

Partners in Action Research

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Partners in School Innovation

Partners in School Innovation (PartnersSI) is a San Francisco Bay Area school-reform organization where AmeriCorps members, whom we call Partners, work full-time in low-income schools to help schools build capacity and achieve their own reform goals. Founded by Julien Phillips and Kim Grose in 1993, PartnersSI currently works with eight local schools and includes among its staff twenty-seven Partners, five School Partnership Directors who help guide Partners work, and thirteen additional full-time staff members.

In our attempt to enable schools' capability for continuous learning and improvement toward reducing the achievement gap, we at Partners work simultaneously at several levels. At one level, we work to impact teachers and students most directly—in their classrooms. But our work in classrooms is not isolated; we work in classrooms in ways that connect with and support whole-school reform. The opposite is also true, whole school reform goals provide the intended framework for Partners' work in classrooms.

Supporting teacher action research (and “classroom-based cycles of inquiry”) is one of several ways that Partners work to help move schools toward achieving their reform goals. We have applied the principle of simultaneous work at multiple levels to our support of action research. More specifically, by supporting teacher action research we hope that individual teachers are learning and improving their teaching practice to enhance student learning, and developing “habits of mind” that include reflection and purposeful inquiry. Simultaneously, we hope that groups of teachers are collaborating (sharing successes and challenges, and looking at data to better understand their teaching and its link to student learning) and that the school as a whole is looking at links between what teachers are teaching and what students are learning, sharing successes/practices among teachers, and shifting culture to value teachers' learning and collaboration.¹

Last year, we at PartnersSI engaged in our own action research: a careful study of Partners support for teacher action research as a simultaneous school-wide and classroom strategy for reform. In particular, since supporting teacher action research was a new reform strategy for us, we were interested in learning 1) How do non-experts support teachers' action research? 2) How does the context of the school influence the success of action research projects? 3) How does classroom level research relate to reform goals of improved classroom practice, whole school reform, and increased equity?

¹ As an organization dedicated to supporting whole school reform by working at multiple levels, the goal of connecting classroom and school reform was clear to us at the outset of our work with action research. Through close attention, we have increased awareness of both the importance of these links, and the challenges to creating them.

Design and Methodology

This study uses an embedded case study design. I began with interviews of seventeen Americorps Partners, in eight different schools, whose work supported classroom-based action research. I analyzed their interviews, and then selected five Partners, whose projects differed on a variety of dimensions, on whom to focus the remainder of the study.

Data collection for the five cases included additional interviews with each Partner, interviews with the teachers and coaches with whom they were collaborating, multiple interviews with Partners' project directors, observations of key meetings, and review of relevant documents. Interviews were semi-structured, audiotaped, and approximately 45 minutes in duration. Interviews with Partners, directors, teachers, and coaches focused on the same issues: descriptions of their action research projects and their role in the project, successes and challenges of the project, and links to Partners in School Innovation's organizational goals with regards to student learning, whole school reform, and equity. Data collection continued for a period of approximately six months. Following data collection, I conducted analysis by coding for major themes within each of the five cases, and then identifying cross-case themes.

As the principle investigator in this study, I am in an unusual position. I am both a former university researcher with a Ph.D., and a staff member at PartnersSI where I play the joint role of reformer in a school and researcher helping our organization to learn from our practice. Thus, this is a study of action research through action research.

Action Research for Reform

The term action research, common within and outside the field of education, emerged from a historic tradition of research for social change. Kurt Lewin coined the term in the early 20th Century, and explained that action research “gives credence to the development of powers of reflective thought, discussion, decision and action by ordinary people participating in collective research on ‘private troubles’ that they have in common” (Adelman, 1933, p.8). Action research has been a growing presence within the field of education, particularly for teachers. The phrase “teacher research,” sometimes used interchangeably with the term “action research,” usually refers to teachers conducting research on and for themselves, in contrast to the traditional model where teachers are either the subject or the recipient of someone else's research. Cochran-Smith and Lytle define teacher research as “systematic and intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (1992, p. 24). By combining the phrases “teacher research” and “action research” to “teacher action research,” we describe a type of research where teachers are conducting studies about their own classrooms or schools, to promote social change in these classrooms or schools.

