

Grand Erie District School Board

Educational Change Fund Projects

1999-00 & 2000-01



Diane Morgan
Action Research Project Manager
Grand Erie District School Board



James Ellsworth
Action Research Project Manager
Herman E. Fawcett Teacher Resource Centre

Process of Action Research Projects

Grand Erie is committed to assisting participants in the A to Z of an action research project which includes the following:

1) Release Time:

Equivalent of five full days (with supply teacher coverage) for

- in-service to explain and support the action research process
- guest speakers for professional development
- presentation of interim research to group for positive feedback
- small and large group discussion and problem solving as ongoing support
- research sharing and publication

2) In-service: Local Support: James & Diane

a) How to do research

- framing the question
- data collection and analysis (including audio and video)
- writing process (including journal writing)

b) Corrective Action/Feedback - definition & resources

- Portfolios - definition & resources
- Student Led Conferencing - definition & resources
- Analysis of EQAO test results

c) Guest Speakers

- Action Research Process Analysis & Values ~ Dr. Jack Whitehead, School of Education, University of Bath
- Corrective Action/Feedback Classroom Practice & Research ~ Ruth Sutton, Education Consultant & Trainer
- Portfolio Organization ~ Barb Bowen & Shari Schwartz

d) School Visits:

- 8 a.m. to 10 a.m.-small group problem solving sessions
- classroom visits for observation/documentation

3) Support for Action Research:

a) Support

- critical friends & mentoring
- transcription of audio taped sessions
- opportunities to present to conferences, P.D. days, OAR web site

b) Resources

- journals
- action research "how to" books
- project resource books - portfolios, assessment, etc.
- sample research projects & journal entries
- conference registration for Action Research Conference

Action Research Comments

2000 and 2001

- “A lasting change in student learning and attitude will only be achieved if the whole school commits to the idea of portfolios and student led conferencing” (*Deb Kekewich, Cedarland, 2001*)
- “Instead of the usual question, ‘what did you do in school this week?’ and the usual answer, ‘nothing much’, we get a more thorough outline of what Chris is learning, and there have been quite a few topics that opened up more for discussion. It also keeps Chris thinking about what he has done and what he has learned.” (*parents of student, Chris, 2001*)
- “I liked making the predictions. It helped me prepare myself so I wasn’t surprised. They helped me improve my marks because I could understand why I got the marks that I did and what the comment on the report card was telling me. It helped because if my parents didn’t like something I could be sure to tell them why I got a mark and I could reassure them I have a goal to improve.” (*Nicole, grade 7, 2001*)
- “Oh, now I get it. Now I know what to do next. Hey, I get this. I can do this!” (*Courtney, fists clenched, arms raised in victory with a grin from ear to ear, talking to grade 6 teacher, 2001*)
- One student Danielle made an exciting breakthrough by writing, “I wonder what would happen if Jamie and John got to roll the die 4 times and the number had to add up to 14. My reply to Danielle was, “your, ‘*I wonder what*’ statement is a Level 4-it shows you are able to project and extend your thinking beyond the given problem. Wow! Try your suggestion as homework or in spare time and I’ll take a look at it.” Danielle did exactly this – setting up an entirely new, more complicated problem patterned after the current one, complete with our usual format for the solution: write-up. I was able to share both of her examples on an overhead with the rest of the class – a confidence booster for Danielle and a concrete goal for others. (*Joanna Finch, Banbury 2001*)
- “I don’t like them because my parents always talk to me about school after they have read them.” (*grade 6 student talking about Response Journals*)
- “Extra help this week has paid off in the fractions test. I admire you for knowing you needed to get extra help and then actually going to school early to get the help.” (*Parent to grade 6 student in response journal.*)
- Parental involvement in this process is essential in order to improve student learning. A parent’s signature in a student’s journal does not equate parental involvementtaking the time to read their student’s journal and comment on their plans for improvement shows a commitment towards their child’s learning. (*Todd Bannister, Banbury, 2001*)

- I have received very few parent phone calls or letters this year with questions about assignments or grades. This may be because parents aren't interested. I prefer to believe, that it is because they feel more informed, after hearing the following comments: "I find the student newsletter helpful in knowing how to assist my daughter" and "...the student weekly newsletter is a better means of communication for the teachers, students and parents." (*Lesley Boudreault, Banbury, 2001*)
- "Extra help this week has paid off in the fractions' test. I admire you for knowing you needed to get extra help and then actually going to school early to get the help." (*Parent to grade 6 student in Response Journal.*)
- I have become more responsive and flexible in my teaching approach. Regular reflections in my journal emphasized problem areas and forced me to make adjustments ...I was able to vent my frustrations, and hear suggestions from my colleagues that I would not have been objective enough to develop on my own. (*Lesley Boudreault, Banbury Heights, 2001*) from *AR Comments 2001*
- "The [wow] question would be raised as, 'One of you asked, was the government so naïve that they thought people would not drink alcohol just because there was a law?' This had a measured effect as the student, whose question we were discussing, would beam at their un-named recognition." (*Neal Stamer of P.J.student, 2001*)
- "Yet another student chose incomplete homework to place in his portfolio saying, 'It will remind me to do my homework and to do it better.'" (*Cindy Mels, of Delhi Public student, 2001*)
- "Using portfolios is pushing me to improve the development of creativity as well as providing an increased variety and wealth of experiences for my students." (*Cindy Mels, 2001*)
- "The students and I were empowered by the visual display of their learning. It served to tell the story of their progress." (*Anita Ricker, of Northview, 2001*)
- "This is Evan's final drawing. His reflection confirms what he has learned. 'This drawing of a snowflake is right. It has six points and it has lines of symmetry. It also has a pattern.' " (*grade 1 Northview student, 2001*)
- "I perceived portfolios less as extra work and more like a huge puzzle. The challenge was to fit the pieces together to make a workable whole, whereby students build on previous success..." (*Lyn-Anne Nask-Dertinger, Delhi Public, 2001*)
- "I am proud of this portfolio item because I have mostly correct spelling, I can complete work all by myself, next time I will correct punctuation" (*Kristy, Grade 2, Delhi Public, 2001*)
- "I gave myself a level 3+ because I wanted to have that as a mark. I can not see how I could give myself that when I look at the rubric. I haven't done what I was supposed to do but I was afraid that it would be in my mark!" (*Ashley, Grade 10, Delhi District HS, 2001*)

General Findings Summary:

1. Portfolios and student-led conferencing are a logical combination of assessment strategies to improve student learning.
2. Parental involvement is crucial to student improvement.
3. Corrective feedback and scaffolding of skill sets lead to independent student achievement.
4. With few exceptions, student achievement improved dramatically throughout the year.
5. Pairs working in a school or the whole school commitment improve the long lasting nature of integrated change.
6. With time and development of the portfolio strategy, student motivation improves through reflection sheets, corrective feedback, empowerment for their ownership of choices, and dialogue.
7. It is necessary to have oral discussion for reflection and goal-setting but follow it with written thoughts in journal format.
8. A portfolio can demonstrate growth and progress through evidence and reflection.
9. Rubrics help with self-assessment and with setting more specific reflections and goals.
10. Portfolios help develop articulation and is an excellent tool to evaluate all the Achievement Chart categories

Change Fund Projects, GEDSB 2000 and 2001

PC Concepts 10/01

The Parameters of Mentorship

James Ellsworth



*James Ellsworth
Program Coordinator Assessment and Accountability
Herman E. Fawcett Teacher Resource Centre*

Origins and Rationale

In September 1999, I became Program Coordinator responsible for Assessment and Accountability in the Grand Erie District School Board. This put me in a position to investigate further the role of 'critical friend' or mentor in the process of Action Research. I had been Head of History and teacher consultant in the past five years, and had participated in Action Research whereby I worked on topics with a team and had the help of 'critical friends' each time.

One such project was to promote integration by specialists (Math, Science and English) who were teaching a non-specialist subject (Self and Society) in the high school. That time two administrators were my 'critical friends' and helped overcome barriers with advice and by providing release time for the teachers. Another time I worked with two elementary curriculum consultants who were co-critical friends while I incorporated Multiple Intelligences into a Medieval History unit in a Grade 11 class.

This year, because of the initiative of my predecessor (Diane Morgan) and my superintendent (Jacqueline Delong), I became the co-facilitator of a project by elementary teachers and support staff to improve student learning through corrective feedback after analysing the results of EQAO testing. If I was going to be a facilitator/mentor and 'critical friend' myself in this system project, then there were a few issues I wanted to investigate.

The term 'critical friend' had been bothersome to me ever since I was introduced to Action Research. I understood the role in the process; namely, to be the sounding-board, authenticator, and advisor to the researcher and his/her work (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, You and Your Action Research, pp. 30, 43). It may be semantics but I had a bias against the word 'critical'. The intent of the term may have been to connote honesty, an ability to give and take both the good and the bad. But the word always seemed to put the relationship on an unequal footing, giving judgmental power to the friend.

"Was I being sensitive or was there something in a word?"

Another concern dealt with the scope of a project and whether the degree or size influenced the effectiveness of the 'critical friend' role. The project brought together elementary teachers who all had experience with the EQAO testing. I had little elementary experience, none with EQAO, and I had been a secondary teacher before my present role. Also, it was a large project involving nine teachers from four schools and four support staff.

"Were numbers and experience a limit to the efficacy of a project?"

Finally I wanted to look carefully at the elements of rapport which are crucial to friend/mentor's relationship. I was presenting myself to nine experienced elementary teachers as their coordinator. They had not chosen me; I was an outsider.

"What were the chief operational factors in being an effective friend/mentor?"

The Project

The project was well designed. Funding provided:

- training in the Action Research process,
- resources; i.e., journals, articles, computer lab, support groups
- release time monthly for the participants,
- professional development on corrective action with Ruth Sutton
- a forum to share findings, and
- opportunities for presentations and professional growth.

The participants were teachers from Grade 3 or 4, and Grade 6 or 7; in other words, they worked as team/pairs with students who had just completed the EQAO test the previous year and with students who were about to take the EQAO test in 2000. Also a support person was assigned to each team. The co-facilitators arranged agendas and resources for each meeting. The intent was not only to evaluate the effect of corrective feedback on specific foci; i.e. for problem solving, explanations of answers, or gender-related motivation, but also to develop team and school-wide approaches to EQAO testing rather than just the specific Grade 3 or 6 teachers and students.

Opportunities for sharing and expanding networks presented themselves throughout the project. For instance, I was able to deliver an interim finding to the Ontario Educational Research Council (O.E.R.C.) in December, to present (along with two teachers) our project to an Action Research conference in February; and my colleague aligned our study with an EQAO project with Nipissing University and Nipissing Parry Sound Catholic D.S.B. in December.

1. Focus Questions

Since I was co-running a larger project than I had done before and completely out of my 'comfort zone' and experience, I wanted to concentrate on the following:

- a) *What are the qualities of 'critical friend' or mentor that help to develop effective rapport and support to a project?*
- b) *What are the lessons to learn from the scope of a project which might affect the role?*
- c) *What elements can offset the 'outsider' factor to help create credibility and trust?*

2. Process & Evidence

Jackie DeLong, our superintendent and Action Research supporter, was instrumental in encouraging the gathering of qualitative evidence. Usually I felt that the gathering of statistics and poll percentages would give strength and credibility to the research. However, I came to appreciate the value of the primary documentation found in the interview, the journal, observations, candid conversations and email. *Each week* I would enter reflections (reflective practice) in a journal; *each month*, after our release time sessions, I would include some observed or verbal feedback from the participants about my support, and for the several *presentation opportunities*, I would make a point of observed and verbal feedback about my assistance. Also, once I had developed the focus questions, I would drag pertinent *comments from email to my Action Research folder* to develop a running bank of statements germane to the research. One evening I *presented the topic of 'critical friend': its role in the process* to an Action Research support group and found the ensuing discussion very helpful. Finally, I *conducted an interview* with one participant and asked for feedback on an *email questionnaire* to twelve others on the project team (succumbing to the need for a poll). Other colleagues contributed with an occasional picture or video tape which I was able to analyse as 'other' evidence.

What I found from the evidence said as much about personal qualities as it did about the generic role of 'critical friend'.

3. Findings

1. What are the qualities of 'critical friend' or mentor that help to develop effective rapport and support to a project?
2. What are the lessons to learn from the scope of a project which might affect the role? Can a facilitator be a 'critical friend'?
3. What elements can offset the 'outsider' factor to help create credibility and trust?

3.1 Qualities of a 'critical friend'

First of all, 'critical friend' has many guises. In my experience, the people who filled that role were administrators who were a sounding board and a problem solver for my project. They were able to be involved directly with me trying to improve my practice. My role in this project was further removed from the direct confidante and trouble shooter one I had been used to. In another project my 'critical friends' were system support staff conducting their own research and I was an extension of their work, so that we shared and discussed as equal partners. In fact, the present project, Improving Student Learning with Corrective Feedback based on EQAO Results, was organized in a similar fashion so that the participants were in pairs and in effect providing their built in 'critical friends' on site.

Evidence shows that the key qualities to develop effective rapport and support as a project facilitator, or indeed as any 'critical friend', are those that provide commitment, communication, and constructive support.

Several practitioners admitted that commitment to partners was more important than the commitment to the project or research. In other words, the personal was more important than the functional. Projects would get completed but the supportive personal style was paramount.

