ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING:
CONNECTING STUDENTS TO THEIR LEARNING

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Harold Lloyd Wood (1926-1998), decorated World War II combat veteran, tireless advocate for the disabled and graduate of the University of Missouri (BS, Business and Public Administration, '51).

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CONNECTING STUDENTS TO THEIR LEARNINGABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Like other schools with similar populations of poor and minority children throughout the nation, the author's school did not produce satisfactory scores on the state's high-stakes testing scheme. The project used an action research model to study how elementary classroom teachers used assessment for learning strategies to help their students more directly connect to curriculum goals and objectives. Furthermore, the author examined his own practice in facilitating the learning of others. Four elementary teachers agreed to participate together in the study. Data was collected from the transcribed audio recordings of the group's meetings, observation notes, journal reflections and final interviews.

The teachers demonstrated their capacity to use assessment strategies to engage their students. The author learned the value of listening as means of affirming the teachers' efforts. However, the most salient finding of the project dealt with the collaboration of the participating teachers, who valued the opportunity to collegially discuss their work in a non-threatening, supportive situation. Implications for conducting similar research are discussed as well.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF STUDY

In America, "gaps" in learning, as measured by achievement test scores, between ethnic groups have long been noted (Haycock, 2004, Walker-Dalhouse, 2005). Children of color and children growing up in poverty do not read, write or perform mathematics as well as white or relatively more affluent children. Data from the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2000) found that only 12% of African-American fourth grade students were reading at or above a proficient level compared to 40% of Caucasian students (Haycock, 2004). Advantaged public school students and private school students consistently out-performed less advantaged urban children (Walker-Dalhouse, 2005).

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) was passed to insure that every child would become proficient in reading, writing and mathematics. The law directs states to assess the learning of children in communication arts and mathematics annually in each public school, and by so doing, make those schools accountable to the public. States are required to develop examinations that assess students, and to provide those results to the public. These examinations include an ever increasing target for rate of success. Beginning in 2003, schools were deemed to have made adequate yearly progress (AYP) if their scores indicated an ever-growing number of proficient students. The target AYP goals in Communication Arts were 19.4% of students tested in 2003, 20.4% in 2004 and 26.6% in 2005. In math, the AYP targets were 9.3% of students in 2003, 10.3% in 2004 and 17.5% in 2005. By 2014, schools are to demonstrate that every student is proficient. Furthermore, NCLB provides sanctions and remedies for schools not meeting these standards for progress (Garner, 2004, and Hall & Weiner, 2004).

The state's Public School Accountability Report (November 2005) provided recent state-wide data regarding various indicators of school success, including the results of the state's Assessment Program's annual tests. The state's Assessment Program has tested students in public schools in grades 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11. Elementary students have been tested in 3rd grade in communication arts and science, in mathematics and social studies in 4th grade since 2001. Beginning in 2006, students in grades three through eight were to be tested in communication arts and mathematics in order for the state to comply with the federal legislation (DESE, 2005).

Data from the Accountability Report (DESE, 2005) is summarized in Table 1, along with test data from Spencer School District and Porter Elementary School. The data indicate that state-wide, 35.1% of all third graders in the state scored at the advanced or proficient levels in 2005, 34.6% in 2004 and 34.1% in 2003. Each of the last three years, the state has met the AYP goals. My district, Spencer School District, has likewise met the target goal in communication arts each the last three years, 26.4% in 2003, 25.5% in 2004, and 28.9% in 2005 (see Table 1).

The test scores at my school, Porter Elementary, however, mirror the "Achievement Gap" national data. At my school, only 9.4% of our third graders scored in the proficient or advanced category in 2005, up from the 7.7% in 2004 but down from the five year high of 16.4% in 2003 (see Table 1). Consequently, my school did not meet the AYP goal in any of the three years.

Table 1

Communication Arts Grade 3
Percent of students scoring at the Advanced or Proficient Level

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
AYP Goal			19.4%	20.4%	26.6%
State	31.6%	35.4%	34.1%	34.6%	35.1%
Spencer SD	28.5%	29.8%	26.4%	25.5%	28.9%
Porter Elem.	2.5%	11.9%	16.4%	7.7%	9.4%

Test data for the state, district and school in mathematics is summarized in Table 2. Scores in mathematics produced a somewhat different pattern. While the number of advanced and proficient students increased in the state and district, Porter still lagged far behind. For instance, the state percentage of 4th graders at the advanced or proficient level has steadily increased in the last three years (37.2% in 2002-03 to 40.4% in 2003-04 to 43.0% in 2004-05). The number of Porter fourth graders scoring at the advanced or proficient level climbed from 11.5% in 2002-03 to 13.5% in 2003-04 to 18.5% in 2004-05 (see Table 2). Our fourth graders' scores improved more (+7%) than the state's increase (+5.8%) and almost as much as the district increase in proficient students (+8.4%) over this three year period. And Porter School met the AYP goal in mathematics in each of the three years. However, even with meeting these goals, fewer than one out of five of Porter's fourth graders scored at the proficient or advanced level in mathematics in 2005.

Table 2

Mathematics Grade 4
Per Cent of students scoring at the Advanced or Proficient Level

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
AYP Goals			9.3%	10.3%	17.5%
State	37.7%	37.6%	37.2%	40.4%	43.0%
Spencer SD	29.9%	31.5%	29.2%	33.4%	37.6%
Porter Elem.	10.7%	7.9%	11.5%	13.5%	18.6%

District Interventions

Spencer School District employed a new superintendent in 2002. The 2002-03 tests were administered in the spring of 2003 and produced data published in August of that year. District scores fell, compared to 2001-02 scores, in both math and communication arts that year (see Tables 1 and 2), the first school year under the new superintendent. The district average among third grade students in communication arts fell from 29.8% scoring at the advanced or proficient level in the 2001-02 school year to 26.4% in the 2002-03 school year. Similarly, fourth grade students produced fewer advanced or proficient scores in mathematics in 2002-03 (29.1%) than in 2001-02 (31.5%) (see Table 2).

Responding to these falling scores, the superintendent immediately convened a select committee that produced an Instructional Crisis Plan. The Instructional Crisis Plan included a number of tasks and interventions designed to remedy the test score crisis situation. Among those tasks was the establishment of regular district-wide writing assessments and a "desktop curriculum" that narrowed the instructional focus to fewer objectives. Furthermore, professional

development activities were to be focused around the language of standards, assessment and data.

This new direction was informed by the writing and presentations of Dr. Douglas Reeves, an author and president of the Center for Performance Assessment, with which the district contracted to provide in-service training to administrators, teachers and central office staff on making standards and data part of the language of leadership and instruction. Reeves himself has spoken during administrator meetings twice a year since the new superintendent arrived. Reeves has extolled the values of teaching to criterion-referenced standards (as compared to norm-referenced measures that compare students to each other) and has explained how teaching to standards, with proper assessment, could improve learning and achievement for our students (Reeves, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). These in-service sessions dealt with making standards work and with data-based decision-making. Spencer School District teachers and administrators, including a number of Porter teachers, have now received training in the process of narrowing academic focus and developing data.

The instructional crisis plan originally created a scheme of district-wide writing assessments. These assessments required students to write to a common prompt six times per year. Teachers were directed to score the writings collaboratively with a six-trait (voice, ideas, organization, conventions, word choice and sentence fluency) scoring guide and the district calendar was arranged to set aside half-day sessions for the collaborative scoring of the writing prompts.

