

From Learned Helplessness to Learned Efficacy: An Action Science Approach to Continuing Professional Education for Comprehensive School Reform

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Abstract

This paper reports the progress and second year findings that flow from a multi-year action research strategy aimed at comprehensive school reform in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. A learned helplessness model is presented as an explanation for why schools continue to struggle with implementing comprehensive reform strategies. An alternative model is offered as a blueprint for empowerment and learned efficacy. Examples from action research projects implemented during the 2002-03 academic year provide evidence that substantial progress can be made in building a learning community within the real world setting of an urban public school system.

Introduction

This paper reports the progress and second year findings that flow from a multi-year action research strategy aimed at comprehensive school reform in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Public Schools System (MPS) is a large urban district that faces chronic problems of low school attendance, high truancy and suspension rates, and low academic performance among a large proportion of students. The recent Federal legislation titled “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) places severe sanctions on schools and districts that cannot show progress in the number of students achieving proficiency in core subject areas. While the present action research project is being implemented within this highly politicized context of “school reform,” the intent is to reach beyond the rhetoric and raise a fundamental question: “What does it take to help schools lay the foundation for sustained improvement in student learning especially within today’s highly politicized and tumultuous environment of public education?”

The action research strategy being employed draws on literature from school reform (DuFour and Eaker, 1998) and organizational learning (Watkins and Marsick 1993; Marsick and Watkins 1999; Argyris and Schön 1996). The research findings and recommendations from this literature converge on a simple yet challenging insight. Help schools create a professional learning community that is focused on three basic questions. What should students learn? How do we know if students are learning? What are we prepared to do when students don’t learn? (DuFour and Eaker, 1998) Action research is a practical strategy that can be used to engage various stakeholders in a coordinated effort to address these questions in the context of whole school reform (Sagor, 2000; Folkman, 2002). The following discussion is an overview of the progress being made in achieving whole school reform among several public schools in Milwaukee.

Why schools struggle to learn: A Learned Helplessness Model

A recent meeting between officials from the Milwaukee Public Schools and representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction involved a conversation around the different resources available to schools that have been identified as “needing improvement.” The list of different programs, initiatives, grants, and other resources that were available and operating in this set of schools was impressive. Yet these schools continue to struggle with student achievement and face severe sanctions if they do not improve over the next one or two years. Clearly, simply adding more resources is not the answer. Argyris and Schön (1996)

explain this situation as an artifact of Model I theories-in-use that produce environments that are highly defensive, lacking in trust, self-sealing and decreasing in effectiveness. Most change strategies espouse a change in the organizational culture and practice of the institution but are implemented by individuals who continue to use Model I strategies that may actually perpetuate the status quo and exasperate the situation. From this perspective the threat of sanctions like those contained in the NCLB federal legislation may only serve to intensify rather than rectify the dilemma in which these schools find themselves. School reform strategies must create environments in which teachers, staff, administrators, parents and community partners learn to work cooperatively together to produce sustainable gains in student learning.

One of the first steps toward school reform is to understand the underlying organizational dynamics that tend to perpetuate the problem. Figure I is a diagnostic model that describes the Model I conditions that are present in many schools and keeping them from improving. At the center of the diagram is the stark reality of continuing low academic performance by students. To explain this situation teachers and administrators point to environmental factors that limit the capacity of schools, which are depicted in the lower circle. Classroom discipline, low attendance and high truancy rates, mobility of both students and teachers, and the lack of parental involvement are given as major reasons why schools cannot improve student academic performance. Beyond these issues, however, people within the school point to a more fundamental dilemma. The curriculum that drives the every day practice of the classroom teacher is not aligned with a shared set of standards. Further, the teachers are not coordinating their lesson plans to ensure a proper scope and sequencing of material within and between grade levels. The end result is a fragmentation of effort and dissipation of energy.

