problem-solving used by individual teachers, and demographic information. The questionnaire and journal were included to provide narrative and anecdotal support for the survey.

Data Collection Approach

The first two parts of the survey were lists of the kinds of people the teacher might talk to during the day. The respondent checked off the types of people with whom he or she had daily contact. Age, gender, experience, staff position, and department differentiated the contacts. The aim of this part of the survey was to develop a contact profile for each participating teacher.

The third part of the survey was developed to identify the teacher's positive and negative feelings about his or her job. The intensity of these feelings was determined by using a 5-point scale. The fourth, fifth, and sixth parts related to the teacher's way of solving problems by asking him or her to identify the people and resources to be used, ranging from least likely to most likely. The seventh part of the survey asked for

demographic data.

Participants used their journals to record their observations and insights on their professional problems and issues, and to say how they solved or addressed these. The questionnaire was developed to add depth to issues of particular concern for this study, such as relationships with colleagues, problem-solving efficacy, job satisfaction, and group participation.

<u>Data Analysis Plan</u>

The data were analyzed first by comparing the surveys, both for individuals and for the group as a whole. Constructing figures and tables as appropriate showed the amount and direction of change by percentages for each section of the survey. The data analysis also compared journal entries and questionnaire responses and integrated them into the findings. These data sources were used for cross-checking data from the surveys, and to obtain as many perspectives as possible on the effects of group participation on teachers.

Chapter 4

Presentation of the Research Findings

The demographic data for the participants showed that, as a group, they reflected the composition of the teaching staff as a whole (Table 1). The participants were female in a teaching staff that is mostly female. The mean years for age and experience reflected the maturity and experience of the staff as well. By subject area, the participating teachers represented four departments. Three of the participants were world language teachers, two were English teachers, one was a domestic arts teacher, and one was a business skills teacher. The two nontenure teachers were lowest in age, experience, and years in the building.

The pre- and postsurvey data for the daily professional contact checkoff list were analyzed for relationships to demographic characteristics. The data for the professional list showed that the number of contacts appeared to depend on the number of years the participant had worked in the building (Figure 1). Participants with more years in the building usually had higher numbers of contacts than those who with fewer years. The mean number of professional contacts reported before and after the study was relatively stable, at 25.4. The teacher who had begun working in the building most recently was the only one to report an increase in professional contacts between surveys.

Analysis of the daily social contact checkoff lists did not establish a clear relationship with any demographic characteristic of the participants (Figure 2). The mean number of contacts before the study was 24.2; after the study, the figure dropped to 20.8.

There were two possible explanations for the drop in social contacts. First, the participants may have become more careful about identifying social contacts the second time they completed the survey. This possibility would have resulted in a lower number of social contacts reported in the second survey. Second, the teacher reporting only six social contacts after the study may not have completed the checklist. Averaging this number in with the others would have resulted in under reporting social contacts for the group as a whole.

The mean responses by the group for feelings toward their jobs appeared to show that participation had a positive effect (Table 2). Participants reported a decrease in negative feelings, and an increase in positive feelings. The mean decrease for negative feelings was a change of -8.11 %. The increase in feelings of insecurity was probably related to a decision made by district voters near the end of the previous school year to dissolve the district. The increase in feelings of isolation may have resulted from greater awareness of the physical isolation from other adults that teachers routinely experience during the school day. The awareness may have developed because of participation in the group.

The mean increase of positive feelings toward the job was 5.15 %. The relatively high increase in feelings of energy could be related to the timing of the surveys. The first survey was completed in the middle of the second marking period. The second survey was completed near the beginning of the third marking period. Perhaps teachers' energy levels vary during the year, depending on marking period phases.

The participants showed that they preferred to solve problems at work without consulting others, particularly administrators and the principal (Table 3). When solving a

problem alone was not a choice, participants preferred other teachers as their problem-solving resource (Table 4). Rankings of problem-solving resources for preference were the same before and after the study, with administrators rated lowest and teachers rated highest.