In the spring of 2005, the district created a Data and Assessment Committee, which took over the direction of the common writing assessments. The committee met for a week during June, 2005. The committee altered the scale for district-wide writing assessments from four

points to six points and further narrowed the curriculum in some subject areas by determining which desktop curriculum objectives were most important. These more important objectives became power standards (Reeves, 2002a). In addition the committee recommended that the district purchase the services of an outside testing firm to conduct monthly communication arts and math assessments of students from 2nd grade through 8th grade. These assessments consist of multiple choice questions derived from the grade level expectations (GLEs) provided by the state department of education, which, in turn, are tied to the questions on the state's MAP tests. To facilitate this new testing scheme, the district leased sets of new laptop computers with wireless technology for each school. These monthly assessments would provide data about how students performed on specific standards.

The Data and Assessment Committee met again in June, 2006, to further revise the writing assessment program, this time reducing the common writing assessments to four from six, and to continue the process of narrowing instructional focus by determining which objectives are most important. Throughout these meetings, as well as the in-service sessions mentioned above, the district's direction indicated implications about how assessment and assessment data could be used to alter instruction. But these sessions were about the work of teachers and administrators. They failed to mention any means of connecting students to their assessments, or to how students could make sense of their own learning.

<div align="center">School Interventions</div>

Failure to keep up with the state's high stakes testing scheme has landed Porter Elementary School in a state of "Needs Improvement" for two consecutive years. Several interventions have been tried without much discernable impact on test scores. In keeping with the district's direction, the Balanced Literacy model has been employed as the school's reading

instruction delivery system (Dorn, French & Jones, 1998; Dorn & Soffos, 2001). This instructional model evolved from the Reading Recovery program that the district had discontinued in 2004. In the 2005-06 school year, Reading Recovery teachers, who worked directly only with students, became Literacy Coaches. The four literacy support staff (two reading specialists and the two new literacy coaches) have worked directly with children in guided reading activities as well as worked with grade level teams of teachers.

Furthermore, the "Needs Improvement" status provided the school with $37,000 in additional grant money for the 2004-05 school year, and $45,000 for 2005-06, to be spent to support the existing instructional program. The bulk of the money was spent on after-school tutoring and professional development activities that focused on testing procedures and preparations.

Problem Statement

Despite the additional assessments of learning, and the other interventions noted above, classroom instruction has not led to significant gains in learning as measured by the state testing instruments. For assessment to be effective, it must inform teachers and students, directing the work of teachers and providing students a means of understanding the objective (Stiggins, 2006; White, 1996; Andrade 2000; Cobb, 2004). While the new assessments generate data for administrators and teachers, a real connection between assessment data, learners and instruction remains to be established at Porter School. With the advent of standards-based instructional models and high-stakes testing, administrators need to know how to help teachers use classroom assessments as formative tools to advance the learning of their students, and teachers need to be able to help students make sense of their own learning.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Research suggests that applying strategies of formative assessment that connect the learner directly to instruction during the learning, can produce significant gains in achievement, especially for poor performing students (Black, 1998; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2004; Stiggins, 2006; Meisels et al, 2003; Rodriquez, 2004). Recent research into instructional leadership has indicated that successful school leaders engage teachers in conversations about the direct application of such research based practices (Blase & Blase, 1999, 2004; Fullan, 2003; Blase & Anderson, 1995; Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005). Furthermore, to be transformational, such an application of instructional improvement strategies requires the collaboration of colleagues (Glickman 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2004; Klinger, 2004). The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent applying the principles of assessment for learning could improve the practice of teaching and the learning of students. In this study, four teachers and I employed two cycles of action research methods to construct knowledge about how teachers change their instructional outlook as they engage in learning and applying the principles of assessment for learning, and about how I can improve my skills at facilitating the learning of teachers. The knowledge gained here will be used to guide my work as a school administrator in supervising instruction and developing curriculum and has provided insight into these two questions:

1. How, and to what extent, do teachers use assessment data and make sense of assessment strategies to inform teaching and improve learning?

2. What insights have I gained about my role as an instructional leader and action researcher?

Significance of the Study

Learning is at the center of everything educators do. The research in this study was conducted at a school in its second and third year of "Needs Improvement" according to the designations of the state's department of education.   This situation of the school provided opportunities for action research to be employed to bring about a change in teacher practice. Teachers learned, implemented and reflected on a new strategy designed to promote the learning of their students. The results of this action research study of their efforts at instructional improvement could provide other school administrators with relevant information when implementing change in instructional programs.

Overview of Methodology

This study employed an action research approach to help teachers improve their instruction by implementing the principles of assessment for learning. This implementation continued through two cycles of diagnosing, planning, acting and then evaluating the results of that action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). Four teachers voluntarily agreed to join me to form a collegial learning team to study and practice assessment for learning (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter & Chappuis, 2005; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2004). To protect the teacher/participants from the possibility of coercion that my role as administrator might suggest, each was supervised and evaluated by the building principal rather than me.

We began our project by diagnosing assessment practices in which each participating teacher engaged. To this end we examined what we know about our students and studied the principles of assessment for learning (Stiggins et al, 2004). Each participating teacher shared how she developed and used assessment information to inform instruction and how, and to what extent, she included students as primary consumers of assessment data. Each of us came to the

project with our own perspective and experience about how to use assessment data. We engaged in planning how teachers begin this practice, basing our planning on the diagnosis that we have concluded. Once the participating teachers and I began the action research cycles, we recorded our observations, ideas and issues. . We met weekly to discuss issues and ideas. Throughout the period of action, I observed teachers and engage in conversations and conferences to facilitate the project. For data generation, these conversations and conferences were audio recorded and transcribed. After several weeks of such collaborative efforts, we concluded the first cycle.

The second cycle convened with reflection and discussion about how the implementation of the principles of assessment for learning has altered each participant's view of their own practice. The direction for the next planning and acting stages evolved from the process of redefining and re-examining our work.

Data for this study was generated from audio recordings of observations and meetings, notes recorded on our website, my own field notes, the journal writing that each of us maintains, and an individual summative interview at the end of the second cycle. Audio recordings were transcribed and secured in my office. The journals included each person's reflections throughout the process. Near the end of the action stage of the first cycle, I collected the journals in which teachers had recorded their reflections, photocopied the writings and returned the journals to the participants. Near the end of the second cycle, I again collected the teachers' journals, photocopied and returned them. These photocopied reflections became part of the data to be analyzed. My own journal entries included field notes of classroom observations as well as daily reflections. All recorded notes from our website, our journal entries and my field notes of classroom observations were examined and studied. These findings from these data sources are reported in chapter four of this dissertation.

Limitations

This study may be limited by the following conditions. First, this is an action research project, site specific and brought to life by the participants and myself. Consequently, generalizing from the findings presented may be limited. Themes about how teachers alter their perspective and their practice, and how an administrator can facilitate those changes will emerge from the data, but the conclusions drawn from these themes may not necessarily provide a plan for others. Secondly, this study focused on only one aspect of teaching—tying assessment directly to students for their learning. This aspect is just part of a teacher's daily work, and cannot by itself account for the relationships a teacher creates with students or the many ways teachers and students interact. Nor is the facilitation of the learning of teachers the only work of a building administrator. In fact, my role as researcher/facilitator was, to some degree, constrained by perceptions of my role as administrator/supervisor. (As noted above, the direct supervision and evaluation of these four teachers will be the responsibility of the building principal.) Finally, this is a study involving only four teachers and myself, with each of us bringing our own perspectives and experiences of teaching to the group. Starting out, none of us have any particular expertise in the area of assessment for learning. Consequently, our learning was our own and our experience in the project may or may not directly inform the learning of others.