Most frequently, teacher action research provides a process for individual teachers, or networks of teachers, to investigate questions of personal significance to themselves and their students, and to act on their findings. Many universities work in partnership with local teachers creating a forum for learning action research skills, discussing action research studies, and sharing action research findings. When engaged in action research, teachers often work independently or with a network of teachers from other schools to focus the study and the impact of the study's results on individual classrooms.

Recently there has been a surge of interest in action research as a school-wide reform strategy. When action research is used as an instrument toward school-wide reform, the school as a whole becomes the focus of research rather than individual classrooms.

The movement to use an action research or inquiry frame for school improvement is especially apparent in California. Related state initiatives include Program Quality Review, the state's school accreditation process which requires that schools enter a process of inquiry around school-identified questions. In addition to the state's influence on promoting action research for reform, the San Francisco Bay Area is especially replete with school reforms based on an action research approach. Over eighty leadership schools in the region have worked with the Bay Area School Reform Collaborate (BASRC). BASRC supports a process of school reform in which schools enter a "cycle of inquiry" that includes an action research cycle of asking questions, collecting and analyzing data, and acting according to learnings from the data. BASRC asks schools to focus their cycle on two questions, one about student performance and another about teaching, and to focus their reform effort on improving school-wide instruction and student achievement according to their findings. Similarly, the Bay Area branch of the Coalition of Essential Schools (BayCES), encourages schools to participate in Data Based Inquiry, a process of looking at data, identifying problems and solutions, and taking action.

Typically, reform initiatives and teacher professional development consist of outsiders bringing knowledge to teachers. Rather than focusing solely on the benefits of outsider knowledge, advocates of action research and teacher inquiry point also to the importance of providing opportunities for teachers to become reflective practitioners (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Schon, 1983), and generators of their own knowledge (see e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Indeed, many agree that teachers' opportunities to acquire outside knowledge have little influence on teachers' beliefs and practices when these opportunities are not accompanied by their reflection on their own and their students' learning (Barth, 1990; Elmore, et al., 1996; Fullan, 1993; Newman, 1996). Despite the perceived promise of inquiry and reflection as a reform strategy, these same researchers find active inquiry and reflection to be absent in most schools. In her longitudinal case study of a school that embodies a culture of inquiry, Stokes (1999) suggests that external support for inquiry-based

reform is necessary to its success, and outlines the nature of the relationships and supports that are beneficial. In particular she explains that critical friendships and adaptable resources to suit school's goals, purposes, and pace of change seem important.

Because Partners from PartnersSI support reform in Bay Area schools who are also involved in the state's PQR process and with local school reform organizations including BASRC and BayCES, it is not surprising that many Partner schools are interested in action research and inquiry as a strategy to achieve their reform goals. In an effort to support teachers' reform work in these schools, one of the many roles that Partners play is that of supporting teachers' action research.

Introduction to the Variety of Action Research Projects

During the 1999-2000 school year, Partners from PartnersSI supported a wide variety of teacher action research efforts. The descriptions below, of four Partner-supported projects in four different schools, provide a brief introduction to the variety of projects that Partners supported in classrooms, with the intention of linking the work to school-wide reform goals.

Mariam²

Mariam provided action research support to teachers in a medium sized (694 students) low income K-8 Charter School. 1999-2000 was the second year of partnership between PartnersSI and the school, and Mariam's second year working full time as a Partner in the school. As one of her Partner roles, Mariam supported an action research endeavor with three important purposes: to support a group of teachers to complete a case study project responding to a teacher question about three students per class; to help teachers to focus on particular students and help them to increase their learning and to connect case study projects to the school's reform goal of increasing student literacy.

Leticia

Leticia's action research project took place within a low-income K-5 urban school with 469 students and 22 teachers. 1999-2000 was PartnersSI's 3rd year of Partnership with the school, and Leticia's second year working as a Partner in the school. Growing out of a long-time school structure of a collaborative inquiry process where teachers met monthly in small groups to investigate areas of mutual interest, Leticia offered teachers in one such group the additional opportunity to extend their inquiry work into the classroom. One teacher chose to participate and Leticia agreed to assist her to investigate the influence of Reading Recovery strategies in her classroom.

