



Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura

ISSN: 0123-3432

revistaikala@udea.edu.co

Universidad de Antioquia

Colombia

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Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura, vol. 12, núm. 18, enero-diciembre, 2007, pp. 279-305

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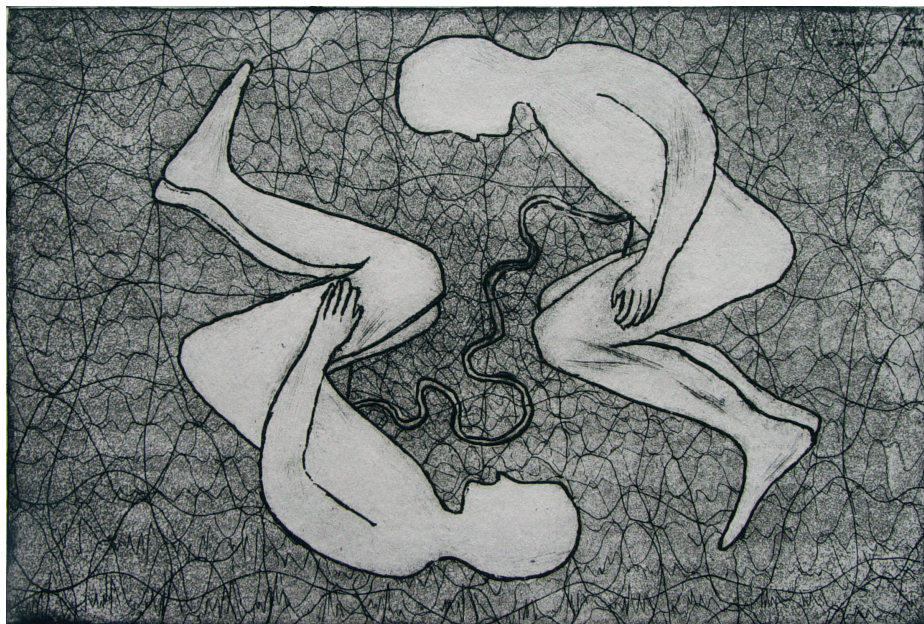
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Developing Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes through a Study Group: A Study on Teachers' Professional Development *¹

Mg. Ana María Sierra Piedrahita**

This article presents the results of a qualitative study that explored the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes of a group of foreign language teacher educators and pre-service teachers through their participation in a study group. Sources of data included minutes of meetings, observations, tape recorded meetings, self-assessment forms and interviews. The findings show that teachers developed knowledge about the subject matter and research. Moreover, they developed skills such as research skills, critical thinking and collaborative work, and attitudes such as initiative, commitment, positive attitude towards research, and risk taking. It is concluded that the use of study groups can be an effective strategy for the professional development of teachers.

Key words: professional development, study group, knowledge, skills, attitudes, foreign language teacher education

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación cualitativa que exploró el desarrollo de conocimientos, habilidades y actitudes de un grupo de formadores de profesores y futuros profesores de lenguas extranjeras, a través de su participación en un grupo de estudio. Los resultados muestran que los profesores desarrollaron conocimientos acerca del área que enseñan, habilidades investigativas, pensamiento crítico, trabajo colaborativo y actitudes como iniciativa, compromiso y toma de riesgo. Se concluye que los grupos de estudio pueden ser una estrategia efectiva para el desarrollo profesional de los profesores.

Palabras clave: desarrollo profesional, grupo de estudio, conocimiento, habilidades, actitudes, formación de docentes en lenguas extranjeras

Dans cet article, l'on présente les résultats d'une recherche qualitative concernant le développement de connaissances, d'habiletés et d'attitudes chez un groupe de formateurs d'enseignants et de futurs enseignants en langues étrangères en analysant leur participation dans un groupe d'étude. Les résultats montrent que les enseignants développent des connaissances dans le domaine qu'ils enseignent, des habiletés investigatrices, une pensée critique, un travail collaboratif et des attitudes telles que l'initiative, l'engagement et une prise de risque. On conclut que les groupes d'étude peuvent être une stratégie efficace pour le développement professionnel des enseignants.

Mots clés : formation d'enseignants en langues étrangères, groupe d'étude, développement professionnel, connaissances, habiletés, attitudes

* Recibido: 06-04-07 / Aceptado: 06-08-07

- 1 Summary of the MA thesis from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This project makes part of the GIAE (Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras) from the School of Languages from Universidad de Antioquia and it was funded by the author.

1. INTRODUCTION

My interest in teachers' professional development increased when I became involved in an action research project in 2001 that aimed to promote teacher and student autonomy. In order to promote teacher autonomy, I created a study group with teachers in the English teaching program where I worked, as I saw this as a good strategy to promote professional development and curriculum improvement. Then, in 2003, when I became a teacher educator in a Foreign Language Teaching program at a public university in Colombia, I created another study group with some teacher educators and pre-service teachers of that program who were interested in developing a proposal for curriculum improvement concerning standards in student language performance, and in studying research.

