

Collaborative Action Research and School Improvement: We Can't Have One Without the Other

Richard Sagor
Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education
Vancouver, WA

Abstract

The issues confronted by contemporary educators are unlikely to be solved by the adoption and implementation of "proven practices." Professional development must focus upon generating the new knowledge and insights required to tackle the challenges of an increasingly diverse student body. The author argues that given the nature of today's students, universal student success is likely to be achieved only through a new ethic of professionalism. This article posits that effective teaching is predicated on two factors: an educator's mastery of the profession's knowledge base and wisdom honed through a disciplined analysis of action. The author argues that through the collaborative use of the specific habits of mind that make up the action research process, teams of teachers will be able to discover the knowledge and insights required to make universal student success a reality. The article concludes with a critical review of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept and discusses how when properly implemented, PLCs can become vehicles to support this new model of professionalism.

School Improvement is not a mystery. Incremental, even dramatic, improvement is not only possible, but probable, under the right conditions (Schmoker, 1996, p. 1).

Action Research is research conducted by one or more individuals or groups for the purpose of solving a problem or obtaining information in order to inform local practice (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 567).

Professional Learning Communities are groups of connected, highly qualified and engaged educators passionately driven by change and "ongoing action" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 325).

The debate on whether teaching is more art than science will likely continue forever. However, what is without question is that the classroom teacher has primary responsibility for creating and managing the conditions where student motivation and learning occur. When visiting an effective classroom, one sees nearly everything (e.g., curriculum, classroom climate, interpersonal relationships, instructional strategies) working together, harmoniously, in service of the goal of student learning. The teacher of the effective classroom is generally able to discuss the specific strategies, decisions, and actions that lead to student learning and motivation. Sadly, these effective classrooms where all students learn and prosper remain more the exception than the norm.

Educating as Engineering

I would suggest that achieving universal student success, be it in an individual classroom or throughout an entire school system, is an engineering problem. Merriam-Webster's (2009) online dictionary defines engineering as a "calculated manipulation or direction." When classrooms or schools are not producing the expected results, a "calculated manipulation or (re)direction" of the social, pedagogical, and/or psychological factors that influence the learning environment is needed. There is no more important work for the contemporary educator than engaging in the engineering required to produce the new knowledge and surface the breakthroughs required for universal student success. In many fields, the work of engineering of critical innovations is called "Research and Development" (R & D). Current school reform initiatives rarely include teachers in the work of R & D. In fact, teachers have often been excluded from the R & D work aimed at creating the knowledge, understandings, and breakthroughs needed for the achievement of universal student success. The challenge of producing success for all students will require extensive re-engineering by the professionals who possess intimate contextual knowledge of the local teaching and learning environment.

Professional Work Defined

Elsewhere I have defined a professional as an individual who is ". . . expected to attack non-routine problems and to do so creatively . . . consider a variety of perspectives when making decisions," and, ultimately, "play a significant role in producing the knowledge and insight needed to move [his or her] profession forward" (Sagor, 2000, p. 31). To appreciate the nuances of this definition, it is worth reflecting on when one might seek the help of a professional. Usually it is for one of two reasons: (a) a need for mentoring from someone with exceptional expertise in an area and a desire to develop greater skills, and (b) a need to address a problem where solutions have remained elusive.

As a rule, problems that are easily resolved or for which there is a commonly accepted solution do not require the time or expense of professional consultation. When a light bulb needs changing, I do not call the electrician; I do it myself. Likewise, when a drain is clogged, I use a plunger before calling a plumber. When I sign a contract to buy a car, I do not feel I need to consult a lawyer and when planning a family dinner, I do not consult a nutritionist.

In essence, one does not need a professional when issues are routine. On those occasions, implementing a proven-practice with fidelity (e.g., screwing in a light bulb, using a plunger, applying the food pyramid) is the most efficient way to proceed. But, what about those times when the problem is non-routine? For example, imagine that the lights do not stay on or they burn out too quickly, the water pressure is too low, the contract is complex and contains unique language, or a family member suffers from numerous food allergies. These are the type of circumstances when one may feel the need to consult a professional.