Marisol and Erica

Marisol and Erica, first year Partners in a large (692 students) low-income urban K-5 school, worked with teachers throughout the school to facilitate the classroom implementation of a

² This and other names throughout the paper are pseudonyms.

school-selected comprehension strategy, Reciprocal Teaching (RT). In conjunction with helping to introduce this teaching strategy, they also supported teachers in engaging in action-research about RT in their classrooms. The introduction of RT and action research to the classroom was intended to bring the school's overall reform work and research on literacy to link more directly with classroom teaching and learning.

Sharon

Sharon supported two action research endeavors at a low income K-5 school in its seventh (and final) year of Partnership with PartnersSI. First, she supported “target group plans”—a school-wide approach to action research where each teacher was asked to identify a particular group of students, and a teaching practice and collect student achievement data three times a year to inform instruction. In addition, Sharon supported another action research effort at the school--she supported a group of five teachers involved with an outside organization called Collaborative Action Research for Equity (CARE).

These four projects, the subject of in-depth study for PartnersSI's action research about action research, provide many important lessons about using action research as a reform strategy, and, the role of outsider support for this strategy.

Balancing Process, Content, and Relationships for Successful Action Research

As Partners supported teachers' action research in their classrooms, the interaction of the *process* of action research (framing research questions, collecting data, analyzing data...) the *content* of action research (the focus of the research question) and the *relationship* between Partner and teacher shaped the action research projects in each classroom and school. Projects with a balance of support among these three factors--where teachers and Partners had 1) a clear understanding of the possibilities of action research, and adequate skills to achieve the process, 2) a focus on a specific content (such as a particular teaching practice, or an explicit student learning goal), and 3) a collegial, respectful relationship between Partner and teacher (aided by Partners spending time getting to know the students, teachers, and classroom prior to embarking on the action research project) —were the most promising.

Similarly, school-wide action research projects with a balance of support among an articulated and agreed upon *process* of pursuing the action research), clear and narrow school-wide *content* focus of a implementing a teaching practice or achieving a learning goal), and supportive *relationships* among colleagues provided the greatest opportunity for the impact of school-wide action research.

Partners played many roles to support teachers in each of these three aspects of teacher action research. Table I presents Partners' roles grouped according to whether their primary emphasis was supporting the process of action research, the content of action research, or the relationships. Although no Partner could possibly fill all these roles in a single project, we

learned that when Partners simultaneously filled some roles from each of the three categories (content, process and relationships) the projects developed most smoothly.

Process Considerations

Processes that provided a *moderate amount of structure* interspersed with *strong support* were especially successful. With little structure or support, other priorities often subsumed teachers' time, and teachers did not focus on or complete action research projects, even when they were expressed as a school-wide expectation.

Mariam's collaboration with the school's literacy coach provides an example of a project with moderate structure and strong support. Early in the year, Mariam drafted an overview of the process to structure teachers action research, and several tools help teachers engage in question asking, data collection and analysis. Mariam introduced the process during the after school literacy course facilitated by the school's literacy coach, and created a calendar of group check-in times and a final sharing day to take place during the course. Meanwhile, she met with teachers one-on-one between meetings, to reflect with teachers and offer support using the tools she had developed. As a result of this strong support and moderate amount of structure, most teachers thoughtfully completed their case study projects, and attributed their success in part to Mariam's support saying that it was "invaluable" and "made all the difference."

Too much structure without adequate support proved frustrating for teachers. The detailed structure and lack of support for Target Group projects at the school Sharon supported provide a contrast to the strong support and moderate structure of Mariam's case study projects. Sharon and teachers agreed that the Target Groups were less successful than they could have been, both because teachers were overwhelmed by the structure, and because they felt little support or accountability to engage in the process.

Table I
Partners Roles Supporting Action Research

Partner roles that supported action research *process*:

- Designing a structure and documentation system for a school that wants to embark on cycle of inquiry work.
- Observing in classrooms and recording observations.
- Collecting data and supporting teachers' data collection (for example by interviewing students, conducting student assessments etc).
- Reflecting on, analyzing and making sense of data.
- Sharing and reflecting on data with teachers.
- Convening groups of teachers for discussion of their action research.
- Facilitating conversations among teachers about their action research.
- Writing newsletters with teachers to share learnings with other teachers.
- Helping teachers to maintain a focus/priority on action research (scheduling times to discuss, sending reminders.....)

