Building a Learning Community through Teacher Action Research: Honoring Teacher Wisdom in Three Chicago Public Schools

Norman Weston

"I couldn't think of a better way to end the school year," said Mary beaming a smile at me. Observing the numerous small clusters of teachers still engaged in animated conversation in the large meeting room and out into the hallway of the Chicago Teachers' Center, I had to agree. Something significant had just taken place. As a veteran teacher and now a Chicago school principal, Mary Cavey had finished out many a school year, but today had been different. It had not felt like the last day of school. With the energy and hum of teachers talking about their action research projects still hanging electric in the air—it felt more like a beginning than an end.

On June 19, 1998, over 100 K-8 teachers from the Illinois Alliance for Achievement Network came together to display, discuss, and visit exhibits which represented the results of over 40 group and individually conducted action research projects. Set up in four rooms and a hallway in the Teachers' Center, colorful tabletop displays had featured examples of student work, project reports, photographs, charts, graphs, newly developed teaching materials, informational handouts, and videos. Topics included:

- Homeless Children;
- Imagery and Its Positive Effects on Education;
- Connecting Mathematics with Musical Sounds;
- Writers Workshop;
- The Student as Storyteller;
- Creating a Web Page;
- A Study of Test Preparation Materials;

- Integrating Music with Study of the Planets;
- Buddy Reading for Emergent Readers;
- Oral Language Development and Critical Thinking;
- Multiple Intelligences and Learning Centers;
- Motivating Writing Through Art;
- Letter Writing to Promote Self-Esteem, and;
- Peer Tutoring...to name only a few.

At the end of the day, many teachers said they had been inspired both by the projects and by the interactions with their Alliance colleagues: "I found this to be a wonderful learning experience," reported one. "I have always thought that learning should be fun. The Alliance has rekindled my thoughts on learning. For this I am grateful!"

"Today has been a very positive experience in helping me get an overall purpose for the program," said another. "It also was beneficial for me to be exposed to all these great ideas. It recharges and motivates me to try some in the new school year."

Recalling her own impressions of the event, Mary Cavey wrote:

> It was energizing to see how meaningful these projects were to the teachers who worked on them. Walking from exhibit to exhibit, I was impressed by the quality of work and the knowledge gained from every project. Teachers became engaged in meaningful reflective dialogue about what worked and what did not. Teachers also came away from the conference as active learners. The excitement and curiosity to learn became contagious.

The event capped off the first year of a long-term project designed to promote the concept of "learning communities" within and between the three schools. As action research advisor to the project, my purpose in writing this article is to try to better understand what happened to bring about the kind and level of positive energy, excitement, and enthusiasm depicted above. It explores the question: What is it about action research that fosters community in schools? An important second purpose is to document how inner city teachers in Chicago Public Schools became involved in teacher action research, shared their teaching practice, and grew professionally.

The Alliance for Achievement Annenberg Project

A goal of the Alliance for Achievement Network is to break down the traditional hierarchical structures of large urban schools, and replace

them with smaller, more intimate groupings, or constellations, of teachers, students, parents, and staff. The belief is that everyone—teachers, parents, and students—learn better in smaller, more personalized learning communities. In pursuit of this vision, in the fall of 1997 three Chicago Alliance schools, Bethune Elementary (560 students; 98% African American), Piccolo Elementary (930 students; primarily Hispanic and African American) and Spry Community School (850 students; predominately Hispanic), in partnership with the Academic Development Institute, the Chicago Teachers' Center, and the Annenberg Challenge, set out on the first year of a three-year project to (1) create a number of small schools, or constellations of teachers and students, within each larger school; (2) provide training in action research to help the small schools and constellations achieve their stated goals, and; (3) unite all of the small schools and constellations within the three larger schools into a symbiotic Network learning community. Specific action research goals were to "generate educational initiatives which draw upon the expertise and creativity of faculty to achieve the school's instructional focus," and to "assess the effectiveness" in achieving those goals. Crucial to the success of the project, a cadre of substitute teachers would be hired to release teachers (two hours in the afternoon for six days from November to May) to learn about, design, and conduct action research. As part of the larger project, the "cadres" would also be involved in creating parent education programs and community sponsored after-school programming for students.