Organization of the Dissertation

This opening chapter described the school and its problematic situation in the era of high stakes testing, and how a promising teaching strategy could be explored through a process of action research. The next chapter documents current research on learning, assessment for learning, recommended practices of professional development of teachers, how school leadership

can influence that professional development, and the tenets of action research. The third chapter describes the methodology of the study. The fourth chapter provides the findings of the study. The fifth chapter presentss a discussion of the findings, the implications of those findings and the recommendations for future studies.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE

The literature reviewed here is organized into these categories: current research on learning, assessment for learning, recommended practices of professional development of teachers, how successful school leaders can influence that professional development, and the tenets of action research. Finally, a summary synthesizes the reviewed literature and explains how it informs this study.

Learning

Learning is the reason for teaching and teachers. How children learn, what kinds of conditions and events can enhance and expand learning, how the brain assimilates new knowledge are all part of a teacher's repertoire. This section reviews brain research regarding learning, psychological factors that impact learning and recommended practices for maximizing learning in the classroom.

During the early and mid 1990s, the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education and the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory created a set of principles they hoped would steer the reform of American education (Alexander & Murphy, 1998). Based on psychological research, the APA designated 14 learner-centered principles to guide teachers (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). Learner-centered means a perspective that focuses on the learner, what he or she brings to the learning, and how the application of appropriate teaching practices can maximize that learning (Lambert & McCombs, 1998; McCombs & Whistler, 1997). This perspective is formed from the premises that each learner is unique in experience, development and emotional state, that learning is a constructive

process by which the learner connects new knowledge to prior knowledge and experience in meaningful ways, that learning is most likely to succeed when positive interpersonal relationships produce an environment of acceptance and order, and that learning is a natural process of understanding and engaging the world. Furthermore, learning is more likely to be successful when it is intentional and the learner has both long and short term goals. Assessment is an integral part of learning when both teacher and student can make use of feedback about outcomes and progress (Lambert & McCombs, 1998).

More recent research on the functioning of human brains validates these principles. The brain is composed of nerve cells called neurons. Information passes between neurons through connections called synapses. Cell parts called dendrites receive information while another neuron part, an axon, is the part that sends information. Where an axon from one neuron connects to a dendrite from another cell, a synapse is formed (Wolfe, 2001). Synapses, the connections between neurons, continue to develop throughout a person's lifetime and are driven by experience (Wolfe, 2006; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). Learning, then, is the process of making or strengthening the connections between neurons (Wolfe, 2006).

But the brain does not only make connections at the cellular level. It also sorts information into meaningful patterns (Wolfe, 2006). The human brain desires to make or find these patterns of meaning (Jensen, 1996). Learning occurs when new information connects to something previously learned. In fact, people cannot learn a new thing without connecting it to some model, schema, construct already learned. We understand something new only when we create a model or metaphor derived from our own personal experience (Jensen, 1996). What is learned, then, is what is connected.

Rather than as a static entity, memory, always an issue for teachers, is better thought of as a process that decays rapidly (Wolfe, 2006). People receive information through their five senses into their sensory perceptions. With the constant bombardment of stimuli, sensory memory sorts and discards (forgets) some bits of information. Other bits become part of working memory. Working memory is the conscious processing of information (Wolfe, 2001). Here, the mind imposes structures, based on experience, on the new information (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). To transfer newly structured information to long-term memory becomes a matter of rehearsal or practice to lead to elaboration and organization (Wolfe, 2001).

Long term memory is composed of two parts: declarative and procedural. Procedural long-term memory refers to that which a person can do without conscious thought (brushing teeth, tying shoe laces, etc.) while declarative long term memory refers to conscious thought. Consequently, declarative memory is reflective, while procedural is reflexive (Wolfe, 2001). Furthermore, declarative memory can be conceptualized as having two parts, episodic and semantic. Episodic memory refers to remembering events and the emotions connected to them, while semantic memory refers to our general knowledge of the world through words, their meanings, symbols that convey meaning about words, and rules of manipulating words and meanings. What we teach in school is aimed at the semantic part of declarative long term memory (Wolfe 2001, 2006).

Emotions are a primary catalyst in the learning process. Our brains are designed for survival, and as the brain receives stimuli from the environment, it sorts and sifts out what stimuli to keep and what to reject. What we attach emotion to, we attend to (Wolfe, 2001). In crisis, people sometimes make irrational responses because perceived physical or psychological dangers cause the brain to close some areas of rational thought in the interest of immediate

survival. Where time is of the essence, our brains react without the conscious processing of information. On the other hand, when the environment and interactions with others (teachers and students, for instance) are physically and psychologically safe and nurturing, students can engage their attention so that meaning and connections can be made (Jensen, 1996; Wolfe 2001; 2006).

Finally, brain research indicates that information learned within one context is readily recalled and usable when a similar context (Wolfe, 2006; Jensen, 1999). Hence, when asking students to make connections with what they read and their world, a standard practice in Balanced Literacy, teachers are expecting students to recall and relate contexts (Dorn, French & Jones, 1998; Dorn & Soffos, 2001).

Assessment for Learning

Prior to standards based assessments, assessment was a matter of norm-referenced tests that measured not against a standard, but rather, measured performance against a normal distribution of performance outcomes. Information from norm-referenced assessments then indicated how a single student or class or group measured against others who took the same test. The problem with norm-referenced testing was that some students came equipped with more tools than others. The goal such testing is to score above average. For standards-based assessment, the goal is to be proficient according to the criteria of the standard (Reeves, 2002a; Reeves 2002b; Conley, 2005).

All assessments of student learning serve to inform someone. Large scale assessments (such as the MAP tests) serve particular uses and provide information to specific groups of people. Likewise, school and district-wide assessments are also assessments of learning. Each of these, however, is a summative event that by its nature refers to the degree of learning already accomplished. While these assessments serve their purposes, the end user of assessment

information is not the student. Assessment for learning, on the other hand is assessment at the classroom level that is conducted throughout the learning process, rather than after it. Information generated from assessment for learning is used to diagnose learner needs, plan instruction and provide students with feedback they can use immediately to improve their work (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2004).

Some commentators conceptualize this kind of assessment, designed to be diagnostic and prescriptive, as inquiry. Serafini (2000) argues that assessment can be viewed through three paradigms: as measurement, as procedure and as inquiry. The assessment as measurement paradigm sees knowledge as existing separate from the learner and places the teacher in the position of distributor of knowledge, with students as the receptacle of that knowledge. Students do not construct meaning as much as acquire information. The acquisition of that information is what is measured. Assessment as procedure involves teachers becoming concerned with the procedural aspects of gathering information about student learning, with the procedures involved becoming more qualitative than quantitative, such as portfolio assessments that move from one grade level to the next. The assessment as inquiry paradigm shifts the epistemological perspective from one in which knowledge is acquired to one in which knowledge is constructed. Likewise, the audience for assessment data shifts from external authorities to the student, teachers and parents. Here the role of assessment is to discover and develop a deeper understanding of the learner and the learning context, and to make that understanding useful to the teacher and learner (Serafini, 2000; Delandshere, 2002).

The distinction between assessments of learning and assessments for learning can be articulated in a variety of ways. Assessments of learning are designed to document achievement or mastery at a point in time, after learning, in order to report for accountability. Information

then is provided to administrators, policy makers and planners as well as teachers, students and parents about student competence (Reeves, 2002a; Conley, 2005). Students work to meet standards and take the test, striving to score high and avoid failure. Assessment for learning, on the other hand, does not serve to provide documentation to others outside the classroom, but rather to inform teachers, students and parents about how to support continued learning. Assessment takes place during learning and is used to inform students of their progress toward openly-stated learning goals and how they may achieve them, as well as to inform teacher practices. The teacher transforms curriculum objectives into those learning goals and creates assessments that measure progress. Teachers can then use assessment information to provide descriptive (rather than evaluative) feedback and to alter their instruction to more precisely meet the learning needs of their students (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis &Chappuis, 2004).

