

What Project LEARN Reveals about Collaborative Action Research

With "critical friends" to assist them, teachers in 50 schools in Washington are researching the answers to their own questions about teaching and learning.

Looking at the surface of things, we might believe that the last 20 years of educational research have provided us all the insights we need to improve our schools. We have seen the effective schooling correlates validated in study after study; we have been given rich descriptions of the workplaces where teachers are motivated and self-actualized, and we have seen evidence that certain instructional strategies enhance the achievement of students regardless of their socioeconomic status.

With each report of a school's success, we want to believe that we, too, can show comparable levels of performance if only we can replicate those factors in our schools. Yet all too often we find the anticipated growth in performance still eluding us. This repeated cycle of high hopes followed by our inability to replicate results continues to produce cynicism among teachers.

Enter Project LEARN

To break this cycle of hope and despair, Washington State University and the faculties of more than 50 schools have collaborated on Project LEARN (League of Educational Action Researchers in the Northwest). Our project is grounded in the belief that education's past failures have resulted not from incorrect data or lack of commit-

ment but from an inadequate understanding of the process of change.

Rather than focusing on adopting "proven" practices, Project LEARN fosters school improvement by enhancing the professional lives of teachers. We accomplish this by working with the staffs of schools and districts who have expressed an interest in initiating school improvement (defined as "enhancing the quality of teaching and learning") by engaging in action research.

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Project LEARN's hope is that meaningful practitioner research will lead to improved classroom practice and become a stimulus for both the cultural transformation of schools and the restructuring of the teaching profession. To accomplish those twin purposes, the project discourages individualistic initiatives, encouraging instead the participation of a "critical mass" of collaborating teachers from each member school.

The Project LEARN cycle begins with the formation of action research teams, teachers who will work together on a problem for at least one full academic year. To prepare for their work, the teams participate in a two-day workshop on the basic steps of conducting action research: identifying problems and collecting data. Teams from several schools and localities receive the training together at a central location so they can create networks with colleagues who are addressing similar problems. At the end of this initial training period, each action research team completes a written action plan, specifying the problem, the data collection techniques, and any anticipated technical or logistical needs.

Next, the teams begin conducting their research. During this period the project offers assistance through a cadre of trained "critical friends." Crit-

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ical friends are educators with research experience who volunteer to help project teachers by giving their independent viewpoints. Many school districts participating in Project LEARN train their supervisors to serve as critical friends for action research teams both inside and outside the district. The current cadre of 20 critical friends consists of school administrators, teachers, university professors, and independent consultants. Project LEARN teachers can request the help of these critical friends whenever they feel the need for feedback from a colleague with a fresh perspective on their particular teaching or research problems. To ensure that the critical friends work to support the research rather than to direct it, their efforts are governed by a set of ethical and procedural guidelines (see fig. 1).

In mid-January of each year, approximately four months after the basic training, the teams attend a one-day follow-up workshop. The purpose of this meeting is to address difficulties encountered during the data collection phase and to provide instruction for conducting the data analysis and action planning portions of the cycle.

Then each spring, Project LEARN hosts a two-day International Symposium on Action Research, where project participants as well as action researchers from elsewhere in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada can present both the process and the results of their school-based research. The annual

International Symposium completes the first-year Project LEARN cycle; however, since many teams will continue to conduct research, we have created a program to serve them. The major purpose of the continuing program is to provide networking training in advanced methods and access to future symposiums.

A First-Cycle Experience

For example, some middle school math teachers at the fall Project LEARN training session began to wonder: If writing is a window into thinking and if the act of writing helps improve comprehension, why not try it in middle school math classes?

The teachers began a collaborative inquiry into the role of writing in the development of computational skills. To test their hypothesis that writing can improve those skills, they decided to use an experimental design. They constructed, then administered tests to their math students during the first nine weeks of school to gather baseline data. They used the results to split the four 7th grade math classes into two groups: two performing well and two below expectations. Then they made the lower-achieving classes the treatment group; and the higher achievers, the control group.

During the second quarter the teachers continued to instruct the stu-

dents in the control group as before, while they gave the lower-achieving students the opportunity to write about the math concepts they were learning, on the day before each examination. In every other respect they provided the two groups of students the same educational experience: the same amount of time for instruction and independent study (minus the writing time for the experimental group) and the same exams.

When the data were analyzed at the January workshop, the teachers found that writing had indeed made a substantial difference in concept acquisition. The experimental sections actually outperformed their (previously higher-achieving) classmates on each test.

