“Essentials” for a Successful School-Wide Action Research Project

Kurt W. Clausen and Dale R. Petruka

Recently, we had the privilege of conducting a year-long case study at an elementary school in Ontario which was carrying out a school-wide action research project. As the year progressed it became clear that, if a school wanted to feel the full benefits of this technique, its implementation could not be undertaken like ten solitary research endeavours with ten separate participants. Instead, we concluded that visible changes had to be made to the traditional school behaviour for this innovation to succeed in the long term. From a literature review and our experiences with the case study school, we identified ten “essentials” that needed to be addressed for a school-wide action research project to prosper, ultimately changing the culture of a school and improving both teacher and student learning. Our findings fall in line with recent literature arguing that a school should be seen as a “learning community”. As a way to bring meaning, motivation and accessibility to professional development, an entire school should engage in peer collaboration, action research projects and collegial dialogue in an effort to improve teaching practices (Peery, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Barkley & Schwartz, 1989).

Have a Shared Goal or Purpose

One characteristic jumps to the forefront throughout the literature: that without some shared goal or purpose, no community, organization or action research project exists (Hord, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1992, 1994; Johnson, 1999). Instead, there is just a group of people working in the same general area. A leader may have a great idea and want to have it carried out in the school. The leader may try to transfer this enthusiasm to the teachers. However, within six months the principal’s personal charisma may wane and teachers’ patience and enthusiasm may wear thin. In the end, rather than personal magnitude, Senge (1990; 1996) points out that effective leadership is based more upon the leader’s ability to articulate and build a vision that members of the organization will accept as their own (1996, pp. 51-2). The accent here must be upon the shared aspect of the goal. If the participants believe that the goal is not their own, it is more likely that they will only give “lip-service” to the goal than actually trying to work towards it. Cooper (1994), for example, recommends that the entire staff of a school needs to set goals and visions from the “ground up” and work toward meeting them. In fact, Cooper goes as far as stating that if some teachers do not agree with the educational goals held by the majority of the school it would be best for them to find another school (see also Senge, 1996).

Develop a Common Language

The sure way to doom a group project from the outset is to assume that everyone is on the same page. The terms “Professional Development”, “Action Research”, and “Guided Reading” for example, can mean many things to many people. With no common language or understanding, participants may go off in different directions in sure confidence that they are in solidarity only to return to find that no-one understood what they were doing. Rather than just carrying out a bunch of scattered projects within a school, educational writers argue that time should be given in advance to help all participants actively construct their reality within the school – to speak a common language. As such, it breaks down the idea that certain people within an organization are transmitting and others receiving an “ideal” knowledge. Instead, learning is seen as going on at all levels of the community (student, teacher and administrator) all the time (MacNeill & Silcox, 1996; Retaillick, 1999; Harada, 2001; Oberg, 1999; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993). Participants become a conscious part of the action research project rather than carrying out something of which they only have a vague recollection.

Create Time for Teachers to Meet During the School Day

This may be the most challenging aspect of creating a group action research project for the principal. Teachers need time to meet with other teachers in the same division and, even more valuable, to meet with teachers of the same grade. During meeting time, they must have a goal they are trying to achieve and must work to help each other meet that goal. Creating time to meet during the school day can be achieved by scheduling teachers of similar grades or divisions with common preparation time, organizing division-wide or school events/presentations for students, or organizing class buddies for reading or project development across divi-
sions for example. This is why educational researchers promote a flexible timetable with research time built right in—weekly, monthly, and yearly (Hord, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Senge, 1990, 1996; MacNeill & Silcox, 1996). Furthermore, “flex-time” must be built into the system. Cooper and Boyd (1994) point out that a flexible schedule will allow for unexpected impositions on teachers due to the reform being implemented. Boyd and Hord (1994) note that even where collaboration is espoused and encouraged, a number of teachers will not join in if they still feel that they must slavishly follow an unyielding timetable. However, if left too flexible, participants may rarely meet.

From a literature review and our experiences with the case study school, we identified ten “essentials” that needed to be addressed for a school-wide action research project to prosper, ultimately changing the culture of a school and improving both teacher and student learning.

Provide Leadership through a Balance of Support & Pressure

For teachers to believe that an action research project is being taken seriously by the administration, long-term commitment must be shown by the principal through a careful balance of support and pressure (Johnson, 1999, pp. 36-37). The support aspect can be shown through a number of means, but are usually tailored to the needs of the members of the community. This may be the acquisition and availability of diverse resources which may include information from the library, classroom, and community, and through technology and the Internet (Harada, 2001; Pappas, 2000, Retallick et al, 1999; Cooper & Boyd, 1994). This may also be supplied through monetary support (Darling-Hammond, 1992, 1994), regular release time for “team-time” (Senge, 1996; Cooper & Boyd, 1994; Hord & Rutherford, 1997), or creating a system of recognitions and rewards for those involved in the reform (Retallick et al, 1999). On the flip side, the principal may also place some “pressure” on participants: an expectation that the members will follow a timeline; interim interviews; a final report (Johnson, 1999). Both aspects show to the community members that administrators are responsive to teacher concerns and show support for innovation (Royal & Rossi, 1996). In other words, for a project to succeed, the principal must be seen by the community of teachers as a believer and participant in the project.