Beginnings and Problematic Questions

My first task was to prepare and conduct two workshops for constellation leaders. (A constellation was defined as "a group of approximately 10 teachers who come together to plan and implement project goals.") The purpose of the first workshop was to introduce constellation leaders to action research; the second was to prepare them to guide their colleagues in action research. Since the workshops could not be scheduled until mid-November, and then again in early January, teachers would have only the second half of the school year in which to conceive, conduct, and report on their research. Meanwhile, a lot was going on.

Because some of the small schools, and nearly all of the constellations were just being created (the project's first initiative), many had not yet begun to formulate their goals and purposes (from which their action research would ideally flow). Also, there were other programs operating in the schools having specific guidelines that teachers had to follow. Two of the three schools were on probation—as part of the Chicago school

reform, these programs and curricula were the result of schools having had low test scores and were administered by "outside partners." In addition, team-building exercises and parent education initiatives were also going on as part of the project.

Time was short. At the university, I have two years to work with a cohort group of approximately 15 teachers on their M.Ed. teacher action research projects; now I had less than six months and nearly 100 teachers! I began to think, in order to make this work, I had to present action research to the constellation leaders in a clear and simple way, while yet being true to its basic principles. What's more, after the two training workshops, I would have to rely upon the constellation leaders to keep the process going in their schools. I came to think of this as "action research by remote control."

I very soon realized that doing action research with teachers in the throes of Chicago school reform would not, and could not, be the same as doing action research with suburban teachers seeking master's degrees. Problematic questions began to surface as I started to plan for the first workshop, only a few weeks away: (1) how can I present this new, and fairly radical idea, to teachers who were already feeling under siege, as being something more than "just another thing" for them to do? For this to happen, I knew that I would have to find a way to win their confidence and trust; and (2) how was I going to advise and train this large group of teachers, scattered around three schools, in the basic precepts and methodologies of action research while having only minimal contact with them? (i.e., the "remote control" problem). It was not until quite a bit later that I discovered the answer to this question was to rely on the action research process itself.

Teacher Action Research vs. Institutionalized Action Research

Educational action research focuses on educational practice and its improvement. The term "action research" was coined by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) to describe a mode of inquiry having the following characteristics:

1. It is an activity engaged in by groups or committees with the aim of changing their circumstances in ways that are consistent with a shared conception of human values. As a means of realizing the "common good"—rather than merely individual good—*it strengthens and sustains a sense of community*.
2. It is a reflexive social practice *in which there is no distinction between the practice being researched and the process of researching it*. Social practices are viewed as "theories-in-action" to be reflectively assessed in terms of their

potential for realizing worthwhile change (Elliott, 1985, p. 242).

Today, action research is being increasingly used for district, state, and even national educational initiatives. (Caro-Bruce & McCreadie, 1995; Heckman, 1996) However, the purpose is often not to better practice or to increase understanding of an educational situation, but to assess the effectiveness of a particular intervention, typically not of the teacher's choosing. Allan Feldman (1995) has termed this the "institutionalization" of action research. "If there is a purpose for employing action research that supersedes the immediate goal of improvement of practice and the longer-term goal of generating knowledge," says Feldman, "then this vision of action research is institutionalized action research" (p. 190).

Noting the increasing use of the term "action research," longtime teacher and action research advocate, John Elliott (1991), has warned, "there are signs that action research has become hijacked in the service of technical rationality" (p. 52). This was not the kind of action research I believed in; nor was it one I wanted to present to the teachers. Returning to the source, I believe that the three basic principles of action research first put forth by Lewin still hold today: *its participatory nature, its democratic nature, and its merging of scientific inquiry with practice* (Kemmis, 1985). With these principles in mind, I put together my own definition of action research for the opening workshop with the constellation leaders.

Since busy teachers have little time to read up on the latest educational theories, I used language they could relate to and explained action research as:

> ...*taking a risk to change your teaching in some way*. It is active inquiry—something you are going to do differently with your students to improve a situation. The idea is to try something out and see what happens. The action research cycle is one of experimentation, reflection, followed by further action. This kind of "reflection-in-action" is an ordinary part of good teaching; action research is a natural extension of reflective practice.