With the experimental work out of the way, the project team turned to the "action" stage of the action research process. They presented the data to their colleagues (and to the International Symposium) and made plans to revise their middle school's math curriculum. This year all math classes in this school include "writing about computation."

Will it continue to make a difference? The teachers think so, but they are sure of one thing: "data-driven" teaching has become a way of life for them. They don't ever intend to give up the search for a "better mousetrap."

Fig. 1. Project LEARN Guidelines for Critical Friends

A critical friend is chosen according to the needs and desires of the project participants. The critical friend will not hold a "stake" or "ownership" in the problem being addressed or in the outcome of the project unless such is granted by the participants.

- A critical friend is a positive friend, whose primary agenda is to assist the project toward success.
- A critical friend may have a personal agenda complementary to the project's. The critical friend will share with the participants his or her motives/intents at the time of the first interaction.
- A critical friend is a visitor and participates only at the continued invitation of the project.
- A critical friend will respond and act honestly at every juncture.
- It is the critical friend's obligation to declare any conflict of interest or conflict of values with the project focus or methods.
- A critical friend will assume that the project's interactions, work, and findings are confidential unless the project directs otherwise.
- The project participants are expected to assist the critical friend by fully informing him or her of all agendas prior to each consultation.

Factors in Our Success

It all began in the fall of 1989, when administrators from eight districts in two states were invited to send teams to participate in Project LEARN's inaugural training program. These districts/schools were invited because of their history of commitment to school improvement and their willingness to support the project financially.

It didn't surprise us that more than 130 teachers from more than 20 separate schools enrolled in that first year program. What was surprising, however, were their comments after their first two days of training. This comment from one teacher was typical: "It's about time someone asked teachers to help set their own school improvement agenda!" Had those comments come from faculty in schools led by top-down dictatorial principals, we wouldn't have been the least bit surprised. Yet, when we repeatedly heard those statements from the slips of teachers who had been participating in organized school improvement projects for years, we had to ask ourselves, *What is it about collaborative action research that has teachers perceiving it as so different from other school improvement programs?* After analyzing preliminary data, we have identified five factors that have facili-

tated the success of our work. We believe these factors have implications for anyone designing school improvement programs.

1. The importance of volition. Teachers have come to expect that their school improvement agendas will be set for them. Thus, participants in Project LEARN appeared genuinely surprised when they found the focus of their projects could be any issue they deemed both important and perplexing. The only preconditions were that the problems being investigated had to impact student learning and be under their control. Further, the reflective interviewing process we used to tease out topics turned out to be a surprise in itself. Apparently, being granted the uncommon luxury of 20 uninterrupted minutes of dialogue with colleagues on instructional concerns was as foreign to participants as it was refreshing. Furthermore, reflective interaction about what is important resulted in common goals for the team. Clearly, people are more committed to goals they have formulated themselves than to those which are imposed upon them.

Ironically, the set of topics that emerged from these teachers weren't much different than we'd expect from a traditional administrator-led process

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(see fig. 2). The only differences were slight: for example, a site administrators' second priority might have emerged as the teachers' first, or vice versa. That's a small price for management to pay in exchange for enhanced ownership and commitment.

2. Availability of critical friends. One major difference in this project was the availability of "critical friends." Throughout the year, this cadre volunteered to lend their expertise to the action research teams. Ethical guidelines were developed to assure that ownership of the research would reside with the practitioners. Those who used critical friends liberally praised their assistance as giving a substantial boost to their projects. Apparently, having high-quality, free consultant help available on demand was not only a new experience for these teachers, but it gave them the psychological freedom to venture into territory where their interests, if not their confidence, led them.

3. A first-class environment. At the outset we decided to hold our training sessions in the large banquet rooms of centrally located first-class hotels where the training time could be divided equally between large group presentations and small group work. Although this format was originally chosen for its efficiency, it ended up paying unforeseen dividends. Our participants repeatedly told us that the quality of the catering, the service, and the surroundings reinforced the perceived importance placed on the tasks at hand—as did the energy generated by dozens of colleagues actively and visibly involved in the same work.

Fig. 2. A Selection of Project LEARN 1989–1990 Projects

1. What factors influence student achievement in our school? What can we do to improve achievement?
2. Will group retellings of literature be a useful tool for K-5 teachers to accurately describe a student's comprehension ability and improve the instructional program?
3. Evaluate the student management system (discipline) and give direction for any subsequent changes.
4. How can we effectively and efficiently conduct group parent/teacher conferences?
5. Is the integrated elementary special education model better for "resource" students than a traditional pull-out approach?
6. Identify variables common to academically at-risk students in order to provide better intervention techniques.
7. How can we increase the articulation of our Language Arts program through 6th, 7th, and 8th grades?
8. Is our delivery of support services helping to maintain or improve student progress in academics, social environment, and language?
9. Develop, implement, and assess effective strategies for at-risk students.
10. How can we create a teaching environment that uses thematic instruction and meaningful activities to bring focus and inspiration to teaching academics while maintaining academic accountability?