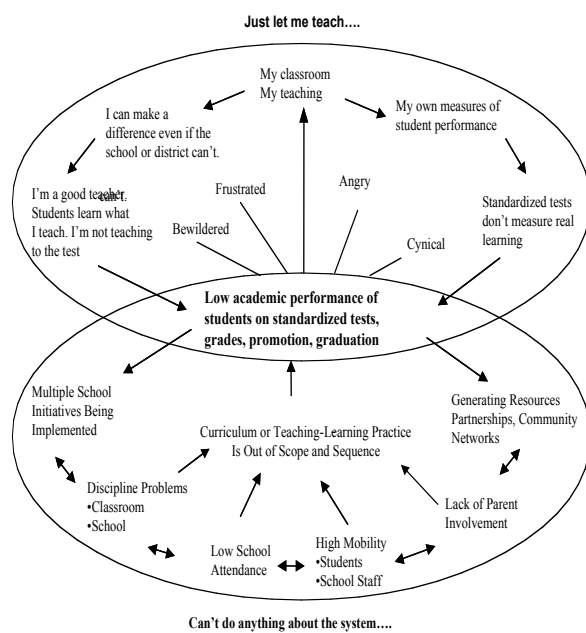


Figure I: Organizational Dynamics Leading to Low Performing Schools

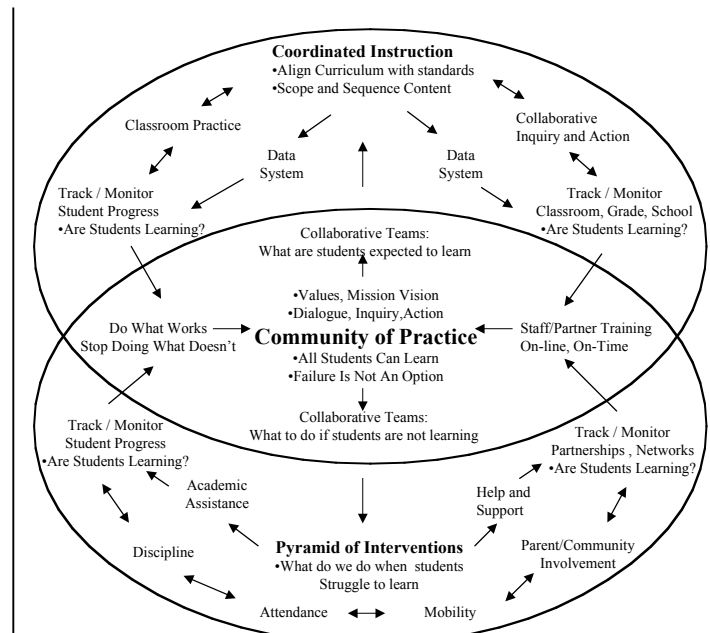


Figure II: Learning Efficacy Through A Community of Practice

The upper circle depicts the response to this situation. The teachers retreat into the classroom with the conviction that they can make a difference even if others cannot. New programs and resources have come and gone with little impact. As a consequence, when students struggle with learning teachers turn inward and simply work harder to reach the at-risk student. They point to

progress in classroom performance while also challenging the validity of standardized exams and “teaching to the test.” An environment of doubt and mistrust begins to shape the school environment. This reaction tends to deepen the fragmentation of effort among the school staff and to further dissipate the energy, resources and capacity that is available for productive problem solving at the whole school level.

Figure 1 depicts an environmental condition that fosters learned helplessness (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). When people confront an undesirable situation that persists in spite of their best efforts they come to believe the causes are beyond their control. They begin to think and behave accordingly creating a self-fulfilling and self-sealing prophecy. They feel bewildered, frustrated, angry and cynical. The phrase “this too shall pass” becomes the mantra that greets any new initiative thereby dooming it to failure. In human beings learned helplessness may lead to suicide. Organizationally, the threat of severe sanctions that could lead to closing a school if it doesn’t improve may be seen as the only way out. In short, hard working, well intending, and highly professional and competent individuals find themselves in a no-win situation that is sapping their energy, commitment, and capacity to continue the struggle with comprehensive school reform.