The First Workshop: Introducing Action Research

The stated purpose and rationale for including action research in the overall project was to "draw upon the expertise and creativity of the faculty to generate educational initiatives." Taking this to heart, I began by saying to the teachers how honored I felt to have been given the opportunity to work with them on this project. I further told them that they possessed a practitioner's wisdom and knowledge that outside "experts" could never

have. I knew that they were busy and overwhelmed; I hoped that they would not see this as "just another thing to do," but rather as an opportunity to do something that *they* wanted to do. Sure, I told them, it would be work, but it would be *their work.*

In this initial encounter with the teachers, I tried to address my first concern: Would they see this as something valuable? Would they see this as worth doing and committing precious time to? My approach was to acknowledge the negatives, while holding out the promise—inherent with so much possibility—that this would truly be a project of their own. At the end I knew that I had made an impact, but I was not quite sure what. Later, one teacher said: "At first we were all skeptical about having another thing to do, but as it went along, and we talked more, we were able to come to a topic we were really interested in."

Teachers Teaching Teachers: Trusting in the Dialogue

The purpose of the second workshop, which was attended by almost double the number of teachers present at the first (this, due to the fact that constellations were still being formed), was to prepare the constellation leaders to introduce action research to their constellations. At the first session, each had been given a packet full of handouts, articles, and examples of teacher action research, along with a detailed five-step outline for conducting action research starting with a focus statement and rationale. Since the first workshop, many had become excited about the prospects of doing this kind of research. One had even explored the topic on the Internet.

After answering any questions about the project, or about action research their teachers might have, I asked them to lead a discussion which would explore some general areas or problems of educational practice that the entire group or individual teachers might want to research. The purpose was to help the group collectively identify those areas or situations they felt needed improvement. Using a model by David Forward (1989), I asked them to address the following questions:

- What is happening now?
- How is this a problem?
- Imagine some solutions.
- What resources do we already have?
- What are our boundaries and limitations?
- What do we need?
- How can we begin?

I explained that I did not expect them to have answered all of the questions

at the end of this problem-defining session. Beginning the dialogue was what counted. To this end, I offered the following advice: "Do not 'short change' the discussion at this first session. It's important to let people 'have their say.' If not, they will not take ownership of the problem, or of possible solutions. A good rule of thumb, I have found is to listen, respect, and affirm." This was not easy to do, as one constellation leader later recalled:

> As a constellation leader, I learned that you have to be a good delegator. I got overwhelmed at times, but I finally learned to turn things over. I didn't have to control everything. It got easier after that.

Action Research by Remote Control

Giving up control and letting the process do its work was something all of us had to learn—myself, the principals, the constellation leaders—even the teachers. When asked at the final forum what the frustrations of the project had been, one veteran teacher recalled this part of the process:

> One of the frustrations was also one of the rewards; and that was coming up with a problem. We had too many problems! Too many ideas. But pretty soon people started getting a focus and they would go off and plan together, especially the women! After while it was just a few of us unorganized men sitting there talking. We finally came up with a topic. But it was the process...trying to get a topic that I found valuable. I've taught for over 20 years, and for me it was rejuvenating.

At the conclusion of the workshop, much to my surprise, I had received a spontaneous round of applause. I was pleased, but stunned. Looking back, I see this was the first indication of the depth of impact that action research would have on this group of teachers. It was as if they had been starved for some kind of personal and professional recognition for a long time. This was revealed later when I asked one constellation leader what she thought about action research as a vehicle for school reform.

> Well, it is one of the few things I have experienced...with all the new programs and so forth...that allows teachers to have a say in things. It respects what teachers know. You can see that here today.

Being recognized and respected can lead to feelings of efficacy and

personal empowerment. "I had never heard about empowerment before this project," said another constellation leader, "but I see action research as empowering the teacher *and* the student. We so seldom have a chance to talk about our own teaching. I discovered a lot of expertise out there!"

Others commented on the power and value of dialogue to create a positive feeling of community which included not only their fellow teachers, but was extended by way of their research projects to encompass students as well. "It was beneficial to collaborate with peers and to let the students know that they were participating in research," said one teacher. Another added: "I learned that cooperating with other teachers can be very rewarding, and that if I let children make some key choices, peace and calm result, not mayhem. (And) that interchanges between classrooms are very beneficial to the kids."

