

ACTION RESEARCH BY PRACTITIONERS

A Case Study of a High School's Attempt to Create Transformational Change

PURPOSE

I worked with one mid-western urban high school for two and a half years (2009–2012) to create a systematic approach to improving its school-wide instructional program. Among the primary goals was to create a sense of a learning community in which practitioners would become stakeholders and undertake some research in order to reflect upon and to ultimately improve their professional practice. My work with this one school, let's call it Seaman's High, emphasized cutting-edge supervisory practices (clinical supervision, action research, lesson studies, differentiated supervision, intervisitations, peer coaching, etc.) as an alternative to traditional teacher supervision and evaluation (see Glanz, 2011). This article will focus, for the most part, on the attempt to incorporate action research by practitioners in the school.¹

CONTEXT FOR THIS RESEARCH AND THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The research study reported in this article was made possible through work I undertook as a Senior Fellow of the Institute for University School Partnership at Yeshiva University. The core of my involvement focused on ways to assist schools to improve instruction in the classroom. More specifically, my work assessed instructional quality in schools in three areas: teaching practices, curriculum development, and professional development (supervisory) initiatives. Schools participated voluntarily in Institute work with Yeshiva University in order to achieve higher levels of success in their schools thereby attempting to effect transformational school wide change. My work in this particular school covered

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examining school-wide professional development initiatives, enhancing professional skills of the administrative staff, and working with teachers to break the prevalence of frontal teaching, a common concern in many high schools (see, e.g., Quinn, 2002). This article will focus exclusively on the latter effort.

Seaman's High School located in the mid-west is an urban school with 65 teachers and 990 students in grades 9–12. Ninety-nine per cent of the students go on to college. Among its peers, the school is considered to be academically rigorous, but it does offer leveled learning experiences for its diverse student body. The average years of experience among teachers is 15, with about 5 new teachers entering each year due to faculty retirements. The school is administered by four individuals, each with a different focus: e.g., general, overall school administration (principal), student support (assistant principal), school-community liaison (assistant principal), and instructional coach. I worked, primarily, with the latter individual.

The initial agreement between the school (as well as other schools in the network) and Yeshiva University's Institute centered on the mutual interest of transformational change regarding various aspects of the school's functioning including, among others, strategic planning, financial and budget analyses, organizational arrangements, and instructional improvement. Instructional quality, the focus of this article, occurs, according to the literature on school reform and change, gradually and when capacity is developed, nurtured, and sustained in the school building based upon extant, cutting-edge educational practices (Fullan, 2005, 2006, 2007; Hargreaves, 2005; Levin & Fullan, 2008; Shulman, Sullivan & Glanz, 2008). Educational quality is achieved to the extent to which those educators who work within the school are empowered to focus on instructional matters. For instance, even though the mentoring of new teachers is clearly supported by research and best practice (Manna, 2010), this school as well as many others in the network of school partners did not have a mentoring program in place for new teachers during their first three years in the school. Schools joined the network in order to transform the way they provided assistance to new teachers through support mechanisms aimed to build teacher capacity (see, e.g., King & Newmann, 2001; Marks, Louis, & Printy, 2002).

Teachers in Seaman's High were informed in advance of the strategic association with Yeshiva University's Institute and were apprised of the objectives of the project, as alluded to earlier. Teachers were divided, traditionally, by academic departments, each supervised by a chairperson. The academic culture in the school was traditional as personified by some of the following practices: curricula created in a top-down fashion, teacher evaluation based on yearly observations and write-ups, monthly faculty meetings focusing on disseminating information, and professional development opportunities primarily out-of-school, with occasional in-house workshops developed and conducted by administrators. My role, initially, was to visit in order to gain acceptance among the teachers. Long visits getting to know the staff and sharing my professional experiences eventually led to cordial professional relationships with teachers and administrators.

After the first year of visits, about eighteen teachers in three distinct academic departments volunteered to examine their teaching practices through the use of instructional leadership initiatives such as action research (Altrichter & Posch, 2009), peer coaching (Truesdale, 2009), critical friends (Bambino 2002), book studies (Sullivan & Glanz, 2014) and instructional walk-throughs (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), all of which aim to deepen the school's commitment to a culture of instructional excellence.

ACTION RESEARCH BY PRACTITIONERS

In order to actively engage teachers in non-threatening ways to examine their practices in the classroom I decided to provide the teachers four options, initially, for reflective practice: Book studies, walk-throughs, peer coaching, or action research. Whatever approach teachers would select, it would occur through self-initiation without oversight by a school administrator. Participants, though, would be asked at faculty or departmental meetings to share their reflective experiences without divulging any confidential matters among the teachers involved. I provided workshops on each option and allowed teachers to decide upon one or more option (but no more than two at a time). Although I will relate some of the experiences among the faculty with some of the options, I will concentrate discussion for this article on action research because, among all the approaches, abundant literature exists on it, and faculty at the Seaman's High were most willing to attempt to implement its practice in their classrooms, at least initially. Aside from book studies, it was the most popular choice. My experiences in working with these teachers in this particular school reveal some intriguing notions about the implementation of innovative instructional practices that, I believe, have implications for other school contexts as well.