Empower Teachers

In an age when accountability is the ruling dictum, and the parameters of power are becoming more and more formalized, empowering teachers may appear to run counter to the way most schools are managed. Indeed, this is an extremely difficult step for most principals to take. However, for any real shared action research project to get off the ground, the “industrial model” way of thinking (which is very compartmentalized and done step by step fashion) must change in a way that reaffirms to all stakeholders that a constructivist or collegial approach is at work. While it is almost impossible to give away any formal leadership powers (bestowed by the board and the Education Act), principals should build expert-power within the ranks: sharing decision-making about local goals and projects; designating people with the power to lead meetings; allowing stakeholders to write progress reports (Johnson, 1999). In return, scholarship finds that, if allowed the time to carry out these actions, teachers will be more likely to develop a feeling of empowerment and will operate for the common good of the school (Cooper & Boyd, 1995). However, this change may be irreversible: once begun down the power-sharing path, if members feel that only “lip-service” has been shown by administration, there is a good chance that they will disengage and the project will not survive (Hord, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Senge, 1996).

Open Communication

Alongside this “democratization” of power comes the similar action of sharing information. Lines of communication between teachers, and between teachers and administration, need to be open in such a way that two-way dialogue is respected and non-threatening. This could be one-on-one, or more generally through some regular, voluntary meeting where staff could express things that are working well along with issues or problems (Hord & Rutherford, 1997). These act as forums for cross-staff communication to discuss timelines, agendas, resources, and problems within the community. Again, this must be seen as something planned out ahead of time. A regular time and place must be reserved for meeting together to reflect solely upon the work of each member (Boyd & Hord, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1994). For this constructivist approach to occur, this form of communication must become an entrenched practice, not simply a number of ad hoc meetings. Furthermore, dialogue procedures must be set

TEACHING & LEARNING
up and followed by all members of the community (including the leaders) to allow for democratic, informed participation in the project.

In our case study, communication was facilitated by a few factors. Locating the classrooms of teachers of the same division together aided communication. One teacher said she talked about her frustrations, and was able to vent with people who understood what she was going through. The principal was seen as a “connector”, bringing teachers together to link classroom, school, board, and provincial goals, and to remind teachers about current priorities. Also, scheduling the prep time of two teachers in the same division at the same time allowed them an opportunity to meet and dialogue. Assigning common working times and expecting immediate changes is rather naive, however – these networks need time to grow. It is important to note that communication is not something that just happens organically – if left alone without a common goal, most participants do not talk about the larger issues.

Keep a Group Memory

Alongside group meetings comes the need to document the action research project – the goal, progress, needs, and achievements. Throughout his work, Dewey (1897, 1916, 1938) argued that teachers, as well as students, should analyze events in their day to identify the reasons for the way they conduct their work practices. This is actually easier when one is doing an individual project. They are freer with their comments, emotions and findings when they are answerable only to themselves. When action research is conducted as a group, participants may be less confident and have more questions. Who will be keeping record? What is of enough importance to be included? How detailed should the record of discussions be? Should minutes be kept of all meetings? This can be a rather difficult and tedious area, but necessary: without a memory, the project will have no meaning in the long term. If handled well these records become a baseline for sustained and systematic, collaborative reflection (Cooper & Boyd, 1994; Johnson, 1999), and a form of continual assessment of school successes and failures (Harada, 2001; Cooper & Boyd, 1994). Again, this is not an organic process - the group needs to focus the talk at these meetings by having an agenda and distributing follow-up notes to facilitate a group memory.

Link Learning

Although action research is not a traditional form of professional development (PD), it is a form of PD. Without this recognition, teachers will not see the importance of the process or how action research can benefit their teaching practice. When a teacher’s action research project is related to in-servicing provided by the board, the two aid each other and the value of each is doubled. The key here is for the ministry, board, school, and individual teacher to have common goals. Fullan (2005) aptly comments on this characteristic: “Capacity building…is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit for working together, and you can’t learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and having mechanisms for getting at it on purpose” (p. 69). Once a teacher’s personal goals are linked to board and ministry objectives and action research and in-servicing build upon each other, any unrelated PD would not only be disregarded: it would be seen as highly disrespectful to the newly developing ethics of the group (Johnson, 1999; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

Think in Collegial Terms

More than just “getting along” or tolerating each other, teachers and administrators (as well as other relevant support staff) must work together as a team to problem-solve and make decisions with respect to not only their individual students, but to the school as a whole. Shaw (1999) concludes that the big change occurs when the community and collective responsibility becomes the focal point of the change, breaking the vulnerable “person dependent” reform process. In physical terms, teachers begin to not only reflect on their own practice (Schön, 1983), but are comfortable with peer observation and interact freely about what they see and learn from their colleagues. Rossi & Royal (1996) point out that in these situations, teachers must be knowledgeable of their colleagues’ goals and current place along the path of achieving that goal and willing to help each other. This can be quite difficult in many schools: The schedule does not permit much time for observation; in many schools one teacher is responsible for a grade or subject. In our case study, teachers found it most helpful to work with a teacher who teaches the same grade. This led to the setting up of tri-school meetings during the school day where specific grade-level teachers could meet and discuss issues particular to their situation. This required much administrative planning to organize lessons for large groups of students and free-up time for teachers to meet and travel to another school. It provided an opportunity for teachers to work together to meet common goals.