Participants rated administrators below teachers in importance for problem-solving as well. In fact, ratings of importance for the principal, administrators, and department chairs dropped during the study, with these resources finishing lower after the study than they did before. According to the postsurvey, support staff also gained in importance relative to administrators, finishing second only to other teachers in importance as a resource. The "Other" category on the survey form for the survey sections on preference and importance was not used for analysis, because most participants did not enter values for it.

There were several possible explanations for the decline in the importance of administrators as problem solving resources. It may have reflected the participating teachers' desire to solve problems on their own when possible. Group members may also have become more confident in their ability to solve problems that they would previously have referred for resolution to administrators, either in whole or in part. The school crisis counselor's role as the group facilitator may have led participants to value him and other members of the support staff more highly than they did before the study.

The first two questions on the questionnaire were similar to the professional and social contact check off lists in the kind of information sought (Appendix). Responses to the first question reflected the stability of the contacts checked off in the surveys before and after the study. Only two of the six participants who returned the questionnaire

reported that their contacts increased, because they enlarged their circle of contacts to include group participants. Responses to the second question, about the effect of participation on relationships in the building, were uniformly positive. Four of the respondents said that participation had helped them build relationships with others in the group and in the building. Two members of the group said that participation showed them that their colleagues deal with professional problems that are the same or similar to their own.

The third question, on problem-solving style, drew varied responses. Three group members said that participation had helped them modify their approach to problem-solving by giving them a new self-awareness about how they solved problems at work. Participation also gave two members new information on how to solve specific problems. One participant said that, through introspection, the journal writing requirement for the study had helped her develop her own resources as a problem-solver.

The fourth question asked participants to describe the effects of participation on their feelings, attitudes and perceptions about their jobs. Four of the six respondents said that they had learned that others in the group shared many of their concerns and problems, and that realizing this was a source of comfort for them. One participant said that the meetings had given her the opportunity to vent her frustrations, and that this was productive for her.

The last question asked respondents to describe their likes and dislikes about participation, and to suggest improvements for future group meetings. Four of the participants liked the group problem-solving orientation of the meetings, while two others said that they liked the opportunity to interact with others. While acknowledging

that they enjoyed participating, two group members disliked the time needed, because of other demands. Two participants disliked what they said was ambiguity about the problems addressed and the lack of resolution for problems that they discussed. Suggestions from the group included getting more ideas from group members for topics, issuing an agenda before each meeting, inviting a guest speaker, giving the meetings more structure, and focusing more on problem-solving activities that produce possible solutions.

The journals provided examples of teacher concerns that would be helpful for planning future groups. For example, the nontenured teacher in her third year of teaching remarked on the importance of daily contact with other teachers as adults, so that she would not feel overwhelmed by student demands and concerns. The journal entries of other participating teachers showed concerns with classroom and time management. Four journals contained comments on or descriptions of specific disciplinary problems that teachers were struggling to solve. In three journals, the entries concerning time management included descriptions of feeling either exhausted or overwhelmed by demands from work.

A uniform preoccupation that all participants' journals showed was their concern for their students. One teacher used her journal entries to describe the successes she had with her students during the school year. She also included short poems she had composed. Her entries were less problem-oriented than her co-workers. However, she still included an entry on a student whose writing troubled her. While the journals did not provide information that could be analyzed in the same manner as survey data, they were a useful source of anecdotal support for more objective measures.

Table 1

Demographic Data and Mean Values for Participants

| Participant | Gender | Years | | | | Tenure |
		Age	Teaching	In Building	Education	
A	F	50	25	13	16	Yes
B	F	24	2	2	17	No
C	F	53	16	5	17	Yes
D	F	(a)	22	22	17	Yes
E	F	31	7	3	18	No
F	F	46	14	14	18	Yes
G	F	45	12	5	18	Yes
Mean Values		41.5	15.7	9.1	17.2	

Note.(a) Data not entered by participant.