STUDY DESIGN

Once the program was initiated, I decided to utilize case study research in order to monitor progress of the various initiatives and determine the impact, if any, on the primary goals of transforming classroom teaching practices away from primarily frontal teaching. This effort, as stated earlier, was part of an overall attempt to foster school wide transformational change. Since the school board, along with the administrative staff of the school were quite interested in determining the efficacy of stated initiatives, I needed to provide, according to them, "concrete, quantifiable evidence." Initially there was reluctance by non-educator school board members to rely on single case study methodologies, as they were perceived by some members as lacking rigor. I spent a significant amount of time in discussions with board members and school administrators explaining reasons I felt such a methodological approach would be warranted in this context. Since the data collected from this aspect of the study only partially represented the overall impact of the stated initiatives, agreement was reached.

I served as a participant observer (see, e.g., Iacono, Brown, & Holtham, 2009) consultant hired by the school to assist in implementing and assessing various instructional improvements in the school. I based my research design on the work of several prominent figures in the area of single case study design (e.g., Bennett & Elman, 2006, 2010; Kazdin, 2011; Willis, 2014; Yin, 2013). Although usually used to monitor individual progress, I used this methodology to track progress of the action research initiative that included several teachers. According to Willis (2014), single case study research "provides a nuanced, empirically rich, holistic account of specific phenomena" (p. 14). Although researcher subjectivity and external validity are two of the more significant limitations of such research, I countered by including as the mainstay of the research baseline data/assessment (i.e., surveys), repeated or continuous assessments (i.e., questionnaires, interviews), and an analysis of the variability of the data (i.e., the degree to which the treatment, primarily action research used by practitioners, changed behavior of the teachers). Data on two separate occasions were also verified by an outside observer. This individual was a member of my assessment team with other schools and he visited this particular high school only occasionally.

A word about the research instruments that were employed is important. I personally interviewed board members, school administrators, department chairs, and teachers, using a semi-structured interview protocol, to assess the extent to which stated plans at transforming practices were accomplished. No one was interviewed without prior consent. Many interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. At times, audio-recording was not feasible given the nature of this ongoing project in a bustling, fast-moving urban high school. Coding of interview data occurred (Creswell, 1998; Weston et al., 2001). Questionnaires, anonymous in nature, were distributed as well. The school (board and administrators) approved this research since, as stated earlier, they contracted my university to undertake an analysis and assessment of the school's instructional program. Participants were eager to receive feedback about their program and its implementation. All participants were informed that all identities would be concealed in reporting results of the study.

The classic works of Denzin and Lincoln (1998) and Merriam (1998) guided this qualitative case study. Since I, as the researcher, was a participant in the school change efforts, every attempt was made to verify data analysis and interpretation through the use of my doctoral assistants and colleagues in the Institute.

Four Questions this Article will Address:

The following questions guided my research; they form the focus of this article:

1. What are some factors that support instructional change at the classroom level?
2. What is action research and its potential for fostering faculty participation in reflective practice?
3. How did the teachers in this initiative react to the use of action research and to what degree did it transform their teaching behavior?

4. What challenges did the school face in its attempt to transform its instructional program?

The article will conclude with a summary of lessons learned as well as possible future directions needed in order to promote practitioner research on their practice.

Question #1: What are some factors that encourage instructional change at the classroom level?

Given the plethora of literature in this area I will try to be somewhat concise. Research is clear that instructional change at the classroom level occurs within the context of a positive school culture that promotes a professional learning community in which professional development is primary (see, e.g., Klar, Huggins, & Roessler, 2016; Sullivan & Glanz, 2006). According to advocates, when all these domains work together then all those involved in the change become committed and motivated.

Slavin (2005) discusses three types of school cultures and the likelihood of change taking place. The first is a Seed School where the staff is cohesive and very excited about teaching. They are led by a visionary leader where the entire staff is involved in decision making and is aware of the research and ideas being implemented. The second is a Brick School where the staff would like to do a better job and is willing to engage in a reform process if they were convinced that it would work. There are good relationships among the staff and a positive orientation towards change, although they do not perceive the need to develop new curriculum or instructional methods. The third school is a Sand School that is doomed to failure. It is complacent. The staff feels that it is doing and has always done a fine job. There are poor relationships between the principal and the staff and there is incompetent leadership. Obviously no school fits entirely into one category, but by studying the school culture you can predict how smoothly the change will take place.