In communication, it was important to have an ability to listen, and respond to needs rather than try to impress with expertise. Relating knowledge and experience worked better if it was to soothe, give permission for anxieties, or offer solutions as possibilities to try rather than presenting oneself as omniscient. Thus relating to the team as a facilitator means leadership tempered with a large portion of empathy.

For constructive support, a project team needs clear agendas, smooth logistics, a good working environment, available resources, a sensitivity to their workload and needs when setting deadlines and tasks, a flexibility and resourcefulness to provide ways and means to achieve success.

Fortunately the gathered evidence suggests that I have those qualities

"...they were particularly relieved by your statements indicating that they should not try to do it all at once...."
(interview)

"...having someone who will listen, no matter what is stressing him out at that particular time, was very helpful...." (interview)

"...your quiet, reflective, informed, intelligent, unbiased (treat people respectfully and equally) manner encourages people to grow...."
(email response to questionnaire)

"...willing to share personal experiences and frustrations ...you did just that..." (email response to questionnaire)

"...helped me to clarify how my project had been going to date and to see that yes, I was actually getting somewhere with it...." (interview)

But there is one other quality that seems important, the ability to put people at ease and to be disarming with a sense of humour. To be less is to err on the side of the functional rather than the personal:

"...I found you very easy to talk to and felt that I got to know a little bit about you through our chats..."
(comment during a monthly meeting).

3.2 Lessons to be Learned...

The size of a project can affect the role of facilitator and even the ability of the 'critical friend'. We shared nine teachers with two co-facilitators and assigned support staff. The breadth of the school district (three amalgamated boards) and regional sampling of school teams made it difficult to get to everyone regularly:

"...you cannot hope to establish any kind of working rapport if the group is too large. As we only met on a monthly basis as well, it would be difficult to get any kind of rapport going..." (comment during an interview and in questionnaire response)

Some felt that a group of nine was about the limit of a group and only worked because they had a paired team mate at school. At one of those monthly meetings I confided with one participant about my frustration in more regular contact with everyone. Her response

was quick and simple:

"... maybe just choose a couple of people to concentrate on for that extra attention..."

3.3 Elements that Affect the Process

A friend of mine once said that if you can't do something well yourself, find someone who can. Part of establishing credibility and trust as an 'outsider' was to do just that. We arranged to bring a 'guru' on corrective feedback to provide professional development for the group. Another caveat is not to minimize one's related experiences, but to go forward with confidence AND vulnerability. Being experienced with presentations and offering to help anyone who wanted to try an opportunity (Action Research Conference, Feb. 2000) instilled a trust and confidence beyond my lack of experience with EQAO or elementary teaching. If numbers are a quantitative illustration, I had no one who was willing to present our project with me in December. However, two in February and two others in June did share presentations me, and four presented on their own in October at the Professional Development Day. Watching me 'prove' myself by hosting a Japanese Action Research delegation in December, and arranging corrective feedback expert, Ruth Sutton, in February helped to illustrate a willingness to do what I asked them to attempt. Also having been published for Action Research in the past and sharing my article gave a certain cachet of knowing of what I spoke.

4. Sharing

We shared the results of the project in process at Action Research conferences in December and February. We also shared our findings with our Board trustees in June and with a collaborative extension of our project in North Bay. All participants wrote

summary papers and agreed to have them 'published' on the website for Ontario Action Research (OAR). And I have presented to a local support network (May) and will present to the Ontario Education Research Committee (OERC) in December.

5. Related Theory

At the Action Research Conference in Brantford (February, 2000), I talked to Susan Drake, of Brock University, about my research topic. She forwarded a draft paper, "Relationship as a Sustaining Force in Collaborative Action Research: Two Facilitators' Stories (Drake & Haskins), which stated that:

"...the main ingredient for our successful collaboration was the building and sustaining of the relationships involved..." We did succeed at collaboration; and

"...they needed someone with some experience in the practical implementation of action research methods..." I was able to offer that and provide resources; and

"...working together with parity..." Vulnerability and recognizing their expertise illustrated parity; and

"...dialogue was the centrepiece...it implies sharing and mutuality..." The monthly sessions and dialogue were key to the team project, as well as providing opportunities to share the findings with others; and

"...an evolving sense of vision rather than a set of inflexible goals..." We became more committed to corrective feedback and whatever it took to improve student learning; and

"...facilitator is a shifting role,

sometimes organizer, other times; theorist, researcher, 'critical friend'...." I learned to give more permission to the larger role of facilitator rather than mentor; and

"...as an outsider, one can raise challenging and naive questions that promote teacher and researcher reflections...." The group allowed me to ask the questions that forced them to articulate their views.

Also, while looking into the semantics of the word 'critical', I found the following quote from a brochure:

"...criticism is not a relationship-building word. And no matter how we combine it with words like constructive or honest, it is still a hard pill to swallow. A close look will reveal that feedback is a much better relationship-building word." I concur.

Just as the team of researchers was investigating corrective feedback to improve their practice and their students' learning, I came to realize the importance of feedback for the role of facilitator.

What I have Learned...

- I have grown in confidence.
- I have given myself permission to deal with elements out of my comfort zone.
- I feel that the term "feedback friend" is the term that best describes the role and process.
- I have learned not to judge myself too harshly about the quality of my contributions to colleagues' efforts
- I have learned the value of qualitative evidence in the pursuit of knowledge

Next Steps:

I will conduct another Action Research with a smaller group to see if it is optimum for facilitator, participant and feedback friend. I plan to conduct an Action Research whereby I introduce Portfolios as the Ultimate Assessment Tool to a team of six, 3 elementary and 3 high school teachers.

James Ellsworth, GEDSB, 2000

PC Concepts 10/01

Effectively Assisting Teachers

in Their Quest to
Improve Learning in the Classroom

Diane Morgan



*Diane Morgan
Action Research Project Manager
Grand Erie District School Board*

When I started teaching high school I thought geography was “where it was at”. In as much as geography is such an integrating subject nothing else could possibly be as important for students. For twenty-two years teaching geography and travelling around the world to try and understand my subject was my professional life.

In an attempt to improve my practice, I took a sabbatical to obtain a Masters degree in curriculum. That broadened my thinking and what followed were several positions as a curriculum consultant to try my skills at improving programming and therefore learning for students. In my final years as a consultant I began the process of supporting Action Research. My superiors were ensuring that I would not coast into retirement!

This turned into a wonderful opportunity to continue that support in a more relaxed fashion in retirement. So here I am –retired and still doing research. Still working with teachers to try to improve learning for students. The money I earn consulting feeds my travel fund that enables me to continue my passion for travel. I’ve come full circle.

Abstract

Since 1995 I have been working with teachers conducting Action Research, documenting and reflecting on the process and trying to improve it so that teachers get the support they need. This paper explores the processes that can be put in place to support teachers conducting classroom-based research. I have discovered that the following are vitally important:

- time to talk to colleagues and to reflect on that dialogue,
- the support of critical friends and consultants and the challenge of experts in the field
- the use of feedback/feed forward loop as a catalyst for change,
- and ample time and support to share their findings in oral and written form with others.

What is most important is reinforcing the idea that teachers have valuable information about what goes on in their classrooms that needs to be shared more widely, both for the benefit of others and for the confidence it builds in teachers.

Focus Question:

“How can I most effectively assist teachers in their quest to improve learning in the classroom?”

Background

In June 1999 an initiative proposal was submitted to the Grand Erie District School Board which would use Action Research to investigate the use of corrective action/feedback to improve student learning and hopefully increase attainment levels in the grades 3 and 6 EQAO testing. I retired in June and was hired to co-manage the project with the new coordinator, James Ellsworth.

Subsequently the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board conducted a parallel study, which became a combined study funded by EQAO. I conducted several sessions in North Bay similar to the ones that had taken place in Brantford. Initially in my support of Action Research I was content to provide support for teachers. That was a role that was comfortable and at which I was reasonably good. When I took over managing the local projects and facilitating in Nipissing-Parry Sound I felt the need to keep a reflective journal and document what we were learning to track what was happening. I can always see ways of improving what we are doing and I was

not content to make the same mistakes in a future project. I saw patterns between what was happening in Grand Erie and Nipissing-Parry Sound. The written study submitted to EQAO by Ron Wideman, Jackie Delong, Kathy Hallett and myself provided me with further opportunities for in-depth thinking about support for classroom research.

In June 2000, we submitted a proposal for three Action Research studies. The proposal was approved and James managed one on student portfolios while I managed two. One study continued the 1999-2000 study with another group of teachers, while the new study used Action Research to investigate student-led conferencing. The three groups met sometimes in combined sessions and sometimes in separate or small group sessions. Again I kept a journal.

It seemed to me that by documenting the process I could learn something valuable about how to help teachers through classroom-based research. After the '99-'00 project I had made notes on how we should

proceed in future projects in providing additional or different support for teachers. In my experience, Action Research doesn't immediately sell itself to teachers increasingly cynical about new methodologies. But teachers will do almost anything to improve learning in their classrooms. Action Research, like anything new, takes more time and risk than those things we already know how to do well. But once immersed in Action Research teachers forget the time and risk and concentrate on improving practice. The consuming question for me then was how to put enough supports in place to encourage teachers to attempt Action Research in an already crowded educational agenda. My question then became: How can I most effectively assist teachers in their quest to improve learning in their classrooms?

The findings in this study reflect the work I did directly with 17 teachers and consultants. Much of what I found was also reflected in what happened in Nipissing-Parry Sound and in the former Brant County Board of Education when I worked with Superintendent Jackie Delong to setup our first Action Research experience with a four Board consortium sponsored by OPSTF. These were additional valuable experiences that have affected my thinking. The study, however, deals directly with documented research with the Grand Erie educators.

The Process

In the first year, teachers were given ten days release time to participate in the project. Two consultants participated and conducted Action Research. Several other consultants assisted teachers in their classroom by providing resources, modelling teaching methods, and helping teachers think through their ideas. The sessions included some instruction on

Action Research methods and corrective action/feedback/feed forward balanced with group and critical friend discussions on the problems and progress of the research. Teachers were provided with journals for reflection on classroom practice. Jack Whitehead of Bath University and Ruth Sutton, a private consultant from Britain conducted workshops for the participants. Attendance at the Action Research conference provided teachers with contact with others, outside their small group, who were also doing action research. Finally a writing day was held in the computer lab to complete their project write-up.

In the second year all of the supports from the first year were repeated. But in response to a survey of the teachers and some of our own observations other supports were added in the hope of improving the writing process and making Action Research smoother and less frustrating for the participants. In other words, the teachers were not the only ones to learn. The facilitators learned to improve practice too. (James Ellsworth's research can be found on the Ontario Action Research web site -www.unipissing.ca/oar).

I went out to schools to provide an extra pair of eyes to assist a teacher in her observations, to touch base with teachers over long stretches without group sessions and to provide support for teachers working without a partner. In April I had teachers hand in a draft copy of their write-up and I made suggestions for their final write-up in May. We tried to increase personal time for teachers and reduce the group time. We also provided more specific instructions and samples of journal writing and projects early in the process. We did more audio-taping and provided transcriptions of those tapes to aid teachers in their reflections.

In both years teachers handed in a written summary of their research and many presented their findings in workshops and seminars to a variety of groups. A summary report was made to the Grand Erie District School Board. Research reports are being published by Grand Erie and some of these will appear on the OAR web site (www.unipissing.ca/oar).

The Findings

I do not believe that external testing proposed by the Ministry will get at the core of good teaching or do anything to improve practice for competent teachers. Many Ministry courses designed for large numbers do not meet the needs of experienced teachers or teachers just out of Teachers College. These teachers' needs are usually much more specific. What is more satisfying for those teachers and what actually works in improving practice, is in-depth classroom research. George Neeb spoke for many of the participants in our projects when he said "by joining the Action Research project, I was encouraged to ask questions of my own teaching and develop ways to solve these questions". Joanna Finch put it this way "this affirmation has helped to fill the void I was feeling, and hence my own sense of worth and self-confidence has grown. How closely we as teachers and students are intertwined!" I reflected that what started out as "work" became a motivating factor in their day. That is not to say that it isn't still hard work. For each, the project has taken on a life of its own because the teacher owns it and the successes are evident. The joy in seeing success was evident in Margaret Juneja when she commented "For myself I am excited about this way of teaching....seeing children smile when you tell them what great answers they have given is certainly a wonderful reward".

We also know from studies on coaching that "sit and git" rarely gets applied in the classroom. My experience as a consultant showed me over and over again that one on one work directly in the classroom had an immediate effect on teaching and learning. Teachers doing classroom research to solve specific problems and improve learning are constantly applying their learning and modifying classroom practice. After the round table discussions each teacher took back suggestions for strategies they could use in the classroom and ways of documenting how those strategies were working. After one such session I wrote in my journal –

"For me it confirms the belief that one of the most valuable things you can do for teachers is just to put them in a room together and stand back and listen to them. They quickly build a trust level that allows them to share with each other and senior administrators their anxieties, perceived professional inadequacies, frustrations, problems and to speak with confidence about their successes. How much better can you get than that? "

Lesley Boudreault sums it up this way "the regular reflections in my journal emphasized problem areas and forced me to make adjustments".