When I consult a professional I do not expect a quick and simple solution. After all, if the answer was obvious, I probably would have figured it out myself. Rather, I need the assistance of someone who, based on his or her knowledge and experience, is likely to ask the right questions about my situation. Specifically, the professional will want to know: (a) What is it I want to accomplish? (b) What is getting in the way of my success? and (c) What might explain the difficulties I am encountering? Then, the professional will consider the following question: Based on the evidence from my case and past experience, what might be done differently to achieve success?

To answer these questions, a professional educator draws on two things. Mastery of the field's knowledge base is an important factor in the decision-making process of professionals. Pre-service education and in-service training are the primary sources of this knowledge base. Schools and universities play a crucial role in helping teachers stay current with developments in learning, curriculum, and instruction. Professionals also draw on wisdom honed through a disciplined analysis of the data related to their efforts in solving non-routine problems. These are the insights drawn through action research and further developed through meaningful collaborative work. The remainder of this paper will focus on this second dimension of professional knowledge, the disciplined honing of wisdom through the analysis of data on experience.

A New Approach to Professional Development: A Focus on Learning, Not Training

School leaders increasingly speak of the virtue of collaboration and professional development for their faculties. It has become common to organize school faculties into teams. However, most of these efforts aimed at fostering collaboration lack attention to the professional work of the educator and the essential purpose of collaborative work. Too frequently school systems adopt or mandate programs and provide professional development as though one size could possibly fit all teachers and meet the needs of all students (Sagor, 1995).

When teachers are mandated to attend training on the implementation of an adopted "proven practice," especially when the emphasis is on learning how to implement the program with fidelity, they are treated like blue-collar workers, not professionals. In the blue-collar model, the worker is expected to follow direction with precision and to carry out duties exactly as management directs. Then, if results do not match expectations, the blue-collar worker feels justified in saying, "Don't blame me, I did my job precisely as I was told!" But, this lack of accountability is not the standard applied to professional practice. Professionals hold themselves accountable for producing the best possible outcomes.

Intuitively, professional teachers know that no particular "proven practice," could possibly result in success with all of the students they have in class and that good teaching involves altering and modifying programs in consideration of students' individual needs (Allington, 2002). Nevertheless, they are often told to "implement" the program with "fidelity" (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006). Experience tells teachers that scripted instruction will inevitably lead to certain students being left

behind. Electing to leave a client unserved or underserved is an emotionally untenable position for a professional in any field. Professional teachers have several options when confronted with this “blue-collar” expectation. Unfortunately, none of these alternatives are particularly attractive: they can quit, they can abandon their professionalism and do what is mandated, or they can choose to be insubordinate and work around the “fidelity” expectation.

If a teacher in this situation quits or acquiesces, the students who are most in need of professional attention will be hurt the most. For the “routine” student, the one for whom the “proven practice” was designed, the implementation of the proven practice with fidelity may be exactly what was needed. But, what of the student who did not respond to the “proven practice” as the teacher’s manual suggested? This is the “non-routine” student. It is not uncommon to find that even the finest scientifically-based “proven practice” will not be effective with one third or more of one’s students (Allington, 2002). If the expectation is for “fidelity of implementation” and teachers are told that deviations from the established instructional routine are frowned upon, what happens for the “non-routine student?” The “non-routine student” is placed in a situation analogous to a sick patient who, although he or she has not responded to the prescribed medication, is nevertheless required to stick with the same treatment protocol.

Professionalism and Action Research

To counteract prescriptive approaches and realize the dream of universal student success requires restructuring the work and expectations of teacher performance so that they are in line with a professional model rather than a blue-collar model. The ethic of professionalism requires the professional educator to continuously ask, “How can my work be modified to produce better results?” Persisting with practices that are not succeeding is the antithesis of professionalism.