In many schools a culture of isolationism that deters change exists. Professional learning communities are difficult to form and collaboration norms among teachers are often weak or, at least, undeveloped (Fullan, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). "There is almost no opportunity, in these schools, for teachers to engage in sustained or deep learning about their practice in the settings in which they actually work, observing and being observed by their colleagues in their own classrooms" (Elmore, 2004 cited in Levin & Fullan, 2008, p. 296). Moreover, it has been shown that top down change does not work because there is no ownership and commitment to the reform and bottom up beginning with the teachers also does not work. Top down and bottom up together with a bias for action is what leads to change (Fullan, 2007).

The ideal stage for change, however, is described in the following way:

School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when: teachers engage in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice (as distinct from teacher characteristics and failings;

the social lives of the teachers, the foibles and failures of students and their families and the unfortunate demands of society on the school). By such talk, teachers build up a common language, adequate to the complexity of teaching, capable of distinguishing one practice and its virtue from another. Teachers and administrators frequently observe each other and provide each other with useful if potentially frightening evaluation of their teaching. Only such observations and feedback can provide shared referents for the shared language of teaching and both demand and provide the precision and concreteness which makes the talk about teaching useful.

Teachers and administrators plan, design research, evaluate, and prepare teaching material together. . . . Teachers and administrators teach each other the practice of teaching (Little, 1981, cited in Little, 1990, pp. 97–98).

Researchers have indicated that one of the most important principles of change is that although the school, writ large, is the center for change, student achievement will not improve without a focus *on the classroom* (Hopkins, 2005; Fink & Stoll, 2005). “The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices in thousands and thousands of classrooms” (Levin & Fullan, 2008, p. 289). Real change is considered successful when it has become part of the natural behavior of teachers in the school (Hopkins, 2005). It involves changes in three areas: new and revised materials and technologies, new teaching approaches, and an alteration in belief and pedagogical assumptions (Fullan, 2007).

Studies have demonstrated that professional community, had the largest significant unique contribution to teachers’ instructional practice (Louis et al., 2010); to which principal leadership contributes significantly (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Marks, Louis, & Printy, 2002). This finding is consistent with previous research that showed that professional community is related to instructional improvement and is correlated with teachers’ adoption of new practices (King & Newmann, 2001; Louis & Marks, 1998; Marks, Louis, & Printy, 2002; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Teachers are more likely to develop when they work with other teachers and not the principal (Zepeda & Ponticelli, 1998). “When the focus of the teachers’ conversations is on the quality of student learning. . . teachers adopt pedagogical practices that enhance students’ learning opportunities” (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008, p. 463). Teachers practice changes when they feel trusted to work alone or with colleagues to improve their practice (Smyth, 1988). The principal should be involved in this community of learners, not just support it, since there are linkages between principal learning, teacher learning and student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

It is interesting to note that a prominent study (Louis et al., 2010) found that reflective dialogue, which is characteristic of clinical supervision, was one of the main constructs of professional community. Some of the other components of professional community identified in the research are receiving meaningful feedback on performance from a colleague, visiting other teachers’ classrooms to observe instruction and having conversation with colleagues about what helps

your student learn best (Louis et al., 2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008), which although are not found in the clinical supervision model, are included in differentiated or alternative models of supervision (Glatthorn, 1984). So although principal modeling and observation had only a very small effect on teachers’ classroom practices, there were other supervisory practices that were strongly correlated to changes in teachers’ instructional practices.

Professional development provided to teachers has also been shown to have a relationship with changes in instructional practice (Blase & Blase, 1999; Robinson, Loyd, & Rowe, 2008; Rous, 2004). Case study data from 20 schools indicated that when principals wanted to develop teaching capacity, instead of working directly with teachers, they provided strategic professional learning programs (Penlington, Kington, & Day, 2008). Support for professional learning of teachers is also included in the alternate supervision model.

It seems that professional community has the largest relationship with changes in teachers’ instructional practices. Professional development also is correlated with changes in teacher practice. However, it is important to note that there are many components of professional community and professional development included in the more recent supervisory models, such as action research.

Question #2: What is action research and its potential for fostering faculty participation in reflective practice?

Practitioners often assert that much educational research has a minimal effect on their practice (see, e.g., Dick, 2004; Hord, 2004; Pajares, 1992; Willemse & Boei, 2013). Educational practitioners, in general, are suspicious by claiming that “research can be made to support anything” (Calhoun, Allen, Halliburton, & Jones, 1996, p. 54). Breaking such stereotypical thinking based on erroneous assumptions and beliefs is difficult, although not impossible. The many attempts to involve teachers and principals in action research projects attest to its efficacy (see, e.g., Glanz, 2005; Gordon, 2008a; Gordon, Stiegelbauer, & Diehl, 2008).