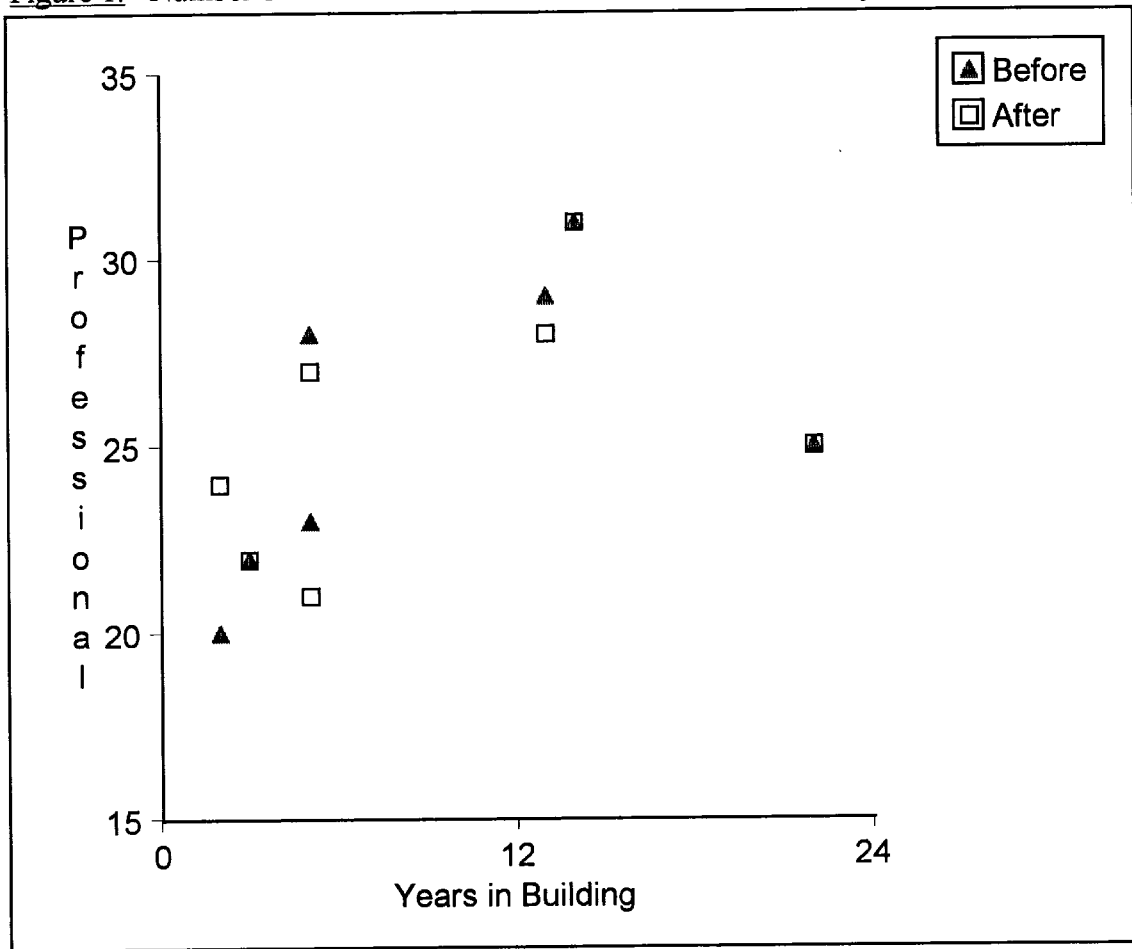Figure 1. Number of Professional Contacts Before and After Study.

