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Empowerment in Action: Action Research As Professional Development

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Staff development that has a meaningful impact on learning and teaching requires extended activity, collective participation, focus on limited content, active learning and connection with goals of the school (Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000). The use of action research as a model for professional development responds to all aspects of the design suggested by Birman et. al. and may also provide the opportunity for a change in the culture of learning and teaching in individual schools (Darling-Hammond, 1995). Additionally, the action research model provides the opportunity for teachers to engage in reflection and discussion with one another. These activities allow teachers to have ownership over their own self-improvement and discover theories grounded in practice (Berthoff, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). In this article, we look at a specific school district that aligned itself with a local college and provided such opportunities for its teaching staff. We will explore the development of the original professional development team, the process by which teachers in the district came to understand "inquiry as a stance", and what happened when teachers began to ask questions about their own practices and assumptions about teachers and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1993, 1999).

Background

In the fall of 1996, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and three neighboring rural school districts (North Adams, Lanesborough and Clarksburg) scheduled meetings to explore opportunities for more formal collaboration among and between teachers in each school and across the district. Participants were also interested in engaging preservice

teachers who were completing their field placements. One outcome was the establishment of a Professional Development Team consisting of eleven local schoolteachers, school administrators, and college educators, all of whom volunteered to serve on the team.

As a result of these meetings, three major assumptions evolved as the Partnership's collective vision of teacher education: 1) In schools, teachers and administrators have practical knowledge of student learning, subject area content, classroom processes, classroom organization, instructional processes, parental concerns and school, district, state and federal policies. Practical knowledge gleaned from first-hand experience largely controls decisions about what students learn in schools; 2) In colleges, researchers and course instructors have theoretical knowledge about student learning, teacher use of subject area knowledge, classroom processes, classroom organization, instructional processes, parental concerns and school, district, state and federal policies. Theoretical knowledge gleaned through research could enhance educational practice and therefore should be made readily accessible to those most directly involved with teaching and learning; and 3) An action research model shows promise for integrating practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge.

Support from an Eisenhower/Goals 2000 grant in 1997-1998 enabled the already existing Professional Development Team to continue its work by establishing a framework for informed decision making through an action research project. It was thought that an action research model would stimulate both preservice and inservice teachers to:

- Reflect individually and in small groups on current practices;
- Identify specific issues, interests and concerns of individuals and small groups;
- Seek knowledge that could be used to inform the decisions about these issues, interests and concerns;
- Connect these personal issues, interests and concerns to the goals of the school, state Curriculum Frameworks and/or Principles of Effective Teaching; evaluate student learning;
- Plan actions to verify, refine, and/or modify specific practices;
- Reflect on what was observed, checking it with research knowledge and personal experience;
- Share the findings of inquiries and observations, building collaborative communities of learning;
- Reexamine the issues, interests and concerns.

The first grant-funded opportunity provided for a semester-long action research class in 1998. The class included 25 inservice teachers, preservice teachers, paraprofessionals and one administrator. Participants met at the college six times during the semester where they discussed the process and product of their action research projects. The results of the first year's program were so positive that the Professional Development Team reapplied and received a second Goals 2000/Eisenhower Grant and promoted a second successful semester of action research. The 1999 group consisted of inservice and preservice teachers, guidance counselors and paraprofessionals, all from the same rural schools as in the previous year. Instructors of the course were a local elementary school teacher and a college professor. Six teachers repeated the course a second time. Each participant received a stipend to compensate for class time.

Action Research

Teachers learn by reading, actively participating, and reflecting on their experiences; they learn by discussing practice, personally developed theories and student achievement with colleagues and they learn by carefully and purposefully observing students (Darling-Hammond, 1998). When they focus their attention on investigating their own classroom practices and students, their teaching is transformed. They become theorists, articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions and finding connections with practice (Goswami & Stillman, 1987). They:

- Step up their use of resources, they form networks and they become more active professionally.
- Become rich resources who provide the profession with new information. They can observe closely over long periods of time, with special insights and knowledge; teachers know their classrooms and students in ways that others cannot.
- Become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically other's theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods and materials.
- Conduct research and report their findings without spending large sums of money. Their studies, while probably not definitive, taken together help teachers develop and assess curricula in ways that are outside the scope of specialists and external evaluators.
- Collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways. The nature of classroom discourse changes when inquiry

begins. Working with teachers to answer real questions provides students with intrinsic motivation for talking, reading, and writing and has the potential for helping them achieve new skills.