Increased excitement and motivation—for teachers and students alike—can result from the participatory nature of action research. "It's something you do *with* your students, not *to* them," I explained at the first workshop. I emphasized this characteristic in order to help teachers get clear about how action research differs from traditional research. Having picked up on this distinction, one teacher later recalled:

> I learned that not only does action research provide motiva-
> tion for the students, it also motivates the teacher. From
> the first day the kids were excited and that made me more
> motivated to continue, to try to change. You have to get rid
> of the things that don't work, throw them out, and try some
> new things. Action research helps you do that.

Having the constellation leaders take responsibility and ownership of the process from the very beginning, I believe, was crucial to the project's success. Ironically, what had at one point appeared to be problematic, turned out to be a necessary element at the very core of the process. Trusting the teachers to go through the process was essential to realizing the product.

Action Research Principles Revealed in Action

In researching for this project, I was influenced by four points, or characteristics, that Feldman and Atkin (1995) used to describe as their "style" of teacher action research. Contained within the principles first set down by Lewin, and then woven into my own "practitioner's" definition of action research, I found each characteristic revealed in either the words or in the actions of the teachers in this project. As though embedded in the process, they are:

1. **It is collaborative.** The collaboration is primarily among teachers, not between teachers and an outside researcher. For this reason, I did not try to steer or influence the focus of the teachers' research. Teachers were allowed ownership both of the projects and of the process of selecting topics to research. In this way, the small schools and constellations were led to develop their own sense of identity and direction. This sense of identity became strong in some groups. I recall showing up to consult with a group one day who looked a little bewildered that I was there. They soon politely told me that they did not know I was coming, and that they already had an agenda set with work to do. Thinking, "This is just what I had hoped would happen!," I quickly re-packed my bag, sat back and watched their process unfold. (Unfortunately, this same group took on such a large project—self-esteem and character education—that they were unable to put in place all of the ideas they had generated in time for the culminating event.)

In addition to fostering a sense of group identity, teacher collaborations also have the potential of identifying problems, or illuminating areas, that normally do not merit the attention of professional educational researchers. This is because projects are often conceived of in ways that can only be imagined or seen by practitioners. A project entitled "Centro de Escritura" (The Writing Center) is a good example. Seeing that their children did not enjoy writing (the problem), two first-grade teachers combined students from their special education and bilingual classrooms in a project designed to improve the children's writing skills by enticing them to become young authors. A project which used relaxation and visualization techniques as prerequisites to creative writing was another unique approach.

2. **Teachers focus on their own practice, not the practice of others.** In this way, the teacher becomes the subject of her own research. The process is self-reflective. Each teacher begins by asking herself: What is going on in my classroom with my children that could be better? Paradoxically, the process can also foster a sense of professional community with trust at the core. Making these kinds of questions public through dialogue with other teachers can trigger a re-examination of values and assumptions affecting practice. For example, when asked what she had learned from the project, one teacher said:

> I learned that if the project is the teacher's own it is going
> to work. I also learned that, by talking in our constellation

group, we have similar problems. It helps to know that it isn't just me who is having the problem.

Another added:

I agree. I learned a lot from talking with the teachers in my constellation. What their problems are. . . I also learned a lot about my own strengths and weaknesses. It was the sharing and communication, I think, that was the most valuable. And all of the projects here today.

Self-reflectiveness leads to a third characteristic:

3. **It is self-developmental**. Action research is a form of professional development that begins with, and is fueled by, a teacher's interest. As Feldmam and Atkin (1995) so eloquently state, a classroom teacher's goal is not to add to a theoretical knowledge base, but to "become wiser" about her profession and practice. This is reflected in one teacher's observation:

A teacher's creativity lies in what she's interested in. Action research, after I got to understand it better, gave me the opportunity, for the first time, to fine tune something I was already doing in my class, but to do it better. I really appreciated that, and I think this is where action research helps the teacher . . .and the children.