Isolation from other teachers is a fact of life. But I know from my own classroom experience, working in a tight-knit department, that when we shared experiences and collaborated on program I was a much happier and more effective teacher. Support is essential if teachers are going to take risks, reduce the frustration and think through the ideas required to make change. Critical friends, preferably in the same school, are essential. Teachers working without a critical friend needed more support and looked forward to the group sessions.

Julie White expressed her feeling of isolation when she said "occasionally I wanted to run across the hall to just one other teacher who was interested." Joanna Finch used her critical friends to her advantage this way: "I discovered that I best learn about what I do and how I do it by articulating these things to others. It was critical to me to have an opportunity to talk with my partner Sue and my mentor Diane". Teachers found the group sessions invaluable in staying focused and working out their management problems. On the survey one teacher said "the meetings brought out in me knowledge I didn't know I had" and Janet Rubas summed it up this way "it brought together a dynamic group of people who were committed to the project and the process". These sessions helped teachers to see that they had valuable insights into their everyday practices.

Support staff who can bring in speakers to engage teachers, provide opportunities for conferences or contact with a wider audience and can work one on one with teachers to solve problems are a real boost to teachers doing research. In the surveys teachers wrote that the project leaders provided an environment in which it was safe to engage in open honest discussion, and which enabled them to take the time to think about what they were engaged in. Lesley Boudreault said "through the sharing process I was able to vent my frustrations and hear suggestions from colleagues that I would not have been objective enough to develop on my own". And Liana Thompson said "working with Bob Ogilvy as a critical friend we were assured we were working effectively with staff...he cautioned us not to over do it".

Critical friends frequently have valuable insights that we may miss. Teachers used students, parents, other teachers and support staff to further validate their own evidence. I went into Joanna Finch's classroom on

several occasions as "another pair of eyes". Others described observations by other teachers and parents as a "fresh pair of eyes". Sue Young had an interesting observation when she reported that "her students enjoyed being "important enough" to contribute their skills, ideas and thoughts to the education system where they often feel their voice is not heard". Jack Whitehead and Ruth Sutton were able to lend their considerable expertise to teachers as they sought new methodologies and solutions to their dilemmas.

I was frequently able to encourage participants in data collection and journalling. Many found keeping up their journals difficult. During the longer stretches between sessions I would go out to schools, on request, to help reduce frustration levels and keep teachers on task. In one such session I said to Todd Bannister "Are you getting this down in your journal?" He replied "honestly, no". Fortunately we had taped the session so he was able later to capture his reflections from the tape. In a similar situation Sue Young told a wonderful story of her classroom the day before. She had on tape a narrative she was able to use in her final report.

Teachers found the concept of corrective action/ feedback/feed forward by Ruth Sutton invaluable when doing their research. It provides structures such as "scaffolding" that intrigue teachers and make it easier to make change. Joanna Finch confirms this. "The scaffolding concept is one I have expanded in a variety of forms in all other subject areas. It has provided the impetus for me to clarify in my planning process, exactly how I am going to assist students to become autonomous learners". Corrective action provides the catalyst for creating the need to change how teachers do business in the classroom. My notes and their research write-ups indicate that the teachers used this

method over the course of the project to make significant changes in their classroom. It provided for lively discussion in the group sessions and allowed teachers to apply methods they were familiar with, in new ways. Like Joanna Finch with the scaffolding concept Diane Clark found the feedback/feed forward loop a valuable concept to work with. She notes that the "feedback/feed forward philosophy has enabled me to pinpoint an area requiring closer attention and then provided me with the tools to foster improvement and change in my students and teaching practice".

Nancy Davis and Sharon Harrison applied this concept to address poor achievement on the EQAO tests: "Using corrective feedback on the test questions, showing them exemplars and allowing them to rewrite answers brought significantly better results when we repeated the 1999 tests in April (2000)". Frances Lainson found the process helped her improve student learning. "Rather than conclude that "they don't get it" and include it as a weakness on the report card I continued to help them by offering corrective feedback and providing further opportunities to improve their results before the summative evaluation for the report card".

In the first year we did not approach the writing seriously until May, even though as facilitators we kept encouraging teachers to begin the writing process and had them write one narrative for us. When May came teachers were in "end of year" mode and under pressure to finish the project so they could "get on with it". They felt hurried and suggestions to improve the reports with specific terminology, more documentation and polishing met with varying degrees of frustration. They felt they had met the requirements of the project and the timelines. In the second year this part of the project improved greatly. By handing in a draft in

April teachers had time to think about the suggestions, find more documentation in their journals and transcripts and were far less stressed making changes in the written project on the May writing day. Projects were finished more quickly. They were all in two days later and there was much less frustration with the process. Some of this also had to do with the fact that we were able to give teachers specific directions, sample journal entries and projects early in the process because we had now been through the process once. For example, I learned that I often had vivid memories of teachers expressing ideas, frustrations or telling stories in our group discussions but they had omitted to put them in their journals where they could retrieve them later on. Being able to hand them transcripts of those sessions or being able to tell them to make a note of that in their journal meant these were in place in the second year when teachers needed them for documentation.

Summary

I believe it is essential on the first round of Action Research to have release time for instruction, discussion and analysis. It is important to have a support system in place for times of frustration and that it is important to work in teams in a school for easy access to that support. As a consultant I have always believed that release time is a small price to pay for improved classroom instruction and for teachers who feel supported and recognized by their administrators.

I also believe that corrective action/feedback theory is an essential part of making substantive change in classroom practice. It requires teachers and students to reflect on their learning and set goals for improvement.

If teachers have a positive experience with Action Research on their first attempt, and work in an environment that supports life-long teacher learning and risk-taking they will continue the process on their own. They will be persuaded by the results in their classroom, they will understand the process and they will know how to problem solve and find help when they need it. A significant number of the teachers in Grand Erie who have participated in Action Research, have either extended their research into subsequent years or continued many of its aspects in their normal classroom practice. Todd Bannister concludes his report with "this Action Research project has provided me with valuable insights into the importance of home and school communication and its impact on student learning". He was able to prove to himself that his initial concern about his ability to create an effective communication link between home and school was valid and he was able to find a solution that he could implement the following year. For its investment in Action Research the system gets local research, classroom improvement and teachers committed to professional development that meets their professional needs.

In preparing for a presentation to Professor Micheal Wodlinger's Masters course in Leadership in Action Research delivered through Nipissing University, I was forced to analyze the processes in Grand Erie that supported Action Research. While not directly part of this research, the reflections illustrated the necessity of creating a culture that supports life-long learning, reflection and experimentation by its constituents. These initiatives were built in Grand Erie over a period of years.

The strategic planning initiative evolved into a capacity for systematic planning through

system areas of emphasis, school-based action plans and EQAO action plans. In fact, four of our participants from North Ward Public School in Paris were exploring various aspects of the school's action plan to improve student communication.

Another initiative emphasized student, teacher and program evaluation. Teachers participating in Action Research are encouraged to make their research part of their evaluation growth strand or program evaluation. Hopefully, this initiative will be extended to include Action Research in the new provincial requirements for teacher evaluation.

System-wide P.D. has always been important in Grand Erie and P.D. days are always planned around system areas of emphasis, thereby, reinforcing system planning and evaluation. In 1997 Brantford hosted the OPSTF provincial Act, Reflect, Revise Conference. Local sponsorship enabled many teachers from the system to attend. One of the key speakers at the conference was Peter Moffatt, Director of Education for the Board. By describing his own practice of classroom research and reflection Peter was able to set a tone for teacher experimentation and research.

The culmination of these initiatives established a culture in which inquiry and reflection were valued. The provision of money by the Grand Erie District School Board (and by that Board in conjunction with OPSTF, EQAO, Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board and Nipissing University) to support Action Research and to publish Grand Erie's research supports and rewards Action Research. I believe these initiatives have created a culture that has made it easier for teachers to conduct Action Research and for system personnel to support and reward it.

Next Steps

Much of the information I have gleaned from five years of Action Research support is valuable and needs to be shared with other support staff members and with the Grand Erie District School Board which has provided the funding for the projects. We need to investigate ways of extending this level of support to other teachers in the District.

Many of the research projects would be more effective if they were initiatives supported by divisions or schools. Students would have a consistent approach and teachers would collaborate instead of working in isolation. Anda Kett saw her research with her grade 4 class as a small part of a larger focus. She wrote "speech problems in the primary years are addressed with enthusiasm, but once a child hits the

junior years the errors are more subtle and often overlooked as something "he'll grow out of as he gets more exposure to proper language"....however, students are not always exposed to proper language throughout their daily life...without significant improvement in their language skills, their future will include many struggles, one of them being the grade 10 literacy test.

Deb Kekewich has some advice for us too, "Yes, my students have made huge gains this year. Yes, my practice has improved. No, my time has not been wasted. But I know my students would be much more independent and confident learners if they had grown up with the process. A lasting change in student learning and attitude will only be achieved if the whole school commits to the idea of portfolios and student-led conferencing".

Individuals can make a difference as each of the participants has in their own classroom. If the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, then, the effect of individual teacher research in Grand Erie will be greater as a result of a system emphasis that supports and rewards it.

Diane Morgan, GEDSB 2001

PC Concepts 10:01

How Can I Improve My Practice To Support Teachers?

Elaine (Cooper)Thomas



*Elaine Thomas (Cooper)
Support Staff
Cayuga School Support Centre*

Elaine Thomas is a Teacher Consultant with the Grand Erie District School Board, working from the Cayuga School Support Centre, in the areas of Special Education, Curriculum and Assessment. Prior to becoming a consultant, Elaine was the department head of Special Education at Dunnville Secondary School and a classroom teacher.

Abstract:

“As a Teacher Consultant, “How can I improve my practice to support teachers?”

After reviewing my involvement with teachers and schools and collecting feedback for one school year, I realized that my actions did not support my goals as a Teacher Consultant. From the feedback I received and my analysis of the adult learners with whom I was working, I restructured how I provide support to teachers and I feel that I am closer to my professional goals.

When I consider my role as Teacher Consultant, I work directly with teachers and administrators in supporting the various initiatives in curriculum, assessment and special education. Though the role demands that the teacher consultant is available to support the needs of teachers and individual schools, I must be flexible in adapting to a wide range of in-service needs. In addition, in responding to these needs, I have to consider how I can present information and resources so that I truly address the needs. I have to consider the needs of teachers and schools, and how I can best support these needs in my practice. The other concern I have about my practice is how I will know that I am responding to these needs in an effective and timely matter.

The greatest challenge I believe that support staff face, is supporting many system changes and provincial initiatives in a climate that is overwhelmed by change. Getting teachers to buy into these changes and to accept some responsibilities for these changes is the second component of the challenge. What I am discovering through the process of reflecting on my practice, is that I am changing my delivery of information and resources, and I also see myself changing the manner in how I support teachers. I see this change occurring because I have changed my opinion on how I can be effective in supporting the needs of teachers and schools.

I began to look at some of the projects that I had direct responsibility for and I started to examine how I was working with these teachers and administrators. In a few situations I found that I was not receiving my desired results. What I found was that I was operating under some basic assumptions about the adult learner. In addition, I believe that I was working too hard and I was doing most of the learning and creating a dependency within the

system for further support. What I believe would be ideal, would be to “work myself out of a job.” This would mean that schools would become self-directed and would utilize the expertise that is present within their staff. In fact, my role should be to foster a learning community, and secondly help to support the development of a school culture that is responsive to change and self renewing.

When I consider how this changes my practice, I believe my role changes from a presenter of information to facilitator. As a facilitator, how I present, what I present and how I work with teachers must change. Rather than responding to the change by providing all the necessary resources, I have to work with schools and teachers in the development of understanding concepts, problem solving situations for implementation, and developing strategies around implementation and managing change. By assuming that by giving teachers resources and by “talking at them,” that they fully understand, I have failed in my practice. I have also assumed that they are adult learners, and that they can move forward because they are motivated individuals. They are adults and they are learners and they are motivated, but they need the supports that learners need. Assuming that adults do not have individual learning needs was my error. I now believe that I did not understand what it truly means to be supportive. I believe that I can only be effective in helping schools to develop if I clearly understand what their needs are, how I can best present this information to them and how I can support their understanding by listening more and by focusing my support in a more specific way, rather than in a general way.

Often after completing a presentation or in-service, I would feel completely exhausted and empty. I wondered if I gave the teachers what they needed. I always had a vague plaguesense that I was providing “coverage

of a particular topic,” but not understanding. I realized that this presentation style was frequently my presentation style and the same style of many of my colleagues. As a consultant, I believe that I have a better than average understanding of the “teaching learning” process, yet I was not utilizing this understanding when it came to my presentation to adults.

What I did and how I collected evidence

In a quest to gain better understanding of my practice, I began to think about the ways that I learn best, and about the opportunities that I have had in which to clarify my thinking. I believe that the best opportunity I have to gain an understanding about the many initiatives I have to support is to tap into my colleagues’ understanding and to actually gain a better understanding by discussing and wrestling with the details. I realized that I had the pleasure of belonging to a very rich learning community with a membership of highly trained and knowledgeable colleagues. These colleagues are my resources and I have used their expertise in trying to meet the demands of my job. This is a strategy that I rely upon in my practice. I then came to the conclusion that in my presentations, I was not utilizing the expertise that existed in the room. As well, I did not acknowledge the need for teachers to work through an understanding of concepts through tapping into each other as a resource. I was doing all the talking and often I left the questions and discussion to the end of the presentation when I had overwhelmed them with details and lost the opportunity to reinforce and check for their understanding. I also realized that changing this presentation style was a high risk activity, as a teacher could speak up and say anything during the presentation. I could not plan for changes in the presentation and at the same time, I was not adapting the presentation to the needs of

the learners. The very nature of presenting rather than discussing, eliminated the possible lively dialogue when true learning and understanding take place. Here I am a teacher missing all my “teachable moments” with my audience, who is really in this situation, my students.