This is why I contend that conducting action research is an essential component of the professional work of educators. Like professionals in other fields, the professional educator is expected to bring a mastery of the profession’s knowledge base to their work. Then, when encountering non-routine problems (e.g., a student or group of students not responding as expected), the professional educator is someone who makes use of all the knowledge, logic, and experience available to craft a viable solution. These sequential actions or “habits of mind” (assessing performance, analyzing problems encountered, prescribing an intervention, monitoring performance, and learning from the experience) are the core of the action research cycle. They are also the daily routine of the reflective practitioner.

Some reflective professionals become engaged in the process of conducting formal action research. Those who do not engage in formal action research should work to develop the same habits of mind. Therefore, policy makers and school leaders should focus on how to support teachers as they engage in professional learning and provide opportunities where colleagues can benefit from each other’s insight.

Supporting Professional Inquiry Through Professional Learning Communities

The challenge before today's teachers is enormous and resources are limited. How can schools re-structure so educators can conduct and share the action research (educational engineering and "Research and Development") that is so essential to school improvement? Many have suggested that an answer lies in the development and support of Professional Learning Communities or PLCs (DuFour, 2004; Wald & Castleberry, 2000). All one needs do is talk to the teachers where PLCs have been implemented and it becomes clear that all PLCs are not created equal (Leonard & Leonard, 2001). Some PLCs are valued by teachers while others are ridiculed as a waste of time. I would suggest that whether teachers regard PLC work positively or negatively is a function of how the PLC is used in each situation. Specifically, where PLCs exist primarily to support and share teacher action research, PLC work is valued. However, when the purpose is to ensure the implementation of "proven-practices with fidelity," teachers resent the mandate to engage in what Andy Hargreaves (1994) has called "contrived collegiality."

To fully appreciate the phrase, "Professional Learning Community," we must first focus our attention on the word, "community." Merriam-Webster's (2009) online dictionary defines community as "people with common interests living in a particular area." Clearly teaching in isolation is problematic for both students and teachers. Grouping teachers together in the same building and providing access to things such as common planning time accomplishes the proximity aspect of the dictionary definition of community. The second requirement for community, the holding of "common interests," is even more problematic. Generally with professional work, the common interest is client service. If teachers are to become part of a professional community, they must be able to work with other teachers who share a passion for the attainment of similar educational outcomes.

Of course, simply spending time with like-minded people doesn't produce school improvement. All communities aren't productive communities. There are dysfunctional communities where biases are shared and problematic behavior is reinforced. What distinguishes a productive community from a dysfunctional one is professional ethics. Specifically, members of a productive professional community are passionate about providing the most effective service for their clients. The rationale for investing in such a community is to improve each member's professional work through collegial support.

In an idealized world where all the issues faced by teachers are routine and all the solutions to classroom problems are known and catalogued, the role of the professional community is limited. The community might wish to occasionally come together to attend workshops, engage in book study, or swap favorite web sites. However, there would be no need for generating wisdom beyond what already existed in the knowledge base. Of course, that idealized world does not and likely will never exist.

This is why the pivotal word in the phrase Professional Learning Community is the verb “learning.” Learning is the only justification for a group of professionals to spend their finite time together. The learning needed by professional educators is specific and focused on discovering how to solve the non-routine problems that are hindering the attainment of universal success. One source of this professional learning is published literature. Many PLCs routinely consult the literature; however, much of the needed learning related to the achievement of universal student success will come from data collected in PLC teacher’s classrooms.

Teachers have continuous access to data; it is produced by their students every day. Classroom data can provide answers to a teacher’s most immediate questions. However, other times, especially when we are too close to the phenomena being studied, we can fail to see or appreciate all the variables or the significance of our data. This is why doctors consult their colleagues when preparing a treatment plan for a complex medical condition, why architects design buildings with a team, and why lawyers craft trial strategies with peers. Not only do these collaborations lead to superior results for the client, but the intellectual act of sorting through theories, data, variables, and hypotheses makes professional work more satisfying (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989).