When I facilitated these two groups, I noticed that teachers seemed to develop certain knowledge, skills and attitudes which are important for their development as professionals and improvement as teachers. I always wanted to document the professional development of these teachers through their involvement in these study groups, but this was not possible due to time constraints. I left the coordination of the second group to pursue graduate studies in the U.S and decided that for my master's thesis I would study the professional growth of some of the teachers who belonged to the second study group, since the group was still in operation.

Another reason for conducting this study was that the idea of study groups in Colombia is relatively new and rarely implemented in institutions as a strategy for professional development, so I wanted to know how effective it could be. Moreover, the experiences of professional development of the few foreign language teachers who have engaged in study groups in Colombia have not been systematically studied in order to really understand what teachers can gain. Cardenas (2002), when discussing teachers' communities or teacher study groups to promote teacher development and teacher research, states that in Colombia these are scarce and that we need to know more about this area and about the instruments and procedures that we can use as we get involved in this form of professional development. In addition, a study carried

out by Gonzales et al. (2002) which looks at the needs of EFL teachers in Medellín, Colombia, shows that EFL teachers face needs in three areas of their professional lives: as workers, as instructors and as learners. In the third area, among other aspects, teachers highlighted the need for opportunities for reflective teaching through research and collaborative work. Thus, the findings of these researchers support the value of this study in forming better programs for the professional development of teachers in this context, not only in the area of EFL teaching, but also in other areas of education in Colombia.

This study aims to understand the knowledge, attitudes and skills developed by foreign language teacher educators and pre-service foreign language teachers through their participation in a study group. Knowledge has to do with the “collective term for concepts, principles and practices in a particular field or professional specialty and the general data, information and experience that are essential to effective performance in learning and applying what has been taught”. (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 197) Skills refer to the things “one knows how to do” and that are “attained by practice” (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 325). Attitudes refer to the “disposition to behave favorably or unfavorably toward some object, person, event or idea” (The Cyclopedic Education Dictionary, 1998, p. 21) and that which directs “a person’s aspirations and ambitions” (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 32). These three components of teachers’ professional development are fundamental if teachers are to perform well as teachers and professionals in any particular field. The research question posed for this study was: *What knowledge, skills and attitudes, if any, do teacher educators and pre-service teachers develop through their participation in a study group?*

A study group is an organization in which teachers themselves, rather than outside experts, negotiate and establish their own agenda and objectives, decide the activities to be carried out, propose topics for discussion and decide how to address them. Teachers’ questions, interests and concerns are a priority to the work and there is always time and opportunity for collaborative dialogue among teachers. It is also a democratic organization where teachers participate voluntarily, work collaboratively and share responsibilities and roles (Hudelson, 2001; Birchak et al., 1998). Besides,

teachers share their experiences and views of education and teaching and promote curriculum improvement and individual and professional development. Making their practice a reflective process also promotes teachers' reflection and leads to curriculum improvement (Birchak, 1998).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley's (1990) definition of professional development represents those aspects of teacher professional development that I was interested in looking at in this study. They define professional development as the "processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills and attitudes of school employees" (p. 234-235). The effectiveness of professional development is tested if teachers know more about their subject, students, and practice and make good use of that knowledge (Little, 1997 in Peixotto and Fager, 1998). An effective professional development practice is characterized by activities that are carried out in school contexts and connected to other school improvement endeavors; teachers set goals and plan and select activities; there is an emphasis on self-instruction and many training opportunities are available; continuous assistance and resources are made available; and training is concrete and involves continuous feedback, directed attempts and support when requested (Sparks and Loucks-Horsley, 1989 in Peixotto and Fager, 1998). This definition of professional development, how its effectiveness is measured and its characteristics, implies that there are more appropriate professional development activities than those that have traditionally been offered to teachers. Moreover, literature on teacher development indicates that in-service teachers do not learn very much from workshops, so they need to participate in professional learning that is experiential (Randi and Zeichner, 2004).

Fullan (2001), states that professional development is not about workshops and courses and that there is a need to develop more powerful ways of learning that occur on a daily basis. In addition, he states that new professionalism requires teachers to take responsibility for their own learning. After pre-service training, teachers can remain in the profession for many years, and due to the continuous changes in demands, this learning process should be constant. Thus, they need to learn more on the job, where they can continuously assess, refine and get feedback on their improvement.

Moreover, teachers need to be in contact with their colleagues in order to learn from them. Finally, he states that since the teaching profession must become a better learning profession, teachers need to work in professional learning communities if educational change is to be achieved. When teachers have the opportunity to talk substantively with their colleagues, this helps them to find ways of dealing with isolation and forming communities of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Learning is not a fragmented approach. It requires constant inquiry, experimentation and assessment as teachers try to increase their effectiveness. Study groups as a professional development strategy have the potential to help build communities of professional practice and offer a job-based approach for teachers' professional growth (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Opportunities for teachers' professional development, such as workshops and seminars, are often based on needs perceived by others and not by educators and, as a result, they are not meaningful to teachers (Schwarz, 2001). In traditional models of professional development teachers are given a passive role. They find it difficult to put ideas into practice because those ideas do not fit into their teaching practice and they do not have the opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). When teachers participate in professional development programs that are more meaningful to them, they are more willing to engage in them and collaborate with other educators. Moreover, this type of collaborative work helps teachers feel empowered to make decisions about schools and students. Clearly, when designing professional development opportunities for teachers, we need to move away from top-down models in order to facilitate teacher learning and, as a result, student achievement (Lefever-Davis et al, 2003).