As we reflected on the action research project as a whole, we considered these elements as criteria for our observations, reflections and data collection. We contrasted and compared our observations to those of Goswami and Stillman for purposes of guiding our reflection.

Lessons of the First Year: Processes of Doing Teacher Research

Although the processes of the actual "doing" action research were not easily visible during the first semester of classes and projects, six issues became clearly evident to the participants after some discussion and reflection at the end of the first session in 1998.

Initial/beginning fear: During the first two Project meetings, the participants were anxious, fearful, and apprehensive about the overall project: "Can I really do this?" "Will there be time in my schedule to do everything I need to do, like data collection and analysis?" "I've never done a research project before--how do I analyze data?" "What are data?" "What if my results don't show anything important?" "What if my project isn't as good as the others?" What the participants did not initially express but voiced by the end of the project was their overriding terror of what they perceived as having to publicly display their teaching with all its perceived weaknesses; they were afraid that colleagues and administrators would focus on negatives.

Framing a question—making sure it was do-able: The framing of a research question became the most critical element of the process. The participants initially generated very broad topics. The participants were anxious to narrow their focus but were also somewhat confused as to how that process occurred. Much time was spent on focusing of the topics and making sure that they were investigating the effects of their teaching on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Discussion centered around the "nugget statement" that participants had been encouraged to create and how research questions resulted from that particular focus. The framing of the question and subquestions was the most anxiety-producing part of the process. Without a clear focus, the participants stayed confused, anxious and without direction or purpose.

Modeling of a completed project: In order to alleviate the initial fears of the participants, one of the co-instructors provided an already completed project. She had conducted research in her own first grade classroom on "Multiple Intelligences" (Gardner, 1993) prior to the commencement of the course.

Collaboration: Collaboration among the participants developed quickly and became unexpectedly significant to all of them. They expressed their desire to hear and see projects, data analyses, time lines and findings from others

in the class. They wanted to read each other's write-ups, they began observing in each other's classrooms, they discovered how to involve their students, para-professionals and administrators. Anxiety levels about the doing of action research and completing an actual project diminished as more collaboration occurred. As participants began to see similarities across studies, they formed teams and/or support groups.

Theory: It seemed almost a natural progression for the participants to connect theory to topics and findings. Although modeled and required, but somewhat underplayed, participants connected their studies to "The Principles of Effective Teaching" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997) and the "Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997, 1998) as well as to their respective building goals and other relevant literature.

Revelation: Toward the conclusion of the first year, the participants expressed surprise at the quality of their reports, their findings, and, in particular, their desire to continue to do action research. They believed that their studies did make a difference in teaching and learning in their respective classrooms. As they became aware of how their findings informed their own practice and the curriculum, the linkages they made to other teachers/professionals came as a pleasant surprise and/or shock to them. By the last meeting, the teachers were discussing their "next projects."

Surprises during the First Year of Teacher Research

Surprises emerged for both the participants and course instructors during the first year of action research. Teachers who at first had difficulty trusting the process, and who at times felt fear and anxiety over the word "research", transformed themselves from skeptics to empowered leaders. Their involvement in action research generated an enthusiasm for their current topic and a desire to examine different areas of their teaching in the future. One participant admitted that she was surprised she enjoyed the semester so much and felt she gained more from the experience than she could ever have gotten from the typical in-service provided annually by the district. Another teacher stated that this was one of the most worthwhile projects she had ever undertaken. One person admitted that when asked to reflect upon her teaching in the past, she only looked at the surface level and felt that she was "teaching what needed to be taught". The project, which required her to collect data and examine her teaching more thoroughly, allowed her to look beneath the surface and find the gaps in her instruction.