The key to sustaining school improvement through the PLC process is to maintain a singular focus on continuously evolving collaborative action research. Elsewhere I have described the action research process as involving four sequential stages: (a) vision/target setting, (b) theory articulation, (c) action/data collection, and (d) reflection/action planning (Sagor, 2004).

Stage one requires vision and goal setting, which is a school-wide responsibility. It is important because there can be no “community” where there is no shared interest. An individual PLC should be a place where teachers who share a passion for an aspect of their school’s vision can engage in “Research and Development” in a collegial manner. The purpose of the PLC is to support the educational engineers as they craft solutions to problems confronting the organization.

Stage two, theory articulation, is a time where the support of colleagues is essential. It is at this stage where the teacher researcher must make explicit his/her “theory of action” for attacking a non-routine problem. This is difficult intellectual work and is always enhanced by the airing of multiple perspectives. Therefore, significant PLC time must be devoted to assisting members in the development of their theories of action.

Stage three, which involves taking action and collecting data, is work that teacher researchers often do alone in the confines of their classroom. As a rule, teachers teach, craft assignments, and have their students produce evidence of their learning. These three data sets – lesson plans, assignments, and student work products – provide a window into the adequacy of the researcher’s “theory of action.” Having colleagues review one’s plans for data collection inevitably result in the collection of richer data.

Stage four calls for reflection and action planning and is the stage where the most important professional learning occurs. It is for this reason that reflection and action planning is best engaged in with colleagues at a PLC meeting. Through the collaborative analysis of classroom data, each team member comes to understand the phenomena of their teaching and their students' learning more clearly than if they analyzed the data in isolation. Since all PLC members typically teach similar curricula to students in a similar context, the act of examining the experience in multiple classrooms provides valuable insights into each individual's teaching.

Conclusion

It is an exciting time to be in education. We have evidence that all children can learn and, more importantly, we now have a national consensus around the goal of universal student success. However, realizing this elusive goal requires unleashing the professional creativity of thousands of public school educators. It is clear there will be no silver bullet that will lead all educators to the "promised land" of universal student success, but there is also no reason for despair. Recent history has demonstrated that professional passion combined with innovative engineering and focused "Research and Development" have repeatedly produced extraordinary breakthroughs.

Schools are filled with professional educators hungry to discover answers to the challenges ahead. It now behooves school leaders and policy makers to get about the business of treating teachers as *professionals* and to re-structure schools as *communities* where teachers are equipped to regularly engage in the *learning* needed to make universal student success a reality.

References

- Allington, R. L. (2002). *Big brother and the national reading curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence*. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.
- Community. (2009). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- DuFour, R. (2004). What is a "professional learning community"? *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 6-11.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Education Service.
- Engineering. (2009). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2009, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com>
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2006). *How to design and evaluate research in education*. (6th Ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Johnson, E., Mellard, D., Fuchs, D., & McKnight, M. (2006). *Responsiveness to intervention (RTI): How to do it*. Lawrence, Kansas: National Research Center on Learning Disabilities.
- Leonard, P., & Leonard, L. (2001). Assessing aspects of professional collaboration in schools: Beliefs versus practices. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 47, 4-23.
- Little, J. W. (1982). Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions and school success. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19, 325-340.
- Rosenholtz, S. J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Sagor, R. (1995). Overcoming the one-solution syndrome. *Educational Leadership*, 52(7), 24-27.
- Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Sagor, R. (2004). *The action research guidebook: A four-step process for educators and school teams*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press
- Schmoker, M. J. (1996). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Wald, P. J., & Castleberry, M. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Educators as learners: Creating a professional learning community in your school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
-

About the Author



Richard Sagor is currently the Director of the Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education in Vancouver, WA. He has served as a classroom teacher, school administrator and professor of Educational Leadership. While at Washington State University and Lewis & Clark College, Sagor worked with several hundred school teams on the use of Collaborative Action Research for School Improvement. Email: rdsagor@isie.org