Of the many options that teachers have to enhance their professional development, taking part in a study group is one of the most effective, since they normally take place during school time. Besides, study groups allow the development of activities of longer duration than traditional professional development programs and make it easier to encourage the participation of groups of teachers from the same school or department (Garet et al, 2001). Study groups are needed because they encourage teachers to carry out curricular and teaching innovations, plan school improvement collaboratively and study research concerning teaching and learning (Murphy, 1992).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 CONTEXT

This study was carried out in a study group that belongs to a Foreign Language Teaching Program at a public university in Colombia. On this five-year teaching program students are trained to teach English and French at elementary and high school. The program serves approximately 350 students. About 80 percent of the teachers in this program are part-time teachers and the other 20 percent are full-time teachers. All of the part-time teachers work in various institutions in the city and have to teach a lot of courses in order to earn a living. Consequently, they have little contact with other teachers in the program. Even though many of them are interested in working collaboratively with other teachers at the school, for instance in research projects and study groups, time constraints do not allow them to do so.

The few full-time teachers often teach two or three courses, sometimes more. They are involved in various research projects at a time and have to coordinate other programs and projects in the school. Consequently, they have a heavy workload. As a result of the various research projects in which they are involved, they have more contact with other full-time teachers. It is important here to highlight that research policies at the university require teachers to include students in their research projects, which has increased collaborative work between teachers and students.

As stated above, the study group was created with the aim of developing a proposal for curriculum improvement concerning student language performance, due to their low standards in communicative competence, and also to study research with the aim of developing a research project based on the performance standards. The group met at the university for two hours each week. All members decided on the agenda for each meeting based on their work concerning performance standards and the research project that they were planning to carry out. The readings and discussions were based on these two topics. Although there was a designated facilitator, all members were encouraged to perform this role since it helps teachers to develop their leadership skills. The pre-service teachers took turns taking the

minutes as the teacher educators were too busy to take responsibility for this time consuming activity.

3.2 Participants

Six of the nine teacher educators and pre-service teachers belonging to the study group participated in this study. Four of these teachers were women and two were men. All of them were Colombian and between the ages of 22 and 42. Marcela, Lina and Diego² were full-time teachers. Sandra was a part-time teacher, and Gabriela and David were pre-service teachers. The full-time teachers had extensive teaching experience ranging from 14 to 16 years. They had taught in formal and non-formal language teaching institutions, as well as at university level. They possessed master's degrees in FFL, EFL, TESOL and Applied Linguistics, all from very prestigious universities in Colombia and abroad. The part-time teacher graduated from the Foreign Language Teaching Program to which the study group belonged. She had 9 years of experience teaching English and French at the university, at other non-formal language teaching institutions, and at a school. One of the pre-service teachers was in the last semester of the teaching program and had two years of teaching experience. She had taught English and French in a non-formal teaching institution and at a high school. The other pre-service teacher was in the 9th semester of the teaching program. He had taught French for a year and a half on a university language program.

In general, these teachers joined the study group because they wanted to work towards improving the communicative competence of students in the teaching program, to be part of an academic community where they could share their ideas and concerns about teaching and learning, and to learn about research.

3.3 Data Sources and Analysis

I used five different sources to collect data. These were 27 minutes of study group meetings, two observations of the meetings, two tape recorded meetings, eight self-assessment forms in which the participants had assessed

² All teachers' names are pseudonyms.

their individual and group process, and six tape recorded interviews. These interviews were transcribed for data analysis.

I used an inductive analytical approach, following Burnaford et al. (2001) and Anderson et al. (1994) data analysis procedures. I read all sources of data several times and highlighted the passages that I considered relevant to my research question. Those passages were related to the themes of my research question, namely, knowledge, skills and attitudes.

My previous experience as coordinator of the two study groups helped me to observe some of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that teachers in a study group may develop, allowing me to have, to some extent, certain pre-established categories for this analysis, such as critical thinking, collaborative work, initiative and commitment. I also developed and defined new categories, such as knowledge about theory, knowledge about research, positive attitude towards research, and risk taking. I coded passages representing these new and pre-established categories.

I was also open to coding passages that, although not related to the themes of my research question, seemed to be meaningful for participants or that might be related to teachers' development of knowledge, skills and attitudes, such as positive relationships among in-service and pre-service teachers, relaxed atmosphere, teachers' lack of time, heavy workload and lack of participation.

Whilst analyzing the data, I wrote notes about things that caught my attention, relating to the three main themes of my research question, and used these notes to present my findings. I grouped all coded passages from the different sources of data under new and pre-established categories. I compared and contrasted categories and I looked for relationships among them. Then, I drew some preliminary interpretations. These categories became subtopics that I grouped under the three main themes.