Figure 2. Number of Social Contacts Before and After Study.
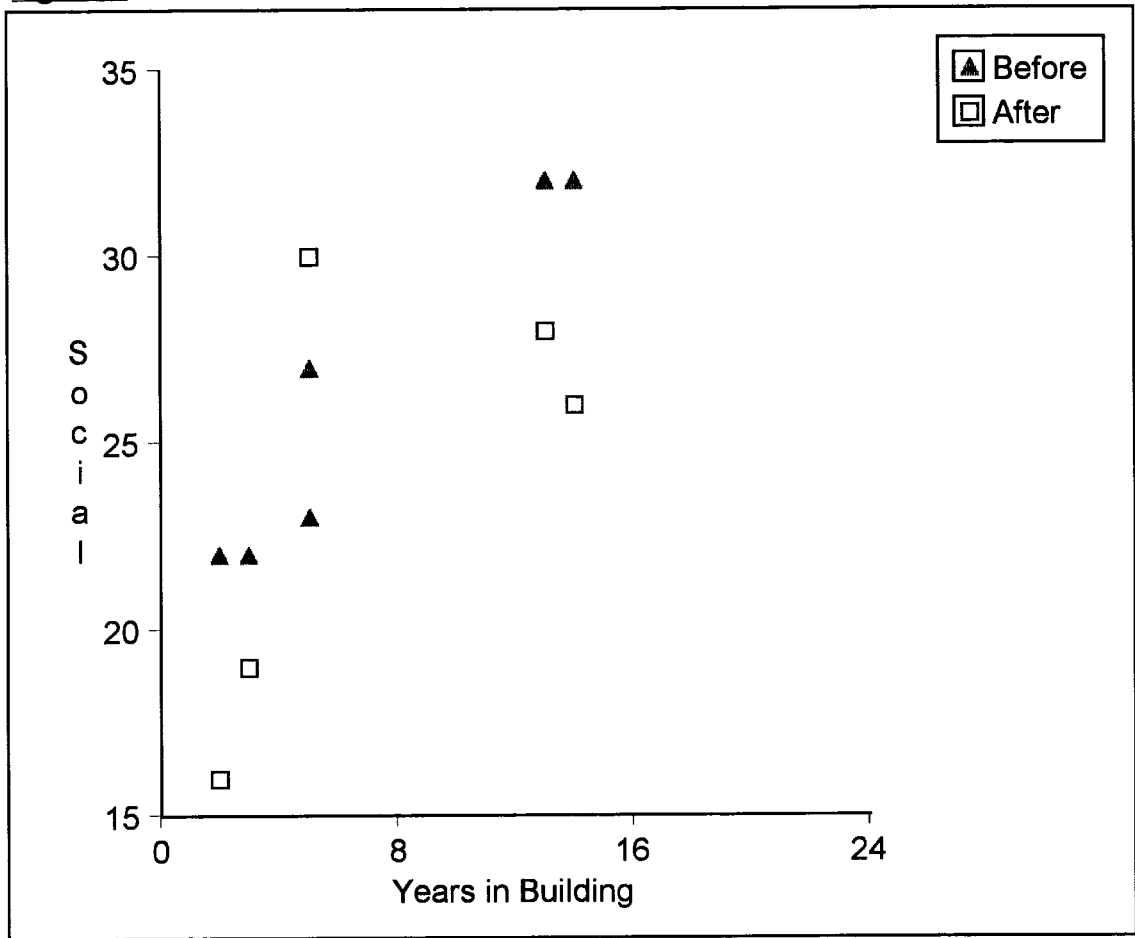
Table 2

Mean Responses by Group for Level of Feelings Towards Job Before and After

Participation

Feeling	Before	After	Change	% Change
Negative Feelings				
Anxiety	3.29	2.71	- 0.57	- 17.39
Frustration	3.43	3.00	- 0.43	- 12.50
Isolation	1.57	1.71	0.14	9.09
Insecurity	1.57	1.86	0.29	18.18
Loneliness	1.57	1.43	- 0.14	- 9.09
Exhaustion	4.43	3.86	- 0.57	- 12.90
			Mean % Change	- 8.11
Positive Feelings				
Satisfaction	3.43	3.50	0.07	2.08
Support	3.14	3.17	0.02	.76
Productivity	3.57	3.67	0.10	2.67
Confidence	3.86	4.00	0.14	3.70
Competence	4.29	4.33	0.05	1.11
Energy	3.43	4.17	0.74	21.53
			Mean % Change	5.15

Note. Respondents used a 5 point scale. Higher numbers indicate higher levels of feelings. Lower numbers indicate lower levels of feelings.