Many participants spoke excitedly about their own projects as well as those of their peers. One of them in referring to a colleague's study of the multiple intelligences, stated that she could not do anything in her classroom anymore without thinking about how her pedagogy impacted the way children learn. As Marks and Louis (1997) observed, empowerment does "positively influence the teachers' efforts to improve instruction, their belief that student

achievement is in large measure a result of their own teaching effort, and their propensity to exchange information among themselves about the effectiveness of their teaching" (p. 263).

We felt that a significant amount of growth had taken place on the part of all participants and, based upon their comments and evaluations as well as our own observations, we decided to offer the course again a year later.

Refining the Processes: Developments in the Second Year

Teachers, paraprofessionals and preservice teachers knew what to expect in the second year. Even those who had not participated in the first year had heard about the program. Additionally, the project was linked to the professional development process that year; teachers who chose to engage in action research met on three different "Professional Development Days" during the semester. The Professional Development Team scheduled a conference at the end of the semester so that individual action research projects could be presented. Attendees included other teachers and staff from the school districts and students in the teacher education preparation program. Most issues from the previous year were modified to some extent in the second year:

Fear: Some participants still felt a little apprehensive as the semester began. The "alumni" from the previous seminar, however, quickly allayed those fears. They provided support for the "new" group, and also shared anecdotes from the previous year that demonstrated how the process was organized so that each participant could complete the process successfully. Some feared presenting their research to colleagues at the end of the semester in the more formal setting of a conference. Again the teachers from the original group provided support by demonstrating their presentations from the previous year.

Framing a question: A new collaborative professional culture was forming by that second year. Participants came to the first class session with clear ideas for action research. They were more focused than in the previous year. They developed research questions earlier and had much less anxiety than the first group. Teachers who had already participated in the course had talked to colleagues at length prior to the second year. The alumni had encouraged others to try action research in their classrooms. In one school, for example, a group of four teachers decided to look at the benefits and constraints of a new math program.

Modeling of a completed project: Alumni as well as a co-instructor provided presentations of completed projects. This allowed new participants the opportunity to see a variety of topics, methodologies, and presentations. They had more time to discuss the significance of their projects in relation to student achievement. They worked less on their concerns with "doing it right" and talked more about published research that they were studying as well as their own findings. In general, there was more discussion about the impact of teaching and learning in individual classrooms.

Collaboration: Participants almost immediately formed collegial relationships with one another. One school was heavily represented due to intense support from the administrator. Educators affiliated with that school, including preservice teachers, paraprofessionals and teachers, formed research teams and examined issues across classrooms. They became teachers for and students of one another and felt comfortable in their role of researchers. These were the educators who clearly initiated the change in school culture that was to be seen in the following school year.

Theory: Participants in the second year seemed to more easily grasp the concept that they do indeed construct knowledge and impact how the curriculum is developed (Gore & Zeichner, 1995; Kincheloe, 1991; Noffke, 1997). They challenged each other to become more critical, to ask the questions that might alter the status quo, and to use their classrooms to learn more about teaching. Although they had shied away from the concept of "theory" at first, they came to realize that they could generate "theory" or practical knowledge themselves (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

Revelation: As in the previous year, participants were surprised with the quality of their reports. Over 100 colleagues and college students attended their conference. The conference itself was part of a series of professional development days. Prior to the conference, these teachers, paraprofessionals and preservice teachers had conducted workshops for colleagues during two previous professional development days. Now their colleagues became critical friends as participants in the course presented the results of their action research. The professional teachers demonstrated to one another that they could learn from teaching and that they had not yet finished learning how to teach (Darling-Hammond, 1998). This was a significant lesson for the paraprofessionals and preservice teachers to witness. We often heard from preservice teachers, for example, that they could not wait for student teaching to end so they could "just teach". Participants in this workshop realized that the focus in education continues to be on learning, at any and every stage of teaching (Magestro & Stanford-Blair, 2000).

Surprises in the second year

Given the quality of work that was contributed by the teachers, preservice teachers and para-professionals, we were surprised with the number of participants who claimed that they were intimidated at the beginning of the class and/or felt a significant increase in self esteem by the end of the class. They said, for example: "I learned that I could do just about anything! I was very intimidated by this project at the beginning but once I started I found I can learn with my students." "My teaching can be improved--and that's OK; I don't have to be perfect." "This seemed impossible at first; I learned that it can be fairly easy to research what goes on in your classroom."

