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Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities

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Book Review

Sagor, R. (2010). *Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press. 155 pages.

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A culture of collaborative inquiry emerges once a specific mindset takes hold in the school (Sagor, 2010, p. xiii).

In the preface of *Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities*, Richard Sagor delves into the focus of his book and the requisite mindset that individual teachers, groups of teachers, and school leaders need to adopt to successfully conduct collaborative action research. A central component of this focus is that of professional learning community (PLC) teams, and the need for collaborative inquiry to exist in order for a PLC to be sustainable and meaningful.

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Sagor defines collaborative action research by the team inquiry process, when a group of individuals who are a part of a specific PLC, grade-level, or teacher learning team engage in inquiry and research. This process most often begins with the individual, the teacher who adopts a mindset of professional learning, action, and change. Sagor contends that through collaborative action research, “the teacher who simultaneously teaches his or her classes while discerning the answers to the most perplexing problems of educational design is the truly complete professional educator” (p. 3). He further adopts a metaphor of teachers as architects – having a solid knowledge base; building curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and organizing modes of delivery to benefit students.

The depth and value of this book is found in the descriptions and specifics of the five *Habits of Inquiry* that Sagor describes are necessary for cultivating successful, meaningful, and collaborative action research. This process includes:

1. Clarifying a Shared Vision of Success
2. Articulating Theories of Action
3. Acting Purposefully While Collecting Data
4. Analyzing Data Collaboratively
5. Informed Team Action Planning

In order for a school to become a professional learning community, these five Habits of Inquiry need to be adopted and confronted by members of each PLC team.

Sagor provides in-depth descriptions of each Habit of Inquiry, with specific definitions, step-by-step guidelines, and examples of successful implementation. For example, in Habit of Inquiry 1: Clarifying a Shared Vision of Success, Sagor engages groups of teachers to reflect on individual goals, share scenarios of student success, and identify achievement targets and assessments. This process is designed to assist PLC teams to construct a specific goal and vision for the research, one that is built on individual ideas and shared understandings.

In the chapter on Habit of Inquiry 3: Acting Purposefully While Collecting Data, Sagor focuses on the process and design of data collection. With an overarching focus on answering the question, “What will it take to produce universal student success with...?” he builds in three subquestions that will constitute the data (p. 53). These subquestions are defined as impact questions – designed to explore action, change, and relationship, and include:

1. What specifically did I (we) do? (action)
2. What improvement occurred for my (our) students? (change)
3. What was the relationship between my (our) actions and changes in performance? (relationship)

These questions are also built around specific types of data to collect. Sagor suggests a wide

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range of qualitative and quantitative data that is appropriate for answering each question, including: time use charts and shadowing (question 1); rating scales and grades (question 2); exit cards and surveys (question 3). Individually, these questions will assist any teacher with collecting and identifying relevant data for the research, but also enable teachers to share their findings, work with other teachers in the PLC teams, and find validation beyond their own classrooms.

This book is thoughtfully and logically organized, moving the reader from the beginning steps of action research to the final product. Each chapter also includes *Leadership Notes* for school leaders and administrators to reflect and adapt for discussions, and reproducible forms that correlate with the exercises and activities outlined throughout the book. The process of action research is presented as supportive and encouraging, a necessary presentation for teachers, school leaders, and administrators to recognize the importance of collaboration.

As a professor who prepares early childhood teacher candidates to conduct research in their own classrooms, I clearly see the value of this book for my students. Many of our teacher candidates are timid, if not completely frightened by the idea of research. Through their coursework, they take one course devoted to action research, but I actively integrate opportunities for teacher research throughout my classes. Action research is challenging for any teacher or administrator,

and Sagor's contention that support systems built through collective inquiry may enhance not just one classroom, but the entire school climate, is a valuable concept for new teachers.

As a former classroom teacher and someone who continues to facilitate the inquiry process with classroom teachers in various settings, I have a strong personal connection with this book. My initial foray into action research was during my time as an instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University where I explored the musical behaviors of preschoolers over the period of one year. Though rooted in my own questions and observations, this project evolved into a wonderful collaboration between the general classroom teachers, the graduate students enrolled in my fieldwork course, and me.

Sagor's descriptions emphasize the view that action research should not, and does not have to be conducted alone; rather, it is through collaboration, open dialogue, and a shared, school-wide understanding of this process that strengthens the research, and empowers the practitioner researcher.

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