To ensure the validity or reliability of my interpretations, I triangulated the different sources of data. That is, I compared my findings of the different sources

of data and considered as relevant categories those that appeared three or more times in at least three of the sources. Then, I shared these preliminary findings with the members of the study group to see if my interpretations were accurate for them and if they felt identified with my description of their situation. I also showed them the extracts that I would be using as evidence to support my findings, in order for them to see what I would be using from their discourses. In general, participants responded positively saying that they agreed with my interpretations. Only one of the participants suggested a minor correction.

4. FINDINGS

I will divide this section into three main themes -- teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. I will then subdivide each main theme into a series of subtopics that resulted from my data analysis.

4.1 Teachers' Knowledge

Good teaching requires both subject knowledge and knowledge of research on other types of teachers' knowledge. Teachers' knowledge of the content that they teach influences what they teach and how they teach it (Grossman, 1995). Moreover, the knowledge about research that teachers gain through professional development activities is significant in the sense that it can help them to carry out their own research projects. As I will discuss below, teachers in this study group have gained these two types of knowledge.

a. Knowledge about theory

Data suggest that five of the teachers, Marcela, Sandra, Diego, David, and Gabriela, have developed knowledge about theory concerning foreign language teaching such as communicative competence, language content standards, performance standards, and learning strategies, which are the topics on which their work is focused. Teachers have gained this theoretical knowledge through the texts that they have read and discussed in their meetings, as well as presentations of topics that they have made, not only to their colleagues in the study group, but also to other teachers at conventions. The following extract,

taken from one of the tape recorded meetings in which Diego explains to the rest of the group why they should include tasks in the performance standard they are creating for the program, illustrates his knowledge about the theory that they have been reading about in the group.

One of the consecutive parts of a performance standard is a task through which the process is measured. Because it is what we once talked about from Ravitz; she said that a performance standard is what allows the teacher or his institution to generate and determine the types of quizzes, measurements, exams or whatever we like to call them. That part also needs to be considered. That is to say, the type of task. (Meeting, 06/12/05)

Three teacher educators, Marcela, Diego and Sandra, demonstrated that they have updated and gained new theoretical knowledge about language teaching which should be one of the key requirements of professional development programs, together with innovation and research (Cardenas, 2002). Marcela, for instance, expressed this in her interview and added that being in this particular group gives her the possibility to focus on topics that she likes and is interested in:

As I told you (it is) to get back to those topics I studied in the masters, (in) foreign language didactics, get back to those topics because...the other research groups focus on other things that, although very interesting and I learn a lot, it is not what I like, it is not what I am interested in. (It is) this knowledge of...getting back to that literature, getting back to that theory (about language teaching) to update that knowledge because there are other different ones. (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06)

However, Lina, one of the teacher educators who joined the group two years after it started, is not certain about the knowledge that she has developed during her participation in the study group since she feels that she is still adapting to it and catching up with the readings that old members have already done.

I think that I am like in the process of strengthening that part about knowledge because I am kind of adapting to the group in that sense [...] So, I think I am like making my connections with respect to the standards for instance. At the

moment I still feel like I am exploring, you know, I don't feel very sure about it. We, the new ones, have to work faster because the others (teachers) have already done different discussions and readings. [...] but I don't feel that this is the new (knowledge) that I have. I have information, but with respect to knowledge and all the articulation that it implies, I am just beginning. (Interview, Lina, 01/30/06)

Although most of the members of the group recognize that they have developed knowledge about theory, they also admit that they still need to have a better command of it in order to carry out their research project. Both new and senior members expressed this concern, as Lina did in her self-assessment.

New members, like me, need to catch up with the concepts, authors and references that the group has explored since its origins in order to have a common ground and agreement in concepts considered basic for the group. That way we may avoid repetition and beating about the bush at this stage of the process, when we need to communicate in a very clear way referring to some aspects (Self-assessment, Lina, 01/11/06)

b. Knowledge about Research

Three teachers, Marcela, Sandra, and Diego, have developed knowledge about research. As with the knowledge about theory, they have developed this knowledge through the readings that they have done about research methodologies in general and action research methodology in particular, which is the methodology that the group chose to develop in their project on performance standards. Two of these teachers had not previously been involved in a research project. The other teacher expressed that although he has had previous research experience, the readings that they have done in the group have given him the possibility to explore research concepts he was not familiar with. In his interview he said:

We have done various readings in the study group, readings about research, research methodology. I have worked on the qualitative (research), you see? Action research and etc. [...] But in the group we looked at that part about the experimental (research). We saw it, we explored it and I think that it is very interesting all that about the hypothesis...the components of the hypothesis,

the kind of experimentation and all those parts of research and methodologies that are very interesting. In my master's I saw them only very briefly since the humanities don't work on the experimentation part very much, at least in teaching that is... we have them, but they are not there. Then you learn a lot. Yes, (I have gained) some knowledge about research...(Interview, Diego, 01/30/06).

What Diego expressed here also represents the way that the other two teachers feel concerning their knowledge about research and how they have gained it.

4.2 Teachers' Skills

These teachers have developed skills in research, critical thinking and collaborative work. As with knowledge, the teachers have developed these skills due to the activities that they have carried out during their time in the group.

a. Research Skills

Data reveal that teachers have developed a series of research skills. Five of the teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, Diego, Lina, and David, have learned to formulate research projects through the process of writing the research project. Marcela, the coordinator of the study group, talked about this in her interview.