Another fallacy that I was supporting in my practice that I believe greatly interfered with my effectiveness is the belief that I have to present “all the information.” I always had tons of handouts, because teachers expect handouts, even though they take them home, file them away and usually forget about their existence. I realized that this was another reason why my efforts in implementing many of the changes in Secondary School Reform have failed. I know that in my practice, I have prepared binders of resources that I felt contained all the information that teachers could possibly require, only to find out that these resources sit on shelves. I also discovered from the numerous conversations I have had with principals and teachers that early concepts that were presented were never understood, and that I had kept on adding new layers of resources and more information on top of a very weak foundation. I never really monitored the understanding. I never checked back with the feedback loop. I did not create opportunities for schools to provide me with the feedback information I needed in order to change my practice. Instead, my initial response was, “why didn’t the school or teacher implement the initiative?” I thought less of them, rather than less of my instructional strategies. I realized that I needed to change my presentation style and check for understanding throughout and follow up the presentation to ensure clarity and provide additional support. I was really missing the feedback to change and adapt.

What I learned from this process

After examining my practice, I have come to some conclusions about the ways that I need to work to best support the needs of my schools:

1. Talk less, listen more.
2. Reduce the amount of information being presented.
3. Provide an overview that shows the connections to the aspect(s) that I am trying to present.
4. Support the audience in thinking through the problems.
5. Identify the strategies and good practices that are working in schools.
6. Support teachers and administrators in the development of networks.
7. Coach rather than preach.
8. Build frameworks that are models for understanding.
9. Ask for input and follow it up in my practice.
10. Check for understanding and follow up to monitor and support the process.

I believe that my practice has changed from me identifying the needs to discovering the needs and trying to respond to them from a common sense point of view. I also believe that the way I give support is by helping schools to build the strength within their school so that they can become more self-reliant and confident. I feel that one of the biggest challenges that face our schools will be the loss of expertise and "corporate memory," with the numerous retirements that are occurring in the profession. Somehow we need to build up new expertise, renew the older staff members and support the large number of new teachers and administrators in itinerant roles. We need to find strategies that create stability and as a central office support person, I see my role in creating expertise within the system rather than possessing all of the expertise. And some day, I hope to work myself out of my job.

Elaine (Cooper) Thomas, GEDSB, 2000

PC Concepts 10/01

Supporting Teachers: Listen and Learn

Janet Rubas



Janet Rubas
Teacher Consultant
HEF Teacher Resource Centre

Janet Rubas is currently a Teacher Consultant in the Junior Division. She has earned a B.A. and an M.A. in Political Science at the University of Illinois, and achieved her Bachelor of Education at the Ontario Teacher Education Centre in Hamilton. She is using EQAO results to improve student learning and to help in the creation of a 'Culture of Assessment' in a school.

The role of Teacher Consultant is one of influence rather than power. To be most effective in the role one must influence teachers to make changes to their own practice in order to improve learning for the students in the classroom. This study examines how one teacher consultant improved her performance by putting herself in, what Ruth Sutton calls, a "continuous feedback loop." Through seeking feedback, listening to, recording, and reflecting on teachers' concerns and ideas the teacher consultant was able to implement projects that supported both teacher and student learning. Through this study, the manner in which she does her job has changed for the better.

Action Research is self-reflection. To reflect on one's practice requires an understanding of what one believes. As a teacher, I strongly believe that all students can and should be successful in the academic setting; that what teachers implement in and for the classroom is the key for student success; and that I, above all else, am a learner myself. These are my beliefs.

I have been a teacher consultant for five years and I am very proud of what I do and have accomplished in this position. I acknowledge that the position of teacher consultant is truly secondary to the position of teacher. Teachers are the 'front line workers' who interact with children on a daily basis and whose interactions lead to student success. As a teacher consultant I

can only support what is happening in the classroom. I might be more knowledgeable about current research; I might better understand the directives from the Ministry of Education; I might have time that can be devoted to reading and planning. However, what I do in my position affects students only indirectly. Although the position I hold exists to improve student learning, I can do that only by my support, influence, encouragement and, perhaps, inspiration of teachers. How I, personally, do that influences how effective I am in my job. My performance must be evaluated on how much that performance assists teachers to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to make changes in their practice that will improve students' learning.

I, then, am in a bind. My position exists to improve student learning. Every position in education exists for that basic, intrinsic, absolute reason; we exist because and for the students. However, I do not come in direct contact with those for whom I am working. My action research question must be directed inward: How do I improve my performance so that I can support those directly involved in the classroom with improving student learning, the teachers, to build the knowledge and skills necessary to help students to be more successful? If I can get better at supporting, influencing and encouraging teachers to broaden their strategies for teaching and assessment, the benefits should be realized in improved student learning. Teachers must provide the evidence which shows that their practice is changing, resulting in improved students learning, and those changes were influenced by work with them. My performance is improving if what I am doing is making a difference to students in the classroom.

In the beginning...

When I started this action research project, I fell into the 'all too common' trap that, as a teacher consultant, I could and should 'fix things.' I had the skills, the ideas, and the knowledge to improve our district's results on the EQAO assessment. The answer was clear! All I needed to do was to develop 'the culture of assessment'; get teachers to accept that the EQAO assessment results as "friendly data" that should be used to improve student learning. I started with the research question: How do I improve my practise in supporting teachers so they accept assessment as a tool to improve learning for students? The assessment I was focussing on was the EQAO results. My improvement depended on teachers changing their attitudes and then changing their practise based on the change of attitude. From my point of view, the results would get better if teachers would just analyze the results, get ideas on what needed to improve, decide what strategies would lead to improvement, focus on those strategies, and collect data on how students were improving. What was the big deal? The EQAO assessments were just one more piece that teachers could use to be more effective in improving student learning.

In sessions with teachers of Grade 3 and Grade 6, however, I learned that teachers had a much different view of the province-wide assessment. Although I considered the results as simply one piece in the assessment puzzle, this certainly was not the perception from the field. Instead teachers said:

- > "The tests are designed to compare schools and teachers."
- > "The tests don't reflect what is really important and what is happening in the classroom."
- > "The tests were set up to ensure that students ended up at level 1 and 2 to make the teachers look bad."
- > "The whole procedure is just political."

*"Advances are made by those
with at least a touch of
irrational confidence in what
they can do."
~ Joan L. Curcio, author ~*

It was as if teachers and I were speaking two languages. They were looking at the assessments from a different point of view, from the experience of the four walls of the classroom. They were 'close' to the situation and, in many cases, felt as if they were being held responsible for poor results. They were not viewing the results as a way to improve student learning but as a way for the government, the public, and parents to determine if they were good teachers. In a time when there is so much change, teachers already were feeling less than confident. 'Just get the tests over with...' was a common reaction. Given that many of the schools with which I came in contact had relatively poor scores, the perception that the tests could be helpful was a frightening and foreign idea.

As I listened to teachers talking about the frustration and self-doubt that came from the testing situations, it was clear to me that just telling teachers that the data was 'friendly' or giving them suggestions as to how they might 'fix' the test scores would never work. If the scores were going to improve, teachers had to be intrinsically involved in the process in order for them to focus on what the scores told them that their own students needed. They had to learn how to put the testing into the context of their classrooms, connect the data to what they were doing, and make changes to their own practice based on that analysis.

It was evident that I had to change how I worked with teachers in order for this to happen. I could not just tell them what to do, I had to wait and listen while they analyzed the data, developed their own explanations, and determined, for themselves, where to concentrate effort.

A Step in the Right Direction...

It was clear to me that the aim of my research had to change. I must focus on improving my own performance and through that improvement, hope to change the attitudes of others. I had to concentrate on what I could and would do differently. After a session with Ruth Sutton and a discussion of the concept of 'corrective feedback', I realized that I was the one who required feedback from teachers on what I was doing, how I assisted or failed to assist them, and what I needed to do differently to help them make changes. In the past, I received feedback in a written form which usually gave teachers the opportunity to say what they found useful in a workshop session. In most cases these written reflections were positive. When negative comments were made, more often they were directed not toward the content but at the organization of the sessions: e.g. "I am too tired for workshops at 4:00 p.m." or, "there was no tea available." It was clear to me that this was not the kind of feedback I was seeking. I needed direct communication; look the teachers in the eye and ask, "*How have I helped you?*" "*What could I do better?*"

Now, at first, the prospect of doing this was really scary for me. Yes, I am a confident individual, at least related to my job. However, I was opening myself up to real criticism. I was opening myself up to being told exactly what I did wrong. Would this really help to improve my performance? I realized, however, that if all data is 'friendly' and I was trying to model a 'culture of assessment' where feedback and assessment data are used for improvement, then the benefits of opening myself up to criticism outweighed the fact that my ego might take a beating. I was going to start modelling for teachers what I believe is necessary for them to do with data from and about their students and their own performance; collect the data, review and analyze it, determine what the data provides as to clues for improvement, develop a course of action to

implement that improvement, try it (test it out), gather more data (assess), and start all over again. I was going to try to put myself in a continuous feedback loop.

A Few More Steps...

It was clear what I had to do. I needed to provide opportunities for teachers to give me direct feedback on my performance so that I could use it to improve. It was necessary for me to build into each of the contacts I had with teachers a commitment from them to connect again for a review not only of my performance but also the results of the contact. It was also necessary to make sure that any follow-up session did not add to teachers already heavy load. I needed to find a way to get the feedback without making them stay after school or requiring them to answer questions on a survey during their own time.

Through this year I have used three basic methods for collecting 'corrective feedback' on my performance:

1. **Let's talk over lunch** - Discuss with the principal the possibility of bringing lunch for the staff and reviewing what had been done in a working session a month or two before. If this meets with the principal's approval, determine a date and order lunch. (Don't forget to ask if the staff have any allergies or food restrictions.) Arrange that staff members will bring 'evidence' of using what we had created or worked on in the previous session. Make it very clear that the evidence was not to assess the teachers' performance, but mine.

Benefits: Teachers feel special, are relaxed, and are quite willing to share. An additional benefit is that one can meet with the whole staff at the same time.

Problems: Lunch supervision schedule may put principals in a difficult situation for coverage. However, if the purposes of the discussion over lunch are clear, staff members can drop in to eat and share their feedback when their supervision duties are over.

2. **Release Time Discussion** - Arrange with the principal for a small group of teachers to gather together to give feedback during the day. Principals must be willing to release teachers from their duties (money from my budget allocated for principals to provide occasional teacher coverage) and must also help to schedule the occasional teacher times so that individuals or pairs of teachers can meet with me. Prior to the date, provide the teachers with an outline of what will be discussed during the time set aside so that they are prepared for the discussion. Make sure teachers understand that the feedback is going to be used to improve my performance, not to assess theirs.

Benefits: Teachers realize this is important (money and time allocated to do it) and are quite willing to share. There is enough time available to review the teachers' feedback, to discuss further actions and improvements, and to get reactions to ideas.

Problems: Cost involved and budget considerations. Lack of occasional teachers to cover the classes.

3. **Teacher Reflection** - At the start of a small group session, ask teachers to reflect on a number (no more than 3) of statements or questions that directly relate to what will be covered in the session. Collect these responses. Shortly before the end of the session, ask teachers to reflect again on the same statements or questions. Collect these responses and compare the two. Once again, teachers must be fully aware that the reflections are to be used only to assess my performance and will not be shared with anyone else.

Benefits: Quick and easy.

Problems: Does not give the depth of information that direct discussion provides. Short time lines so that teachers really haven't had the opportunity to use and apply the information in the classroom.

What did I find out ... What did I change...

My focus had now changed. Although I had started trying to gather information on how to help teachers to use assessment data in the classroom, including the data from EQAO, my focus now was directed inward; How will I use feedback to improve my performance as a teacher consultant? Although I have applied the feedback I collected over the year in many different ways, I want to tell two stories that have changed forever the way I do my job.

Early during this academic year, a principal asked me to conduct an after-school session for junior teachers on literacy, assessment, and evaluation. The session was to be small (four teachers) and informal (let the teachers talk and discuss issues). The principal had expressed the concern that the teachers were not using a balanced approach to literacy, focussing instead on one type of reading and response.

As our session progressed, it was evident that the teachers were collecting all kinds of data on the students they were teaching. They all had mark books with 'levels' assigned for numerous pieces of student work.

Our discussion moved towards whether teachers were really getting an insight into what students needed in order to improve. With the principal as part of the discussion, we talked about some of the methods that could be used which might provide more detailed information on what students could do and how they might set goals for improvement, for example; oral reading conferences, student surveys to determine interests related to reading and writing, and portfolio systems. The teachers politely asked questions and made comments.

