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Politics and action research: An examination of one school's mandated action research program

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Abstract

Action research has been shown to empower educators, create lasting changes in schools, and have an impact on student learning outcomes. Given these positive results, many school leaders are beginning to mandate the use of action research within their schools. While some in the field have warned against mandating action research, there is little research examining the effects of doing so. This study examines the mandated school-wide action research program at Fieldstone Elementary. While some results align with the action research literature (importance of collaboration, necessity of time to conduct action research, etc.), this article also examines the political tensions surrounding these ideas. Implications for those interested in mandating action research programs are provided.

Keywords

Action research, teacher research, professional development

For years, action research has been lauded as a way for teachers to improve their practice (Dana & Yendel-Hoppey, 2009; Mertler, 2009; Stark, 2006), to engage in on-going, in-depth, critical dialog with colleagues (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Mohr et al., 2004), to share knowledge across, and outside of, the profession (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006; Hatch et al., 2005; Meyers & Rust, 2003), to generate theory from classroom practice (Nias, 1991; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006; Zeichner, 2003), and to address issues of inequity in schools and in society (Benson & Christian, 2002; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehr, & Zeichner, 2007).

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In this study, we examine one school's mandated action research program. In reading the literature related to action research, we note that several scholars (e.g., Gallas, 1998; Zeichner, 2003) have warned against mandating this type of program. However, there is little literature examining the *effects* of requiring teachers to participate in the action research process. In order to begin filling this void, the study that follows examines Fieldstone Elementary's¹ mandated action research program. Furthermore, our findings are couched in the political tensions within the school. Throughout the study, we found ideas similar to those reported by others: the importance of collaboration, time, etc. (e.g., Hubbard & Power, 1999; Pine, 2009). However, this study adds the additional lens of the political tensions inherent at Fieldstone. These tensions played an important role in the development of the program and offer readers additional insights into the benefits and barriers of mandating action research.

Politics and power in action research

Bolman and Deal (2003) refer to schools as "living screaming political arenas" (p. 186). As such, educational institutions are replete with politics (Senge, 2000). A host of actors— influencers, owners, associates, publics, coalitions, directors, etc. (Mintzberg, 1983)—engage in a flurry of dances tied to the politics embedded in the cultures of our educational organizations. Because of this, action research within schools must acknowledge the political element. Bolman and Deal (2003) recognize this political side of education by noting, "The question is not whether [schools] will have politics but rather what kind of politics they will have" (p. 200).

While some teachers pride themselves on remaining "neutral" when discussing politics within the workplace, others posit "no teaching of any kind . . . is actually neutral" (Gutstein & Peterson, 2013, p. 6). Claims of neutrality are raising questions from a host of critical educators around the globe. The work of a variety of authors (i.e., Compton-Lilly, 2003; Gutstein, 2006; Lyman, 2007) demonstrates this movement away from neutrality and toward an *inquiry stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

While this critical turn is often seen as a positive step, some educators bristle at the idea of change. Because of this tension, conflict arises. Embedded in conflict is the element of power. Griffiths (2009), for example, ties politics in action research to "a concern with power relations" (p. 85). In doing so, she and others (i.e., Noffke, 1997, 2009) insist on disrupting these power relations and, in turn, the status quo. This leaves many educators feeling very unsettled. As Shafritz and Ott (1992) suggest, "[F]or many, power is not a subject for polite conversation. We often equate power with force, brutality, unethical behavior, manipulation, connivance, and subjugation" (p. 397). With these types of images tied to power, it is no surprise that educators might shy away from the politics of action research. In the study that follows, we examine the ways that one school found itself embroiled in the power and politics that can be unearthed through mandated action research.

Background and context

Fieldstone Elementary is a rural school located in southern Indiana in the United States. According to data reported to the state of Indiana during the time of the study, 381 students were enrolled in Kindergarten through sixth grade. Of those students, 372 were white,² five were multiracial, two were Asian/Pacific Islander, one was Hispanic, and one was American Indian. Sixty-nine students received special education services, and free or reduced-price lunches were available to 168 students. No children were identified as English Language Learners.