Well, the experience of designing the project did require (me) to develop research skills in the formulation of the research project in our context. That was a contribution of the study group because (in other groups) where I have been before, the project has already been done. I mean, I have not participated in the formulation of the project, formulating it to this point. So here I definitely had to learn, limit the research project, name the research project, design all its parts and formulate the problem. The study group gave me a lot on that point (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

Moreover, Gabriela, one of the pre-service teachers, has developed her ability to write articles, as she commented in her interview.

I have had the opportunity to write, I mean, for the first time in Spanish, with Marcela and Dora, which is already the chapter of a book and it is an

achievement for the group, for me as a student, for them as teachers. And the second time I wrote with Diego (the memoirs of) the presentation that we did in Cali in November. (Interview, Gabriela, 01/31/06)

Looking for information is another research skill that these teachers have developed by looking for theory related to the topics that they are dealing with and the institutional information that they needed to formulate the research project. The following extract from David's interview exemplifies this.

I have talked to them (the other pre-service teachers) outside the meetings and they like the topic a lot, and besides this, they look for information. I mean, they don't just do what we do in the meetings. And I also go further. I look (for information) on the internet or in other places (such as) books, read books about research, articles that have been written about communicative competence and all those strategies that are applied... (Interview, David, 02/01/06)

Furthermore, five of the teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, Lina, Sandra, and David, have developed their planning skills. They are now more able to manage their time and better plan activities as a result of their participation in the group. Lina, for instance, expressed the following in her interview:

I believe that this about time (management) has helped me a lot while being in the study group. Like the time management to be able to do the work we are carrying out in the group. And a lot more in the sense of doing it on time because...if we need certain information for next week it should be for next week because maybe later the information could be very valuable, but it is out of time...I feel that that part of time (management) has been very, very important. (Interview, Lina, 01/30/06)

It was interesting to find out how, in their jobs as teachers, David, Lina, and Sandra have been able to put into practice the planning skills that they have developed in the group. For instance, David, one of the pre-service teachers, commented the following:

I am a teacher right now. So, it (the organization) has helped me a lot because I organize an agenda, that is to say, a lesson plan. I mean, at the beginning when I

started to work I didn't do any of that and I saw at the beginning of the meetings (of the study group) that there were the minutes, that it was said what was going to be done. So I thought that that was very organized so I am doing the classes like that. This is why I plan the class, the steps, the procedures... (Interview, David, 02/01/06)

The fact that this previous comment comes from a pre-service teacher is particularly significant because it shows that study groups can be very beneficial for pre-service teachers. Since the knowledge, skills and attitudes that pre-service teachers need to teach well are not developed completely during their teaching program, they need to be prepared for lifelong learning (Hammerness et al, 2005) and study groups can equip them for this task as this comment from David shows.

On the other hand, Diego, one of the teacher educators, expressed that rather than just developing his research skills, the group has allowed him to put those research skills that he had already developed in other research groups into practice.

Developed or at least put into practice (skills)...if you are not involved in research you start to forget the projects and things such as looking for information, the gathering of...although we still have not gathered data seriously, however, we always gather information with the teachers, (in) meetings, the reading of academic texts, always trying to update (the knowledge) about standards, you are always looking, (and say) look I found this, look at this, look at that. So, you look for information, you are attentive to the group, you get more informed, you explore the standards. (Interview, Diego, 01/31/06)

b. Critical Thinking

The study group has activated teachers' critical thinking which is displayed in three forms – questioning, argumentation, and reasoning. Concerning questioning, it was possible to observe that four teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, Diego, and Lina, questioned each other about their points of view or actions, as represented in the excerpt below from an observation in which the group was discussing the pertinence of writing a term in a handout that was going

to be given to other teachers in the program about the language performance standards being designed by the group. In this excerpt, Gabriela questions other members of the group because they do not want to use a term in the handout that they have been using for a long time and which, according to her, is appropriate to describe what they want to describe.

Gabriela: Aren't we going to use the word environment?...

Marcela: The thing is...let's write it, but we'll see how they react there.

Gabriela: But if we did this (the performance standards) and we have read a lot of things then we should write about what we have read, shouldn't we?

Cecilia³: Possibly. Or we can also use the terms we usually use here.

Gabriela: But then what do we read for? For instance, when we wrote the article, Diego and I, for the memoirs (of a presentation) there we talked a lot about...we mentioned (the word) environment a lot, which is what the European Framework says, and here we are saying that we got this exactly (as it is) from the European Framework.

Lucia⁴: We don't have to exaggerate and use a lot of specialized language.

Gabriela: But environment is not specialized. And if we already know and looked for it...then because everybody says linguistic level then we have to say linguistic level when we already know it is communicative competence? (Observation, 01/17/06)

Members' critical thinking is also nurtured through the opportunity to put their argumentation capacity into practice. Data shows how four teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, Diego, and Lina, often give arguments to support their ideas and convince their colleagues. In the following extract from one of the tape recorded

3 This teacher did not participate in the study. However, her name is a pseudonym.

4 This teacher did not participate in the study. However, her name is a pseudonym.

meetings, in a discussion about content and performance standards, Diego is trying to convince teachers in the group that the performance standards are the same as the course objectives.

