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Using Action Research to Facilitate School Improvement

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Abstract

This study describes a joint project between a mid-sized urban school district and local university. Specifically, district and university personnel collaborated to provide action research training for building leadership teams. A multi-method approach was used to identify the barriers and facilitators of the use of action research training as a method for teachers to create school improvement. A content analysis of the action research plans that were a summative product of the training is provided. Findings include the importance of both technical research skills and attention to the provision of time as a resource for those involved with school improvement efforts.

Introduction

Along with persistent demands for rigorous academic standards, a recurring theme in current calls for educational reform is the need to involve local schools and districts in planning for school improvement. A decade after the release of *A Nation At Risk*, Terrel H. Bell, former Education Secretary and co-author of the report, acknowledged that as a result of the ineffective top-down reform characteristics of the 1980s, “changes in decision-making authority have been sweeping the nation” (1993, p. 595). Bell is unaware of any major American school system that does not have a campaign underway to strengthen site-based management of schools. In fact, varying models of educational decentralization are “in vogue” among many Western nations (Caldwell, 1992; Winkler, 1993). Although the extent to which site-based management is implemented varies from district to district, it is apparent that the trend toward local governance of schools is redefining the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents, administrators, and other members of the local school community.

Review of Relevant Literature

A fundamental element of site-based management models is one or several strata of school-level governing bodies that are comprised of administrators, teachers, parents, and community members. These stakeholders are presumed to be the most knowledgeable individuals when it comes to identifying and establishing effective learning environments for students at a particular school (Carlos and Amsler, 1993; Marburger, 1990; Mojkowski and Fleming, 1988). Behind the thrust for school-based governance councils is the principle of participatory democracy. Theoretically, greater participation in decision-making helps build consensus for certain reforms, thus ensuring that changes reflect the judgments and expertise of those directly involved in the teaching-learning process (Carlos and Amsler, 1993; Kreps, 1986; Owens, 1987; Ramirez, Webb, and Guthrie, 1991). As schools adopt participatory decision-making models, stake-

holders in the school improvement process have been compelled to develop skills and techniques that promote effective group communication, consensus building, and problem solving (Bailey, 1991; Gresso and Robertson, 1992; Schlechty, 1990).

Not surprising, the emphasis on educators as decision-makers has fostered a renewed interest in the concept of action research. First popularized by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, action research has endeavored to create a space in the research process for individuals who have been traditionally viewed as non-researchers (i.e., teachers and administrators). Examples of exploratory action research activity have been many and varied, and research collaborations between schools and universities world-wide have been documented throughout the United States and abroad (King and Lonnquist, 1992, 1994; Noffke, 1997). Widespread interest and study notwithstanding, the use of action research, as a school improvement model, has yet to become either well understood or well established in schools.

Purpose and Context of the Study

This study considers both the process and product of the school improvement endeavors in a mid-sized urban school district. Several years earlier, the district had adopted a site-based management system in which administrators and teachers assumed responsibility for the educational outcomes in their buildings. To facilitate this restructuring effort, building leadership teams were established in each school. The initial progress of the building leadership teams was slow and inconsistent, so the school district teamed with a local university to provide training for the school improvement teams. The intent of the training was to help building leadership teams develop communication and action research skills that would be useful for the teams as they developed a written school improvement plan. This study describes the collaborative efforts of the school district and university to provide the action research training. Specifically, the purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to identify the barriers and facilitators of the use of action research skills as a method

for teachers to create school improvement, and (2) to conduct a content analysis of the school improvement plans that were a product of the action research training.

Methods

Participants. Fourteen building leadership teams (3 high schools, 3 middle schools, and 8 elementary schools) participated in the action-research training. Each building team was comprised of the building principal or assistant principal, a parent (usually a PTA member), teachers, and other support personnel (primarily guidance counselors). One of the teachers on each team served as the *official* union representative. In addition to the 104 school-based participants, several district administrators, the union association president, representatives of the PTA, and three university professors assumed various roles throughout the training.