At the time of the study, each of the 29 teachers at the school was white and had, on average, 11 years of experience. However, a gap was evident between teachers with 20 or more years of experience (six teachers with up to 36 years of experience) and a group of teachers with five or fewer years of teaching (15 teachers with as little as zero years of experience). This gap presented challenges that will become evident in the sections below.

For several years prior to this study, the state had labeled Fieldstone as a failing school based on standardized test scores. Because of this status, the school was eligible for funding from the state to develop and implement a school improvement plan. School improvement plans are seen by the state as a way to improve students' test scores and to remove institutions from the list of failing schools. Interestingly, rather than following precedence and standardizing curricular offerings by implementing teacher-proof, scripted lessons as is typical in these situations (Apple, 2000), the principal and the school improvement team chose to invest in the empowerment of its teachers by adopting an *inquiry stance* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) to teaching and learning at Fieldstone Elementary. Funds were secured to promote four classroom teachers to the role of instructional coaches and to hire substitutes to cover the classrooms of the teachers so that they could engage in collaborative action research meetings. Both of these choices had ramifications.

First of all, the principal chose to promote four teachers to instructional coaches. Of the four coaches, three had five or fewer years of experience. In doing so, she was rewarding passion and work ethic over seniority. This caused high levels of discontent amongst the veteran teachers in the school.

Second, rather than having all teachers meet at the same time, the teachers were split into seven collaboration groups. In previous years, the principal had moved away from the "team meeting" approach in which all teachers in one grade level met periodically to discuss curricular decisions. Instead, she encouraged teachers to engage in cross-grade level conversations where teachers read books on a topic of need or interest, examined the work of individual students, and examined the experiences students were offered throughout their time at Fieldstone. She and the coaches saw action research as the next logical step in this progression. In creating collaborative action research groups, they again wanted to ensure that voices from all grade levels were present in each group. As we will discuss below, this decision, too, caused consternation amongst members of grade level teams.

Ryan was hired by the principal to assist in the implementation of the action research program after she heard Ryan speak about action research at the university where she was pursuing her doctoral degree. During the year prior to the implementation of the action research groups, Ryan was asked to facilitate the action research projects of the instructional coaches. This process had two purposes: (1) to ensure that the coaches had experience with action research and (2) to draw attention to Ryan's role as a facilitator of an action research group (as the coaches would be taking on this role during the following school year). Because of his role at the school, Ryan had inside knowledge of the school, its teachers and students, and many of the political tensions that were evident in the environment. This study, then, was one way for Ryan to assist the school in examining its action research program while also detailing a specific example of a mandated action research program.

Data collection and analysis

Two main data sources comprised the data set for this research: interviews and teachers' final projects. Twenty-five teachers and administrators at Fieldstone participated in semi-structured interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1984) near the end of the school year. These interviews were conducted on site at the school and lasted anywhere from 15 to 40 min. Because of Ryan's close working relationship with the school and his interest in its success, Shanna was asked to conduct anonymous interviews with the teachers. While Shanna was a graduate student at the university where Ryan was employed, she had no other ties to, or knowledge of, the school or its action research program. Because of this distance, Shanna was able to ensure that the teachers could answer interview questions without the fear of ramifications and offered an outsider's perspective when analyzing data.

In addition to the interviews, final projects were collected from each educator at Fieldstone. Final projects included papers, PowerPoint presentations, and posters created by the educators (teachers, principal, and guidance counselor) at Fieldstone. In collecting these data, we attempted to answer the question: What are the effects of mandating school-wide action research?

Corbin and Strauss's (2007) constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. As we began our analysis of the data, open coding was employed to develop preliminary themes that guided our initial examinations of the data. Initially, both researchers examined the data independently. We then met to discuss the relationships between the ideas and patterns identified during our first pass through the data. During subsequent passes through the data, axial coding assisted us in refining our themes and subthemes.