The focal point then of assessment for learning is the student. Here the student is the primary consumer of assessment information. Stiggins (2006) argues that schools in the past have served to sort students by achievement and that student failure was the student's problem. Now, society expects schools to produce students who can continuously learn new skills. Students are expected to meet foundational standards in reading, writing and math (Reeves, 2004; Stiggins, 2006; Haycock, 2004, Walker-Dalhouse, 2005).

Past assessment and grading practices have served to reward some students and punish others. Now assessment must help all students succeed. Assessments must provide students with the opportunity for productive responses: students must understand assessment results and know what to do next. Stiggins argues that raising standards and high-stakes testing attempt to motivate students to learn through raising anxiety (Stiggins, 2006). Brain research argues just the opposite, that anxiety makes us think less clearly (Wolfe, 2006; Jensen, 1998; Stiggins,

2006). Assessment for learning argues that students learn best when they know what is expected and required for success, and they understand how to close the gap between their own work and the standard for success (Stiggins, 2004, 2006).

A tactic for providing students with this kind of knowledge about what is expected can be found in the use of scoring guides. Clear, accessible instructional scoring guides or rubrics can provide students with important information that can lead students to become self-regulated learners (Saddler & Andrade, 2004). Such scoring guides can serve as teaching tools as well as tools of evaluation and accountability (Andrade, 2000). Andrade and Ying (2005) studied undergraduate college students' use of rubrics to guide learning. Their findings indicate that using scoring guides supported the process of formative assessment (Andrade and Ying, 2005). However, Andrade's 2005 reflection of using scoring guides in her own teaching cautions that the value of employing scoring guides is dependent on the quality of the scoring guide (Andrade, 2005).

Black and William (1998) reviewed studies that incorporated some kind of formative assessment in their strategies. They found that "innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains" (p. 142). Furthermore, since successful students already make good use of assessment (hence their success), improved formative assessment that includes frequent feedback aids low achieving students more, thereby closing the range of achievement outcomes while raising the achievement of all students involved (Black & William, 1998).

Rodriquez (2004) evaluated the relationship between student achievement and assessment practices through an examination of data derived from the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). Focusing on mathematics instruction in middle schools, he studied

the interrelations of classroom assessment practices, student self-efficacy, students' effort and student achievement. Rodriquez found significant relationships between teacher assessment practices and classroom performance. For instance, frequent moderate levels of textbook-based problem sets of homework were associated with higher performing classrooms, whereas employment of teacher-made multiple choice tests in mathematics correlated negatively with student performance (Rodriquez, 2004).

Meisels and his colleagues (2004) examined variance in scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) of low income, urban third and fourth grade students. Students who had experienced a curriculum-embedded performance assessment strategy, Work Sampling System (WSS), were compared to similar students in schools that did not employ WSS. Achievement for all students was measured by the ITBS over a three year period. In WSS classrooms, instruction was driven by classroom assessment of student performance in terms of standards-based criteria. The researchers found that students exposed to such practices produced far higher reading scores than their demographically similar counterparts. Furthermore, gains in achievement were experienced by both high and low-achieving students in the WSS classrooms (Meisels et al., 2004).

<div align="center">Professional Development</div>

Schools, school districts and researchers have long concerned themselves about how to best improve teaching and learning. Teacher learning is at the center of professional development. McLeskey & Waldron (2004) conceptualize teacher learning through three perspectives: knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice. The perspective of knowledge-for-practice is the most commonly associated with professional development, holding that the more teachers know about subject matter, instructional strategies,

etc., the better they will teach. This point of view relies on formal knowledge or "best practices" (p.6). A distinct knowledge base of research validated practices is made explicit and learned by teachers with the assumption that teaches will employ this new knowledge in their classrooms.

Knowledge-in-practice is a considerably different perspective. It suggests that teaching is a craft, that knowledge of effective practice is what good teachers do, and that that knowledge is embedded in the experiences of their day-to-day work. From this perspective, teacher learning becomes a matter of constructing and solving problems, guided by experience but finding information from a variety of sources. From this perspective, teachers learn from experience, reflection and inquiry into that experience, and participation in collaborative study groups (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004).

Knowledge-of-practice does not draw a distinction between the formal knowledge of knowledge-for-practice and the craft knowledge of the knowledge-in-practice. Rather, this perspective sees all learning as constructed in a context, directly connected to the knower but also relevant beyond the immediate environment. For teachers this means playing a central role in generating knowledge by creating sites of inquiry within their classrooms and schools, connecting their own work to broader issues and critically examining their own assumptions and theories as well as those of others. Teachers then become participants in the transformation of school practices (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004).

The conditions necessary for professional development to successfully impact teacher practice involve several aspects. Opportunities should be created for collegial inquiry and discussion that connect external expertise and research to teachers' work while respecting teachers' own discretion and skill. Successful professional development is contingent on the close alignment of instructional practice to the district's curriculum and standards. Student

outcome data must be shared and administrative support provided throughout the project. Projects that induce teachers to take ownership of the change and share it with others produce successful outcomes (Klinger, 2004). However, recent studies have shown that efforts to advance teacher efficacy appear to be inhibited by large-scale reform efforts (Wood, 2007; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

Professional learning communities refer to normative school cultures that support reflection and study of the central tasks of education by colleagues collectively assuming responsibility for achieving a shared goal (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996). To create that kind of community, schoolteachers must share a set of assumptions and values about their students, learning and teaching. Values central to a teacher's daily work include their perspective on their students and their capacity for learning. To sustain such a community, a focus on student learning must lead change. Teachers need the time and opportunity for reflective dialogue about their work. Such discussions provide opportunities for teachers to appraise themselves. Teaching then becomes a public act, where teachers share their practice and its effects with peers. Such "deprivatization" (p. 182) leads to collaboration among teachers. Collaboration is the essential outcome of reflective dialogue, the public display of teacher practice (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Wood, 2007). On the other hand, in reviewing the effects of state policy reforms on classroom instruction, Swanson and Stevenson (2002) noted that teacher isolation and autonomy are resistant to change.

Zepeda (2004) reported a case study in which an elementary school moved towards a professional learning community. In this study a new principal and assistant principal of an elementary school revamped a compliance-driven supervisory model by offering teachers a voluntary peer-coaching format that allowed teachers an opportunity to collaborate about their

practice of teaching. Each teacher was observed formally four times during the school year,

either by peers or, if they declined the opportunity to participate in the peer-coaching format, by

the principal or assistant principal. This format required the administrators to effectively share

the leadership function of the school, but also tied professional development activities directly to

a long-range strategic plan and the needs of staff members. According to the case study report,

the process of sharing leadership created a community of learners in which teachers actively

participated in inquiry into practice, action research projects that informed their practice,

generative problem-solving and reflection. By creating a climate of trust and dialogue, the

administrators altered the nature of school from one of compliance to one of collegial

collaboration (Zepeda, 2004). Likewise, Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell and Valentine (1999), in

their study of three middle schools involved in maintaining professional learning communities,

found that principals must "locate a balance that provides for the communal characteristics while

attending to the bureaucratic imperatives…"(Scribner et al., 1999, p. 154).

Glickman (2002) reports a similar scenario for professional development. He argues that

schemes of peer coaching, in the mode of clinical supervision can be effective in promoting

empowerment and efficacy. Usually involving a team of teachers working together as a

community of learners, such groups can become "critical friends" (p. 17), sharing information,

strategies, issues and concerns. To be effective, a protocol of how meetings of colleagues must

be pre-established to focus conversations around issues that would improve learning and

instruction (Glickman, 2002).