Action Research Training. The training was initiated during a two-week summer workshop. A senior district administrator and university professor assumed responsibility for developing the training sessions, and they selected a number of commercially available materials (ASCD, 1994; Calhoun, 1994; Sagor, 1992). The two-week training was actually conducted by a collaborative team of district and university personnel. The essence of the training was a five-step action research process of problem formation, data collection, data analysis, reporting results, and action planning. In addition to this technical training participants received training in team building and communication skills.

Following the summer training, monthly follow-up sessions were held. The purpose of these sessions was to provide additional support and address specific issues that teams encountered as they began to implement the action research process in their respective schools. Teams were afforded the opportunity to share ideas and experiences and provide support to members of other teams throughout the district. During this four-month time period, facilitators were available to work with individual schools. A total of 38 site visits were made to 10 of the participating schools. These 10 schools had requested some form of support from a facilitator (e.g., assist with data analysis, lead focus group, etc.). Several months into the training, each team was required to develop and submit a written action research plan. Presently, district and university personnel are continuing to work with individual teams and at least one more group session is planned.

Procedures

A multi-method approach was used to evaluate the process and product of the action research training. First, a somewhat traditional closed and open-ended questionnaire was administered at the completion of the two-week training program. The purpose of the instrument was to assess the participants' perceptions of their readiness to undertake action research initiatives at their respective schools. The

questionnaire was administered several months later to gauge changes in attitudes and perceptions.

Next, interview data were collected and field notes were developed after each follow-up session and throughout the subsequent months as the building teams began to implement the action research steps. The field notes included session agendas, participant's work to date, and short interview style quotes that were generated during large group discussion (Yin, 1984, Merrimam, 1990). Focus group interviews (Kruger, 1988) were used to develop the teams shared perceptions of the action research process and were compared to the individual perceptions gathered (Miles and Huberman, 1994). From this data set teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the barriers and facilitators of employing an action research process to the study of school improvement were generated.

Finally, a content analysis of the action research plans was conducted. A thematic analysis of the manifest components of the plans revealed the status of the school improvement endeavors across the teams and provided evidence for evaluating the efficacy of the training.

Results and Discussion

Initial Training. At the conclusion of the summer workshop training, the members of the school improvement teams were excited and motivated about the endeavor that lay ahead. They were generally very confident about their abilities to implement action research in their schools, and they were quite satisfied with the personal and professional development that the training afforded. The participants expected that the knowledge and skills they gained during the training would be useful both during the initial stages of implementing school-based management and in sustaining their efforts. Many of the participants commented enthusiastically on the partnership between the district and university personnel. The joint endeavor was seen as a positive and worthwhile venture. Without hesitation, the component of the training that they valued most was the time to work cooperatively within and across schools teams.

Follow-up Training Sessions. The analysis of the qualitative interview data that were generated during subsequent training sessions suggests that time was the major barrier to successful development and implementation of a school improvement plan. Lack of time to think, talk among team members, and prepare and analyze data collection tools were cited as significant barriers to the improvement effort and hampered both individual and team goals.

Additionally, the qualitative data provided some insight into issues of teacher and principal empowerment as a result of the action research effort.

Time. If there is any consensus in the school improvement literature on the single most important structural support teachers could receive, it is that of time (Caldwell and Spinks, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994; Little, 1993; Raywid,

1993). The findings of this study are no different. However, what our results suggest is that additional time to work on improvement efforts is necessary, and the use of the time spent must be considered. As others have already found, the provision of time to meet and plan may result in changes in terms of curriculum planning and classroom innovation, it cannot guarantee innovation (Louis and Miles, 1990). The same is true of action research efforts. Adequate time to meet and study may improve the chances that quality research efforts will result; however, time alone cannot ensure success.

One way to consider this issue is to consider time as it is experienced in schools. For the teachers in this study, and teachers elsewhere, the lived time of the classroom and school day is intense. Daily, many decisions must be made and often little ‘research’ goes into the decision-making process that results in daily classroom bound decisions. Thus, it is natural for teachers to fall back on these kinds of decision-making processes when approaching an action research project as well. However, as we reviewed the data collection tools and subsequent analysis of school based data we found that quick immediate “peeks” at the information collected is not sufficient to create shared understandings of either the problems to be studied or solutions to be explored.