Because of space limitations, reporting on each of the identified themes is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we have chosen to focus on two characteristics often discussed in relation to action research: collaboration and time. While we are aware that these themes are not new to the literature, we have added the additional layer of the political landscape at Fieldstone Elementary.

In doing so, we discuss complexities that go beyond simply providing teachers with time to conduct action research and colleagues with whom they can collaborate.

The politics of collaboration

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) note, “The daily rhythms of schools typically provide little time for teachers to talk, reflect, and share ideas with colleagues” (p. 86). Because of the isolation inherent in schools, authors in the field of action research often point to collaboration as one of the essential components for successful action research programs (e.g., Calhoun, 1993; Collins, 2004). Hubbard and Power (2003) state, “You need someone with a listening ear who is sympathetic and attentive as you try out ideas and brainstorm solutions to problems” (p. 23). Others note that those engaged in action research need more than one “listening ear.” Pine (2009), for example, writes, “Through action research, teachers form communities of reflective practitioners who together engage in cycles of research and action that lead to professional growth and improved practice” (p. 113). McNiff and Whitehead (2010) see these communities of reflective practitioners as a moral responsibility of teachers.

The School Improvement Team at Fieldstone attempted to create collaborative spaces for educators to engage in dialog over the course of the year. As stated previously, action research groups met for half-day meetings one to two times per month. Fieldstone educators, however, noted problems related to collaboration within these action research groups. Ideas discussed below include the lack of choice in relation to members of the collaboration teams, the disconnect between “new” and “experienced” teachers, and the impact of “resistors” on collaborative efforts.

Lack of choice in relation to collaboration teams

While the original intent was to share information across grade levels, many teachers were irritated with the way groups were formulated. Several teachers described feelings of frustration related to the mandated action research groups. Elizabeth, for instance, stated:

I don't think people quite knew what they were getting into. There was not an option for us. It was an expectation, and I don't think all of us really had a concept of what this was, how it came together, how it worked.

Even though the principal and the School Improvement Team had written the grant, shared it with the staff at a faculty meeting, and asked for feedback, several educators still felt as if they had been left out of the conversation.

Wilma stated:

I don't have any problem with professional development, but I felt forced to do it this way, and that bothered me some . . . I think that it would have been better accepted if we would have had a choice, but that is just what I think.

In fact, it was not just what Wilma thought. At least six of the 25 teachers interviewed felt they had been forced to participate in the groups. Ophelia reported, “Well, you had to do it, and that was our professional development for this year. We were not given a choice.”

In addition to those who felt the program had been imposed upon them, others were irritated that they had little or no say in how teachers were assigned to collaboration groups. Ophelia, who—as noted above—felt that she had been forced to participate added:

[Choosing the people in my collaboration group] would have...made a difference... Working with the same grade level would have helped, but I think that right there is one of the problems with this. We had absolutely no time for collaboration although we were told [we would] be able to collaborate. But... rather than focusing on the curriculum, what is it we want to do, what is it we need to do, it turned into... a professional development and we have not examined our curriculum this year because we didn't have time, we have been doing this stuff.

Even those who supported the collaborative meetings were frustrated with the composition of the groups. Charlotte noted:

I think the main issues for me came from the collaborations. They weren't all as beneficial as they could have been for me, and I think the main reason is the makeup of my specific group. There were several teachers in there that did not have the same philosophies or beliefs that I did, and so when I would take my data and I would ask questions... I don't necessarily think that I got the most out of it because their beliefs were different, or their philosophies. And so they saw things totally different than I did.

Throughout the interviews and in the final papers, the politics of these choices became evident. Teachers threatened to seek action from the teachers union in e-mails to the principal. Linda stated:

Most of the conversations I have heard and I have had have been complaints. You know, because of the process and the time and the not having any input. And I am a union rep, so I get to hear all the complaints.