Instructional Leadership

Yukl begins his study, *Leadership in Organizations* (2002), with a disclaimer that no one definition can suffice and, to illustrate the point, provides nine. After further discussion of the various aspects of leadership, Yukl arrives at a serviceable definition:

> Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and
>
> agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done
>
> effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective
>
> efforts to accomplish the shared objectives. (Yukl, p. 3)

Leadership within an organization's culture requires a significant understanding of that culture (Schein, 1992). An organization's culture is "a pattern of shared assumptions that the group…considered valid and…a correct way to perceive, think and feel..."(Schein, p.12). Transforming the culture of a school, then, becomes an exercise in transforming those shared assumptions to a higher plane of efficacy and effectiveness (Leithwood & Duke, 1999).

Rather than a study, Kouzes and Posner (2006), veteran researchers and writers on leadership, wrote a reflection on the nature of the leadership. Their theme is that leaders should think in terms of their legacy, what they leave behind after their working years are complete. They argue that the best leaders are concerned not with their own success, but with the success and growth of their subordinates. Furthermore, they see the first function of leadership as to serve their constituents (Kouzes and Posner, 2006).

Service to others is the theme of leadership espoused by Sergiovanni as well. Schools are more than just another type of organization. They are special places, the only institution designed to serve the public's interest of educating the next generation in academic skills and

knowledge but also in acceptable social norms and cultural values. How well they serve that end

is the overarching challenge of school leadership (Sergiovanni, 1996).

For school leadership, the effective schools literature of the 1970s and 1980s produced

lists of attributes that school leaders might work to create. These lists include such elements,

among others, as a shared vision, a concentration on learning and teaching, high expectations,

positive reinforcement, monitoring progress and home school partnerships. What is unclear from

this literature is the ways and means of accomplishing these ideas (Ouston, 1999).

Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) provide insight into how specific leadership

behaviors are associated with increased student learning. In a meta-analysis of leadership studies

from 1978 until 2001, they examined whether, and to what extent, school leadership influenced

student achievement. They established criteria for their analysis, including studies of United

States K-12 schools and with those similar cultures. To be included, studies had to examine the

relationship between leadership and achievement, measure student achievement on a

standardized test and describe findings in terms of correlation data. Their meta-analysis of

research studies examined over 5000 studies and reports, but found only 69 studies in that 23

year span that fit into their criteria (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

The researchers extracted or computed correlation data from the 69 studies, then

averaged those correlations to produce an average positive effect size of .25. That is, an increase

in general leadership will result in an increase in student achievement. General leadership,

however, is too nebulous a concept to inform the work of school leaders. Therefore, the

researchers identified 21 responsibilities common to the work of school leaders that have a direct

impact on student achievement, and the correlation effect size of each. For instance, their data

indicates that "situational awareness" has a positive correlation of .33 to student achievement, while "communication" has a positive correlation of .23 (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005).

Furthermore, Marzano, Waters and McNulty (2005) argue that the nature of school improvements can be seen to come in one of two categories, and that these 21 responsibilities influence these categories of change in different ways. Some change/improvements are incremental and within the range of interventions possible given the culture, procedures and practices of a particular school. These are referred to as first-order change and can be seen as the next obvious step, practice or structure. Second-order change signals a dramatic shift in assumptions and beliefs, and requires a significant alteration in the way things are done. First order change, because it is produced by the day-to-day operations of school requires the employment of all 21 of the responsibilities. Second-order change, such as the one envisioned in this project, require effective engagement of seven of the responsibilities: knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment; optimizer; intellectual stimulation; change agent; monitoring/evaluating; flexibility; ideals/beliefs (Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005).

Leadership for second-order change can also be seen as a ministerial function (Sergiovanni, 1996). The key part of the word "administrator" is "minister." Leadership is creating consensus around covenants of shared purposes and values, and enabling others—parents, students and teachers—to meet their commitments. In this sense, leadership is not about getting others to follow. Leadership is about stewardship, the maintenance of values, and pedagogy, the guiding, protecting and enabling of students and teachers. Leadership, then, has a moral voice. School leaders are called to serve ideas and ideals, to share in the creation of values and purposes, to build relationships that encourage and enhance our work (Sergiovanni, 1996).

Likewise, Fullan (2001, 2003, 2006) sees a moral purpose in the work of schooling. Individual teachers come to the profession trying to make a difference in the lives of their students, and while the work of school leaders is to value that moral purpose that each teacher brings, this is not sufficient. For Fullan, moral purpose in schooling must extend beyond the individual teacher. Reducing the gap between high and low achieving students has become the only measure that counts, and individual teachers must collaborate and work within schools to achieve that end (Fullan, 2003, 2006). Acting on moral purpose is problematic, however, as it must reconcile contentious interests and forces. To achieve moral purpose is to forge an interaction between interests and groups. This interaction, making coherence and consensus part of the work of school, then becomes a central quality of effective leadership (Fullan, 2001).

Blase and Anderson (1995) explained how consensus and coherence-making work within a school and how empowerment or disempowerment of teachers is a reflection of the leadership at the school level. Open and effective principals, according to the 770 teachers who participated in the study, were honest, communicative and participatory, created collegial relationships that supported their work and valued their contributions. These relationships contributed to a strategy that created a more productive and humane school culture (Blase & Anderson, 1995)

Blase and Blase (1999) studied teachers' perspectives of principal's instructional leadership by employing an open-ended questionnaire to 809 full-time public school teachers. Teachers completed the questionnaire during course work at universities in southeastern, Midwestern and northwestern United States. Line by line analysis of respondents' answers produced categories and subcategories for principal characteristics and behaviors that teachers identified with effective as well as ineffective leadership. This data produced two general

themes: talking with teachers to promote reflection and promoting professional growth (Blase and Blase, 1999).

The data demonstrated that talking with teachers as a means to encourage critical reflection, motivation and efficacy was valued by teachers. This talking takes five primary forms: making purposeful, non-threatening, suggestions either formally or informally; providing specific, non-threatening feedback about observed classroom behavior that established a problem-solving orientation; modeling appropriate practices coupled with conferencing; employing inquiry and soliciting advice and opinions about instructional issues; and praising specific teacher behaviors (Blase and Blase, 1999).

According to the teachers in the study, effective instructional leaders employed six strategies for promoting the professional development of teachers. Effective instructional leaders emphasized the study of teaching and learning by providing staff development opportunities to address instructional needs and taking part in those opportunities themselves. Furthermore, effective principals created cultures that supported collaboration between teachers by providing time and support for networking and coaching among peer teachers. Encouraging and supporting program redesign by teachers was also found to encourage flexibility and diverse approaches to teaching and learning (Blase and Blase, 1999).

In a more recent review of the study data, Blase and Blase (2004) provided specific examples of successful principals' behaviors under the general umbrella of instructional leadership. They conceptualize instructional leadership as a merging of supervision, staff development and curriculum development. Specific to conferences or conversations with individual teachers, the researchers noted five strategies that successful principals employed that encouraged growth in teachers. These strategies included making suggestions that teachers

found to be purposeful and appropriate to a specific need or issue. Before making suggestions, successful principals listened to teachers, and then suggested ideas in such a way as to broaden or enrich the individual teacher's thinking or strengths (Blase & Blase, 2004).