It seems that these performance standards are the same as the course objectives. You see, introducing yourself and giving information is something that you can do after teaching, not only one, but various contents, you see? Now, asking and giving information can be one content part of unit X, so I say: expresses nationality, that in five questions, but that implies those contents. I mean, those are specific contents, the nationality, the age...I mean, the first one, the one that Gabriela says is a content standard, I see it more like a performance standard because of the way it is presented which is general. If we were going to talk about the course objectives for level one, obviously in a course objective we are not going to ask for the nationality, instead, we would write: introduces himself and gives personal information. That is a general objective. The specific objective could be: gives and asks personal information, etc, etc. (Meeting, 11/22/05)

Finally, in their interviews and self-assessments, three teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, and David, expressed how the activities that they do in the study group have helped them to develop critical thinking skills such as reading critically, connecting readings to context, and reasoning. For instance, David comments on how he has developed his reasoning skills through the activities that he carries out in the study group:

Maybe a lot of reasoning because you have to look, for example, in the performance standards that we are creating, which ones match the levels that we are creating. Then, it has helped me a lot to look at the problems we have had here in the School of Languages and I see that there are a lot of things...and I say no wonder we have been this bad. Then, it has helped me to see those things from a wider point of view. (Interview, David, 02/01/06)

c. Collaborative Work

The collaborative work that teachers engage in while participating in professional learning communities such as study groups allows teachers to be in contact

with colleagues and helps them learn from one another (Fullan, 2001). Working collaboratively in the study group has given four of the teachers, Marcela, Diego, Sandra, and David, the opportunity to learn how to work in a group and to understand what group work implies, which I believe has helped them to meet regularly in subgroups, in addition to the usual meetings, and to work on activities related to their research project or the language performance standards, as seen in the minutes and tape recorded meetings. For instance, Marcela expresses the following in her self-assessment about learning and collaborative work:

What I value most (in the study group) is the continuous learning about the implications of group work, in this case, a very heterogeneous and sometimes unstable group. (Self-assessment, Marcela, 04/20/05)

It is important to highlight that even though the group is heterogeneous and its members are continually changing because of personal and contextual reasons, teachers like Marcela really appreciate the opportunity to be in contact with their colleagues. The other teachers expressed similar ideas concerning collaborative work. However, they did not make comments related to the heterogeneity or instability of the group.

4.3 Teachers' Attitudes

The teachers have developed a series of attitudes during their involvement in the study group, such as initiative, commitment, positive attitude towards research, and risk taking. All of these have been crucial for the advancement of the study group's work in the sense that the teachers' attitudes towards the study group's work have effectively influenced its operation, enhancing the accomplishment of its goals. However, as it will be seen in the description that follows, the lack of commitment and responsibility of some teachers contributes negatively both to the advancement of the group's work and to their own professional development. Thus, teachers need to take action in order to overcome these negative attitudes.

a. Initiative

Three of the teachers, Marcela, Gabriela, and Diego, have developed their initiative. Their initiative is observed in their willingness to propose ideas and

to make suggestions that contribute to the development of the study group's work. The following extract from one of the minutes shows the kind of ideas proposed by the teachers during the meetings.

The recommendations made by Gabriela, about including activities such as data analysis, creation of categories and other activities more related to the professional and academic development of the students that make up part of a research project, are approved by the rest of the students in training,. These activities will be included in the part about student's responsibilities in the research project. (Minutes, 07/27/05)

Some teachers' participation during the meetings is very little which obviously reduces their possibility to contribute ideas or suggestions to the study groups' work. These teachers give various reasons for their lack of participation. David, one of the pre-service teachers, discussed two of them. First, he feels that he does not have the skills that the teacher educators have. Second, since he is new in the group, he has not been able to do all the readings that the other teachers have done since the beginning of the group.

I recognize that I don't participate because I don't feel I have the skills that maybe the other teachers have [...] but I believe this is because, as we have said in the meetings, many joined the group late and so many have not done all the readings. I haven't done all the readings because I started seriously with the group in October. Then reading all the articles about the topic...no. Then I believe that this is one of the reasons why students do not participate much. Or they also often feel overshadowed by teachers because they contribute a lot and they know...they are the ones who know. (Interview, David, 02/01/06)

On the other hand, Sandra, one of the teacher educators, expressed that she does not participate much in the meetings because she lacks time to do other readings that would help her to contribute with ideas to the group.

I think it (the participation) could be better. From the readings that we do... because sometimes they (the other teachers in the group) contribute from their experience, from what they do here (in the institution), from other things they

have read. I don't know. For instance, Diego reads a lot and I wonder: where does he get all those things? But that is very good because I learn a lot. But the idea is also to contribute. I mean, if I had more time to read too and bring more contributions to the group. (Interview, Sandra, 02/01/06)

Lina, the teacher educator who feels that she is still adapting to the group and catching up with the texts that the other members have already read, expressed that her lack of participation is caused by her lack of theoretical knowledge with respect to the topics dealt with by the group.