Although originally developed primarily for the professional development of teachers (Zehetmeier, Andreitz, Erlacher, & Rauch, 2015), action research is a kind of research that has reemerged as a popular way of involving practitioners, both teachers and supervisors, as well as professionals in other fields (e.g., health care practitioners) so that they better understand their work (see, e.g., Acosta, Goltz, & Goodson, 2015; Altrichter & Posch, 2009; Beaulieu, 2013; Glanz, 2014; Gordon, 2008b; Ioannidou-Koutselini, & Patsalidou, 2015; Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Corey (1953) explained that action research is undertaken “by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices” (p. 141). Corey was the first educator to include supervisors as they “attempt to solve their practical problems by using the methods of science” (p. 141).

Action research, a type of applied research, is a form of deliberate inquiry that is conducted by practitioners to improve practices in educational settings. Action research, like other types of research, utilizes an array of methodologies

and approaches. Action research, however, differs with traditional research in three ways:

1. Action research doesn't rely on advanced statistical techniques to analyze data.
2. Action research is utilized primarily by practitioners to solve specific problems.
3. Findings from action research are often not generalizable to other groups and situations.

These three differences do not minimize its importance and relevance for educators. Action research is not merely defined as a narrow, limited practice, but can utilize a range of methodologies, simple and complex, to better understand one's work and even solve specific problems (Acosta, Goltz, & Goodson, 2015; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). Educators apply action research to "systematically study and reflect on their work and then make informed changes in their practices" (Zepeda, 2012, p. 269). Properly used, it can have immeasurable benefits such as creating a system-wide mindset for school improvement, promoting reflection and self-improvement, among many others (Hallinger, & Heck, 2010; Oolbkkink-Marchand, van der Steen, & Nijveldt, 2013; Rodgers, 2002). Sullivan and Glanz (2014) suggest a range of benefits that action research can provide, including empowering teachers, creating a focus on school improvement, improving decision making, fostering reflection, promoting ongoing instructional improvement, enhancing the school environment, and supporting professional development.

Glanz and Heinnman (in press) have conceptualized five forms of engagement involving action research. For purpose of this literature, I will focus on the form that was most relevant for this case study research: participative. Participative action research, which was the form I primarily introduced to the faculty at the high school, focused on banding several teachers, primarily in the same discipline, around a common, seemingly intractable issue; i.e., finding alternatives to frontal teaching. As will be emphasized later, this was a perceived problem among teachers given the fact that high school periods were confined to 37 minute segments. As one representative teacher put it, "How can I do anything else but teach frontally with such little time to convey the material they need?" Nonetheless, teachers rallied around this form of action research engagement that fosters a "bottom-up" process that has the potential transform a school's staff into a professional learning community (Arredondo Rucinski, 2012; Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Within such an approach, the opportunities for staff engagement are high. The ultimate goal in this form of engagement is to facilitate an environment for reflective inquiry and professional development (Sagor, 2000). One's praxis is elevated by the encouragement of team involvement and collaboration.

Participative inquiry raises critical questions among those involved in the process. Questions may include, "Who is included/excluded and why?"; "What are

the group dynamics of the team?" "Who are the natural leaders?"; "What impact would power struggles have on the effectiveness of the research inquiry process?"; "What factors encourage or impede the development of a community of learners in solving mutually agreed upon problems in order to improve the school?"; "What is the role of the supervisor or school principal in this process?"; "How can s/he deliberate the inquiry and, at the same time, remain a significant partner without dictating priorities?" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Boothroyd, Fawcett, & Foster-Fishman, 2004; Isenberg, Loomis, Humphreys, & Maton, 2004).

Yet, we felt that working in this one high school, given the nature of the teaching staff (described below) and the support proffered by school administrators, that participative action research had a good chance of accomplishing its goal. This form of engagement, we felt, was ideal given the willingness of participants within a school to work together to solve or understand a pressing issue. Challenges existed, though as readers will discover, in terms of conflicting individual personalities, political constraints, and social dynamics among organizational members as a whole.

Question #3: How did the teachers in this initiative react to the use of action research and to what degree did it transform their teaching behavior?