The second strategy that successful principals employed in conversation and conference was to provide feedback. That is, they provided teachers with "another set of eyes" with which to examine their work (Blase & Blase, 2004, p. 37). Such feedback, when provided by successful principals, focused on specific behaviors observed and tended to be as nonjudgmental as possible, although constructive criticism was also provided, but as an expression of caring and support. Successful principals also taught in classrooms as a means of modeling good instruction. Such modeling, by successful principals, was not considered intrusive because respectful, collegial relationships had already been established (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Finally, successful principals supported teachers by soliciting advice and opinions from teachers and employing an inquiry approach to their conversations with teachers. Such an approach tends to encourage reflection, while seeking opinions and advice provides teachers with a sense of value and encourages commitment (Blase & Blase, 2004).

Action Research

Action research is research that employs a repeating spiral of gathering and analyzing data, planning and taking action, evaluating the results of that action with the intent of further analysis, planning, acting and evaluating, all in the interest of solving a problem or improving a condition or practice (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). Generally, action research presumes a particular world view, a particular understanding of how we know and what counts as knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

The positivist tradition would have us believe that knowledge is fixed and outside the realm of the researcher. The discreet elements of the world —knowledge, reality, truth--are always there and discoverable; but they exist as objects to be uncovered intact, undisturbed by, and separate from, the researcher. Knowledge is value-free, and the research that follows the positivist tradition removes the researcher from any taint of bias and participation directly in the research. (Thomas & Brubaker, 2000) Action research, on the other hand, is located closer to the constructivist perspective that sees knowledge as dependent on the construction of the meaning by subjects as they interact with the world. It presumes this subjectivist epistemology while maintaining that the objective world exists independent of us (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005) Heron's (1996) concept of co-operative inquiry rests on this kind of paradigm, which he sees as "participative reality" (p. 10). We are subjects acting in an object world that, as we engage it, changes because of that engagement. Reality is constructed by "our mental shaping of it in the process of participating with it." (p. 37). Knowledge is the product of the research, but is created and made real and useful as the researcher and participants make sense of their work in the world. Participants become subjects, acting in the context of their environment, creating knowledge by rigorously analyzing that context and reflecting on their role in it (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

Action research, then, is not research done on participants, but research done with participants as they seek to find solutions, improved practices and new ways of examining the world. Action research is a participatory, democratic process that combines theory with practice, action with reflection in pursuit of practical solutions to pressing issues of all involved (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

Summary

This project weaved together the research strands described above and required new learning on the part of participating teachers and this researcher. Given the nature of the school, its students and the lack of success in their learning, the implementation of such a learner-centered concept as assessment for learning appears appropriate and necessary. Fully implementing such a program would require a second-order change in practice that obliges teachers to examine their own beliefs and assumptions about teaching. Learning theory indicates that each of us brought our own prior knowledge and experience to the project, and will need to connect knowledge of the tenets of assessment of learning with our own concepts of our daily practice. To succeed in producing new knowledge of practice, our team must become sufficiently collegial in order to critique our assumptions and examine our values through reflective dialogue. Successful school leaders create climates that support this kind of learning of teachers by supporting their efforts, providing feedback and encouraging reflection about their work. The process of action research—diagnosing and examining practice, planning for action, acting and evaluating the results of actions—provides a structure for this work of learning a new, promising strategy by engaged participants.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

Standards, assessments and data-driven schools have become part of the language of schooling in the early 21st century. Federal legislation requires schools and school districts to measure themselves against an ever-increasing goal until all students are proficient in communication arts and mathematics. Nationally, many minority students and many students growing up in poverty continue to produce measurable learning that does not keep pace with these standards, or with the progress of white and more affluent students. Students at Porter Elementary School have failed to produce scores that indicate successful learning as well.

Assessment schemes provided by the Spencer School District and the state, and implemented at the school, have yet to produce significant improvement in achievement. While data have been generated by these schemes and analyzed by teachers and administrators at the school, students have not been involved in assessment other than as recipients of grades and test summaries. As the assistant principal of the school, I have sought a research-based means, program or strategy that would help teachers connect instructional assessments to learners in a profound, direct manner. Several teachers also expressed concern about the lack of connection between instruction and assessment, and that generating data for analysis alone did not have much impact on improving their students' learning. Assessment for learning promises a means to do just that: impact student learning by engaging each student through formative, classroom assessments (Stiggins, 2006). Coghlan & Brannick (2005) state that "action research is research *in* action ... that uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or

organizational issues together with those who experience the issue directly" (p. 4). For this reason, I chose to utilize this approach for this study.

<div align="center">Site Demographics</div>

Porter Elementary school has a student population that is almost entirely African-American. Roughly half of our 560 students live in rent-subsidized apartment complexes and 52% (2005-06) receive free or reduced lunches**.** Because of earlier re-districting decisions, students residing in these apartment complexes are bused to my school daily, passing a nearby neighborhood school on the way. The other half of our student population lives in single family homes, condominiums and more expensive apartments near the school. This neighborhood appears to be a suburban, middle class area: two-car garage homes with mature trees, well kept lawns and landscaped surroundings. We also have a number of foster children, children with various learning disabilities and impairments, as well as a number of students with diagnosed psychological disorders.

The Kindergarten through sixth grade school was organized around the traditional model of elementary schools, with four classrooms at each grade level and one teacher for each class teaching every subject except art, music and physical education. Class size varied from 18 students per classroom to as many as 25. All teachers were fully state-certified in their area of employment. The building, constructed in 1978, was originally an open-pod design. It was enlarged and renovated in 1998 to create a traditional classroom arrangement. This reconstruction provided the school with a computer lab, an expanded library, music and art classrooms as well as conference rooms and additional office space. Besides regular classroom teachers, the school included special education teachers for students who require additional support, and teachers for two classes of more severely disabled students. A full time speech

pathologist, as well as physical and occupational therapists served the needs of the students. The school has two full-time guidance counselors and a social worker, all of whom were available to students and their families.

Several years ago, I created a building schedule for the school day around the tenets of the Balanced Literacy model. Two hour uninterrupted periods of time were made available for reading and writing instruction at every grade level. Planning time for teachers has been arranged so that grade level teams have common planning time for one hour on each of four days per week.

Participants

Four teachers at my school, two from sixth grade and two from fifth grade volunteered to be part of this study. Each was involved the previous school year in developing and using a scoring guide that could be used to inform their instruction and provide students with a target of what counted as success. Each of the four readily agreed to be part of this project. Each expressed to me privately that the assessments imposed by the state, the district or the principal did not sufficiently inform their work. To prevent the possibility of coercion or reprisal that my role as assistant principal might suggest, none of the teachers received formative or summative evaluations from me. Rather, their work was supervised by the building principal. The teacher/participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the project at any time, and that their identities would be concealed, by use of pseudonyms, from readers.

Alice is a Caucasian single female fifth grade teacher who has taught at Porter for three years. Previously, she taught at this grade level in another urban setting with a similar minority and socio-economic community. She has proven to be a valuable resource to the school,

providing a bully prevention program with detailed strategies and volunteering for additional duties when the school's instructional specialist was absent for extended periods.

Betty is an African-American 5th grade teacher with grown children. For 20 years she taught in the city schools, dealing with children more impoverished than ours. When she moved to a neighborhood near our school, she applied in our district and we were happy to ask her to join our school. While not as active in the school community as Alice, Betty has created positive personal relationships with students and parents, and has challenged students with engaging lessons.

Cathy is a Caucasian 6th grade teacher, a veteran with 20 years in the district. During her career, she has taught in several grade levels and served as one of the district's technology trainers, teaching teachers how to use the district's first generation of desk top computers. Despite her years in the profession (and with her retirement on the horizon), Cathy is eager to try new means of engaging students in their own learning.