Several teachers described their experience with action research using a growth metaphor:

I feel like with this project that I have planted some seeds that I hope will grow, and that I want to continue with next year. Once I got into the project, I really liked it. So did the kids. It kind of forced you to try something you always wanted to do but never got around to.

Others viewed the developmental aspect of the process in a more difficult, yet positive light: "This experience taught me how difficult teaching is," said one teaching cadre. Another learned "how much of a struggle it is to incorporate your own ideas and also the reward of going through the struggles." The word "struggle," leads to a fourth characteristic:

4. **It has a moral component**. Questions like "What is the best thing to do in this situation?" often lead to "What is the right thing to do?" A project

entitled "Homelessness: The Problem of Transience" is an example of the moral dimension that action research can sometimes take. At the year-end event, this project received the most visits of any, as evidenced by the number of written comments left behind by teachers. While most were short: "Very worthwhile project!" and "Great project!," the amount of interest shown in this project reflects an educational situation unique to inner city teaching. Who else, except teachers who have to work with children who are periodically homeless, would even conceive of such a project? In their caretaker's role, these teachers identified and acted on a problem having far deeper meaning and significance than most surface attempts to reform inner city schools by focusing on test scores.

Action Research in the Context of School Reform

Two schools in the project were on probation for having low test scores. Denying this fact would not make it go away. So, rather than let it sit there like the elephant in the room that no one will acknowledge, I decided to bring it up on my first site visit to one of the schools.

"How can you do this action research project when you have to be concerned about raising test scores?" I asked this after the group had already met once together to talk about action research. "Well, this all sounds good," I recall one teacher saying, "but the reality is we have to raise those scores." However, after a short period of discussion where the teachers used words like "humiliated," "intimidated," and "denigrated" to describe how they felt about being on probation, invariably someone would bring the conversation back to what it was they wanted to do for their action research. "Listen, respect, and affirm," I thought to myself at the time.

The teachers' show of faith in me, and in the process, convinced me even more that the approach of allowing individual teachers, small groups, or constellations to choose what it was they wanted to research was the correct one. I would trust in the process; the decision would be entirely theirs.

In the end, some teachers and groups did choose to focus on test-related problems. One well-documented project, "A Study of Test Preparation Materials," concluded that these materials were worthwhile for their students, they were not a waste of time, and would be used again next year. What this reaffirmed for me, was that teachers must play a major role in selecting topics for their research—including topics that the research consultant might not be especially excited about!

Trust and faith, both in the teachers and in the principles and processes of action research, are necessary pre-conditions for real and lasting school reform. As one teacher later said:

> I see action research as the "wave of the future" for school
> reform because it comes from *inside* the school, from the

bottom up, not being told this is what we have to do by somebody else. This is the only way reforms will work.

Creating the Conditions for Change

The culture of distrust and suspicion that so often pervades big city schools may also be at the heart of failed efforts at reform in those same schools. A study of 210 schools from the Consortium on Chicago School Research concluded that social trust might be the key factor associated with improving schools (Sebring, Bryk, & Easton, 1995). Similarly, a study of reform activity in 57 urban school districts from 1992-95 found that the apparent failure of reform in these districts was due not to too little reform, but to too much (Hess, 1998). Noting that, on average, one significant reform initiative had been launched every three months in these schools, the study recommended that the frantic pace of reform in urban schools be slowed; that schools quit looking to outside "experts" for "quick fix" remedies; and that an "increase emphasis on providing focused, consistent, stable, long-term leadership that cultivates expertise and community in the district schools" be adopted (Hess, 1989, p. 27).

The point is that real and lasting change takes time. It often takes as long to create the *conditions* for change as it does *implementing* change. That is why, in the initial year of this project, a lot of time was spent on getting teachers to trust us, trust each other, and to trust the action research process. This was necessary so they would commit to it. Central to establishing trust and commitment was having teachers choose their own topics to research. If we had told the teachers what to research, I am convinced the project would never have gotten off the ground, or have been easily sabotaged by indifference. As it turned out, action research, to those who wholeheartedly embraced the concept, became like an antidote to all that was negative in their professional lives.