However, as the discussion went on, I noticed that one of the teachers was becoming more and more upset. She stopped contributing to the discussion and almost physically withdrew from the group, pulling her chair back from the table. The principal did not notice this withdrawal and about then, excused herself to finish some details in the office.

The teacher who had withdrawn came back into the discussion and wanted to share with me and the group the work she was doing related to language. The evidence she shared made it clear that she worked very hard to make sure she was 'accountable.' She examined every expectation,

determined how she was going to evaluate how the students were doing on that expectation, and connected levels of achievement to her planning; what will a level 3 or 2 look like? Her records contained information about every assignment the students completed with levels assigned for each.

When she was through sharing what she had been doing, she looked at me and said, *"I have tremendous respect for both you and (name of principal). I know that you both have many great ideas. Some of those ideas I use all of the time. But when you start talking about other things we can do, like more conferencing or portfolios, I get very upset. - I just can't do any more!"*

I have plenty of time for assessment; it's the way I teach.
~ Anne Davies, Ph.D. ~

This heartfelt statement and direct feedback about what was being discussed in our session gave me the most important insight into how I could improve my performance. It is absolutely necessary that I, as a support to teachers, never be seen as adding more to their jobs. I must help teachers reflect on what can and should be replaced in the way they are working. Never add more, find a better way.

Since that experience, I include in every workshop that I do with teachers and every consultation with principals, a discussion of how to determine what is expendable; what will this new idea or procedure take the place of; and, how will the idea make work in the classroom with students better?

This experience pointed out to me that I must listen and learn from teachers. It doesn't matter what I intended (I never meant for teachers to take on more), what teachers perceive can be quite different. If I don't ask and do not allow myself to be open to what they are saying in both words and through body language, what was intended and what actually occurs might never match. It is not unlike the classroom situation. We can teach all kinds of concepts and skills but if we do not listen to and observe what children say or show what they have learned from that lesson, we can never be sure that what we intended to be the outcome actually was the result.

My second story involves my work in helping teachers learn the Ontario Curriculum Unit Planner. The principal of a school asked that I introduce the tool to a portion of the staff who would then, in turn, share the tool with their colleagues. Four teachers met with me in a whole day training session in which the planning model was introduced and then the teachers worked in pairs to plan a unit using the Curriculum Planner.

This is the basic model for introducing the Planner that I had been using throughout the year. Rather than just talking about the tool I always felt it was necessary that teachers employ it for planning a unit that they might use in their classrooms. When groups came to me, they were to already have an idea of the expectations that would be addressed in the unit they would plan in our session.

In this case, the teachers met with me, we worked to understand the planning model, and then, they planned their units (as much as was possible in the day) as we worked through understanding how to navigate through the Planner.

About one month after our planning session, I arranged with the principal for her to release the teachers for the morning so that they could provide me with feedback on our work together. The feedback provided me with a number of interesting insights;

- All of the teachers thought the Planner was a very interesting tool that provided helpful information for teachers.
- Few believed that the Planner would be used readily by teachers to write units. The time necessary to write a unit was just not available.
- All believed there were some elements in the Planner that would provide teachers with time-saving tools (e.g. the rubric maker).
- Neither of the pairs of writers had finished, or even worked on, the unit they had begun in our training session.

This feedback was quite a bit different than what I had expected to receive. Foolishly, I thought I was introducing the Planner in such a way that teachers would find it an indispensable tool. Once again, I was seeing the Planner from my perspective and not from the perspective of the classroom teacher. I could see all the possibilities that the Planner would provide. However, without the time to use it and learn it, teachers would only skim the surface of what it could do. Just skimming the surface would not give them the commitment or insight needed to go back and use it. And, using the Planner is the only way to find out how much help it can be.

So, how do I change my performance to help teachers understand the ‘power’ of the Planner better so that they might commit to using it on their own. Based on the feedback I received from these teachers, I sat down and started to think about what would encourage teachers to go back and use the Planner. I decided three things:

1. Teachers had to walk away from the training session with a unit that was complete enough to be useable in their classrooms. The unit had to be in the electronic format, rather than in a hard copy, so that teachers would have to access the Planner themselves in order to get the unit.
2. Teachers had to be shown how units that were already completed in the Planner could be found and copied so they might be changed to better suit the teachers’ own classroom and grade. Teachers had to be shown that one could plan a unit without having to write much at all.
3. Teachers had to learn how to access elements of the Planner without having to write units. Teachers need to be made aware of elements like the Teacher Companions with information on numerous teaching/learning strategies, assessment techniques, and accommodations for various exceptionalities or the rubric maker which easily accesses the achievement level descriptors.

On the basis of these thoughts, I have developed a new training session that I now use with teachers and have shared with other teacher consultants to use in their training workshops on the Planner. In this session, the unit we work on is ‘almost’ complete. Teachers write only one of the subtasks. All of the others have already been finished, so that when the workshop concludes, teachers walk away with a unit that can be used in the classroom. Through the session, teachers

are introduced to those elements that will be most helpful to them in using the Planner as a resource for planning a unit on their own. They are shown how and encouraged to copy subtasks, resources, and information from the Teacher Companions. They are shown how to easily access expectations, achievement level descriptors, and lists of accommodations. They gain experience in using the rubric-maker.

The feedback I am receiving using this new model is very positive. One principal said, "I learned more about the Planner in two and a half hours with you than I did in three separate workshops given by the Ministry of Education." A teacher commented, "The unit we planned was great but even more important, I learned how to use the Planner for more than unit writing... I learned how it will make my job more manageable so I can spend less time writing rubrics, for example, and more time working with the students."

Back to the beginning...

My action research question was and continues to be: How do I improve my performance so that I can support those directly involved in the classroom with improving student learning, the teachers, to build the knowledge and skills necessary to help students to be more successful? I have learned through this research that I must listen carefully to teachers in order to support them. In most cases they know what they need. This does not mean that I only present "what they want to hear." It does mean, however, that no matter what information or skill we are working on, I must take time to find out how the ideas presented were used or not used in the classroom. I need to plan what I do and what supports I provide, based on what teachers tell me is making a difference in what they do in the classroom. I know that I have changed the way I work in this position for the better.

This understanding will continue to improve my performance. I will forever be in a continuous feedback loop because I have learned that by seeking feedback, and acting on the feedback, not only do I provide better support to teachers, I also model the assessment practice I believe teachers must implement in the classroom to enhance student learning.....

Listen and learn.

Janet Rubas, GEDSB, 2000

PC Concepts 11/01

How can Five Early Literacy Teachers be effective in 75 schools?

Janet Trull



*Janet Trull
Early Literacy Teacher
GEDSB*

Janet Trull has been an Early Literacy Itinerant teacher with the Grand Erie District School Board since 1999, after achieving her Bachelor of Arts degree at McMaster University and becoming a Specialist in Visual Arts through Brock University. She also earned a Specialist designation in Special Education through York University.

Currently her research interests include Early Literacy, Sign Language and “First Steps”, an Australian language program for reading, writing, oral language and spelling.

In September, 1999, I thought it was impossible. Centrally assigned along with four other teachers to develop and implement an early literacy program, I became part of a dynamic team whose vision became: to strengthen early literacy programs for students through partnerships with teachers. As a group we were to build relationships with 500 primary teachers and demonstrate language activities in front of 10 000 students, as well as to promote literacy through workshops and presentations. While investigating the programs adopted by surrounding school boards, I met with Lisa, an experienced Early Literacy teacher.

“Your model seems to be set up for failure,” Lisa told me. “There is absolutely no way you can visit fifteen schools each week, consider the school literacy plans of each school, and support literacy programs effectively.” She was very helpful in showing me her school board’s Early Literacy Binder, explaining the in-service plan, and making it clear that the facilitator of the package was a primary consultant...not an Early Literacy itinerant teacher. Her job, as an itinerant literacy teacher, is to provide remedial reading and writing in two schools, supporting the primary teachers by giving one-to-one instruction to students at risk. She does not work with identified students, but students who are working at Level One in The Ontario Curriculum Levels of Achievement language curriculum expectations for their grade. The fifteen itinerant teachers in her board are given their assignments after the EQAO scores have determined the most needy schools. Assignments may change from year to year, as scores change.

I left Lisa’s office feeling overwhelmed with what I was beginning to perceive as an impossible assignment. She had only reinforced the doubts I was feeling as a member of a team which had yet to determine a role for itself, and my waning confidence as I travelled from one school to the next, meeting principals, secretaries, primary teachers, and thousands of children. I had an introductory spiel that I had delivered so often, I couldn’t remember who had heard it and who had not. I wandered around school corridors that looked familiar, and certainly smelled familiar, trying to find the staff room. Where was the photocopier? Where, for heavens sake, was the washroom? By the third week of September I was a wreck.

And then I learned something very important about my job. I had control over my time. I had a schedule that was not imposed upon me. I made appointments. I didn’t have yard duty. If I was invited to a staff meeting, or a division meeting, I was thoughtfully given the first place on the agenda, and then I was allowed to leave. This new control over my day was a surprising benefit that I hadn’t expected.

This new flexibility came with a number of new responsibilities, but I felt energized by the way that I was able to personalize my practice. My confidence took a baby step out of the cellar.

Being part of a team was a great support. Our team meetings had no external agenda. One of our first tasks as a group was to determine what expertise each member brought to the team. Barb was a Reading Recovery trainer and Mary Lynn had E. S. L. experience. Kelly felt

confident in the area of teacher and classroom resources and Bonnie had used phonemic awareness programs in her classroom. I have a background in special education and modified programs. Grace, our program leader, was an encouraging facilitator during these initial meetings, giving us the direction we needed to develop our role and our vision, while respecting our autonomy.

One thing we all agreed upon from the start, was that we needed a method of evaluating our program. Action research was the obvious choice, as the cycle of inquiry would be an excellent structure for a role that seemed, as yet, so illusive.

Our question became:

"How can five Early Literacy Teachers be effective in 75 schools?"

We took a leap of faith and dove in. I used a growth strand to track the early implementation of our inquiry, providing us with a tangible plan to use for reflection and possible revisions. The action research model justified the time in our team meetings dedicated to sharing stories of success and failure, joys and anxieties. The first month was a whirlwind of new faces, many welcoming, but many suspicious. We hadn't expected instant acceptance, but neither were we prepared for the hostility that some teachers feel for "them". Suddenly, we were cast in the role that administrators and consultants must sometimes feel is a very heavy burden. "I'm one of you!" I reassured teachers again and again. "I'm not here to evaluate or judge. Fear not!"

The unconditional support of the team proved to be an essential infrastructure

for our program. Alone, we would have surely collapsed. None of us predicted the energy and strength generated by five like-minded professionals.

The team was quick to recognize that this first year of our role needed to be one of building relationships, as opposed to facilitating change. When I look at the questionnaire that I took with me to my initial division meetings, I find it easy to understand why I was treated coolly. It was full of professional jargon and what may have been perceived as unrealistic expectations. Once we let our partnerships with teachers guide us, however, change began to happen. Trust grew. Doors opened. We revised our schedules to allow more time to meet with teachers during their prep time. We learned which teachers had time to chat before school, and which teachers stayed late. We found the time to listen to their stories. As the year went on, we heard fewer cover stories (Connelly, Clandinin, 1999). Once they realized that we were not bringing imposed prescriptions to their classroom, that we were not trying to force our vision of literacy on them, many teachers (not all) relaxed and shared their struggles as well as their successes. Their stories became our stories. Their students became our students. We walked into their classroom landscapes eager to help them succeed.

By the time the Act, Reflect, Revise IV Conference came around on February 18, 2000, I had adapted a model for delivery of literacy strategies which included a menu of demonstration lessons, and a full schedule of bookings that covered all 15 of my schools weekly. This gave me about a quarter day in each school, enough time for one demonstration lesson, a quick visit to

answer a question from another teacher, and perhaps time to drop off some promised materials. I wouldn't leave until I had a booking

for the following week. By this time, I knew the fastest route from one school to the next. I knew which schools had coffee and which didn't. I knew where all the washrooms were. And amazingly enough, I knew 105 primary teachers by name. I had taught over 2000 students,(very few of whom I knew by name.) They, however, all remembered my name, and it is truly rewarding to walk into fifteen schools and be recognized with smiles and hugs.

The conference was an important one for me. I was honoured to have my paper published last year, and this fact was thoughtfully recognized. I presented my project to a group of teachers in a round table discussion. But most important, I heard language throughout the conference that I have been able to apply directly to my practice. Listening to teacher researchers, I recognize a language that supports my daily work. It is the vocabulary of my teaching story that so closely reflects my personal values and justifies the time and passion I put into my professional relationships. It is a humanizing language, as opposed to a language of power and hierarchy. When I hear this language coming from Board administrators, I feel a great surge of optimism for the future of communication throughout this board. This language needs to be promoted so that it permeates all levels, until it affects the leadership styles of principals and legitimizes professional passion. I've gotten a lot of mileage out of that statement! I recorded a list of the phrases I heard at the conference, and they proved to be of great help to me as I

prepared the early literacy presentation for Program Council. "Make connections; model the asking of questions; promote inter-dependence; use creative ways to prevent teachers from becoming discouraged," are a few ideas that I was able to apply to my early literacy practice. It is a language instantly recognizable in the teacher stories I share on a daily basis.

