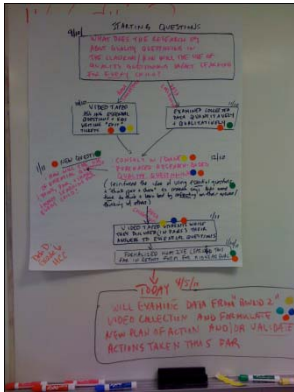# Teachers as Investigators of Practice?

by Diane Cunningham

At Byram Hills School District, teachers have many opportunities for professional growth. In 2009, Tim Kaltenecker, Curriculum Director, initiated a new professional growth option for teachers with the support of LCI. He wanted to offer job-embedded professional development and believed that action research could foster a shared commitment to student learning. Together, we designed a year-long staff development experience that has successfully guided teachers in deepening their ability to study their practice and student learning.

What is collaborative action research?

Collaborative action research is a learner-centered approach to staff development. It engages educators in meaningful learning opportunities and enables them to reflect on their practice in order to improve student learning. The action research process allows teaches to select a job-embedded focus and engage in a systematic study. Teachers in the program begin by framing a question and then move to taking action, collecting and analyzing data, reflecting, adjusting course and, often, generating new questions to pursue.

At Byram Hills, teachers who choose to engage in action research may work individually or in small groups inside of a cohort. For example, Barbara is working independently this year to study the value of the TI-Nspire calculator as a differentiation tool in her high school math classes while Maria, Jennifer, Ann, and Peggy are studying how to best use student interviews to diagnose students' struggles inside of the RTI process. All of the teachers engaged in the action research process this year are part of a K-12 cohort, so no one is ever alone in the process.

How was the program designed?

We designed this year's program to minimize time out of the classroom while still providing time for teachers to learn collaboratively. In September, all teachers in the cohort came together for a full day to learn about the action research process and to plan their studies. This full day was followed by four, half-day sessions. These half-day sessions provided time for instruction around data collection and analysis, but more importantly, they provided time for teachers to reflect, share learning and problem solve together. Some teachers used the second half of those days to work independently or in small groups with my support. The program culminates with a full day of writing and sharing between cohort members.

In year one of this initiative, while teachers studied their practice, Tim, Carol (a participating principal) and I engaged in action research alongside the participants. We felt it was

important to participate with the others and to model using the process in our leadership roles. I focused on the nature of teacher change, Tim focused on how the process impacted teaching practice, and Carol focused on what it takes to support teachers in the process. We each had our own research questions and data collection plans - I collected data from teacher reflections, work samples and discussions, while Tim and Carol collected observational data, anecdotal data and interview data. While we learned a tremendous amount in year one, we continue to learn in year two.

How do teachers change? What do they learn?

Several themes that emerged from my action research and from Tim's related to teacher change and learning. First, I discovered that teachers began to view themselves as researchers. Their reflections revealed that this was a new role for them:

"I never thought of myself as a researcher…now I'm able to collect data and analyze it and use it…"

"This process gives me permission to experiment in a thoughtful, organized way…I can say, "Ok let me continue to focus on learning about this."

"Action research has allowed me to be on the balcony and watch the dance floor…it allows me to see a bigger picture and not in an evaluative way."

A second, but related finding revealed that teachers were using classroom data differently and documenting their observations more systematically. They reported:

"…we were able to focus on the kids and were able to collect several forms of data. In a week we ran this trial and we have some interesting things and we have data to support what we see…"

"It is important to really scrutinize children's work in order to better guide my instruction. Having a better handle on my teaching and the process of learning to gives me a better ability to do that scrutinizing."

"I don't say, I'll remember it…I say now, I'll write it down. Coding the data has allowed me to draw strings between things."

"… I guess I am more deliberate in tracking successes and failures. I am collecting data that doesn't always end with successes and not taking it personally."