Conclusion: Sustaining the Action Research Culture

The barriers and challenges to classroom action research have been identified as the following: the push toward standardization, an emphasis on assessment and accountability, budget pressures, and time (Feldman & Atkin, 1995). Conversely, things I see as needed to sustain a culture of action research are:

1. **Supportive Leadership**: To have a chance of surviving at all, principals and district administrators have to be supportive of the process. With the help of project staff, the principals came to see that teacher action research could be a vital part of professional development and building

a quality school.

2. **Time**: Teachers need time to meet and discuss their research on a regular basis. To be sustained, action research cannot be seen by teachers as an add-on. When asked what they would change for next year, many mentioned the need for more time.

3. **Collaboration and Sharing**: Teachers need opportunities to share their research with a wider community. Typically, most teachers work in isolation; unaware even of what others in their own buildings are doing. Collaboration begins within a school, but can expand later. Built-in mechanisms to regularly exchange ideas, share problems, and report progress create the conditions which allow for shared understandings and new knowledge to emerge within the group, while also reducing feelings of isolation.

4. **Teacher Ownership of the Research**: The chances of action research becoming self-sustaining are slim unless teachers see a potential for improving their own practice as a direct result of the process. It is critical that the research agenda be that of the teachers. Unless the research agenda is her own, a teacher will have little reason or motivation to follow through.

5. **Action Research is Self-Initiated Professional Development**: Action research respects, and is built upon, the unique wisdom and practical knowledge possessed by classroom teachers. It is a process by which teachers begin to systematically focus on their professional practice. An important intrinsic reward for engaging in this process is that it allows teachers to get better at what they do. The motivation thus becomes internal and self-sustaining because the situation, or problem, is their own.

6. **Access to Information**: Part of the action research cycle is gathering information relevant to the topic. While the teachers were able to generate a lot of ideas and problems to investigate, they lacked ready access to sources of information on their topics. Next year, to address this problem, we are working to make Internet connections available within the schools so that teachers might have access to a "library without walls."

Summary and Next Steps

What is clear from the first year of this project is that the concept of action research has been enthusiastically embraced by most of the teachers. The model suggests that increased teacher autonomy has a major role to play in creating and sustaining long-term educational improvement. Teachers' evaluations of the project revealed consensus around four themes: (1) satisfaction in knowing that this was their own work; (2) the value of meeting regularly with other teachers to discuss practice; (3) a desire to

connect more often with other Alliance schools, and; (4) to meet together in their constellations more often.

Teacher enthusiasm, energy, and ownership are necessary prerequisites for school improvement. Their appearance signals the first step toward sustained reform. Challenges and questions for the second year of the project become: How to make action research part of the continuing ethos of the school and of the Alliance Network? And, how to build upon the work teachers have done so far? We dare not disregard the teachers' first attempts at action research. To foster a culture of action research in schools, teachers need to feel that their research efforts are ongoing, continuous, and connected. Seeds have been planted.

Final Thoughts

"You didn't think we could do this, did you?" said Marta. She was standing there looking up at me as a video of her research project on cooperative grouping was playing in the background. Marta is a special education teacher with a lot of experience. "We worked 15 minutes a day, every day, putting this together," she continued, obviously proud. "It was a lot of work!" "No," I said, "I *knew* you could do it." We both had a good laugh. I was surprised at Marta's remark, though. Because never once did it occur to me that she, or any of the other teachers, could not do this work. That they might *choose* not to do it, yes; but never that they could not.

It seems that the primary attribute that an action research facilitator has to have is an unwavering faith and confidence in teachers' abilities to not only do such work, but to *want* to do it. Central to creating a culture of action research, and the attendant learning community in which it is held, is establishing and nurturing a climate of trust, expectation, and honesty. I never told the teachers that action research would be easy, nor that it would even work. I simply said that I respected them and their knowledge, and that this was a chance to explore something that they were truly interested in. Authenticity, trust, and dialogue I now recognize were the keys to the success of the event that introduced this article. As an outsider, I had the opportunity to become a catalyst for a process that one teacher described as a "point of departure for a long but positive destiny in education." From the inside, said Mary Cavey:

> Surely this experience indicates what is at the heart of whole school change. Teachers involved in activities that promote genuine professional discovery as we journey together building stronger learning communities.

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