From Learned Helplessness to Learned Efficacy

A second step toward school improvement is to design an intervention strategy that will reverse the organizational dynamics described above—shift from learned helplessness to learned efficacy. Organizational efficacy is learned as individuals work in teams to create tangible products that bring results. Figure II provides a blueprint for learning efficacy in a school environment. At the center is a community of practice in which everyone shares the conviction that all students can learn and failure is not an option. (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). Members of the community work in collaborative teams to specify what students should be learning. The upper circle depicts the focus of this effort as coordinating instruction throughout the school. The assignment is to align the curriculum with state standards and to scope and sequence the material across all grade levels. Next, the teacher teams turn their attention to classroom practice. The intent is to coordinate daily instruction to ensure that everyone is covering the agreed upon material as planned. This line of inquiry and action leads to the second question of a professional learning community: How do we know if students are learning? Now the school-based teams track and monitor student progress by constructing a series of common classroom assessments that are administered at each grade level and/or content area to all the students at the same time. Care is taken to ensure that the questions cover what was actually taught in the classroom and accurately gauge student learning. Once administered, the school-based teams assess the results. The challenge is to resist the temptation to compete with colleagues in terms of who is the best teacher and who has the smartest students. Rather, the intent is to view the results as an indicator of how well students are mastering the material, which students across all classrooms at each grade level are progressing as planned, which need additional support, and what teaching and learning practices can serve as best practices to be shared among the team members and throughout the school.

At this point the third question of a professional learning community becomes the focus of inquiry and action: What are we prepared to do when students aren’t learning? The lower circle depicts the response to this question. Collaborative teams of teachers, staff, and community partners design a series of initiatives or a pyramid of interventions that is aimed at providing academic support to students who continue to struggle with learning. The array of activities may also include programs aimed at students who are doing well or excelling in their studies. The

array of activities includes what most schools already have in place and may require little, if any, additional resources. The challenge is to keep all students engaged in learning (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). The pyramid of interventions should include classroom and grade level activities, whole school initiatives such as mentoring programs, special day school study programs as well as after school programs coordinated by community partners. The focus is on targeting students with specific needs and interests, monitoring their progress, and communicating the results among school staff and parents as well as the students themselves. Each element within the pyramid must be aligned with classroom instruction and could deal with issues of discipline, attendance, mobility and parent/community involvement in the school. The goal is continuous student improvement in learning coupled with documented best practices among all of the academic support activities.

Communication among the different collaborative teams is supported by a comprehensive data system that integrates district level information on student academic achievement with day-to-day classroom performance. The system is used for curriculum planning as well as monitoring student progress. It helps teachers to identify students who are struggling and refer them to support programs. It facilitates taking attendance in a full array of programs and activities and monitoring individual student progress in meeting learning objectives. Community partners who offer after school academic support programs like tutoring and homework help access the data to plan and coordinate their activities with day school instruction. Parents receive regular and frequent feedback on their student's progress as well as practical assistance on how to help. The principal and school leadership teams accesses the data to monitor progress in school improvement across all grade levels and among all students. The principal engages the teachers, staff, family and community partners in assessing the results and planning for continuous improvement at the school, grade, classroom, family, and community levels. At all times emphasis is on how well are the student learning and what does the data say about the progress being made and what needs to be changed.

Implementing the Strategy

A series of action research projects were implemented in several schools during the 2002-03 academic year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The group of schools included elementary, middle, K-8 and high school settings. The format, however, was similar in each case. An action research class was organized at each site as part of a larger school reform strategy that was being implemented throughout the school building. Participants were recruited among teachers, administrators, and other staff members including paraprofessionals. In each case the principal or representative from the administration participated in the class. The class was organized as an action research team(s) that would focus on one or a number of assignments associated with the reform effort being implemented within the school. Emphasis was on teachers, administrators and support staff working together on a common project. The team(s) would frame and implement a project, document results and make recommendations for continuing the action research process during the 2003-04 academic year. Participants earned three undergraduate or graduate credits for completing the class. The written assignments included team papers documenting the different projects and results that were produced during the year plus a personal reflection essay on the experience. Participants taking the class for graduate credit submitted a second paper that related the action research process to the literature on school reform or related topic.