Teacher Empowerment. While teachers reported that they felt “empowered” by the research tools the training provided, school politics and structural concerns (time to meet and plan, shared understandings of school mission and values) dominated the focus group interview sessions. Furthermore, the focus group interviews suggested that the pressures of teaching in an urban district exacerbated even minor analysis efforts. In particular, meetings scheduled to analyze data often became “emergency” sessions to troubleshoot the daily concerns of managing an urban school population. However, there were many bright spots among the interview data as well. Team members reported feelings of efficacy in both the use of “research skills” to analyze school-based data and the development of the team approach as a method to collectively examine school issues. Focus group data reinforced the emotional, social and intellectual support members had gained during the study’s progress.

Principal Empowerment. While principals may have experienced some relief at the prospect of sharing the burden of school reform and change efforts, they also did not reevaluate what the role changes meant in terms of their positions of school leadership. Being freed from “having to know all the answers” in and of itself doesn’t free an administrator from the role of keeping the school moving toward its improvement goals. Thus, they found themselves trapped in a common dilemma—how to empower staff while still leading the group toward shared reflection and progress. Moreover, this is a second example of a lack of technical skill albeit of a different kind. The principals lacked the technical skills to renegotiate their new roles in addition to the technical skills to prepare the action research report documentation. Therefore, while they may have delighted in the

ability to “share the burden” they were unable to take the freedoms a lightened burden afforded and channel that energy elsewhere in the school organization.

Analysis of the Action Research Plans. At the conclusion of the follow-up session, the teams were required to submit a written action research plan. It was made clear by the facilitators that the written plans were “working documents” and that in all likelihood, teams would be at different points in the action research process. Although the teams were instructed to follow the guidelines suggested in the ASCD training materials, there was no attempt to prescribe the exact format that the teams should follow in writing their plans. It seemed reasonable to expect, however, that each plan would contain a problem statement, data collection and analysis methods, and action steps since both the ASCD materials and the facilitators’ directions explicitly identified these components.

Organization and Format. Although the plans did contain similar components, they were also characterized by a considerable amount of variability. Each plan was uniquely organized, varied in both the depth and breadth of information provided and the amount and type of ancillary materials included (e.g., mission statements, sample questionnaires, data analyses, etc.). An initial examination of the plans revealed two distinct organizational patterns. One group of plans (a total of eight plans) were logically-organized and professional-appearing of 10-15 pages in length. These building teams documented their work with a variety of support materials, and all but one of the plans contained a list of the team members. Two of the plans in this group were submitted in nicely-bound notebooks with colorful covers and seemed to convey a special sense of school pride. In contrast, the other group of plans (a total of six plans) clearly stood apart from the others. Of this group of six plans, five of the plans were more like executive summaries of the teams’ progress to date, and their lack of description documentation (1-5 pages) or organizational structure made them difficult to analyze and evaluate. The sixth plan was simply a conglomeration of documents (i.e., minutes from meetings, memos, several questionnaires, a ballot of some sort, etc.). This plan had no logical order or structure to it.

Problem Statement. Each of the plans identified a problem that would serve as the focus for the research plan. Only two of the plans described problems that were *directly* related to learning “improving math proficiency” and “improving language arts and writing” respectively. Interestingly, six of the plans identified *achievement criteria* as the goal (i.e., raising standardized test scores, increasing grade point average, and increasing attendance rates). Three schools identified goals that are somewhat tangential to student learning (i.e., safety, and school climate). Finally, three teams identified the need to improve faculty communication as their problem. The focus on performance criteria such as test scores and attendance rates is noteworthy. One might argue that students who attend school regularly and perform well on standardized measures are more likely to have mastered

the skills and knowledge that will prepare them for the workforce or post-secondary education. Or, one might contend that schools today are pressed to use hard data to demonstrate “evidence” of school improvement.

Both the workshop facilitators and the training materials stressed the need to consider the professional literature as teams began to clarify and focus their problem statements. Nevertheless, only one team indicated that they planned to consider the literature related to their problem area. Of course, the absence of a reference to related literature cannot necessarily be construed to mean that teams omitted this process. Rather, it might simply be a conscious choice of the team not to document this step. Given that educators are often criticized for dismissing the value of professional literature, however, it is just as likely that this all-important step may have been omitted.