Now, in June, 2000, it is time for me to review my evidence. What influence have I had on students' learning? Beyond building relationships, I see evidence everywhere. Often, when I enter a school, a teacher asks me to come to see a word wall that wasn't there in September, or I'm invited to a performance of Readers Theatre, or a student reads proudly to me from his journal. I am most excited when a teacher takes a lesson I have demonstrated and extends it, improves it, and shares it with others. Teachers in my area have responded eagerly to opportunities to visit other classrooms. I feel like a philanthropist, as I encourage them to take advantage of a half day release time to see their peers deliver programs like guided reading, or to see effective literacy centres. When asked, most teachers are happy to share ideas, from alphabet songs, to parent communication letters, to term plans.

I have a new respect for primary teachers. Their dedication and concern is evident in every school I go to, from Oneida Central, a small country school where generations of families have received their elementary education, to Major Ballachy and other core Brantford schools where teachers and administrators struggle with transience, high absenteeism, and chronic late

arrivals. These teachers are often discouraged. The breaking of the barrier into their classroom landscapes has given primary teachers throughout the board an opportunity to make connections that are mutually supportive. It has opened the door to an interdependence that brings expertise from one classroom to the next, from one school to the next, from one community to the next. In the fall of 2000, we look forward to strengthening that interdependence with the inservicing of our Early Literacy Strategies booklet, which includes practical classroom ideas from each of the three former boards. It covers reading, writing, oral language, and spelling strategies, with examples that promote shared, guided, and independent activities.

What have I learned? I have learned that five Early Literacy teachers can indeed be effective in improving student learning across great distances and against all odds, evidenced by photographs of students engaged physically in their own learning. I have learned that a new role needs patience. Our vision, to strengthen early literacy programs for students through partnerships with teachers, could not be forced and depended on regular reflection and revision to be successful. I learned that all classrooms are not equal. Some are rich in print, learning centres, and reading materials. Others are cold -- literally -- and bereft of materials. Some have students who have enjoyed literacy in their homes and preschools. They have library cards. They get bedtime stories. Others arrive at the Kindergarten door knowing nothing about print. A surprising number of five year olds are

unable to identify the first letter in their own names.

I learned how stressful it is for teachers to prepare these students for Grade Three EQAO testing when they know that some students start so much lower on the skills development

continuum than others. That is why it is our vision to strengthen early literacy programs for students through partnerships with teachers. I have learned how far a positive comment can go when I acknowledge the positive things I see happening in a teacher's classroom. I've learned how rarely teachers receive positive comments and how important they are. I'm convinced that my greatest contribution this year has been in making connections, facilitating peer coaching, and encouraging the sharing of excellent practices. I learned something new every time I went into another teacher's classroom.... a clever way to make a mini-greenhouse, or a control technique that saves a teacher's voice. I've learned how little I knew one short year ago. "Collaborating," "participating," "connecting;" these words are part of an inclusive vocabulary that has improved the quality of my own practice.

References

Connelly, F. M. & Clandinin, D. J. (1999). *Shaping a Professional Identity: stories of educational practice*. London: Althouse Press.

This article was first published in the
ONTARIO ACTION RESEARCHER - V.4.1.3
- Papers - 2001

Janet Trull, GEDSB, 2000

Janet Trull, GEDSB, 2000

How Can I Improve My Effectiveness as a Leader in the Change Process?

Being Instrumental in the Change Process
“The Creation of a New School”

A Review of the Amalgamation Process
of
St. Williams, Walsingham and Port Rowan Public Schools

Kim Cottingham



*Kim Cottingham
Principal
Port Rowan Public School*

I started my teaching career in 1971 at Southwestern Regional Centre in Cedar Springs, a Ministry of Education School for the Developmentally Handicapped. I spent the next 10 years working in Special Education Settings. In 1981 I left teaching to work in business until returning to teaching in 1987. Since that time, I have worked as a vice-principal for more than 7 years and have been a principal since September 1999.

In September of 2000, I was assigned as principal at Port Rowan, Walsingham and St. Williams Public School. As principal, I was to supervise the closure of Walsingham and St. Williams and the reassignment of students for the fall of 2001. I am currently principal of the recently amalgamated Port Rowan Public School.

I graduated from the University of Windsor in 1974 with a B.A. in Psychology and a B.Ed. in Elementary Education. I graduated with a Masters Degree from the University of Windsor in 1976 in Curriculum and Instruction, focusing on Special Education. My Thesis for my Masters Degree was a “Comparison Study of the Institutionalized and Non-institutionalized Developmentally Disabled Students on the Domains of the Adaptive Behaviour Scale”.

“How Can I Improve My Effectiveness as a Leader in the Change Process?” is the product of my Professional Review by my area superintendent, Jackie Delong. Through a process of reflection and critical review of the events of the 2000 - 2001 school year, I worked to identify areas of growth and gain insight into my leadership skills and personal style.

The Preamble

Since 1997 (sic), the Grand Erie District School Board has worked to transform three (3) distinct regions into a single school district. The most significant challenge at that time was to provide a fiscally responsible structure that ensured the curricular needs of all students in this vast region. This was compounded by the existence of numerous community schools that were established four or five decades ago representing small rural communities. Many of these schools consisted of six to eight classrooms. Early in their planning, the Board recognized that these small schools were becoming impossible to maintain. The funding model of the Ministry of Education did not provide sufficient support to maintain schools of less than 150 students.

The Board developed a plan to review each school area in the district. Each area would develop an Accommodation Study Group to determine the best possible direction for that area. These accommodation groups would represent each school through the school administration, the school council, federation and union representatives as well as senior administration directly associated with the area. Each group would be chaired by an elected trustee that represented that community.

It is this accommodation study that has directly affected my personal and professional life for the past two years and is the catalyst for this report. Like everyone else in the Grand Erie District School Board, my life had been directly affected by the educational reform and restructuring that had taken place.

In the spring of 1999, I was named to the Principals' Pool and was awaiting assignment for the upcoming year. I received a call from our director, Peter Moffatt, in late May of that year and was advised that I was needed to assume the role of 'Acting' principal for a colleague who had been injured months before. I was being located in the Paris area which was a significant change from the southwest region of the board where I had spent most of my administrative career. Nonetheless, I was pleased with the assignment and prepared myself for the move.

In preparation, I spent the last two weeks of August working at my new school, trying to get ready for the months to follow. On the 31st of August, I attended the Director's annual preparation of the troops. In a room with more than a hundred of my fellow principals and vice-principals, I listened to a variety of directives and new policies that would affect education in the year to come.

At the end of the meeting, the Director indicated that he wanted to speak with me for a moment. He then advised me that I would be moving the next day to Houghton Public School, the most remote of all of the schools in the southwest. He indicated that the health of that principal was such that I would be needed there for several months and that my experience in the area made a quick change possible. I accepted without hesitation and returned to my school, packed the items that had barely been unloaded and struck out for the southwest.

I mention all of this because of its impact on me as a person, on me as a leader. Our school board, although modest in student numbers, is massive in geography. On a weekly basis, the best plans of the board are impacted by this geography. My sudden move is an example of that impact. This move however, is quite simply, the single most significant event of the past two years. As principal at Houghton Public School, I

was drawn in to the Valley Heights Accommodation Study. It was this accommodation study that would lead me to the role of principal of Port Rowan, Walsingham and St. Williams. My job was to use the 2000-2001 school year to prepare the community, the staff and the students for the closure of two of these schools and create a new school at the Port Rowan location.

This paper is the product of my Professional Review by my area superintendent, Jackie Delong. Early in the school year, she described a process of journal writing and critical review that would ultimately lead to a personal discovery about my leadership. Jackie asked me to identify an area of potential growth, develop a question that would represent that area of growth and then use my journals and discussions to review any real change. A group of principals was identified from Jackie's family of schools that would be participating in this process. We met following every Family of Schools meeting to share journal entries, comments and insights. Jackie would provide new direction at each meeting and that direction would change with each participant depending on their individual needs. I was encouraged to work from my point of view and make this personal. I should openly discuss my feelings throughout the process and include specific reference to people that might be important. I noticed that each person would journal and write in a different manner and this kind of uniqueness was encouraged. I felt license to bring my personality and belief system to every meeting. Ultimately, Jackie asked that I pull this all together into a narrative.

It did not take me long to realize that I knew nothing about closing schools, building new schools, creating new school communities or

supporting people in this process. I had my area of growth.

Thus, the question:

"How Can I Improve My Effectiveness as a Leader in the Change Process?"
Being Instrumental in the Change Process
"The Creation of a New School"

During the Valley Heights Accommodation Study in the spring of 2000, I became familiar with the emotional climate surrounding pending school closures and school restructuring. Trustees, Senior Administrators, School Principals and Vice-principals, School Council Chairs and Employee Representatives worked together in an 'ad hoc' process to assess the impact of the currently funding formula, declining enrolment and long range projections on the future of schools in the extreme southwest corner of the board. The numbers and forecasts provided a framework for review and established the direction. The passion of the community and the creativity of the ad hoc committee were the energy behind the solution.

During the process, I felt pulled in a number of directions. It became clear that each participant looked to me for some kind of loyalty and appealed to my "sense of responsibility" in working toward a final solution. In the early going parents and community members looked to me to lead the way and "save our school". Trustees and senior administrators carried the "build for the future" banner. This was a polarization that I had not bargained for, yet this was where I found myself. I stepped into this arena with trepidation knowing only that the seas ahead were, at best, turbulent.

Each meeting was wrought with emotion. There were numerous times when it seemed that a reasonable solution was impossible. We would be mired down in details, differing points of view and different agendas. Caught between a community working to preserve its high school and the Board equally determined to preserve its solvency was no easy place to be.

Two months into the process, with deadlines looming and hostilities rising closer to the surface, a proposal came forward that injected new hope. The creation of a grade 7 to 12 High School at Valley Heights would satisfy the interests of all concerned. Two elementary schools would close, Walsingham and St. Williams. This would provide the financial savings needed while the high school would continue to be sustainable. This had the potential to furnish all of the stake holders with a viable solution. Within a matter of a few weeks the final details were put together and a final report prepared for the Board.

There was a powerful sense of satisfaction.

Following final approval of the recommendations of the Valley Heights Accommodation Study, schools were realigned to best reflect the future amalgamations. I prepared myself to assume the role of Principal at Port Rowan, Walsingham and St. Williams Public Schools.

The Vision

Throughout the summer one truth became clear, I did not have the slightest clue as to how to lead this process. Since confusion is nothing new to me, I found that this was not a source of any real anxiety and the summer months were quite restful. As the final weeks of August rolled around, however, the

tension began to grow. How on earth was I going to accomplish this task?

Suddenly, the job seemed daunting.

As luck would have it, I was reminded of Stephen Covey and the 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' Two things were clear, the need for a "Personal Vision" and the need to work from a "Circle of Influence" Was there a vision that would work to cover all aspects of this process? Could I identify something that I could hold on to when the going was rough? After several days, I realized that this process was about schools, students and teachers. A vision emerged that has worked to keep me on track and focused:

- In September 2001, the students and staff of Walsingham, St. Williams and Port Rowan Public Schools will converge on a *new* school located in Port Rowan. This experience should feel familiar and safe to all of the participants. In fact, students and staff should feel the same comfort that they would feel if they were returning to their previous school. It should feel like home.

Although this vision statement is simple and direct, achieving such a vision is not a simple task. It is, however, a worthy task. This vision has helped me to see beyond the budgets, the conflicts and the personalities that occasionally cloud the change process. It also keeps me attentive to the needs of the groups affected most by the change. Despite the positive intentions and fundamentals behind the decisions of the Accommodation Study and the Board, the lives of 350 students and staff have been significantly disrupted. It is essential, therefore, that the humanistic elements of this change remain front and centre. This simple vision has

served to provide me with the passion needed to move forward and to work towards the best school environment possible.

Let the Games Begin

My journal entries in the early months of the school year reads like a summer walk through the park. It seems clear, in retrospect, that my lack of knowledge and experience had left me naïve of the events to come. Through regular dialogues with my superintendent a process started to emerge. It was imperative that all stakeholders be involved and that they have a voice. The simplicity of my vision statement made it clear that my circle of influence included four key areas: students, families, staff and structures. I firmly believe that the simple nature of these discoveries assisted me not only in the initial weeks of the transition process but through to completion.

Port Rowan Public School annually prepares a Harvest Dinner in the fall of each school year. This event is organized by Diane Whitside, a grade 5 teacher at the school. I approached Diane in mid-September and asked if she felt it was feasible to extend an invitation to the students of St. Williams and the grade 6 students of Walsingham to attend this dinner. We would use this event as an opportunity to bring all of the students together in a positive, informal way. Diane agreed that it would be possible and it would be a great beginning. Members of the Transition Team, Board Chair Arlene Everets, and a handful of other local officials were invited to attend and get a glimpse of the future student body of Port Rowan Public School. Parents from both communities became involved, children from both schools met and teachers became familiar with their future students. It was an overwhelming success. I am indebted to Diane's commitment to making this day a

success. Arlene Everets discussed with me her overall impressions and indicated that she would be recommending similar events in communities where schools were amalgamating. She has even gone further and praised this event at Board meetings where amalgamation was being discussed.