Third, Tim and I both found that teachers' professional knowledge and understanding of students were enhanced as a result of engaging in action research. Teachers shared that reading about new practices supported their efforts to try new approaches. For example, one teacher reported, *"my view of differentiation has changed. In the past I saw differentiation based on level, but through my reading I found that I can differentiate based on interest and based on how students learn…which has really shaped how that plays out in my classroom."*

We also found that teachers' ability to use data systematically allowed them to see, more clearly, what was working and what wasn't. And that data is informing their practice in significant ways:

"My students raise for themselves new conjectures… that is what is coming back to me from their feedback. When the feedback comes back to me it sometimes changes how I approach the next lesson."

"We felt for awhile that our current process [for teaching spelling] was outdated. This is confirming it."

Finally, teacher reflections, discussions, and interviews revealed that the journeys they were on as classroom researchers were not always smooth. Their work as researchers caused a myriad of emotions. Teachers explained that strong emotions came from two places. A sense of frustration and anxiety sometimes came from wanting to see students progress more quickly and revealed their commitment to student success. And, the deep reflection that was a part of the process caused them to feel vulnerable at times. One teacher said, *"you realize, maybe I'm not as good as I thought"* … and another explained *"…the lows come especially when you realize you have to self-correct or something you did didn't work."*

What does it take to support this work?

Tim and Carol's findings about support revealed several important themes that have informed year two and have allowed us to continue to work successfully with the second cohort. First, the data revealed that the most important role of the building administrator was to provide opportunities for dialogue between administrator and researcher that were not connected to evaluation. Related to this finding was that teachers appreciated their administrator, who listened and encouraged them when the work got tough. One teacher stated,

"…it is the conversations we had throughout this process that have most helped me. Your support in my project has given me the freedom to try new things and perhaps step away from the old."

Teachers also made it clear that the administrator was even more appreciated for providing planning time so that individuals, pairs and teams could examine data and plan for next steps.

The second theme revealed in the data was that the process requires a knowledgeable, supportive and non-judgmental guide facilitating the program. Teachers appreciated having someone to answer questions, problem-solve with them and value their work without judgment. They stated, *"It is important to feel that my work is valued…"* and *"I appreciate the freedom to explore without feeling judged."*

The third, and perhaps most exciting theme, that has emerged from all three of our investigations is the theme of community. Teachers have clearly stated and demonstrated, in various ways, that action research is best done in community. They report learning from

and with their peers about instructional approaches, best practices, and about issues and concerns at the various levels of education. Almost all comment that the structured time for these discussions was invaluable. And, beyond gaining new knowledge from their peers, they speak to essential elements of community such as collaboration, trust and emotional support. They explicitly describe the value of experiencing the ups and downs of the process with others who understand. Comments from their interviews and discussions include:

"There is a level of trust in this group that allows me to continue to try new approaches."

"I crave *meeting with this group."*

"I learned content by listening to other teachers' projects."

The changes teachers experience in this process are complex and significant. In two years, we have seen two cohorts of educators gain knowledge about their topics, their students and each other. They developed new instructional skills, and they have become researchers of their own practice. When asked to capture their experiences in just six words, teachers from cohort one wrote these "six-word novels".

- Problem exists, action tried, results unexpected.
- Permission to gather data without ego.
- In truth. I know. More now.
- Thought, don't agree. Now I do.
- You think? You think. You think*!*

So where are we now?

We ended the year by providing each teacher with multiple opportunities to reflect upon their research, to articulate their learning and to describe the impact that their work has had on the students they teach. In April they mapped their journeys to date as a pre-writing/sharing activity, and in June they spent a full day examining and sharing student work samples while drafting small written summaries for the District website. It is our hope that publishing the work of these teacher-researchers will both promote learning in the wider community and interest other educators in engaging in action research.

Finally, we have seen evidence that Tim's goal of fostering a shared commitment to student learning is emerging as a very real outcome. Barbara, who I just recently interviewed, states, *"I think the role my colleagues play is huge...they've come in to help me out and have been another set of eyes when I do a new lesson. They are actually helping me gather my data...and when we talk about it and more questions come up they offer to let me try it in their classes...my whole department is now helping me...it really is fostering a community... like we are all in this together."* This outcome is exciting and the prospect of studying this closely in the coming years is even more exciting. I enter next year, as does Tim, with new questions to pursue about learning, leadership and community inside of the action research process.