I think that with respect to that part of the participation...I would like to... participate more. And it is not because I don't want to, but because of the state where I am, in which I don't feel secure enough to give certain opinions [...] So, I believe that that part of better organizing knowledge, with respect to what we are doing in the group, would give me the confidence to participate more in the group. (Interview, Lina, 01/30/06)

b. Commitment

Three of the teachers, Diego, Sandra, and David, have developed commitment while being in the group. According to them this commitment is due to the kind of activities that the group requires them to carry out in order to achieve its goals and also to the possibility of exploring the topic that the group is working on, as Diego expressed it;

I am a new teacher here, so maybe exploring this (the topic the group is working on) has given me a series of new attitudes towards the institution, like more commitment for instance. When you know it (the institution) more you know about the courses, the quality of the students. Then it is a more positive attitude, more commitment, you want to help more, participate, you see? That part concerning attitudes. (Interview, Diego, 01/30/06)

However, there is a lack of commitment to the study group from the part of most teachers. According to the data, this lack of commitment is caused by teachers' lack of time since both teacher educators and pre-service teachers

are involved in many other activities that are as important to them as being in the study group. Gabriela commented the following in her interview.

I would like to say that...I mean, I still lack some commitment. I am just beginning. I have a lot to learn, to experiment, and lately, maybe because, although there is no excuse, but because I am in the teaching practicum, doing my dissertation, and many things, I have left the study group's assignments to one side somewhat, so I know that I have to be more committed to it. (Interview, Gabriela, 01/31/06)

The coordinator of the study group feels that teachers have lacked commitment and has expressed her discontent. She has seen that teachers are not taking responsibility for the activities that they have committed themselves to do.

People are not really assuming responsibility. It seems contradictory. One would think that when you have an institutional commitment, your work commitment would be higher because you have one more responsibility. And I don't feel they are being very responsible, and I don't feel their commitment. So it is very contradictory. That is what I don't like, what I see as negative, a little bit negative. But it is a very personal perception. (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06)

Teachers' lack of responsibility is observed in their not being on time for meetings, not handing in assignments on time and not attending meetings. An example of this is the following extract from one of the minutes.

Diego has not been able to finish his summary because the document is very long and has a lot of definitions, so he will share it with us in the next meeting. (Minutes, 02/24/05)

Data indicate that teachers' lack of responsibility is caused, to a great extent, by their lack of time, caused by their heavy workload. Diego commented on teachers' lack of time in his interviews.

Sometimes we don't have time, like at least the time that we would like to dedicate to it (to the project). I think that that is general. The full-time teachers

are very busy and there is no...let's say... time release. For instance, I have three courses, heavy courses: grammar, phonology, oral communication II. Eh... I am in charged of the creation and organization of a reading course for blind people. Well, a lot of things. Plus the evaluation committee, the teachers committee, and extra things you have, although that shouldn't count, however, it is there. But, sometimes you don't have any time left. The classes are very time consuming, the preparation, well, a lot of things. And I see that my colleagues are in exactly the same situation. All of us have a lot. However, you get the time and are always ready for what the group needs, what you can collaborate with. (Interview, Diego, 01/30/06)

c. Positive Attitude towards Research

Clearly, all teachers in the group have a positive attitude towards research and this is one of the reasons why they joined the group. However, being in the group has helped Gabriela and Lina to develop an even more positive attitude towards research. Gabriela commented that her attitude towards research is more positive because she sees the benefits of being involved in it.

Eh...a more positive attitude towards research because you get the experience, you see the benefits, you see that you learn and create solid relationships with other people, then (I have basically developed) a more positive attitude towards research. (Interview, Gabriela, 01/31/06)

In her interview, Lina commented that her previous experience of research in a private institution, where she had worked before getting the job at the university, was not very motivating and the researchers were lost in certain things because they lacked clarity about what they were going to do, whereas, in the study group, everyone is clear about what they are going to do which has helped her to develop this positive attitude.

Attitudes...I would say that with respect to research. Because the experience I had had concerning research, which was at (a private institution), because of the fact that it is private, its purpose was not necessarily teacher education. And the project we had was like a fight. At the beginning it was supported by

everyone, but afterwards, as it implied investment for teachers' qualification, then it began to foil... We were clear about what we wanted and (we wanted) this qualitative perspective and all that, but I feel we were lost in certain things, we lacked clarity [...] but here (in the study group) it is clearer. So it is an attitude like more...it is in a sense more positive. (Interview, Lina, 01/30/06)

d. Risk Taking

Data indicate that all teachers have developed a risk taking attitude while being in the study group. When they do not understand something or are confused and need some sort of clarification, they ask questions that are answered by their colleagues and help them clarify ideas or concepts. The following dialogue from one of the observations in which one of the teachers was not clear about what the other teachers meant by a standard text, a term that the group wanted to use in the performance standards that they were creating, illustrates this risk-taking attitude.

Lina: what is a standard text? I'm sorry but...

Gabriela: the personal, the academic, I mean the everyday.

Lina: we are saying that the students are exposed to authentic texts, so they have to produce authentic texts. That is to say texts about real life. If we are going to write about the professional, it is in what way? Is it an article? Is it a recipe? Is it a journal entry? A newspaper article? Or is it a radio report? Or is it a commercial? I don't know, but it has to have a form when it is standard...that's why I have the question. What is a standard text?