Partner roles that supported *content* for action research:

- Participating in professional development with teachers.
- Experimenting with a new teaching practice alongside a teacher (e.g. each of you working with a group of students).
- Introducing a new teaching practice to students in a classroom.
- Sharing articles or suggesting professional development opportunities for teachers.
- Posing questions that help teachers to identify their learning needs.

Partner roles that supported *relationships* for action research:

- Locating and preparing classroom resources that support the content of the action research project (e.g. gathering materials for a unit the teacher will be teaching and doing action research about.)
- Supervising groups of students in a classroom so that the teacher can gather data or engage in some other aspect of the action research project.
- Substitute teaching in classrooms so teachers could observe one another, or so coaches/teachers could meet. (This is legal only in a charter school).
- Assisting coach or teacher by taking on some of their tasks (e.g. scheduling meetings, making charts, Xeroxing documents for a meeting).
- Meeting with teachers to accomplish tasks related to the action research work (planning lessons, discussing students, looking at student work).

Providing “administrative follow-through” at meetings (collating, coordinating and keeping track of different people’s tasks, Xeroxing, writing...). The numerous requirements that they read in the six-page description of target group projects confused teachers, and they saw few forums for support, or follow-through³.

Content Considerations

In general, action research projects with a narrow focus—on a particular teacher practice or an explicit learning goal linked to a teaching practice—felt more successful and engaging to Partners and teachers. A vague content focus, (for instance: “How do the various literacy practices I use influence student learning?”) did not provide sufficient guidance for data collection, data analysis, or action and led to frustration for Partners and teachers.

Among PartnersSI’s central goals is to increase educational equity and reduce the achievement gap between students of color and white students. Not surprisingly, action research projects with explicit questions about equity tended to not only be more focused on a particular content, but also to produce findings and recommendations more directly linked to increasing equity. For example, the focus of Sharon’s collaboration with teachers on CARE included extensive “Beyond Diversity” professional development alongside the teachers. Teachers described the content of this professional development as “powerful” and “eye-opening”. During regularly scheduled follow-up sessions, CARE encouraged teachers to ask their own real questions (stimulated by the “Beyond Diversity” workshop and their teaching experience) about equity, culturally relevant teaching practices and family involvement. CARE provided a structure and framework for teachers to answer their questions by planning culturally relevant lessons, examining how targeted students of color responded to particular lessons, and linking teacher learning about targeted students of color to the larger classroom. Teachers explained that through the support of CARE and Sharon (and another Partner, Sarah) they were able to answer real questions that they’d been wondering about.

Influence of Broader School Context on Action Research Progress

Several school context factors were especially influential on the success of action research as a school-wide reform strategy. A *school-wide collaborative process* that supported action research provided ready opportunities for collaboration, and sharing of ideas. Even when a teacher’s action research had a different content focus than that of other teachers, a school-wide collaborative process provided opportunities for teacher leaders, Partners, or

³ Sharon, like the teachers, had numerous other responsibilities at the school. Some of Sharon’s time went to supporting the successful CARE projects described later in this paper.

PartnersSI staff to make connections and move the influence of a classroom-based action research project into the wider school community.

The action research project on which Leticia and her teacher colleague, Karen, collaborated provides an example of the importance of a school-wide collaborative process. Leticia played multiple roles supporting Karen's action research in the classroom and helping to connect this classroom action research to the school-wide collaborative process called collaborative inquiry. Leticia observed in Karen's classroom, shared and reflected on data with Karen, and raised questions. Meanwhile, Leticia and Karen continued to participate in the monthly collaborative inquiry process with the other Kindergarten teachers from which the classroom level project initially arose. During collaborative inquiry meetings, Leticia posed questions, pushed for clarity, and provided "administrative follow-through (collating, coordinating and keeping track of different people's tasks, Xeroxing, writing...). During these meetings, Leticia and Karen also discussed, with the other Kindergarten teachers, the action research work that they were doing in Karen's classroom. In addition, each collaborative inquiry group shared their work with the whole faculty. Here again, Karen shared her more in-depth classroom project with other teachers in the school. The structures to share action research work at the grade level collaborative inquiry group as well as the school-wide sharing provided a forum for others to connect with the work in which Leticia and Karen were engaged. Without these forums, there would have been little opportunity for the work to have influence beyond Karen's individual classroom.⁴