Sarah also referred to the threat of union action in noting, “There are a couple of really strong willed [teachers] who bring it to the union every time anything looks like a change... in job requirements.”

From a distance (two years have passed since the teachers engaged in the mandated program), those in charge of the program now acknowledge the fact that more participation should have been encouraged. Choices related to the composition of the groups, the time allocated for action research, and the content under study could have been decided upon more inclusively. Because those with power in

the situation (the principal, the coaches, and Ryan—as an outside facilitator) saw the tremendous possibility of change, decisions were imposed that could have been more thoughtfully negotiated with all those involved.

Disconnect between new and experienced teachers

Another hot-button issue related to experience. As noted earlier in the paper, there was a gap between two very distinct factions of teachers: those with 20 or more years of experience and those with less than five years of experience. Difficulties between these two groups surfaced repeatedly. Charlotte stated:

I hate, *hate*, to put the stereotype out, but most of our teachers that have been here for a long time have not put the effort forth like the younger teachers did. And that is the thing, I don't like to say that because everybody always says, 'Well, the older teachers . . .' or 'The younger teachers . . .' and I don't like to make that separation. But it was clear . . . For the most part, the teachers that have been here for . . . 20 years plus just didn't get into it as much as the younger ones did.

Even when the experience gap was not directly acknowledged, it was clear that teachers were positioning themselves in one camp or the other. One “younger” teacher, Carrie, openly criticized the “older” teachers in stating:

The only problems with this professional growth model were for those teachers who chose not to accept it. Some teachers do not want to change because they either think they are already doing everything right or they do not feel comfortable asking for help. I feel sorry for those teachers who think they have it all figured out. No, I correct myself. I feel sorry for their students, as *they* will be the ones suffering the consequences.

While, amongst themselves and in the interviews, the new teachers discussed the disconnect between themselves and the veteran teachers, the veteran teachers took more formal routes in identifying the issue. Union representatives filed complaints when three “new” teachers were hired as coaches (citing their lack of experience) and when the principal mandated action research.

Impact of “resistors” on collaboration teams

When experience was not directly acknowledged, code words such as “resistors” were used to delineate one faction from the other. Sarah provided an example of this type of demarcation in noting:

It might have created a rift between the people who bought into it and the people who didn't. But those problems existed prior to the action research. We have some very strongly spoken, outspoken, squeaky wheels—complaining people who are that way

no matter what they are involved in . . . It probably just gave them a role, their familiar role in being a resistor. Resistors are still the resistors.

Others, too, described the effects of the resistors. Yvonne shared, “The willingness to share, some of our staff aren’t really willing to share the data and I think that maybe there might be a lack of comfort . . . among the colleagues.”

Greg stated:

You know, when someone is communicating, it is great because you can learn all kinds of things from someone. But someone who is not communicating can really, it can stop a conversation really quick if you have someone who won’t participate or doesn’t prepare. Just little things like that don’t seem like a big deal but when you are having a meeting or conversation like that, it can get stopped really quick.

Collaboration, then, was a very political aspect of the mandated action research program at Fieldstone Elementary. Regardless of the attempts of the principal and the School Improvement Team to include others in the change process, educators felt they had limited input on the makeup of the collaboration groups. Similarly, the makeup of the collaborative groups was hindered by rifts between a cadre of experienced teachers and an influx of new teachers. Because of this, the school became divided into two groups: (1) those who appreciated the opportunities to engage in action research and the collaboration that was provided and (2) those who resisted the program and/or its implementation.

The politics of time

In addition to collaboration, many experts in the field of action research point to time as a necessity within these programs (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). In describing the success of the Classroom Action Research program in the Madison (Wisconsin) Metropolitan School District, Caro-Bruce and Klehr (2007) note, “Sustained discussions with other teachers over long periods of time seem to be uncommon in teachers’ previous experiences and important for helping them learn to analyze their practices in depth” (p. 15).