For this particular article describing this one school intervention, I will not focus on the overall strategic vision and goals that were meticulously charted early on in the project (for more details on the larger effort, see Glanz, 2011). In spite of the fact that Seaman's High invited our team to work with them on school wide transformational change, in large measure due to a charismatic and popular principal who sought "to do better," we began our research efforts by undertaking baseline data. Extant surveys of teacher (and student) satisfaction, board and community participation in the school were examined. Informal, and later formal semi-structured interviews were conducted with school administrators, board members, teachers, and upper-grade students (grades 11-12). Visits to classrooms were undertaken using an observation protocol to monitor the instructional core (see City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Marzano, 2009). Thick anecdotal descriptions of classroom interactions were taken and transcribed, for the most part. Initially, observations were conducted by two individuals to achieve a sense of consensual validity. Once a baseline was obtained, I conducted subsequent observations of classrooms over a two year period (selected excerpts of these reports will be noted below briefly). Educational and curricular materials were also examined. A perusal and summary of the schools instructional program was prepared in terms of a formal baseline, report. My comments that follow center only on aspects of the report that are relevant to classroom teaching, as they are my focus in reporting this study as well as the fact that, as mentioned above, instructional quality is a key factor to achieve significant transformational change.

Our general finding that although frontal teaching does have a role to play in a school's pedagogical approach, it is overused in many classrooms at Seaman's

High; in fact, many teachers even use a lectern or podium to *lecture*. Recitation was evident in many situations wherein the teacher was most active, guiding lessons, posing questions, in rapid succession and calling randomly upon selected students. Many students during choral recitals (i.e., repeating in unison words or phrases uttered by the teacher first) were not engaged. The teacher's attention was focused on approximately 40% of the students of the class with most students' educational needs not attended to, a common problem with overuse of frontal teaching (see the classic study by Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969). Formative assessment, in general, was rarely applied. Use of pair and shares and other forms of formative assessments were not observed. Teachers at Seaman's High have not, for the most part, been effectively prepared in more recent pedagogies and technologies that allow for differentiation and alternate modalities or approaches of teaching including among others, pairs and shares, cooperative learning, small group projects, reciprocal teaching, etc.

Following the report, long discussions ensued among faculty, especially with departments. Most interest was generated about teaching practices, not necessarily because most teachers felt it sorely needed improvement, but they seemed intrigued with the finding that teaching was overly frontal. One teacher explained, defensively, "How else is one to teach?" Another joined in, "We have large classes, a short amount of time, and much material to cover." Teachers in the English department, on the other hand, didn't seem perturbed by the recommendation because they felt their classes were not overly frontal. "We incorporate active learning by encouraging students to read aloud and to role play," one English teacher explained. Our report alluded to specific departments such as science and mathematics in which the prevalence of frontal teaching was marked. One teacher reacted somewhat harshly. "What do you mean we teach in frontal manner, we conduct experiments with the students?!" Findings, though, demonstrated that although experiments were indeed conducted, they were, for the most part, performed by teachers themselves with most students looking on most of the time.

It was after these discussions about the study's findings that we introduced action research as a means for teachers themselves to gather data to determine realities in the classroom, to see for themselves the manner in which they were teaching, and to possibly discover teaching alternatives, if they deemed them necessary. At this point in our work, administrators expected teachers to select some sort of instructional option towards improving teaching. Some selected book studies (i.e., a group of usually no more than 4 or 5 teachers were to select a book to read and then discuss its implications among themselves), while others preferred collegial walk-throughs (short visits to classrooms that focus on student work), or lesson studies, in which a team would create a lesson and then observe a colleague teach it. A post-conversation would later ensue among lesson participants. The action research group, albeit small to start (6 teachers; one later dropped out for health reasons) took their work seriously. The focus of our attention in this article will be on their work.

At first, teachers in the action research group were eager to participate in learning about action research as it was a concept they were somewhat familiar with in that some of them had attended previous seminars at local and national conferences on the subject. "Yeh," said one of the teachers, "at the conference there were a bunch of sessions on action research and it really sounded useful. . . . I mean, you get a chance to frame your own questions and ultimately see what is working, . . . or not." Another teacher posited, "A colleague at another school had mentioned that her principal gave teachers an option to either be observed formally by her or to do an action research project on your own. I think I'd opt for the latter." None of the volunteers for the action research group, though, had actually ever used it to solve a real problem they faced in the classroom.

School administrators designated specific times for teams to meet. Two times were most common: one, during common lunch periods, and two, during daily preparation periods. Teachers in the action research group began to review the steps in action research:

1. Reflection

Group members discussed at length the 'claim' from the report that teaching was primarily frontal and that the needs of all learners weren't necessarily met using such an approach. Some representative comments included: "They [the administrators] are telling us that we have to focus on this perceived problem." "I think we have some leeway here to come up with an action research inquiry as long as it relates in some way to improving teaching." "No, we have to focus on the issue of overly frontal teaching." "The bottom line is what do we need to know to do a better job at teaching?" Much time was spent by the group reflecting and deciding on a focus for their action research projects. During this first phase, they also decided to examine some of the literature for ideas about alternatives to frontal teaching or ways to ensure that all students learn optimally in a given lesson.