The conference itself provided surprises. Several of the participants noted that it was very different to speak to

colleagues rather than their students. Although some were concerned at first, they soon realized that their sharing of results became the starting point for a larger conversation. One said, for example, "I was so excited when people in the audience started asking questions. We got into some critical issues about classroom behavior—everyone had something to contribute!" Although no one knew it at the time, this research project actually had implications for the next school year.

Summer 2000—Action Research as Culture

The courses had ended and the faculty, staff and administration in one of the participating schools held a meeting to conclude the 1999-2000 school year. In reviewing the key issues for the upcoming year, a discussion ensued regarding the possibilities for professional development. After some discussion one teacher who had been the co-instructor of the action research course, suggested that the entire teaching staff might engage in action research and use the professional development time for the discussion and reflection of their classroom data collection and analysis. The teachers were eager to begin and engaged in an animated discussion to select the topic for the following year. They finally decided upon discipline in the school. Before the close of school, the teachers had divided the introductory work and begun to survey and interview staff, students and parents. They examined current research and developed a review of literature. They decided how they would engage in the research in their individual classrooms during the fall. They also planned their professional development days to provide discussion, feedback and more research on the current topic. They no longer felt the need for the formal course. Teachers now felt that this was a "natural" way in which to study the latest school-wide issue. They owned the action research process and the team was no longer needed.

Action Research as Professional Development—Reflection

Allan and Miller (1990) state that "action research models that are based on collaborative communities can bring about educational reform" (p. 202). They assert that when teacher researchers plan their own professional development, the results have "the likelihood of producing long term change" (p. 202). Based upon our experiences with action research, we concur and believe that action research offers teachers an opportunity to get serious about standards, reinvent professional development, encourage and reward teacher knowledge and skill, and assist in creating schools that are organized for student and teacher success.

Teachers, preservice teachers and paraprofessionals transformed their teaching through this process (Goswami and Stillman, 1987). They took time to "reflect, make connections, and better understand what they are doing now and would like to do in future classroom situations" (Vacca, 1994, p. 673). This was illustrated throughout the courses by a number of participants. One teacher, in

examining how she was addressing the state frameworks in mathematics, described her constant confusion over the expected curriculum. During her research, she commented, "All these years I was banging my head against the wall and now it all makes sense...I must be specific and clear in my directions and to do this, I must have a clear vision of where we are going." In a collaborative project, three teachers examined their math curriculum in search of "authentic" learning experiences. While all three thought they provided such experiences, they found that "although our lessons provided many types of experiences daily, and although our lessons were often creative and fun for our students, they did not meet our criteria for authentic learning experiences." They now have a more clear understanding of the types of lessons that allow students to learn in authentic ways.

Participants gained confidence in themselves as writers and teachers (Goswami and Stillman, 1987) and therefore felt more confident in requiring more writing and editing, as well as peer teaching, from their students. In addition to writing syntheses of their research, many participants kept self-reflective journals (see Ogberg, 1990). They read their journals throughout the projects, looking for evidence of strengths and areas in need of improvement. They used the information to alter programs and pedagogy in ways that would benefit student learning. One participant described her journals as "a chance for me to really sit down and reflect on my teaching during a particular lesson or day. My journal entries were a valuable resource that provided feedback for my students, myself and my research." Another, a teacher for over 25 years, remarked, "I learned to pay closer attention to each child and to observe her or his own learning style. It was also enlightening to me to discover so many websites that are available to educators. I have made new friends in class and on the Web."

In addition to providing leadership for their colleagues, they also became users of current research (Goswami and Stillman, 1987) and models of how to use and critique literature in their respective fields. All research, for example, reflected connections to the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997-1998). Only recently had the state required evidence of the use of the Frameworks. This, therefore, was a new curriculum for all participants and, for most, a new way of teaching as well. Action research gave these educators an opportunity to "try out a new approach while monitoring what (was) occurring" (Dicker, 1990, p. 208). One teacher admitted that she felt pressured to "change" when the Frameworks were sent to her. Her project provided the evidence she needed to be comfortable with what was already working in her classroom and gave her the ability to discover some small steps that she could take to implement new suggestions and strategies. The mathematics projects that have already been cited provided more feedback for teachers in relation to the Frameworks. Simply providing a "safe place" to read and discuss the documents appealed to many of the participants. One teacher said, "I never thought I would read the new State Frameworks—they seemed so long and inaccessible.