To address this issue, the grant secured by Fieldstone’s School Improvement Team allowed for the hiring of substitutes to cover the class of each teacher as s/he attended half-day collaborative meetings one to two times per month. In doing so, the School Improvement Team was creating sustained time for dialog, collaboration, analysis of data, and completion of the teachers’ final reports.

Interestingly, the literature in the area of action research is void of reports that have examined the tensions inherent in the allocation of time to conduct action research. As we found, simply having time does not ensure the success of an action research program. While the data from this study confirm that time is, indeed, a key factor in managing the work of action research, *how* time was allocated and utilized was highly controversial.

Lack of time

Throughout the interviews and within their final reports, teachers commented about the availability of time. Six of the 25 teachers, in particular, were very passionate about the lack of time available to complete the task of conducting an action research project. Kenneth—one of these teachers—commented, “The time constraints of being a teacher and trying to do this action research . . . that is just really really tough.”

Similarly, Linda noted, “The challenge for me was the timeline . . . The time just wasn’t there to do it.”

Greg acknowledged that time *was* available, but it simply was not enough:

As much time as we had, there was still a time issue. It was hard to find the time to work with what I needed to do and to implement the things that I wanted to implement . . . [There were] still a lot of things that I would have liked to have done.

Interestingly, three of the 25 teachers interviewed noted that the time allocated was sufficient for the task. Francis, for example, stated, “We had plenty of time to go over [our research projects] again and again with our group. Then you had time to write it . . . and since we were given time to work on it, that helps.”

In talking about the benefits of the program, Wilma said, “The benefits were having time during the day to talk to other teachers. Sometimes you just need to run your ideas by somebody else and hear a little feedback to go forward. That was really a benefit.”

Ophelia, too, felt that plenty of time was allocated for the action research program. Interestingly, though, her perception of that allocation was different from that of Francis and Wilma. Ophelia noted, “I thought it was a waste of time. A total waste of time . . . I don’t think that we needed to meet as often as we did.”

Interruption of teaching time

Others discussed the interruption in their teaching time caused by the action research meetings. For many, they appreciated the fact that time was allotted; however, almost a third of the teachers complained during the interviews that time allocated for action research meetings was simply time away from their students. Patricia was very passionate about the time away from her students:

I would almost rather have someone come to my house at night and babysit so I can get [my action research] done because what we ran into was a pickle. It was how much I was out of the room. I needed to be out to meet with my group . . . It was really good to meet with my group and we have these really good discussions, but at the same time . . . I had one week where I was out four . . . days because I . . . had a case conference . . . , then I had special ed collaboration, then the next day I was out for a

beginning teacher [meeting]... Then [I had] action research half a day. Some of my kids only saw me Friday that week.

While Patricia's example is the most extreme reported, others concurred. Ilene, for instance, reported, "Generally, [we met] every two weeks, but it was for half a day... which is not a terribly large amount, but kind of throws the kids off sometimes."

Charlotte, however, saw time away from her students in another way:

Other teachers have said that the main problem is that we are out of our classrooms so much... You will probably hear that a billion times [during these interviews]. But I don't necessarily see that as a problem because what I am learning when I am in my collaboration outside of the classroom is going to make up for that time I was out. You know? So... I guess you can say that we were out of the classroom and that was time lost, but I don't necessarily see it as a problem.

Little time with grade level teams

One final element related to how time was allocated for action research. Several teachers bemoaned the fact that the time for action research took time away from other necessities, mainly time to collaborate with their grade level teams. Because time typically used for team meetings was reallocated for meetings related to action research, Virginia worried that the meetings were taking away valuable planning time. In her interview, she stated:

I am new to my grade that I am in, and so are the other two teachers actually. None of us had actually taught it before, so we had to spend a lot of time without getting paid and without a coach or anything, just on our own doing stuff – which is fine, because I expect to have to do that, but it would have been nice to still have a little bit of time during the school day [to meet with my grade level team].