2. Select a Focus

This step included discussion in three areas: (a) "Knowing what we want to investigate," (b) "Developing some questions about the area we've chosen," and (c) "Establishing a plan to answer these questions."

Representative comments included, "Let's come to an agreement on what aspect of our teaching we should focus on." "Do we all have to focus on the same aspect like our questions and students answers and how we react?" Much discussion continued without a clear focus agreed upon. They called the instructional coach for assistance. In the end, they reached consensus that they'd focus on teacher-student interaction during questions-answers. They also came up with what they thought was a "novel, interesting investigation." Based on material they had read from a Marshall Memo, they examined the literature about the ecology of a classroom (e.g., table-chair arrangements impacting on student-teacher interaction during the lesson): "Yes," one of the teachers said, "let's focus on that aspect as well." One said, "I read that the way the desks and chairs in the room

are set up influences, to some degree, the manner in which a teacher presents info." "Now that we have some focus, we need to phrase research questions and structure our study." They were discussing, and correctly so, the design phase of action research.

3. Collect Data

Once teachers had narrowed their focus to a few specific areas of concern, and had developed some research questions (e.g., "What impact does less lecturing and more student engagement (e.g., working in cooperative learning groups, problem-based learning, etc.) have on student motivational levels and achievement?" and "What impact do alternative seating patterns to traditional rows have on teacher teaching behavior and student attentiveness?"), as well as made a plan to answer them, they appeared ready to gather information to answer their research questions. They decided to work in pairs; one teaching, while the other observing in order to collect data. They decided to audio-record transactions, to be kept in confidence between them, and to video-record portions of the lesson to capture seating arrangements and other related interactions.

4. Analyze and Interpret Data

Once they collected relevant data, they began the process of analysis and interpretation in order to arrive at some decision/conclusions. At this juncture much reflection and discussion occurred to make meaning of the data. First, pairs discussed each other's findings. Then they joined the others to compare data. Some representative comments included, "I tried to shorten my lecture to allow for more student input"; "I noticed that by seating them in groups rather than common rows that such an arrangement was more conducive to discussion, and, . . . very interesting, I tended to talk less seeing them sitting in groups"; "It seems a seating arrangement does break frontal teaching somewhat"; "But I still need to cover ground!"

5. Take Action

Finally, they reached the stage at which a decision had to be made. They answered their research questions about the effectiveness of their teaching in terms of limiting 'frontalness.' They found that talking less did encourage and engage students "more than ever before." They still had reservations, however, about the manner in which they would "cover ground, . . . complete the course of study . . . cover the curriculum." They also gathered some information about the seating arrangements in their rooms and their impact on teaching and students. They did find that seating students in horseshoe patterns or traditional groups proved more conducive to student-teacher engagement. At this point in their deliberations, four possibilities existed in terms of the overall project: (a) They could *somewhat modify* their teaching based on their reflections and insights gained; (b) They could *greatly modify* their practices; (c) They could be *somewhat dissatisfied* with the results and therefore might reexamine their research questions and collect fresh data; or (d) They could *disband* the action research project, or modify it greatly.

Action research, they knew, is cyclical and ongoing. The process didn't necessarily have to stop at any particular point. Information gained from previous research may open new avenues of research. At this point, we encouraged teachers to consider some of the questions below that made most sense to them:

1. What concerns me about the process?
2. Why am I concerned?
3. Can I confirm my perceptions?
4. What mistakes have I made?
5. If I were able to do it again, what would I do differently?
6. What are my current options?
7. What evidence can I collect to confirm my feelings?
8. Who might be willing to share their ideas with me?
9. What have been my successes?
10. How might I replicate these successes?
11. In what other ways might I improve my teaching?

These five teachers engaged in action research as practitioners for the 2009–2010 school year. During one of my visits, I spent time with the team, responding to their questions, and at times, "putting out fires." Most of the troublesome areas focused on administrative logistics, rather than interpersonal conflicts. Prior to this particular visit, and the reason for my urgent attendance, was that I received an email from the instructional coach as follows: "Action research teams had their recent meeting last week. Some grumbling about time and responsibilities. . . . Should I disband the team?" I discovered that the team's complaints had essentially to do with administrative logistics and constraints on their time to do the job they wanted to do "to make it right." Parenthetically, similar issues arose among other teams including the PD team and the clinical supervision team (although with the latter they had difficulty debriefing each other with sufficiently appropriate supportive language). The mentor program and the book studies group seemed to continue without any issues.