Although the teams were able to identify a problem area for study, most problem statements were written in broad, generalized descriptions and only four teams included actual research questions in their problem statement C even though the samples provided in the training materials clearly identified the need for research questions. While the lack of clearly identified research objectives could be an indication that the teams were still in the process of delimiting their problem area, it is more likely that the teams lacked the skills and practice to focus their target area—a task that is challenging to even experienced researchers. The need to identify specific questions, however, is a critical initial step in the action research process because it is the questions themselves that will drive the data collection and analysis steps.

Sources of Data. The second component of the plans was sources of data, and 13 of the teams addressed this topic. The four teams that listed specific research questions were able to identify data that were congruent with their questions. For example, the number of office referrals and interview data were suggested data sources as indicators of improved safety. Writing samples, test scores, and teacher observations were identified as indicators of written expression. Nine teams did not identify specific research questions, and they took one of two approaches to this section. Six of these teams identified the data sources (e.g., staff, student, and parent questionnaires, archival data, and interviews, etc.) that they used to identify and clarify their problem focus. The remaining three teams conjectured about the sources of data that they *might* use as they implemented their plans.

Several issues bear noting. First, teams did seem to understand that the value of multiple measures. Of particular concern however, is the obvious misuse of survey methods. Twelve teams proposed or actually sent questionnaires to parents. Judging by the number of responses reported, it is clear that there was no consideration given to the necessary sample size, the representativeness of the sample, and the biased responses.

Data Analysis. The five teams that collected data to clarify their problem statements were actually in a position

to analyze data. Indeed, three of these teams reported actual results (in the form of frequency counts and narrative analysis) and the other two teams simply stated that they analyzed the results. The remaining teams could only conjecture about how they *might* analyze the data, and they did so in very vague and broad terms.

Action Plan. The last component of the documents was an action plan. The purpose of this part was to identify the steps that teams expect to initiate. Although ten teams *addressed* the topic of an action plan, only three of the teams actually identified a list of specific steps that they plan to undertake, and only one of the teams actually considered such topics as resources, participants, and a time-line for completing the tasks. The remaining seven plans included a very vague and often flowery narrative about future actions.

In summary, the variability in the plans may be due to several factors. First, given the nature of the training materials, it may be that the *technical* skills of action research were not sufficiently addressed. The need for choice and independence in developing their plans notwithstanding, beginning researchers are likely to benefit from structured guidelines or perhaps even a template to guide their efforts. Certainly, the technical skills of action research must be addressed. To the trained researcher, the ASCD materials may make sense. But the process of systematic inquiry needs more depth. It is difficult to adapt *formal* research methods (i.e., survey sampling, questionnaire design, etc.) for use in action research endeavors if one doesn't know the fundamentals. Second, it was obvious through the interview and focus group data that teams were at varying stages. Some teams were cohesive units. Other teams appeared to struggle through the process. Clearly the need to communicate among themselves was prerequisite to any systematic problem solving.

Conclusion

In summary, our discussion results in two arguments. The first centers on the need for technical skills to be developed in all members of the school improvement team for progress to be made toward an action research agenda. Second, it is important to note that the members of these teams felt strongly empowered and efficacious toward their ability to work together on shared common school improvement goals. Even without a complete battery of technical skills, teachers can achieve strong affective results by simply participating in a program focused on school improvement goals.

Time is not only necessary to carry out change agendas but essential if innovations like action research are to be maintained. Schools cannot remain both static and exceptional. An institutionalized ongoing self-renewal process is necessary for the maintenance of school effectiveness, and this, in turn, implies a need for considerable and regular blocks of time devoted to technical skill-based learning and the creation of school improvement knowledge. Teachers need opportunities to consider action research plans and data

within department or grade level gatherings and in the context of all-school efforts. Consequently, the use of time devoted to action research must be understood in two ways. First, teachers must be provided the means to meet on a daily basis to address issues of concern to immediate work groups of faculty—departments, grade levels or teams. Second, provision must be made for cross connection among smaller work groups that emerge in the full faculty. It is only when school efforts are clearly described and focused upon that improvement based on action research projects will occur.

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