Through this lens, and other lenses presented above, we see that time represents much more than an opportunity to conduct action research. For some there was not enough time to complete action research projects. For others, time dedicated to action research was a waste of time. Still others felt that time dedicated to action research was time lost with their students or with their grade level teams. We see some of these tensions as personal (e.g., Patricia's "pickle" and her suggestion for babysitting services). Yet many point to political tensions at Fieldstone and in education more generally.

Virginia, for instance, referred to the lack of pay for time she spent outside of school preparing to teach. Charlotte's comment that Shanna would hear about time away from students "a billion times" during the interviews is testament to the conversations and frustrations at Fieldstone. Differences in teachers'

testimonies in relation to the adequacy of time allotted for action research also have a political edge. Ophelia's comments that action research was a "total waste of time" are laden with anger associated with the program. As this study begins to illuminate, to simply state that action research requires time is to ignore the political tensions that surround the personal and professional lives of educators.

Implications

Although many experts in the field of action research state the importance of collaborative working groups, it is important to examine the *types* of support offered to those engaged in action research. Teachers in this study craved choice in deciding the colleagues with whom they would collaborate. Specifically, several teachers showed a desire to work with colleagues on their grade level teams. While the reasoning of the principal and the School Improvement Team may be justified (the design team had hoped to encourage the sharing of ideas across grade levels and to assist teachers in examining the entire elementary school experience of Fieldstone's students), several educators felt the system had been imposed, misunderstood the purposes of the selection process, and/or rejected the model. For us, this points to the importance of inclusivity and communication in the designing of school-wide action research programs. While we tend to agree with those who warn against the mandating of action research programs (Caro-Bruce, Klehr, Zeichner, & Sierra-Piedrahita, 2009; Wachholz & Christensen, 2004), we see some promise for this type of system. However, without teacher buy-in and open communication, such programs may fail to realize the potential of action research for *all* involved.

Interestingly, when the principal and the School Improvement Team at Fieldstone asked for feedback on the proposed system of action research, they received none. Taking that as a sign of buy-in, they proceeded with the plan. This tells us much about the politics that were present at Fieldstone. Specifically, in this instance, divisions between new and experienced teachers were evident before the action research program was mandated. As previously noted, tensions arose when coaches were hired by the principal. Of the three coaches hired, three had fewer than five years of experience. This ruffled feathers and even led to a complaint from the union representatives. These tensions were exacerbated when experienced teachers felt they were left out of the decision-making process in relation to the mandated program. As noted earlier, choices related to the content and composition of the action research groups could have quelled some of these tensions. Unfortunately, those with the power to make decisions took the silence of the others as a sign of compliance and pushed their plan forward.

All of this raises many questions for those hoping to implement school-wide action research programs: What forms of professional development have succeeded/failed at this school in the past? Who has a voice in this school? How is that voice used? How are the voices and the ideas expressed in formal settings different than the voices and the ideas expressed in informal situations? How can we use multiple forms of communication to elicit everyone's voice?

Time, too, has been noted as an essential characteristic of successful action research programs. Yet, even when time was available to participate in the action research program at Fieldstone, there were problems. While a few teachers felt that the time allocated at Fieldstone was sufficient for the task, a majority of the teachers felt there simply was not enough time to complete their action research projects. This was compounded by the fact that many teachers felt that the time spent in collaborative action research groups was time away from their students. Rather than improving experiences for the students at Fieldstone, these teachers were concerned that they were losing valuable minutes with their children. Still others felt that the time used for action research should have been spent working with their grade level teams to discuss curricular issues.

Therefore, we suggest further research is needed on the allocation and utilization of time for action research. Time—no matter how creatively structured—is not enough. We commend teachers and schools around the world who engage in action research; yet, we feel that to truly take hold on a larger scale, the concept of time in relation to action research demands further study and development.