In the fall of 2010, my work continued with these teachers and although they still complained about "finding time to engage in reflection and the like," they mentioned, "curiously" to one of them, that the "process, even though flawed at times, in the end proved a useful means to examine their teaching." One team member reported, "I try to talk a bit less and engage students more with questions." Still another reported, "Before I lecture on a topic, I do a K-W-L activity with them first to engage them for my talk." "I think I am less frontal; I don't know." No teacher could point to anything specific to demonstrate substantive changes in their teaching or in student achievement levels. Most of their comments focused on some benefits of action research

study such as, "This sort of research enabled me to see my classroom in ways I hadn't before." Three of the five reported that they "enjoyed planning and sharing with my colleague."

Question #4: What challenges did the school face in its attempt to transform its instructional program?

Based on an analysis of data, we derived the following two areas of concern:

Premature Initiation of Initiatives

The administration and department chairs at Seaman's High were excited about developing alternatives to traditional supervision and evaluation. Several ideas were discussed. As consultant, I was able to provide the school with an explanation and some PD in the interested areas: Book studies, intervisitations, peer coaching, lesson studies, instructional rounds, action research, etc. In their eagerness, more than one model was initiated often causing confusion. One AP explained as follows:

PD teams had their first meetings. Mentors and book study look like they are going to be crackerjack teams. Clinical rounds may be a social and logistical nightmare, but they could be productive with the right protocols and guidance. Teams of protégés found it helpful to talk with one another, even if sometimes for the "misery loves company" – to know there is not something wrong with you if you are not a seasoned teacher right out of the gate. Have we bitten off more than we can chew here?

Another example of not providing sufficient PD preparation before initiating a strategy occurred in instructional rounds. Teachers seemed not to be able to distinguish between focusing on the process, rather than on the individual teacher:

Hi, Dr. Author. The clinical rounds team met today and they wanted clearer guidelines on what they were looking for. They also were talking a language of evaluation even as they were aware that it was verboten. My gut is that despite the potential benefits of rounds, culturally we are not ready for them yet. I can talk a good game about observing "teaching not teachers", but there are agendas built into observation protocols (e.g., lessons should have beginnings, middles, and ends or student participation is important, or the content should be correct) that will lead to judgments no matter how polite we are. What should we do?

I suggested that they step back and have more discussion prior to implementation. The action research team must be considered within this overall context of various initiatives. I surmise (confirmed by my research partner) that the action research group may also have suffered from premature initiation but only because we initiated too many projects at once.

My interviews with department chairs and teachers at Seaman's High indicate that, as the literature demonstrates (see, e.g., Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Day, 2007; Reeves, 2009), without preparing participants with requisite knowledge and skills for a given initiative, the instructional reform effort is likely to be met with resignation, if not outright resistance. One teacher said, "I felt I just had to go along, . . . you know, don't rock the boat, . . . after all, other were enthusiastic; I just didn't feel that way." Also, as indicated in the literature review, without attending to and transforming the school's culture that promotes a learning community and willingness to take risks, new instructional approaches are not anchored for success. Several interviewees' reports led to this conclusion: "We are just used to the administration telling us what to do."

I think these findings are quite relevant to anyone who attempts to implement an action research initiative at any school. The major implication is not to rush head-long and ensure that all *t's are crossed and i's dotted* before proceeding.

Morale Issues

Instructional improvement is not made in isolation of other variables affecting a school, as highlighted in the earlier literature review. Context is key, so is economics. AP1 reported:

Reviewed results of faculty satisfaction/culture survey with AP2 and think about what is next . . . We run a risk on morale both from tone set by the head and from the change in PD expectations while salaries are frozen and no new contract has been agreed upon. We are also burning out well-meaning faculty on issues like dress code.

During my interviews a number of faculty members reported that morale "was at times high, but at other times low." Another stated, "We are uncertain what is going to happen. . . all these changes are frightening." Perhaps this latter comment also reflected by others could be attributed to moving along radical transformations in instruction and supervision too quickly." After listening to the teachers and administrators, moving deliberately and slowly as long as progress is being made makes the most sense. AP1 said it best, "Change isn't easy . . . you don't change a school overnight . . . It's fine to strategically plan like we are but we must always keep in mind the morale of the faculty as well as our own."

There were issues the school's administration had to grapple with as well (e.g., finding time in their schedules to handle instructional leadership initiatives) but discussion of these concerns are not relevant here because the focus in this study is on the teacher practitioner.

SOME REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Although the aforementioned challenges were apparent, our sense was that Seaman's High (faculty and administrators) acknowledged the challenges they faced. Yet, they were willing to forge ahead. Administrators were particularly

thrilled to witness teachers engaged in activities such as action research in which they would monitor their own professional practices in a thoughtful, measured manner. The principal said, "I hope we can continue such work with our teachers. After all, it's the practitioner that makes all the difference in the classroom."