Table 3

Mean Responses by Group for Frequency of Problem-Solving Style

at Work Before and After Participation

Frequency	Before	After	Change	%Change
Self	3.86	3.71	- 0.14	- 3.70
Teacher	3.14	3.29	0.14	4.55
Teachers	3.43	2.86	- 0.57	- 16.67
Dept. Head	2.29(a)	2.29(a)	0.00	0.00
Administrator	2.43	2.00	- 0.43	- 17.65
Administrators	2.14	1.86	- 0.29	- 13.33
Principal	1.86	1.86	0.00	0.00
Support Staff	3.00	2.71	- 0.29	- 9.52
Outside	2.86	2.71	- 0.14	- 5.00
		Mean % Change		- 6.86

Note. Respondents used a 5 point scale. Lower values indicate lower
frequency. Higher values indicate higher frequency.
(a)The participating department head did not make entries here.

Table 4

Mean Rankings by Group of School Personnel for Preference and

Importance for Problem-Solving

Personnel	Before	After	Change	%Change
Principal				
Preference	1.71	1.67	- 0.05	- 2.78
Importance	2.71	1.83	- 0.88	- 32.46
Dept. Chairs				
Preference	4.00	3.50	- 0.50	- 12.50
Importance	3.00	2.17	- 0.83	- 27.78
Administrators				
Preference	2.86	2.67	- 0.19	- 6.67
Importance	3.00	2.50	- 0.50	- 16.67
Other Teachers				
Preference	6.00	5.86	- 0.14	- 2.38
Importance	3.43	3.83	0.40	11.81
Support Staff				
Preference	3.43	2.83	- 0.60	- 17.36
Importance	2.43	2.67	0.24	9.80
Mean % Change				
Preference				- 5.84
Importance				- 11.06

Note. Preference was rated on a 6 point scale. Lower values indicate lower preference; higher values indicate higher preference. Importance was rated on a 4 point scale. Lower values indicate lower level of importance; higher values indicate higher level of importance.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

The study showed that participation in a support group with a professional

problem solving focus reduced job-related feelings of stress. These results appeared to

validate the expected effects of participation. Participants reported decreases in feelings

of anxiety, frustration, loneliness, and exhaustion. On the other hand, feelings of

satisfaction, support, productivity, confidence, competence, and energy increased. These

changes occurred within a group that had a total of four monthly meetings, and was

heterogeneous in age, years of experience, teaching specialty, and years in the building.

A reasonable conclusion was that committing relatively little in institutional resources

may reduce stress in teachers with a wide range of personal characteristics.

Group participation did not affect teachers' preference for solving problems with

as little help from others as possible. Reluctance to turn to others for help may have been

the result of several factors. There may have been a desire to maintain the perception in

others of the teacher's competence. Physical and social isolation may have created a

tendency to use personal resources to solve problems even when help is available.

Teachers may have determined that seeking help might lead to a surrender of professional

autonomy. In a more positive light, group participation may have increased teachers'

confidence in their problem solving abilities, so that they felt they needed less help. The

tendency of teachers in the group not to seek help from others may be understood as the

result of one or more of these explanations.

The factors contributing to isolation helped explain the disjunction between survey data and journal entries related to feelings of isolation. The surveys showed an increase in these feelings during the study. Questionnaire responses and journal entries, on the other hand, suggested increased feelings of collegiality and identity toward group members and non-administrative building staff outside the group. The literature on group participation predicted the increased feelings of collegiality and group identity. Participation in the support group therefore appeared to motivate some teachers to overcome their feelings of isolation in relation to certain groups or individuals. Creating a support group for teachers apparently was effective in reducing social and professional barriers, both within the group and in the teachers' working environment.