Denise is also a Caucasian, a veteran of 15 years, all of it spent at Porter School. She has taught summer school and raised a daughter as a single parent. She is a diligent worker, running the school's science fair and volunteering for a variety of other school activities. She, too, is interested in creating a more substantial connection to her students and them to their learning.

<center>Researcher as participant</center>

I have served as the assistant principal at the school for five years, and have worked at other district schools for a total of 15 years, all as assistant principal. I have been a teacher or administrator in schools since 1977. My first teaching position was in a small rural district with 200 students Kindergarten through 12th Grade; I taught 21 fifth and sixth graders. Since then, I have taught in American Samoa, Genoa, Italy and St. Louis County, Missouri. I have been a

small town elementary school principal, and worked for two years in the state department of education.

Over the years, I have worked with children who came to school with varying degrees of expectations for themselves. For many of my successful students, school was a means to an end, and education was a tool that allowed students access to the opportunities America provides. Their parents, whether black or white, rich or poor, single or married, had used schooling to further their own goals, and they expected their children to do the same. Many other students who came from less successful households brought less in the way of expectations about how schooling could benefit their lives in material ways. Generally, they seemed to doubt their own capacities, as well. Yet, all of these students come to school with talents, gifts and intelligences that, if engaged, nurtured and encouraged, could be employed to provide access to any number of possibilities. My interest in this study and working with these teachers emanated from these experiences and these children I have witnessed.

In observing and working with the staff at the school for these past five years, I have witnessed the move to a standards-based curriculum and additional assessment schemes, but also the lack of a direct connection between the assessments and our students. During the previous school year, I had worked with three of these teachers, Betty, Cathy and Denise, to develop a scoring guide they could use to score expository paragraphs that students wrote in science and social studies. Students were provided with the rubric and worked through models of successful writing before completing their first independent assignments. The teachers and students then used the rubric as a tool for formative assessments throughout the year to guide writing and writing instruction. Later in the year, Alice asked me to model the process in her room, and she, too, began using the scoring guide and expository writing assignments. Each teacher found the

practice informative and each indicated that their students benefited from its use. After seeing

Dr. Stiggins' presentation at the Powerful Learning Conference, February 7, 2006, I purchased

the materials available there and brought them back to share with the four teachers. Each agreed

to join me as a participant in a study group that would investigate and practice the principles of

assessment for learning. I explained that I would provide information, support and facilitation of

conversation, but that my primary function would be to observe and record our collaboration and

their resulting practice as teachers.

<p align="center">Application of Action Research</p>

As stated in Chapter Two, action research is research that employs a repeating spiral of

gathering and analyzing data, planning and taking action in the interest of solving a problem or

improving a condition or practice, then evaluating the effectiveness of the action to inform

further planning and action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). In this study, the cycles of action

research were employed to construct knowledge about how teachers change their instructional

outlook as they engage the principles of assessment for learning. This implementation of these

principles continued through two six-week cycles of diagnosing, planning, acting and evaluating

the results of our actions. Since this was a participative project that involved the work of several

teachers in addition to me, it was impossible to predict the direction and implementation of

actions for the second cycle. For the first cycle, the stages of this action research project could

be predicted and are described below.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis involves the naming of issues to study in a collaborative, shared manner

(Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). This project began by studying the principles of assessment for

learning, then diagnosing the state of practice of student assessment in each teacher's classroom,

discerning to what extent each teacher employed one or more of the principles. That is, how do students make sense of their own learning and how does each teacher help her students do so? This shared self-evaluation on each teacher's part required a collegial climate of trust and respect.

*Planni*ng

The planning stage of the cycle followed from our discussions and conversations in the diagnosis stage (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). The teachers planned their own implementation of assessment for learning principles in one or more subject areas. Here, I expected to draw on our previous work in developing a simple scoring guide for expository writing. However, the actual planning of lessons and units of study with assessments that students can readily access was left to the individual teachers. .

Acting

Likewise, the real action in which these teachers engage their students could not be foretold. While I expected teachers to work through the planning and practice stages as colleagues, sharing their ideas and issues, I also expected some divergence in actual lessons and lesson plans (Heron, 1996).

Evaluating

The concluding activity of this first cycle wasto examine the data such practice will generate, as well as other data, and evaluate the results of our efforts. This required some study and reflection on everyone's part and will test the strength of our collaboration.

The team engaged in an off-cycle period of data gathering, reflection, and planning before beginning the second cycle of inquiry. I expected our reflections and discussions to produce new directions for the use of formative, learner-centered assessment. However, the

nature of action research gave us the freedom to determine for ourselves those new directions; hence, I could not predict the specific nature of these efforts.

The second six week cycle continued as the first, with our diagnosis and planning during the off-cycle period leading to the actions of the second cycle, which gives rise to data generation and then analysis, evaluation and reflection. At the conclusion of this second cycle, I interviewed teachers to determine their thoughts and feelings about the project, and how the experience has changed their methods and perspective about teaching. Data were collected throughout the project in the form of journal writing, on a website or "blog" that was established for teachers to share issues and ideas, and in field notes in which I recorded my observations of classroom activities. Consequently, data emerged throughout the project.

<div align="center">Data Collection through Observations, Meetings and Conversations</div>

During the diagnosing and planning stages of this action research process, our interactions necessarily took place in meetings. These meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions analyzed. As we moved into the action stage in which teachers test out their plans, I observed each teacher to note progress and serve as another set of eyes and ears for the teacher to consult. Consequently, conversations ensued. These conversations were recorded and transcribed for purposes of data collection as well.

<div align="center">Data Collection through a Website</div>

The work of teachers is busy, extremely interpersonal and difficult under the best of circumstances. At Porter School, with its high number of low performing students and high free and reduced lunch population, teacher time is at a premium. To facilitate the process of our common efforts and to keep each other informed, without the necessity of meeting together beyond the formal diagnosing, planning and evaluation meetings, I established a specific kind of

website commonly known as a blog, where we could communicate our thoughts, concerns and issues. The Spencer District has provided us each with laptop computers and a secure network connection. By this means, we were able to share our common work, and preserve a record of that sharing for purposes of data collection.

<div align="center">Data Collection through Journals</div>

Journal keeping is a means of developing and refining reflective skills (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).   Each participant and I reflected, keeping track of our thoughts and feelings about what we have done and observed in this project. Such writing recorded the experience of key events in the course of the project before time had altered our perceptions of those events (Heron, 1996; Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).   Each of us brought our own perceptions and knowledge to the project and each of us experienced the day to day work of the project in our own way. We were behooved to observe carefully and record our memories of experience, since memory is the primary source of data generation (Heron, 1996). My journal writing also included my field notes of classroom observations of teacher practice and notes from our meetings (Boglan & Biklen, 1998). Each of the teacher/participants agreed to write and maintain a journal of her perceptions and thoughts for the purpose of data generation. I collected all the journals at the conclusion of the project, read and analyze the writings for common themes to emerge. Before the conclusion of the project, the teacher/participant journals were returned to them. Throughout the entire process, my own reflections, as recorded in my journal, addressed how I have altered my practice of coaching, supporting and facilitating learning in my organization.

The teachers involved were veteran educators with considerable tacit knowledge to bring to this project. Reflecting on that tacit knowledge to make it explicit and available for critique

was central to the purpose of this project (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Hence, while reflection

and analysis took place during the period between action cycles, and point to new actions or

strategies for the second cycle, examination of our work will be continuous, unbroken cycle of

reflection and action (Heron, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Since our data came from

memory we each needed to "pay heed moment to moment to our continuous participatory,

creative, ever-changing emphatic and unrestricted perceptual transaction with the world" (Heron,

1996, p. 117).