Develop a Culture of Trust & Respect

As the final “essential”, most educational researchers point out
that a culture must exist based on personal trust rather than bureaucratic rules and policy (Darlington Hammond, 1992, 1994; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Cooper & Boyd, 1994). Again, this goes beyond mere tolerance, and being able to work together. It must mean extending oneself, or putting oneself in a place where someone could exploit you: To go beyond your classroom and help others, and not expect (but hope for) reciprocity. Hord & Rutherford (1997) describe this as “the kind of respect and trust among colleagues that promotes collegial relationships, a willingness to accept feedback and to work to establish norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, and the development of positive and caring relationships among students, teachers, and administrators”. This is a very difficult characteristic to reach and takes years of work to build such bonds.

In the end, when all teachers in a school are doing related action research projects, and when meetings and in-services are related to that research, the culture of the school begins to change – from working in isolation to working together. Its long term benefits are tremendous, but it should not be undertaken by someone interested in only short-term results while maintaining the traditional structure of the school. Action research shouldn’t be seen as an add-on to the school day but rather as part of the school day. It cannot be demanded by the principal. Neither can it just be planted and left to grow on its own. Planting it is a good start – but not good enough to make a group action research project succeed and function for more than the short term. And once the project grows, it may take on a life of its own beyond the boundaries set by its creators. In the end, the school must be willing to change its whole perspective of “work” and “learning” within its walls.

References
Cooper, C. (1994). Why schools must change (pp. 11-15), in Post-Conference Readings: Toowoomba, QASSP.
TEACHING & LEARNING


Roch Carrier is the recipient of numerous awards and of honorary degrees granted by both Canadian and American universities.

4:2 Fall 2007

Roch Carrier: Short stories for FSL students

Editions Soleil publishing inc. is pleased to announce the publication of Roch Carrier raconte... an anthology of fourteen short stories selected by Anthony Mollica, professor emeritus, Faculty of Education, Brock University. The anthology contains short stories from well-known works such as Écrits du Canada français (Montreal: Écrits du Canada français); Jolis deuils (Montréal : Éditions internationales Alain Stanké); Ne faites pas mal à l’avenir (Montréal: Éditions Paulines); La fleur et autres personnages (Montréal: Éditions Paulines); as well as Le joueur de basket-ball (Toronto: Livres Toundra).

The anthology is accompanied by 2 cd-roms with the short stories read by the author himself. In addition, a Cahier d’activités by Anthony Mollica is also available. The Cahier provides a wealth of exercises which test the student’s comprehension as well as provide ample opportunities for conversation and discussion.

"As far as I know, this is the first time that an author reads the short stories in an anthology destined for French as a second language (FSL). It’s a publisher’s first,” said Mollica. To reach a wider audience, Mollica has provided marginal vocabulary to assist the students when reading the short stories as well as a French-English glossary. The anthology is suitable for both French as a first language as well as for FSL students enrolled in both immersion and core programs.

The short stories vary in topics and themes:

- "Le joueur de basket-ball" and "La poignée de main", focus on basketball and hockey;
- "Un dompteur de lions" and "La chatte d’Espagne", on idiomatic expressions and proverbs drawn from the animal world;
- "L’ouvrier modèle", on trades and professions;
- "La religieuse qui retourna en Irlande", nationalities and the francophone world;
- "Grand-père n’avait peur de rien ni de personne", fears;
- "Les cartes postales", post-card writing;
- "Nathalie et son bonheur" and "Un très joyeux Noël", relationship between parents and children;
- "À cause d’un peu de fumée", the dangerous effects of drugs and narcotics;
- "Les cœurs en chocolat", on obesity, love and loneliness;
- "Une si joyeuse fête", the loss of a dear person; and in;
- "L’école du rêve", on education.

Carrier is no stranger to the reading audience. His "Hockey sweater", a short film based on his short story "Una abominabile feautella d’erabile sur ghiaccio", produced by the National Film Board of Canada, is considered a classic and the opening lines of the short story in both English and French are found on the five-dollar Canadian bill.

Roch Carrier is the recipient of numerous awards and of honorary degrees granted by both Canadian and American universities.

Anthony Mollica presents copies of Roch Carrier raconte... to the author, Rock Carrier.