

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

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**Title:** The Effectiveness of Classroom Action Research as a Professional Development Tool

**Authors:** Carol Fisher (principal) & Tim Kaltenecker (district office administrator)

**Year:** 2009-2010

**School:** Coman Hill & District Wide

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SUMMARY OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context**

As administrators and evaluators of teachers, we were interested in how classroom action research can impact teachers' practices that lead to improved student learning. We hoped to learn the value of action research as a professional growth opportunity. Therefore, it was imperative to understand 1) the role of the administrator in supporting this work, and 2) how classroom action research enhances teachers' knowledge and improves instructional practices.

**Action Plan**

As a result, we developed two overarching research questions: 1) How does an administrator evaluate the success of teacher participation in action research? 2) How does the action research process enhance teacher learning and improve teacher practices that lead to increased student learning? These questions provided a framework for data collection.

Data were collected from three sources to address these questions. First, anecdotal records were maintained from participation in the six workshops throughout the year. Second, we interviewed teachers on an individual basis throughout the year about the process, teacher actions and student learning. Third, we analyzed documents including teacher action research plans, student work samples, and teacher impressions of student learning. Overall, we collected data about five times throughout the school year from nine participants: six from Coman Hill Elementary, two from H. C. Crittenden Middle School, and one from Byram Hills High School. We coded the data using themes from the literature and looked for emerging patterns in the data.

**Results**

Five important themes and one unexpected finding emerged from the data.

1. *The building administrator plays a key role in a successful action research program.*  
The administrator offers support to teachers by:

- a) Providing opportunities for ongoing dialogue with teachers who participate in action research. This dialogue adds clarity to teachers' thinking, giving them an opportunity to reflect on their learning and receive feedback from an objective perspective.
- b) Being a good listener and a cheerleader. Teachers need to know their efforts are supported, and the encouragement from leadership provides the necessary motivation and confidence to persevere through the process. One teacher noted that "the conversations we had throughout this process has most helped me. Your support in my project has given me the freedom to try new things and perhaps step away from the old."
- c) Allowing time for teachers to work on their action research. Otherwise, the effort might get lost to the competing demands upon a teachers' time.

2. *Teachers benefited from collaboration with their colleagues from all disciplines and grade levels.* First, teachers provide support to one another. Teachers said "I crave meeting with this group" and "It's good to talk about it with someone who cares." Second, teachers develop a collective responsibility toward each other and learn from one another. One teacher said that "I learned content by listening to other teachers' projects."

3. *Teachers' professional knowledge and understanding of their students were enhanced by participating in an action research program.* Teachers demonstrated increased knowledge about their topic from both the review of related literature and from employing new practices and reflecting upon the data. A significant factor in teachers' learning was their ability to focus deeply on a particular topic. One teacher noted that "The process keeps me focused on one idea. It forces me to read and learn about something new." Sometimes teachers' data confirmed their beliefs: "We felt for awhile that our current process [for spelling] was outdated. This is confirming it." And sometimes the data were unanticipated: "I had preconceived notions of what I would get out of [the data], but my data were different than what I expected."

4. *An effective action research program requires a facilitator that is knowledgeable about the action research process and is supportive of teachers' efforts in a non-judgmental way.* Given a safe environment with appropriate support, teachers are more apt to take risks and be honest about their learning. Evidence of this was expressed by the teachers: "It is important to feel that my work is valued..." and "I appreciate the freedom to explore without feeling judged."

5. *The process of action research evolves from uncertainty to confidence for some teachers.* As they continue to read and engage in the process in a supportive and collaborative environment, teachers become more confident as researchers.

6. *The action research process allowed for an effective collaboration between central office and building administration.* We discovered that the collaborative inquiry process provided opportunities for us to understand each other's perspective in instructional improvement. Together, we used these insights in ways to strengthen both the building level and system level approaches to professional learning and growth.

## Implications

Some conclusions and the implications for practice include:

1. A strong *guide* provides necessary support and structure to teachers during the action research process. District leaders should be certain to support the action research process with a knowledgeable and supportive leader—who is not the evaluator—to guide teachers during the process.

2. The *structure* and *time allocation* are critical for successful collaboration and sharing to occur. The district should carefully plan for an appropriate implementation process. The program should allow for both structured collaborative time as well as independent time for teachers to engage in their research. Do not be afraid to provide flexibility with teacher time; the process creates *autonomy* and *collective responsibility*.

3. Collaboration with colleagues provides necessary support to promote learning. An action research process inherently promotes teacher learning. District leaders should encourage teacher participation across grades and disciplines, and allow time for teachers to collaborate on their research and reflect on the process.

4. Administrator participation demonstrates support to teachers. By participating with teachers, administrators learn both the process of action research and the tenacity required to implement a plan. Above all, administrators participating in the process are likely to earn valuable trust and respect from the teachers.

5. The process *and* the learning outcomes are equally as important. Communities often want quick results. Thus, leaders look for programs that will quickly improve standardized test scores. A collaborative inquiry approach to professional development might not appear to be the fast-track approach. The process learned, however, benefits teachers beyond the training program as they develop a process for continuous improvement. Teacher ownership of their professional growth creates long-term improvement in classroom practices that far outlasts the initial excitement that comes after a one-day workshop.

6. Recognize that action research is a journey with struggles, realizations, frustrations and joy. Engaging in research is not common to most teachers. Thus, the process of inquiry results in a multitude of emotions, which speaks to the importance of a supportive environment. Teachers emerge as confident researchers, and they experience much joy by engaging in a collaborative inquiry process with colleagues across the district.

## Next Steps

We recognize that the data were limited; we engaged in this research over the course of one first-year pilot program and used a small sample of teachers. We encourage further studies to explore the impact of an inquiry approach to professional development. Additional questions that emerged include:

- How can the collaborative inquiry program be expanded to include more teachers and administrators while preserving the successful elements described above? What would be the impact of a cohort group staying together for two years? The participants in the program develop a commitment to one another and to each other's plans. Would the group benefit by remaining a study cohort beyond one year?

- The participants relied upon and valued the objective facilitator. At what point do we begin a turn-key process to train a teacher facilitator? What would be the impact of a teacher facilitator in the collaborative inquiry process?
- To what extent do teachers engage in a collaborative inquiry model beyond the scope of the structured program? Do they continue to utilize the process—or elements of the process—as part of their own professional learning?

The collaborative inquiry process from the administrative perspective warrants further study to explore these questions.

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