Leadership Development

The experience of developing, organizing, and completing the work for this thesis yielded insights on the relationship between information and leadership in an organization. Information flows appeared to depend on institutional and administrative interest in the thesis project. Information played a critical role in the development and organization of the teachers' professional development group, yet key pieces of information appeared either in passing or at the last moment. The main concern for the intern became determining what information was needed in a situation in which the only questions that received answers were those asked.

An event that took place before the teachers' group met illustrated this situation. The group was originally planned for beginning teachers in another building in the district. After many requests for information over several weeks, the intern was ready to begin when his mentor informed him that a doctoral student had already initiated a similar

project involving the beginning teachers in that building. Fortunately, at the suggestion of his mentor, the intern adjusted his thesis slightly to use teachers in his own building for the planned group.

This was not the first, nor the last, instance in which information critical to carrying out the thesis project was disclosed after plans had already been made. The relatively low level of institutional and administrative interest consistently limited the intern's perspective and visibility in his thesis project. This in turn led to inadequate or partial responses to his queries for information. Developing the thesis project would probably have progressed more smoothly if the intern had generated more visibility and interest within the district before proceeding with his plans.

Implications for Further Study.

There were several areas for further inquiry identified during the study. Only a handful of studies have explored the effects of support group participation on teachers. This study attempted to add to the small body of knowledge concerning those effects. Another area of potential study was the interaction between building culture and approaches to problem solving. This study did not address the context in which the participating teachers worked and interacted with their colleagues, or the traditions and norms that guided them. Finally, the rise in feelings of isolation reported by group participants needed further investigation. The role of isolation needed clarification in its relation to problem solving preferences and job stress. A more broadly based study involving more teachers, and possibly more than one building or district, could begin to address these issues.

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Appendix

Research Instruments

Professional Development Group Participating Teacher Survey

(Please Note: All information collected on this survey will remain confidential.)

For purposes of this survey, "professional" refers to job-related issues such as curriculum, instruction, and classroom management and discipline.

A. Who do you talk to during the school day about professional issues and problems?

(Please check those that apply)

___ 1. teacher in classroom next to or near yours.

___ 2. teacher you share your room with.

___ 3. teacher you co-teach with.

___ 4. teacher in your lunch period.

___ 5. teacher with same prep period as you.

___ 6. teacher in same duty period as you.

___ 7. teacher in same department as you.

___ 8. teacher outside your department.

___ 9. teacher in your department with same subject classes (eg. U.S. History, World History).

___10. teacher in your department with different subject classes.

___11. teacher with same academic level classes as you (eg. Honors, C. Prep, General, etc.).

___12. teacher with different academic level classes than you.

___13. teacher with same grade level classes as you (eg. 9th, 10th, etc.).

___14. teacher with different grade level classes than you.

___15. teacher younger than you.

___16. teacher about the same age as you.

___17. teacher older than you.

___18. teacher with tenure.

___19. teacher without tenure.

___20. male teacher.

___21. female teacher.

___22. teacher with less experience than you.

___23. teacher with same experience than you.

___24. teacher with more experience as you.

___25. teacher who is a newcomer to the building.

___26. teacher who is an old timer in the building.

___27. teacher who started in building when you did.

___28. custodial staff.

___29. hall monitors.

___30. secretarial staff.

___31. assistant administrators.

___32. building principal.

___33. other (please comment).

Comments:

B. Who do you talk to each day about personal and social matters not related to your job?

(Please check those that apply)