In addition to a supportive school-wide process, an agreed upon and understood *school-wide focus* provided opportunity for classroom level action research to have school-wide impact. The importance of this focus is apparent in the project that Mariam supported. During their work as a leadership school in the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) the school where Mariam was a Partner agreed to focus their reform effort on literacy, and literacy support for English Language Learners. The after school Literacy Collaborative classes, where Mariam provided support and structure for the case study projects, were an integral part of the school's focused literacy effort. The importance of the connection between the school-wide focus on literacy, and the case study projects was clear to teachers. As one teacher explained, "This work is not seen as useless, it's directly related to what the school is trying to get done."⁵

⁴ Despite the benefits of the school's collaborative inquiry both Karen and Leticia felt that the greatest impact of the action research work remained within Karen's classroom, and both would work harder at creating linkages if given another opportunity for action research.

⁵ The link between the school-wide focus and the case study projects provided a strong foundation of support. However, teachers and Mariam still faced many challenges including logistics of data collection, lack of time, and the difficulty of explicitly linking student scores to teacher instruction.

Linking Classroom and School-wide Reform

Creating strong connections between classroom and school-wide action research projects proved to be both an important opportunity and an ongoing challenge for Partners and teachers. The linking of classroom and school-wide reform seemed to be smoothest and have greatest impact when the members of the school community supported and understood a focused approach to reform, and all Partners at the school supported the same initiative. Erica and Marisol's work provides a particularly strong example of the power of linking classroom and school-wide action research.

Although 1999-2000 was the first year of partnership between PartnersSI and the school where Erica and Marisol worked, the school had a long history of reform, most recently highlighted by work with BASRC. In conjunction with their BASRC work, the school was engaged in a school-wide cycle of inquiry around literacy, and chose a single reading comprehension strategy, Reciprocal Teaching (RT), to implement in classrooms school-wide. Because the school had such a clear and focused agenda for literacy reform, PartnersSI structured a partnership that in large part supported this focused effort.⁶ Each Partner supported teachers' RT and action research in similar ways, by introducing RT to students in classrooms, using RT with student groups while teachers worked with other RT groups, preparing resources for RT lessons, introducing the process of action research, supporting teachers to frame action research questions and collect data, convening groups of teachers for discussion before during and after RT cycles, and sharing RT learnings through meetings, newsletters, and a conference presentation. Due to the school-wide focus on RT and action research, both Partners and school leaders created opportunities for dialogue about RT and the school's reform process. Lessons from the action research about RT were shared within groups of teachers during each cycle, during whole school staff meetings, and, on one occasion, at a regional conference presentation prepared by a group of teachers and Partners.

Inquisitive Teachers

Not surprisingly, teachers who gained the most from action research were usually those who contributed the most to the action research projects. Teachers who chose to engage in this type of inquiry work because they were especially motivated to find answers to questions, and those with more experience in research and teaching tended to participate in the action research

⁶ Although the school's literacy reform plan was quite focused, like in most reforming schools, staff were involved in numerous efforts.

process more intensively, and as a result, have better planned and executed projects. The teachers for whom Leticia and Mariam provided strong support were those with a personal interest in pursuing action research and therefore chose to take advantage of Leticia and Mariam's offers to provide additional action research support in the forms of classroom observations, one-on-one reflective dialogue. The committed group of teachers who chose to participate in CARE with Sharon went beyond their initial commitment to the project, and each teacher planned classroom follow-up to their action research project, and the group planned and facilitated a staff development based on their CARE work for the other teachers in their school. Other teachers, less interested and/or less experienced in action research found action research to be a distraction from their other priorities. Many of these teachers felt frustrated by the action research projects they engaged in, put minimal effort into these projects, and did not want to engage in the additional action research support offered by Partners. Partners offering support to these teachers often felt unwanted and unappreciated.