Following the dinner, our Transition Team moved to Valley Heights Secondary School for its second meeting. The success of the dinner had provided a positive lead up and I was prepared to move forward in our planning for the future. At the meeting I became profoundly aware that several issues remained unresolved, in fact, several issues had been virtually unexamined. We were in trouble. The success of the dinner had been overshadowed by a floundering transition team.

The Accommodation Study had recommended that JK to grade 6 school be established in Port Rowan. Grade 7 and grade 8 students would be accommodated at Valley Heights. Sub-committees had been established to represent the JK to grade 6 transition and the Valley Heights transition. I had not anticipated that either group would falter in any way. I was mistaken. My closeness to the JK to grade 6 transition connected me directly with all aspects of that sub-committee; however my direct involvement with Valley Heights was limited. My thinking was that they were best suited to determine the needs and direction for that very unique transition process. Our transition meeting provided me with a clear picture of the situation at Valley Heights. The Valley Heights sub-committee had become stalled on details and was without direction. They had made a sincere effort to achieve some kind of focus for the group but it was clear they were struggling. I left the meeting frustrated and deeply concerned. As leader of this process I knew that the

responsibility for finding clarity and direction was mine. Unfortunately, I was not completely clear myself.

I spent the next few days trying to resolve this issue in my mind and to develop a plan of action. It seemed that a mere two months into the process we were facing a brick wall with no way around it. I dialogued with several people about the nature of our circumstance. The dialogue provided a sounding board. Each discussion provided a little more clarity and ultimately led to a new starting point. I returned to my vision and my circle of influence. There were four things in my circle, students, families, staff and structures. I needed to return to the fundamentals and attack this problem with these elements in mind.

It had become clear that my leadership role needed to change focus. Delegation to sub-committees is a wonderful approach but those committees need to be informed and aware of all of the elements affecting their duties. Valley Heights could not seem to visualize the inclusion of grade 7 and 8 into their structure. I had assumed that this understanding existed and that our previous discussions had been based on this assumption. In retrospect I should have been more aware of the disparity between elementary and secondary education. Just as a school would welcome this year's batch of grade 9 students to a new world of timetables, course credits, locker assignments and homerooms, grade 7 and 8 students would be similarly welcomed. Consideration of any other model was beyond the experience of Valley Heights. There was a significant philosophical difference that needed to be understood before any planning could begin.

The following week, I met with key participants at Valley Heights. Over the

course of two hours, I provided them with a view of elementary education. I provided them with a road map to follow and a set of assumptions that could be made about the classes that would be arriving. In a very short period of time we achieved a new understanding and a lack of consensus on priorities. I am convinced that the fundamental problem was a lack of information and a lack of understanding. This was not the product of any lack of commitment or desire. I also believe that it was completely necessary for the process to unfold in this manner. In other words, having a misguided transition meeting may well have been a catalyst in achieving a level of understanding that otherwise would not have been realized. In the weeks that followed each transition meeting gained in momentum and achieved increased productivity. Record of this meeting is contained in my journal:

- Met with the high school, confirmed my assumption, they did not understand the elementary structure
- I went through a number of issues from recess to time tabling and then went for the slam dunk...location of Walsingham students
- "The programming needs of Wam requires that the students be located inside VHSS in 3 rooms that are close together ...guess what...they now understood
- they began to see the prospect of including this program in the high school...they were actually excited....they even started to talk about who might move to portables to accommodate this change
- I was relieved to say the least...but I am not sure that I won't have to revisit this issue
- We need two recommendations from the subcommittee

1.that the programming needs of 7 and 8 students require that they be located in adequate rooms inside VHSS
 2.that a number of rooms be identified as a required addition to VHSS to meet the needs of the increased number of students. (design would be discussed but not recommended)
- ultimately....we are hoping for enough information to make a recommendation from the transition team that will bring us closer to tendering.

Change Within Change

Following a somewhat hapless and misguided beginning, the transition process gained a full head of steam and was well underway. The sub-committees became strong and projected confidence. I was very pleased and feedback that I received from most affected groups was more positive. In the process of setting up the next Transition Team meeting, I met with Gerry Kuckyt at a principals' in-service to set up a meeting date and began to discuss the structural needs for Valley Heights and Port Rowan. Gerry and I quickly agreed that it would be possible to meet the classroom needs of the grade 7 and 8 students at Port Rowan and forego the transition to Valley Heights. During the accommodation study, this was not an option that had received much attention. It was believed that the impact of a new Catholic High School in the area and the possible transfer of students to other secondary schools in the area would leave Valley Heights with a significant decline in enrollment. It was now clear that such a decline would not prevail and that Valley Heights was, in fact, at capacity. Gerry and I both agreed that a JK to Grade 8 model for a school was preferred over other alternatives. We had a five minute meeting with Jackie Delong and confirmed that we were all on

the same page. In fifteen minutes the ground work had been laid that would change the decisions of the last twelve months.

In the days that followed, it became clear that in order to change the decision of the accommodation study, several things had to occur. Any recommendation to change the design of school amalgamation would need to come from the community. Any proposal that would be divisive to the community could not be pursued. Since the Board had approved the recommendations of the Accommodation study, any change would require a Board resolution. Finally, any proposal to the Board would need to be completed within 6 weeks. This issue was thick with politics. Despite my preference for a JK to grade 8 school, I knew that blindly charging forward would have long term deleterious effects.

Again stepping back to my stated vision and my circle of influence proved the best guide in moving forward. Although I knew that the community had to assume the lead on this issue, they needed to be aware of its potential. The unique nature of a tripled school environment had resulted in 3 school council members acting as co-chairs. I met with each one of them and discussed the potential of a new option for Port Rowan. As I had expected, they were unanimous in their support.

Our next transition meeting was scheduled for the end of November. We needed to meet with each School Council and discuss this new initiative. Each meeting was plagued with questions about the fundamentals behind a change in plan and concern that the original recommendation of the Accommodation Study did not include this option. In collaboration with the council chairs, we chose to maintain a focus on what could be and avoid pointless reflection on

what should have been. This proved to be the right approach. The School Councils reflect the mood of the community and within the domain of 'school closure' there is a definite feeling of distrust. Simply acknowledging that a JK to grade 8 model was overlooked and that this was our opportunity for a new view was sufficient for council members. We were able to achieve consensus with the expedience necessary to make this a reality.

The November Transition Team meeting was the converse to the confusion that surrounded our last meeting. We were well organized. Each sub-committee presented direct and detailed reports and provided specific recommendations to the team. The sub-committee from Valley Heights had made huge advances in their understanding and resolve. I could sense the positive mood that comes with success. After all reports and updates had been completed, I shared with the group the content of our frequent School Council meetings. Despite the significance of this change the discussion was relatively brief and supportive. We had done our homework and it showed. This was an important level of endorsement and each question or concern was addressed consistently and with confidence. Participants from around the room provided their views and support. We had achieved another level of consensus. In view of the need for community support, the Transition Team recommended that we hold an open meeting and present the JK to grade 8 proposal.

In concert with the School Council chairs, I set up a meeting at Valley Heights within 10 days of the Transition Team meeting. Pam Coon, Lou Anderson and Gunther Csoff presented this proposal to a room of about 40 to 50 parents. Unlike the School Council and Transition Team meetings, things did

not move along without incident. Some parents at the meeting used this opportunity to voice a variety of frustrations. There were a variety of concerns expressed, citing issues of poor communications, lack of involvement, lack of caring, to name a few. Despite efforts to deal with all of these issues throughout the process, it was obvious that I had not been totally effective. In reflection, however, I realize that, to members of the community, this process was leading to the destruction of important community centres. It might be possible to ease the pain that is connected to losing a school, but it was impossible to eliminate it. These people needed this opportunity to vent their frustration. Ultimately, the meeting changed course and, except for a single voice, the group unanimously supported a JK to grade 8 model for Port Rowan Public School. From my journal on January 8:

- return from the holidays
- presentation in place, school chairs should be prepared for presentation tonight
- met with Pam, Lou, and Gunther to review the presentation for the Board Meeting
- hour long meeting, everyone on the same page
- discussed types of questions that might come from trustees
- Pam and Lou making presentation
- Our group is first on the agenda
- I am in the background as a support, SCC chairs are carrying the ball
- Lou and Pam do a good job in presentation
- Preparation is key, they are able to answer all questions including the deadly, "Why was this not considered last year?"
- The Board delays the vote until the end of the meeting, it is a long night

- Ultimately the board approves a new design for Port Rowan, JK to grade 8

In the week that followed, I met with the School Council chairs and we drafted a proposal to be presented to the Board. ON January 8, 2001, Pam Coon and Lou Anderson presented the data and circumstances at the Board meeting. Following a few questions for clarification, the Board approved a change in venue for Port Rowan. I was relieved and actually quite proud that, as a community, we had moved through uncharted territory and provided an improved learning environment for our students. We had amassed sufficient data to confirm that a JK to grade 8 model was, not only a preferred curricular model but was also sustainable well into the future. There is a profound sense of satisfaction in being involved in a process that you know will impact on students for years to come.

A Surprise

As I left the Board meeting it seemed that there was now a glow surrounding our small corner of the board. We were on our way. Nothing could stop us now. Like a well oiled machine, we seemed to be running on all cylinders. However, consistent with the past, there was yet to be another mountain to climb. Within days of our success, Trustees were receiving phone calls from members of the St. Williams community. Complaints, concerns and alternative solutions became the order of the day. Petitions started to move through the community. "*Save Our School*" was alive and well.

I was overwhelmed with frustration. In my mind there was no time to waste. We needed to move forward. We needed to finalize every detail. I was not prepared for any surprises like this. The Accommodation Study was the time for any dissension and to revisit old issues was not something that I

had anticipated. Again my vision and circle of influence provided the answer. I needed to stay focused on the fundamentals and stay on track. My personal journal for this period confirms my frustration:

- the weeks that follow are turbulent to say the least
- I am to present a Transition Report for the Board on Jan. 15
- Jackie gets a delay, there is nothing ready for that report since we have spent all of our time on preparing for Jan 8
- I need to contact the members of the Transition Team and have one more meeting
- content of that meeting will be to share the elements of the report to the Board
- there is a movement underway in St. Williams by a few concerned citizens to save the school
- this group has been going door to door drumming up support to keep the school open
- Mr. V. seems to be heading this up and they are making a presentation to the Board on Jan. 15
- I have not seen the presentation and am not aware of the group's intent, this has me very uneasy
- Simcoe Reformer contacted me to get some info regarding the closing of St. Williams, an hour of conversation and considerable effort on the part of the paper to get me to say that it is a tragedy to close the school in St. Williams and that keeping it open would in fact save construction costs

Sub-committees continued to meet and develop recommendations for the transition team. We now had the data at our disposal to determine the specific structural needs of Port Rowan. I continued to receive phone calls from trustees and concerned community members about the overall mood

in St. Williams. I then became clear that this group of concerned citizens had armed themselves with a petition, some local press and were now preparing a submission to the Board. The recent municipal elections had changed the face of the Board significantly and this had become a very real concern. Although unlikely, it seemed quite feasible that a sympathetic Board might well change months of meetings and hard work in a single night. We moved ahead despite this uncertainty.

We held our final Transition Team meeting near the end of January to prepare for a presentation to the Board in mid February. The meeting went well. Sub-committees continued to do a great job. We were well prepared and loaded with all of the relevant data. I had one concern that had plagued me in recent weeks. The number of JK and SK registrations had the potential to create a situation that would require another classroom.

If we underestimated the numbers for the fall of 2001 and found that we needed to create an additional JK/SK classroom, another portable classroom would need to be placed at the school and virtually every teacher in the school would need to be assigned to another room in order to maintain a sensible flow in the building. Closing an existing school and replacing it with portables was a definite sore spot in the community. Even those participants that had worked so hard to find workable solutions over the past two years found this possibility intolerable. I shared this information with the Transition Team and had prepared the final report to suggest two possible scenarios. In preparing my report I felt the need to be accurate and confident. This situation left some key issues unresolved. I was pleased to discover that the Transition Team understood this dilemma and the

sensitive politics surrounding it. As a result we were able to include both eventualities in our report to the Board with final determination of need to be confirmed after JK/SK registration in April.