Regarding my aforementioned allusion to teacher and principal enthusiasm, I think we can learn an important lesson and caveat for those engaged in the effort to initiate action research initiatives. Teacher involvement in action research (along with the other initiatives) at Seaman's High did not emerge due to a groundswell of teacher interest and support, at least initially. Involvement in action research, as one alternative to instructional improvement at Seaman's High, was essentially required, if not coerced. Teachers were indeed expected to be involved in some meaningful way in the overall project. As I reflect on my own work in the school as a participant researcher, I wonder about the role I played to encourage teachers to join the action research, a particular interest of mine. I also wonder about the degree to which we can offer teachers opportunities for action research engagement without having to compel their participation. Teachers I worked with at Seaman's High, though, were professionals who, by in large, accepted the opportunities presented in order to examine and possibly improve their teaching practice. One of the tasks I did not undertake in writing this article was to discern the degree to which, if at all, these teachers continued to use action research as a means for self-reflection and improvement since my involvement ended. Regardless, if action research is to play a significant role for practitioners, then their involvement should be as genuine as possible. I try to proffer some suggestions for accomplishing such an objective below, along with other conclusions.

What lessons can we learn from this report? In closing, here are a few lessons divided into two categories:

1. General lessons about the nature of school reform:
 - Schools that are encouraged by their boards to improve are more likely to remain steadfast even as they encounter challenges and setbacks along the way.
 - Principals who provide sufficient support leadership are best at sustaining faculty interest in the specific reform.
 - Instructional improvement initiatives should be supported or nested within a larger strategic planning effort.
 - Resistance to change is common and should be expected.
 - Success is a multi-layered, gradual process not always assured, but improvements even though incremental do occur.
 - Implement new changes slowly (even one at a time) and provide participants enough time to fully understand expectations and time to build requisite skills to ensure success of strategy (e.g., use of action research).
2. Specific lessons about the use of action research by practitioners:
 - Action research naturally flows from the daily work of teachers because teachers inquisitively pose questions about the efficacy of their practice.

- Although natural and based on common sense strategies, action research does require specific professional preparation in order to use it properly.
- Teachers should read some of the abundant literature on action research work with practitioners at other schools.
- Teachers should spend sufficient time (six months to a year) learning about action research prior to implementing it in their classrooms.
- Support personnel should be readily available for teachers to consult when questions or problems arise.
- When actually working on action research projects, teachers, working in teams, should brainstorm questions for inquiry.
- Data should be collected from several different sources.
- Data interpretation, among teachers, needs to be guided by an action research specialist.
- When actions are taken by teachers in the classroom, their impact should be monitored carefully.
- Forums at which practitioners meet to share insights should be regularly planned.
- Reflection is the key skill and disposition most valuable in action research.

Changing and building a new culture of learning and improvement certainly takes time and continuous commitment. Remaining focused or as one interviewee said, "Keeping your eye on the prize," makes good sense. Positive instructional change in any school is inevitably fraught with challenges. This school is still in process of developing new ways of learning and improving. The results of the action research initiative in this study are tenuous because transformational change does not occur quickly. It is clear that the teachers involved in action research took it seriously and began to seriously reflect upon their teaching, perhaps, in ways they wouldn't or hadn't before. Still, it is also clear that action research is no panacea to transform practice in the short run. Teachers, as practitioners, will have to forge ahead by continuing to phrase and rephrase their research questions, gather still more data, and reflect on them all, again and again.

END NOTE

1. Many details and specifics of this school have been omitted in this article, so as to maintain the anonymity of the school and study participants.

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REFLECTING ON TAKING ACTION

Three Suggestions

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Several years after my work in Seaman's High School was complete, I was in touch with the assistant principal, and I am happy to report that the initiatives we began have continued, probably in large measure because the administrative staff is still in place. Although I ended my article with some personal reflections and lessons learned, and posed as well several questions about my role as a participant researcher, I want to reflect more deeply here about several specific suggestions I can proffer for those interested in engaging in action research. One of the more challenging tasks I had was meeting the expectations of both teachers and the administrative staff. Although they were interested in the project, they were still somewhat skeptical about my ability to lead them in action research. The following suggestions might have alleviated some of my apprehensions.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

A fellow working in a large city would leave the building each day for lunch. He would pass the pretzel stand on the corner and place a quarter on the cart, but would never take a pretzel. This continued every day, week after week. Finally, the woman running the stand spoke up as the fellow put his daily quarter down. "Sir, may I have a word with you?" she asked. The fellow said, "I know what you're going to say. You're going to ask me why I give you a quarter every day and don't take a pretzel." The woman responded, "Not at all, I just wanted to tell you that the price is now 35 cents!"*

A researcher must expect the unexpected because research is a slippery, unpredictable process. Resistances came from the least expected sources, as did

*Some of the following stories were culled from *The Executive Speechwriter Newsletter* (802-748-4472) and from Oracle Service Humor Mailing List (jokes@oraclehumor.com).

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