___ 1. teacher in classroom next to or near yours.

___ 2. teacher you share your room with.

___ 3. teacher you co-teach with.

___ 4. teacher in your lunch period.

___ 5. teacher with same prep period as you.

___ 6. teacher in same duty period as you.

___ 7. teacher in same department as you.

___ 8. teacher outside your department.

___ 9. teacher in your department with same subject classes (eg. U.S. History, World History).

___10. teacher in your department with different subject classes.

___11. teacher with same academic level classes as you (eg. Honors, C. Prep, General, etc.).

___12. teacher with different academic level classes than you.

___13. teacher with same grade level classes as you (eg. 9th, 10th, etc.).

___14. teacher with different grade level classes than you.

___15. teacher younger than you.

___16. teacher about the same age as you.

___17. teacher older than you.

___18. teacher with tenure.

___19. teacher without tenure.

___20. male teacher.

___21. female teacher.

___22. teacher with less experience than you.

___23. teacher with same experience than you.

___24. teacher with more experience as you.

___25. teacher who is a newcomer to the building.

___26. teacher who is an old timer in the building.

___27. teacher who started in building when you did.

___28. custodial staff.

___29. hall monitors.

___30. secretarial staff.

___31. assistant administrators.

___32. building principal.

___33. other (please comment).

Comments:

C. Please use the following scale to rate factors I through 12.

1=very low   2=low   3=moderate   4==high   5=very high

With regard to your job, how would you rate the level of your feelings of:

_____ 1. anxiety

_____ 2. frustration

_____ 3. isolation

_____ 4. insecurity

_____ 5. loneliness

_____ 6. exhaustion

_____ 7. satisfaction

_____ 8. support

_____ 9. productivity

_____ 10. confidence

_____ 11. competence

_____ 12. energy

Comments:

D. Which statement most closely matches your problem-solving style at work?

1=never   2=rarely   3=sometimes   4=usually   5=always

_____ I. I solve the problem by myself.

_____ 2. I talk to another teacher for help in solving the problem.

_____ 3. I talk to more than one teacher for help in solving the problem.

_____ 4. I talk to my department head for help in solving the problem.

_____ 5. I talk to an administrator for help in solving the problem.

_____ 6. I talk to more than one administrator for help in solving the problem.

_____ 7. I talk to the principal for help in solving the problem.

_____ 8. I talk to support staff for help in solving the problem.

_____ 9. I talk to people outside of work for help in solving the problem. (Please comment)

Comments:

E. Please rank items 1 through 6 in order of importance.

When dealing with a professional problem or issue, who would you consult with first for help?

    1= least likely   6= most likely

___ 1. the principal.

___ 2. department chairs.

___ 3. administrators.

___ 4. other teachers.

___ 5. support staff.

___ 6. other. (Please comment)

Comments:

F. Please use the following scale to rate the importance of items I through 6.

1 = unimportant 2= somewhat important 3= moderately important 4= very important

How would you rank the following people as resources for help with professional problems?

___ I. support staff.

___ 2. department chairs.

___ 3. administrators.

___ 4. other teachers.

___ 5. the principal.

___ 6. other. (Please comment).

Comments:

G. Please give the following demographic information

    1. Your name?_____

    2. Age?_____

    3. Teaching experience? Years_____ Months____

    4. Years at Edgewood Senior?_____

    5. Certificate(s) held?_____

    6. Department?_____

    7. Years of education?_____

    8. Tenure?   Yes   No

Thank you for your time

QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions.

Please answer each question as candidly and thoroughly as you can. Do not consult with anyone else in the group about your anwers, either on these questions or on your survey.

No one will see your answers but me. They will be used only for the purposes of this study. Please see me if you have any questions or concerns.

Please return your answers and the completed survey in the enclosed envelope to me by Monday, February 15. Thank you for your cooperation.

1) What effect, if any, has participation in the group had on who you talk to about professional issues and problems, and what kinds of issues and problems you talk about? Please explain your answer.

2) What effect, if any, has participation in the group had on your relationships with your colleagues in the building? Please explain your answer.

3) What effect, if any, has participation in the group had on the way you solve problems (your problem-solving style)? Please explain your answer.

4) What effect, if any, has participation in the group had on your feelings, attitudes, and perceptions about your job? Please explain your answer.

5) a) What did you like about participating in the group? Please explain your answer.

   b) What did you dislike about participating in the group? Please explain your answer.

   c) What suggestions do you have that would improve future groups or future meetings of this group? Please explain your answer.

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