Marcela: the standard is a medium point, lower than what we call familiar register. That is to say, what they do at home or with their friends. This doesn't mean it is wrong, but something like very familiar. (Observation, 01/17/06)

In many groups people do not take risks and ask these kinds of questions or admit that they do not understand something because they fear ridicule. However, in this group teachers do not feel afraid of asking questions because

there is clearly a comfortable and relaxed working atmosphere. When talking about the strengths of the study group in her self-assessment Lina said:

Both students and teachers feel free to express their points of view, making interactions smoother and provoking deeper discussion.(Self-assessment, Lina, 01/11/06)

Moreover, in observations and tape-recorded meetings it was possible to see how these teachers were always making jokes and laughing in the middle of discussions which also contributed to the relaxed atmosphere of the meetings.

The chart below presents an overview of the findings described above. It shows the knowledge, skills and attitudes that each teacher developed.

Teachers	Knowledge developed	Skills developed	Attitudes developed
Marcela	Knowledge about theory.	Research skills, critical thinking, collaborative work.	Initiative, risk taking.
Lina		Research skills, critical thinking.	Positive attitude towards research, risk taking
Sandra	Knowledge about theory, knowledge about research.	Research skills, collaborative work.	Commitment, risk taking.
Gabriela	Knowledge about theory, knowledge about research.	Research skills, critical thinking.	Initiative, positive attitude towards research, risk taking.
Diego	Knowledge about theory, knowledge about research.	Putting research skills into practice, critical thinking, collaborative work.	Initiative, commitment, risk taking.
David	Knowledge about theory.	Research skills, critical thinking, collaborative work.	Commitment, risk taking.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shed much light on my above-mentioned research question, namely, *What knowledge, skills and attitudes, if any, do teacher educators*

and pre-service teachers develop through their participation in a study group?

Data suggest that study groups give teachers not only the opportunity to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes, but also the opportunity to put into practice the knowledge, skills and attitudes that they have already developed in other groups. It also indicates that study groups that are created to work on a specific topic seem to have the potential to help teachers develop subject knowledge related to that topic or to update it, allowing them to perform better within the group. Moreover, when teachers can work on a topic that is chosen by them, it helps them to become more motivated and committed to the group.

Depending on the type of activities that teachers perform in a study group, they develop certain skills and attitudes that can equip them to do a better job within the group itself. They can also put those skills and attitudes into practice in the research projects that they engage in, as well as in their teaching practice. However, issues such as teachers' lack of time can prevent teachers from developing their initiative and commitment. The continuous changing of group members can also hinder teachers' initiative since they might lack the theoretical knowledge of senior members and, therefore, not feel prepared to engage in discussions and contribute ideas.

This study also shows that in a study group it is crucial to have a comfortable and relaxed working atmosphere. This not only gives teachers the freedom to express their points of view and ask questions without feeling intimidated, but also gives them the opportunity to develop knowledge through their discussions and creates an opportunity for mutual learning.

The findings of this study suggest that study groups, whether comprised of teacher educators and pre-service teachers or any other form, can be an effective strategy for teachers' professional development. The benefits of implementing this strategy in educational institutions are clear since the knowledge, skills and attitudes that teachers develop in these communities can qualify them to do a better job as teachers and professionals, as was the case with the participants in this study, who supported curriculum reform in their institution and engaged in learning by building their knowledge base (Arbaugh, 2003).

5.1 Implications for Teachers

This study highlights some of the constraints that teachers in a study group may encounter due to their lack of time and the continuous changing of members. These aspects should be considered seriously by teachers in a group since it can obstruct the group process, in terms of teachers' development and the achievement of the study group's goals. Moreover, teachers need to be more concerned with the way in which the lack of administrative support, in terms of time and money, affects the study group's process and consequently their professional growth. Thus, they should take action in order to make their administrators pay more attention to these issues and give them the support that they need to be able to accomplish the goals that they have set for the group.

When creating a study group, teachers should make sure that it offers teachers the opportunity to work on a topic that they like, which will help them become more motivated and committed to the group. At the same time, teachers need to see the personal and professional benefits of participating in a study group so that they become more motivated to stay and keep working.

5.2 Implications for Administrators

After seeing how teachers' lack of time, due to their heavy workload, affected their performance in the group, I conclude that the support of administrators in reducing teachers' workload is fundamental, especially when their work is beneficial for the institution. It is very difficult for a study group to be successful when teachers do not receive the administrative support necessary to accomplish their goals. If teachers feel that their work is not seen as important, the group is far more likely to disintegrate (Herner, 2000). Because study groups seem to be beneficial for teachers' professional development and, as a result, for the institution where they work, administrators should consider more active support of pre-service and part-time teachers who get involved in these learning communities. For instance, by paying them for the time that they invest in the group, teachers will feel more motivated to work in the group and in the institution.

In sum, I hope that the results of this study are significant to administrators, teachers and policy makers, and that they provide these stakeholders with ideas

of what is needed in order to appropriately implement study groups in their institutions, thus allowing teachers' professional growth to be achieved.

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