Finally, we expect that any school will have those who reject the idea of action research. In creating school-wide programs of action research, there will inevitably be those who lack an understanding of the power of action research or who simply are not interested in expending (or have not seen the value in expending) the time and energy necessary to embark on the change process. For us, this seems remarkably similar to teaching a class of elementary students. Just as teachers have to devise multiple forms of instruction to engage a vast array of learners, those who undertake school-wide action research programs may need to devise multiple means of participation in these programs. Just as teachers differentiate their instruction for every learner, school leaders will need to provide multiple entry points into their action research programs.

Reflection

In closing, we hope to make two things clear. First, our purpose in writing this article was not to promote or refute the idea of mandating school-wide action research programs. Rather, we wanted to draw attention to the politics of such an endeavor. Regardless of the intent of such programs, there are many influences on a teacher that may impact her/his reaction to the program. Returning to the discussion of power and politics at the beginning of the paper, we urge readers to consider what Bolman and Deal (2003) refer to as *constructive politics*. They note, “Constructive politics is a possibility—indeed, a necessary possibility if we are to create institutions and societies that are both just and efficient” (p. 201). We know that there are educators around the globe putting their differences aside in exchange for constructive purposes—the most important being the education of the children we serve on a daily basis.

Second, we want readers to know that, although there were many contentious aspects of the school-wide action research program at Fieldstone Elementary, there

were many successful outcomes. Bolman and Deal (2003) offer advice in noting, “Conflict is natural and inevitable . . . If conflict will not go away, the question becomes how to make the best of it” (pp. 197–198). And many teachers did what they could to make the best of a contentious situation. For instance, Carolyn offered:

[The school’s action research program] let you talk to other teachers more. That is something that I don’t get to do very often, so it was good to get feedback . . . about what we are doing . . . [We talked] about what others were doing, how students react differently in different environments. We just got a chance to talk to other teachers and get ideas from them.

Rita shared another benefit in saying, “I always looked at [student work] to see what was wrong. I never looked at it to see what was right. It is from what is right that I know where to go next.”

Ilene noted that she would be much more intentional with her teaching steps in the future. Heather noted the impact that the findings from her research will have on her teaching in the years to come. Mary, previously frustrated with the way her classroom was functioning, was able to recognize the productive power of the “noise” in her classroom. Even Ophelia, who considered the action research a “complete waste of time,” was able to see benefits to the program. She noted, “Did [action research] help [my students]? Yes, I think it did. I think it helped the whole room because . . . I was more focused on being very specific and more consistent with [my teaching].”

In a very powerful example of teacher learning, Sarah reported:

I started out doing an action research project about a particular student who was not showing confidence in her ability to use a variety of reading strategies. So I thought it was about the student, but as I gathered more data and looked carefully at what was happening, it was more about looking at myself than looking at the student . . . I found that I was not as responsive as a teacher as I thought I was. It was a painful but enlightening insight . . . When I look at the students most carefully, I’m really looking at myself.

Regardless of the problems with Fieldstone’s mandated action research program and regardless of the political tensions and ramifications at the school, how can one deny the power of action research as a transformative experience for Sarah and for others? Without mandating action research, would Sarah have made this shift in her thinking? How many other teachers had career changing experiences because they were mandated? It may never be known; yet, one thing is clear: As those who design and implement action research programs in schools, we must ensure that *all* participants are offered multiple entry points into the action research process. In creating a differentiated approach to action research—just as we would differentiate our instruction for our students—we can ensure that all educators accept the

challenge of action research while avoiding political tensions that might derail change before the process even begins.

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We thank Victor Friedman for leading the review process for the author of this article. Should there be any comments/reactions you wish to share, please bring them to the interactive portion (Reader Responses column) of the website: <http://arj.sagepub.com>.

Notes

1. The names of the school and the educators who worked there have been changed for the purposes of confidentiality.
2. Demographic information was retrieved from <http://www.doe.in/gov/data>. Demographic descriptors are those chosen by the state of Indiana.

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