Current Action Research Work at PartnersSI

PartnersSI's action research about Partners support of action research has provided the impetus for several changes in our work. Understanding the importance of the three triangle points--content, process and relationship-- and the interdependence of these points has provided Partners and their directors with a tool to identify potential areas of leverage for the projects. Similarly, increased understanding of the importance of strategically creating interconnections between the classroom triangle and the school triangle has proved an important lesson for Partners and their directors as we support action research in schools this year.

An analysis of the challenges that Partners encountered when supporting teacher action research in 1999-2000, has been important for PartnersSI's understanding of how to improve support for teacher action research in 2000-2001. The most obvious challenge was that many Partners felt under-prepared to assist teachers with the process of action research. Partners encountered difficulties understanding and articulating an overall vision of an action research project. This was especially challenging because teachers, too, had difficulty understanding the process and purpose of action research in relation to school reform. In addition, certain types of data collection—especially classroom observations—proved difficult for Partners who felt unsure how to collect and present information that would be useful to teachers.

We have designed this year's professional development and support structures at PartnersSI to respond to the challenges Partners faced last year when collaborating on action research. During and after my investigation of Partners support of action research, I familiarized myself with literature on models and examples of teacher action research. As a result, I've

become a sort of “consultant” for our action research work at PartnersSI, particularly the professional development that we provide the Partners. For instance during Partners initial orientation, I facilitated a session involving all Partners the big picture vision of action research, along with examples of successful Partner supported projects, and practice at supporting teachers in the earlier stages of action research. I also facilitate a reflective inquiry group for Partners, in five three hour sessions, to increase their understanding of action research and skills to support action research with teachers. In addition, consultation and dialogue with individual Partners and Partner school teams address particular needs.

As PartnersSI’s support for Partners, and Partners’ support for teachers continues to grow and improve, we hope that this study provides a model within our organization and the schools with whom we partner of the potential learning and improvement that comes of careful action research.

Implications

Although the findings from this study emerge from a limited number of classrooms and schools where Partners in School Innovation Partners and staff provided a unique form of support for reform, the cases described in this article suggest implications worthy of more general consideration.

- **Committed non-expert support providers can provide useful support to teachers’ use of action research for classroom and school-wide reform.** Our experience at PartnersSI shows that possible support provider roles include collecting data for teachers (for example, interviewing students based on teachers’ questions, or observing in classrooms for student response to a particular teaching strategy), structuring action research projects for teachers (creating documents to help teachers decide upon research questions, or gain a big picture understanding of the possibilities of classroom research), working alongside teachers to implement a new teaching strategy and serving as a reflection partner, reflecting on data with teachers individually and in groups, and raising questions with teachers based on data. To profitably engage in this work, this study suggests that support providers and teachers need opportunities to understand the purposes of action research, and to gain proficiency in skills relevant to action research including asking researchable questions, collecting and analyzing data, and planning for action.
- **A balance among content, process and relationships strengthens action research projects.** The findings of this study suggest that the content of the action research (what the action research is about) should have a clear and narrow focus. The process of action research (how the research is carried out) should provide moderate structure and strong support. The relationships involved in the research (between support providers and teachers, and among teachers) should be strong and respectful.

- **Links between classroom and school-wide action research support reform.** Strategic attention to connecting action research to three levels of reform: the classroom, teacher groups, and the whole school might help strengthen the benefits of action research as a reform strategy.
- **Inquisitive and well-supported individuals and schools lead to promising action research projects.** This study suggests that certain schools (including those with a school-wide collaborative process and a school-wide focus) and certain teachers and support providers (those internally motivated to find answers to questions and those with more experience in research and teaching) are the most easily engaged in the action research process. For individuals or schools without these attributes, support providers might consider fostering their development. Greater structure and clarity of purpose can help strengthen the work of individual support providers and teachers who are less experienced or motivated to search for answers.

To be most effective, reform needs to occur simultaneously at both the level of the classroom and the school (see e.g. Fullan, 1993). The study presented here details the promise of action research as a reform strategy to connect the two levels. The findings and implications of this study are important not only for what they contribute to our knowledge about action research as a reform strategy, but also for detailing the potential of non-expert support for this strategy. Consequently, the findings and implications are relevant both to researchers who are trying to better understand action research, and to reformers and practitioners who are engaging in school reform.

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