I have actually integrated them into every step of my project—they are really helpful once you get beyond the cover."

The action research model provides meaningful professional development in a time when the focus on staff development has changed from teaching to learning (Magestro & Stanford-Blair, 2000). Participants collaborated with their students as well as with one another. One teacher noted, "My students helped me throughout the project. I asked them to keep journals and be honest about what they saw in my teaching and about how they thought they were learning...I developed a much closer relationship with them and therefore began to understand better how each one learns." A school adjustment counselor asked her students to help her with her project entitled, "Collaborating with Students to Improve Social Skills." She noted that "an unexpected benefit of this project was the community involvement that occurred. My plan was so simple. I would teach kids how to deal with teasing and they would use the skills on the playground. Well, change is complex and needs to be systematic. So, I decided to involve older students as research assistants and members of a "tease patrol". Communication through letters and calls to parents (about the project and the students' roles) completed the development of this project as a true community project."

Pitfalls of Doing Teacher Research

Sardo-Brown, Welsh and Bolton (1995), through data collected from their action research project, describe six barriers to teachers doing action research: (1) "research is anxiety-provoking;" (2) there is "differential status" (from "ivory tower" researchers); (3) there exists a "lack of ownership;" (4) the "structure of the school day" is problematic for gathering data and reflecting; (5) there are "sensitivity issues;" and (6) there may be "administrative or institutional resistance." Participants, particularly in the first year, experienced some anxiety over conducting research. These included questions of ability to "do" research, concerns over being judged by peers and/or supervisors, worries about the formulation of the research question(s), and concerns that data collection might never end—that one question always seemed to lead to another. As the group proceeded most became more comfortable with the ambiguities of action research and teaching and learning in general; they eventually understood that the process is ongoing and never ends.

The structure of the school day was another barrier. An elementary school setting, for example, is not usually conducive to writing in journals and recording information on checklists. In some classrooms, the research question focused on one subject area that was investigated for only 45 minutes a day. For others, the focus was on areas across the curriculum. Then there were the teachers and paraprofessionals who saw the students only once or twice each week for whom collecting data in such a brief time span was difficult.

The last pitfall was of our own making: we did not include enough public school administrators within the process. Although the local administrators fully supported the projects, they were not involved in actually doing them.

Lessons We Learned

We, as co-instructors of the action research seminar, learned several lessons from facilitating this experience. The most significant involved the issues of: teacher empowerment, teacher reflection, classroom change and teacher/administrator collaboration. In reconsidering Goswami's & Stillman's (1987) elements in teacher research, we found that several of their considerations supported our own experiences. Teacher researchers became theorists through testing their own assumptions and directly connecting their findings to practice. They formed many networks, working collaboratively to test group-constructed hypotheses across different classrooms, arranging to co-teach certain subjects for the benefit of data collection and video taping, comparing and contrasting their data findings and bringing administrators into the process, allowing for administrators to readily show support. Finally they provided the education profession with new information. This was especially true regarding the newly implemented Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks along with the Massachusetts "Principles of Effective Teaching". The teacher researchers spoke about "authentic learning opportunities" and "writing during math lessons". They developed insightful and probing assessments of their own lessons as well as the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework lesson requirements, generating better working definitions and challenging mandated notions. They also collaborated with students and found that this collaboration changed the level and nature of classroom dialogue and prompted student-initiated lessons and motivation incentives.

As co-instructors of this action research project, we learned how much classroom change was implemented through the initiatives of teacher-researchers. This was not a requirement of the project so that it occurred at all was a pleasant finding but that it occurred as it did, across all participants, was astounding. Simply said, we found that action research works. Finally, a change in the culture at one school was evident when the teachers themselves initiated an action research professional development model for Fall 2000.

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