The three questions associated with a professional learning community provided the framework for designing the action research projects. The MPS district is currently

implementing a comprehensive literacy initiative that embraces this approach to school reform with strong emphasis on aligning the curriculum with state standards coupled with data driven decision making at the school, grade and classroom level The following is a summary of the major products that were produced by the different action research teams.

Q1. What should student be learning? Most of the action research projects were organized around this question. The participants formed themselves into classroom or grade level teams and worked on aligning their lesson plans, syllabi, and learning projects with state standards. The teams chose to align one subject area (reading or math) rather than take on the task of aligning the entire curriculum. The class participants engaged their subject and/or grade level colleagues who were not taking the class in the alignment process. In effect, the class members provided grassroots leadership by helping the entire school to align its curriculum. In March 2003, the MPS central office published a set of district wide “learning targets” for each K-12 grade level that was aligned with state standards. This publication greatly assisted the efforts of the school-based teams. In the end, the action research teams produced a matrix showing the connection between the specific concepts, information and skill sets being taught in the classroom with the corresponding learning targets and state standards to which they are associated. The team reports were turned into the principal as part of the school reform strategy. One school team produced a binder containing the aligned curriculum and distributed it at the final staff meeting in June. Another team posted the planning matrix on the school intranet system allowing subject area teams throughout the building to continue aligning the curriculum and to share the progress and challenges being encountered with other teams throughout the school.

Q2. How do we know if the students are learning? Two sites were able to begin addressing this second question in addition to aligning the curriculum. At one school, the principal requested that all teachers design and conduct a common assessment in math. The class participants worked with their colleagues in producing the common assessment and integrated the results into their report to the whole school at the end of the year. At a second site, the school was implementing a professional learning community model using Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) grant dollars. The facilitator of this grant worked with the leadership team of the school to design and implement a common assessment in each of four subject areas. In another school the class participants focused on assessing the degree to which the approach to reading being implemented in the first through third grades was working. In all cases the schools concluded the year with a commitment to continue using the action research process to align the remaining subject areas of the curriculum as well as focus on developing and administering common assessments.

Q3. What are we prepared to do when students continue to struggle with learning? This is the third and perhaps the most challenging of the three questions. It calls for a network of academic support initiatives that is coordinated throughout the school and aligned with classroom instruction. One action research class decided to focus on this question as its part of the CSR strategy being implemented in their school. As a beginning, the class members focused on three initiatives already in place and designed a system for teachers to refer students into these programs, monitor their attendance and progress, provide one-on-one mentoring and support for the students, and assess the extent to which the three initiatives were producing tangible gains in student learning. The class members developed and pilot tested a computer tracking system that would automate the process of referral, attendance tracking, and communicating student progress among teachers, other school staff, and parents. The class members developed an action plan for

the next academic year that included implementing this referral and tracking system throughout the school.

Conclusion

The action research initiatives undertaken by this small group of schools holds great promise as an integral part of a comprehensive school reform strategy. In the space of one year teams of teachers in different school settings worked together to address some of the underlying dynamics of struggling schools—teacher isolation, fragmentation of effort and resources, and an atmosphere of doubt and mistrust regarding whole school reform strategies. They formed collaborative teams and produced documents and professional practices that aligned curriculum, developed common classroom assessments, and designed data systems to track and monitor student progress as a result of coordinated classroom and school wide strategies. Action research is a process of continuous improvement. In every case, the schools have made the commitment to continue the process and have upped the anti. Rather than having a university class being offered once a week for a small group of volunteers, the intent now is to bring the action research process into the heart of the organization—the school leadership team which has the responsibility to guide the reform effort and assess its impact on student learning at the classroom, grade and whole school level. The goals are to complete the curriculum alignment, begin conducting common assessments, develop strategies to support students who struggle with learning, document results, and identify best practices throughout the school building. The leadership team will facilitate the process and assess gains in student learning that flow from these actions strategies. Stay tuned for a progress report from each of these schools.

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