The Board meeting in February was uncomfortable. School Council chairs Pam Coon and Lou Anderson met me at the board office. A contingent from St. Williams was present to make presentation to the Board to keep St. Williams Public School open. This was very awkward evening. The community group from St. Williams made their presentation appealing to a sense of responsibility from trustees to keep these small communities solvent. In the weeks before the meeting there was genuine concern expressed by trustees that maybe we had acted too quickly in closing these schools. As I stood at the podium to present our report I was very concerned, but we had done our homework and we had logical data to support our proposal. Ron Gowland prepared a media display to show the layout of the school and Jackie Delong stood beside me throughout. During my presentation you could see the trustees move back in their chairs, more relaxed and reassured. I believe that for the first time they became aware that we were proposing a solid, sustainable school where ultimately students would come first. A few questions followed. Within a matter of minutes the Board rejected the community group's request and approved our report. The Board even supported the premise that the actual classroom need would be finalized after JK/SK registration. My journal of February 12 reads:

- lucky day, this is the same night that St. Williams is presenting to the Board
- this feels very uncomfortable, but I feel well prepared

- Ron Gowland will man the media presentation, SCC chairs are in attendance as support and Bonnie has come to watch the carnage
- I am very nervous, and waiting to have the parents storm the Bastille
- the meetings goes very long, it is late and St. Williams parent group is the first to make a presentation
- figures have been drawn from the director's report and then manipulated in a very confusing way to present some justification for keeping St. Williams open
- after the presentation the Board decides to hold discussion until after my presentation, great. I am not real comfortable with that notion
- the Board Room is the driest place on the planet
- by the time I get up to speak my mouth is so dry that I am stumbling on each word
- I move quickly through the presentation, in fact a couple of times I got way ahead Ron's media support
- overall the presentation goes well
- questions are few, mostly about communication
- I think that the Board finally had a chance to understand the entire process and see first hand the proposal and the foundation for the proposal
- one of the trustee's comments that this is a well done presentation and that the transition team has done its homework
- the Board approved the report and the budget target
- the response to St. Williams was thanks for the presentation but everything remains as planned
- on the drive home it felt a little awkward, it was great to have gone through this process and have the report approved by the board, but I felt like I felt a special bond to the St. Williams

community. My efforts had basically confirmed their worst fear. That their school was closing. This was not a classic win-win in that sense

- In the days that followed, I began to feel better and better about this accomplishment
- There was a real sense of completion and this has followed the proper path
- I also became more and more aware that the process was critical to building for the future, I am better informed, the community is better informed, staff, students, all stake holders have gained insight

Of all the events that occurred during the previous year and a half this was the most difficult. I was pleased with the outcome but I cannot say that I felt victorious. My involvement as a school administrator in this community over the years had provided me with a unique bond with its people. I believe that most of them have come to trust me and see me as a support to their children and their families. In a single evening I had been instrumental in shutting down one of the cornerstones in that community. Although I am convinced that the children of St. Williams will ultimately benefit from the decisions made that evening, I am similarly impacted by the loss that accompanies this benefit.

Leadership

The experiences of the past two years have served to confirm many of my beliefs about leadership and provided me with a framework to challenge those beliefs. Most significantly, I have come to understand that leadership is not based on a particular set of strategies but, instead, founded in guiding principles and a set of values. If I had organized a particular set of strategies to supervise the amalgamation of three schools in the summer of 2000, I would have been

doomed to frustration, conflict and confusion. By leading from a vision and a circle of influence instead, it is possible to shift gears and sometimes redirect into unfamiliar domains. In the Valley Heights area the original plan dictated a JK to grade 6 model in Port Rowan and a grade 7 to 12 model for Valley Heights. An open minded approach allowed for a completely different structure to emerge. Despite the wear and tear on all of the stake holders precipitated by massive change, the community, students and staff were ready to dig deep and push for even more change. The end result is a better learning environment for students. Consider the four elements of that circle of influence:

- *Students* ultimately were provided with a school structure that better reflects the organization of the Ontario Curriculum
- *Students* will participate in a school model that is most consistent with elementary schools across the province, a proven model
- *Families* come to experience their children's education in a single location from the age of 4 through to 14
- *Staff* remains organized in an 'elementary school' model, a model with which they are familiar
- *The structure* remains sustainable over a longer period of time

Overall this unexpected change proved to be an indisputable improvement for all participants.

I have come to realize that leadership is defined by the context in which the leader finds him(her)self. Over the past two years I have found myself in the midst of a small set of rural communities that have been forced into change. My background and style of leadership has worked well in this

circumstance. As a leader I am adaptable in my approach and this has served me well. In fact, a personal short coming around organization and planning may well have made me well suited to lead this transition. By not having to live by hard and fast patterns of organization and planning, I was able to move in different directions quickly and easily. The context of a different leadership opportunity could very well result in this becoming a detriment to effective leadership.

The success of the process and my leadership in it has been verified through the emergence of community support and affirmations provided within the school. At a recent Board meeting in May, a trustee from the Burford area referred to the events in Port Rowan as an 'inspiration'. I received a phone call following the final Board meeting from the gentleman who led the St. Williams delegation to Save the School. He congratulated me on our success and indicated that he was prepared now to move forward. I was astonished. The seemingly pointless exercise of allowing this delegation to present to the Board was in fact more than worthwhile. He went on to tell me that his goal was to be heard, to have a voice. Having achieved that, he and his group were ready to support amalgamation efforts in the Port Rowan area. From my journal:

- I received a call from Mr. V. two days after the Board meeting, he congratulated me and indicated his desire to move on...he affirmed that his desire was to be heard and he felt that the Board had done a good job in hearing his concerns....go figure....this was not a turn that I had expected

I have learned from this that leadership is sometimes simply stepping aside and allowing the right events to occur.

This experience and the process of regular critical review have been strengthening for me as a leader. Regular discussions with fellow principals and Jackie Delong have helped me to develop new characteristics as a leader. I believe the most important characteristic developed is one of personal confidence. I have led this process my way and have been encouraged to do so. Bonnie Church, my vice-principal has acted as my critical friend, keeping me on track and confirming my views. Regular dialogues provided feedback that directed me to changes and methods that would improve my performance. The end result is a confidence that will stay with me for years to come. I am indebted to my two vice-principals, Bonnie Church and Brian

Mayhew, who worked tirelessly to manage the schools while I moved about trying to prepare and work through a significant transition process. I hold in them the same trust that was held in me when I was asked to assume this responsibility.

Throughout this experience I appreciate having been led in an affirming way. I have felt trusted and empowered. I have also felt that mistakes are allowed and they can often be the source of new directions. As a leader I try to exemplify those characteristics. It is my hope that these pages show that leadership is a combination of commitment, knowledge and flexibility, that leadership is a much about the people being led as it is about the leader.

Kim Cottingham, GEDSB, June 2001

PC Concepts 10/01

Roots and Wings: Facilitating the Process of Action Research

Cheryl Black
&
Heather Knill-Griesser



*Cheryl Black
Vice-Principal
Brier Park School*

Cheryl Black is an elementary vice principal. Previously she taught vocal and instrumental music at the secondary level. Cheryl has also just completed her Master's of Education degree as a member of the Grand Erie District School Board at Brock University. She has acted as a resource person for reflective practitioners for the last three years. Her first action research project is published at Ontario Action Researcher available at www.unipissing.ca/oar



*Heather Knill-Griesser
Teacher Consultant-Primary
Division Teacher Resource*

Heather Knill-Griesser is currently a Teacher Consultant-Primary Division in the Grand Erie District School Board. Previous classroom experience includes extensive primary experience. Heather has recently completed her Master's of Education degree as a member of the Grand Erie District School Board/Brock University cohort. Heather is also the Early Years contact for the board and a trainer in First Steps. She has engaged in Action Research projects for the past five years and has acted as facilitator for reflective practitioners for the past two. Previous projects have been published in the Ontario Action Researcher at www.unipissing.ca/oar.

ABSTRACT

Encouraging practitioner-researchers to become engaged in research and supporting them once they begin, involves a tricky balancing act. Each researcher needs to know that assistance is available yet leaning too hard on that support may impinge on their actual learning experience. Discerning the amount of support each person requires to ensure success is difficult and different for every researcher. This article describes some of the more nebulous factors in providing and sustaining that support.

The energy in the room was tangible. As each teacher described their research to date all attention was empathically focused on the speaker. Individuals or pairs had chosen an area of concern in their classroom practice and were researching a means for improvement. Professional colleagues were able to validate their own knowledge and experience by sharing ideas and suggestions with each other allowing them to move their thinking forward.

Projects that included monitoring the effectiveness of a new resource, implementing assessment strategies or improving an aspect of classroom practice were shared in a community of learners. Successes were celebrated, challenges were articulated, and possible solutions were gathered.

There was a different kind of teacher talk in the room. Laughter, dialogue and positive interaction became the rule rather than the exception. Teachers were engaging "in a variety of learning opportunities both individual and collaborative that [were] integrated into practice for the benefit of student learning...recognize[ing] that continuous professional growth [was] an integral part of teaching" (OCT p. 14).

What spark inspired this newly-created community of learners? How had this change in attitude/environment been achieved? Why were people excited to discuss their changes in practice? When had the change taken place? Where will their new mind-set take them? Would their interest in life-long learning be sustained?

In our experience as facilitators of action research in various settings, we have discovered the necessity for the following common elements: establishing a foundation of trust, providing resources, sharing prior knowledge and experience as we model the process, promoting positive, professional dialogue, and celebrating finished projects with an interactive presentation. The same combination of elements are not always

needed in every situation. Navigating the balance between "leading from beside" (Greenleaf, 1977) and standing back to permit the researcher to "become autonomous and strive to realise the educative potential within themselves" (DeLong as cited in McNiff, 2000, p. 282) requires a strong intuitive sense.

The first step is establishing a foundation of trust. There must be trust between the facilitators and the new researchers, trust between colleagues, trust in themselves, and trust in the process. The initial engagement in the process involves a certain amount of trust in the facilitator and trust in their own professional ability. Continued involvement is often dependent on safe, respected professional dialogue.

The process is a continuing cycle of acting, reflecting and revising one's practice. Trust in that cycle, the process of researching one's own professional practice, is the most difficult to achieve and one that may only be developed by the individual. Meeting with a critical friend or a group of colleagues to share and receive feedback, aids in short term reflection and provides the support necessary to take the project to completion. The final stages of data analysis-- reflection and reporting on the entire project from start to finish--will enable the true level of professional growth to become evident.

Another element involves sharing our prior knowledge and experience. This allows us, as facilitators, to empathize with the struggles others may have with the process. The fact that we are engaged in our own action research project, modeling the process, helps others believe that we truly understand their struggles and enables them to trust our empathy and care. Since each action research cycle will transform into a new cycle which has the potential to continue indefinitely (McNiff et al, 1997), reflective practice frequently becomes an integral part of professional growth

Resources come in many shapes and sizes. Resources may include items necessary for data collection such as personal journals, digital cameras, video cameras and tape recorders. Professional literature and journal articles about the process are also helpful. Another cycle becomes evident. As reflective practitioners become more confident in the process, they are able to articulate their resource needs. Honouring their requests whenever possible, shows our confidence in their professional judgment which continues to increase their confidence in the process. As with many aspects of the action research process, it is difficult to determine which comes first.

Another important aspect of modeling our respect for the professional judgment of others, is supporting them in their selection of their

chosen area for research. Facilitators dictating a topic for research implies a lack of confidence in the researcher's ability to monitor their own areas for needed professional development. Also the researcher's choice will hinge on their own values as educators thus improving the level of engagement in the study and increasing the probability of completing the project.

The action research process is seldom smooth and improvements rarely happen at regular intervals. Each success is often followed by a period of questioning one's practice and sometimes even involves a period of doubting the ability to make a positive change. As a result, it is extremely important to meet with a critical friend or with a group of respectful colleagues to discuss frustrations and receive supportive feedback. Michael Bassey believes that a critical friend is crucial to the process (1991). Costa and Kallick (1993) articulate a critical friend as, "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward"(cited in Lambert et al., 1995, p. 89).

At the end of each school year, a celebration is planned where completed projects are presented to a group of fellow researchers. This provides the "final validation exercise" (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996, p. 110) to prove that the claim to knowledge is a valid claim. It supports the claim that "the research is credible, so this knowledge may be put into the wider body of knowledge and acted on by others" (McNiff et al., 1996, p.110).

Facilitating the action research process for new reflective practitioners, is our own action research project. Acting as critical friends, we have realized that every individual has a slightly different way of perceiving their practice based on their

values and their professional judgment. Each individual is working in a slightly different context and often needs different resources, or forms of support depending on their stage of engaging in the action research process. Learning to trust our intuitive sense while supporting others in the process is evidence of our commitment to our own continued professional growth and life-long learning.

In our experience, supporting a practitioner-researcher through the Action Research process is like nurturing a caterpillar through its metamorphic cycle. We provide a safe, supported environment for the growth and development of a new researcher. The researcher transforms into a confident reflective practitioner who contributes to the professional knowledge base of educators thus improving student learning.

Bibliography:

- Bassey, M. (1991). Creating education through research. Presidential Address to the British Educational Research Association, Thursday, September 29, Nottingham, England.
- Black, C. (1998). Improving group dynamics and student motivation in a grade 9 music class, Ontario Action Researcher. Available at: www.unipissing.ca/oar.
- Delong, J. (2000). My epistemology of practice of the superintendency. In J. McNiff & J. Whitehead (Eds.), Action research in organizations (pp. 274-284). New York : Routledge.
- Ghaye, A., & Ghaye, K. (1998). Teaching and learning through critical reflective practice. London: David Fulton.
- Greenleaf, R. (1977). Servant leadership. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Lambert, L., Walker, D., Zimmerman, D., Cooper, J., Dale Lambert, M., Gardner, M., & Ford Slack, P. (1995). The constructivist leader. New York: Teachers College Press.
- McNiff, J., Lomax, P., & Whitehead, J. (1997). You and your action research project. New York: Routledge.
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (Eds.). (2000). Action research in organisations. New York: Routledge.
- Noddings, N. (1984). Caring, A feminine approach to ethics and moral education. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Ontario College of Teachers. (1999). Standards of practice for the teaching profession. Toronto, ON: Ontario College of Teachers.
- Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind, "How do I improve my practice? Cambridge Journal of Education, 19 (1), 41-52.

Cheryl Black and Heather Knill-Griesser, GEDSB, May 2001

PC Concepts 10:01