4. *Public affirmations.* Several times in numerous ways, each team was invited to tell all the other teams about the status of their initiatives, their needs, and their goals. The sharing provided a supportive environment for risk-taking and experimentation in which people could generate ideas, network with each other, and become collegial. Apparently, enthusiasm and success are contagious: the positive, successful teams provided hope, encouragement, and inspiration to faltering colleagues.

The public affirmations not only facilitated sharing across schools, but they also created a certain amount of peer pressure to follow through with the upcoming tasks of data collection, analysis, and action planning.

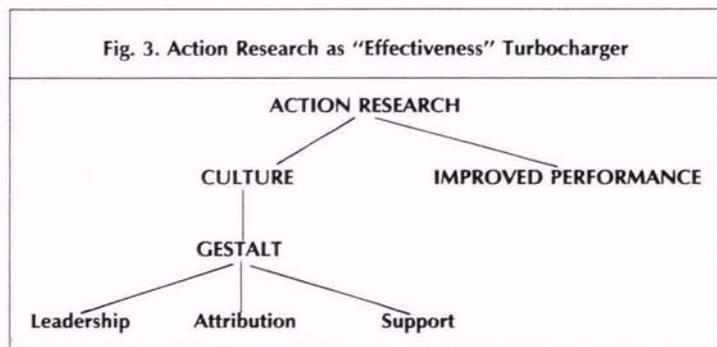
5. *Strategic scheduling.* Teachers are very busy people. The constant demands from students, administrators, and parents can be so overwhelming that an optional project, regardless of how meritorious, often falls to the bottom of a "to-do" list. Fortunately for us, we made several strategic and logistical decisions that provided just the requisite amount of extrinsic pressure for participants.

The initial training, held during the last week in September, coincided with the time of year in which the pressures of getting school started had largely subsided while all the school-opening enthusiasm was still in bloom. Even so, many participants' best intentions went unfulfilled until December, when they realized that the January follow-up training was just around the corner. The knowledge that they were expected to have locally derived data to work on at this session apparently was just enough of an incentive to get them moving on their projects.

Likewise, the need to conclude and polish the projects in time for presentation at the International Symposium (late April) provided just the push that several teams needed to stay on task. Apparently, our inservices not only provided training but strategically orchestrated support and encouragement throughout the year.

Making Good Schools Better

It would be nice to say that every team that participated in Project LEARN



completed its research, that the culture of all the schools underwent positive transformations, and that student learning dramatically improved at each site. Unfortunately, that didn't happen, at least not everywhere. However, our preliminary data did suggest certain sharp distinctions between the work environments of the teams that thrived and those that faltered.

When asked to identify which factors enabled or constrained progress on the projects, the responses of Project LEARN participants produced an interesting pattern. Those who had been part of successful teams credited the nature of their projects (the importance of the topic being researched and the action research process itself), external support (released time, administrative encouragement, and the help of their critical friends), and the nature of their colleagues (their drive, commitment, and "chemistry") with keeping the projects on track. Likewise, teachers on the teams that failed to carry through cited the nature of their projects (not important enough to justify the energy necessary), the absence of extrinsic support (lack of resources and released time), and the nature of their collegial work group (divisive and leaderless) as the chief reasons for dropping their projects.

Our analysis of these data led us to conclude that schools with productive cultures (a habit of focusing on important issues, norms of leadership, collegiality, and support) are the ones that will get the most out of action research

(Saphier and King 1985). Conversely, schools where these norms are weak will probably not find action research to be a particularly productive strategy (although the evidence suggests it will do no harm). Those findings brought us to conceptualize "action research" as a cultural turbocharger (see fig. 3).

A Promising Tool

So far, our search for the perfect school improvement strategy hasn't turned up the magic potion which will turn any frog into a prince. As powerful a tool as collaborative inquiry appears to be, it will not transform a school in the absence of leadership, collegial respect, and technical and logistical support for the professional work of teachers.

But in an atmosphere of support, trust, and collegiality, collaborative action research has great potential for focusing a school's attention on the correlates of effective schooling. Offering such a tool to school faculties may prove to be one of the most promising actions we can take to improve our schools. □

Reference

- Saphier, J., and M. King. (March 1985). "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures." *Educational Leadership* 42, 6: 67-74

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