<div align="center">Data Collection through Interviews</div>

At the conclusion of the second cycle of the project, I interviewed each teacher, seeking

to elicit reflections on how we have each altered our respective practice. For me, this was an

opportunity to gain feedback about my own efforts and how they could be improved and

enhanced as I work with teachers. For the teachers, this interview was a private, guided

reflection on their own work and how the project has affected their practice.

<div align="center">Analysis of Data</div>

Through this process of journal writing, website entries, observations and final

interviews, data regarding the effectiveness of this project and the effectiveness of my facilitation

was generated. Action research is by nature about action and reflection. As the data of

observations, meetings, blog entries and journal writing accumulates, analysis began. The first

step in analysis was to organize the data into a framework that reveals basic patterns. As the

teacher participants and I discussed and reflected on our work in learning, planning and

implementing the principles of assessment for learning, I reviewed these patterns to determine

their validity as constructs. These patterns were then be categorized as codes, or families of data.

The data were examined repeatedly to sort previously unmarked information into the categories

(Boglan & Biklen, 1998). My analyses of the data were guided by searching for answers to these research questions:

1. How, and to what extent, do teachers use assessment data and make sense of assessment strategies to inform teaching and improve learning?

2. What insights have I gained about my role as an instructional leader and action researcher?

Trustworthiness

To have value for others, all research activities must be trustworthy. Do the methods employed honestly describe the events they purport to describe (White, 1994; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Herr& Anderson, 2005)? This question presumes an understanding of what counts as true and real. Research conducted in the positivist tradition, for instance, conceptualizes ideas of validity in the criteria of objectiveness and representation. That is, the research is free of the bias of the researcher and the sample studied accurately represents the general population. Assertions derived from the researchers' findings can then be generalized (Thomas & Brubaker, 2000).

Action research sees knowledge as a construction of its participants and has its own issues with criteria for determining validity (Heron, 1996; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest a means of considering the issue of validity. They argue that action researchers generally

> agree on the following goals: (a) the generation of new knowledge,
> (b) the achievement of action-oriented outcomes, (c) the education
> of both researcher and participants, (d) results that are relevant to
> the local setting, and (e) a sound and appropriate methodology. (p.
> 54)

Each of these goals requires a certain kind of quality or validity criteria, and each indicates a question that can only be answered after the research is written, but each is interrelated. Dialogic validity refers to the engagement of others to verify the generation of new knowledge, but new knowledge is not generated without democratic validity that refers to the extent to which collaboration is manifested. As the learning team members proceeded through the project, collaboratively diagnosing, planning, acting and evaluating our work, we generated data that pointed to further analysis (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

This data generation and ongoing analysis also caused us to reframe the questions and pose new problems to be solved as a team. Similarly, outcomes of the research which lead to a resolution of a problem are valid, but are not likely to happen unless this process of reframing problems and issues has validity. Therefore, our collaboration as colleagues was continually reaffirmed throughout the project. Finally, the four teachers and I expect to learn and to refocus our professional efforts because of this project; the extent to which we do so is a measure of catalytic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

My project was valid to the extent to that we produced new or verifying knowledge about how to improve assessment practices to serve our students (the team's focus of study) and about how teachers' perceptions of their work as educators change as they practice the strategies of assessment for learning and how I have facilitated their work (my focus of study). This learning was limited to the extent that participation in our collegial relationship allowed us to pay "extraordinary heed" (Heron, 1996, p. 117) to the issues we confront and challenge our own "uncritical subjectivities" (Heron, 1996, p. 145-147). Validity became intertwined with the process of our collaboration, the recorded evidence of our individual and mutual growth, and the products of our study.

Chapter Four

FINDINGS

Two cycles of action research were employed to examine how teachers use assessment

data directly with students to enhance learning. Through this examination, I also wanted to learn

how my own leadership could be brought to encourage the learning of teachers. The subject

matter of this learning project came from *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning* (Stiggins,

Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2004). As compared with various summative assessment

techniques, mandates and legislated requirements that produce information for policy makers and

administrators and eventually teachers, classroom assessment *for* learning, CASL, concerns itself

with the student and teacher as educational decision-makers. The basic tenets of assessment for

learning are discussed in Chapter Two. Assessment for learning focuses on five keys to quality

classroom assessment:

> 1. Clear purposes
>
> 2. Clear learning targets
>
> 3. Sound assessment design
>
> 4. Effective communication of results
>
> 5. Student involvement (Stiggins et al., 2004).

To accomplish these five key components of an effective classroom instruction model,

the participating teachers studied the recommended seven strategies (Stiggins et al, 2004). These

strategies include providing a clear and understandable learning target for student learning

(strategy one) and the use of good and poor examples of anonymous student work to provide

students with clear pictures of what counts as success in terms of any one target (strategy two). A

scoring guide or rubric is a tactic frequently employed to provide a clear picture, for instance, of

a detailed expectation. The third strategy involves providing students with descriptive feedback which students then use to complete or enhance their learning. In this strategy, the rubric plays a role of providing that descriptive feedback. As teachers practice these first three strategies the next becomes obvious. Students become involved in tracking their own progress and learn to self-assess and set goals for themselves (strategy four). Focusing lessons on one aspect of quality at a time (strategy five) allows teachers to focus their feedback and narrow the volume of that feedback for students. Likewise, students learn to focus their revision on one element at a time (strategy six). Finally, the classroom assessment for learning process expects students to reflect on their learning and monitor their own progress. The meetings, conversations and reflections described below form the record for how each of the participants practiced these strategies, and in so doing expanded their own repertoire of teaching skills. They also document how my own efforts at leading the group impacted that learning.

Classroom assessment for learning served as the content that the participating teachers explored as their part of this project. Their tasks were to diagnose their own use of assessment in instruction and how they and their students make use of assessment data, plan and prepare lessons that reflected the seven strategies, and then evaluate their work. Through this process we planned to meet weekly to report progress, pose questions and review the text. As I will describe below, while each participating teacher experienced the learning of this assessment program similarly and practiced at least some of the seven strategies, the participants' learning varied in the depth and rate.

Application of Action Research

As stated in Chapter Two, action research is research that employs a repeating sequence of gathering and analyzing data about an issue or problem, planning and taking action in the

interest of solving that problem, then evaluating the effectiveness of that action to inform further planning and action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). In this study, four participating teachers studied and practiced the seven strategies described above to improve the learning of students in their respective classrooms. This implementation of these principles began just before Winter Vacation, 2006, with an organizational meeting to set meeting times and discuss the project. Regular meetings were held December 21, 2006, January 10 and 17, and February 2 and 7, 2007, during the first cycle of diagnosing, planning, acting and evaluating the results of our actions.

<div align="center">Limitations of Data Collections</div>

At the beginning of the project, I had expected to gather data from several sources: transcripts of our meetings, observations of classroom instruction and conversations about those observations, journal writing from the participants and myself, and a website, commonly called a 'blog' specifically arranged to use as a means of communicating with each other. As the project proceeded, it became apparent that I was the only one using the 'blog.' Indeed, only Alice wrote a response (http://assessment-for-learning-at-porter.blogspot.com/ January 10, 2007). I also used emails as a means of communicating with the participating teachers, and this became a source of data as well.

The journals proved somewhat more useful, but here again, did not provide the wealth of data I had anticipated. The participating teachers, like classroom teachers in every elementary school, were busy people and proved to have little time to write.   As will be noted throughout the rest of this chapter, our meetings served as a more productive opportunity for thoughtful reflection.

The participants each took a pseudonym for the project. (Group meeting, December 21, 2006) This was done to protect the identities of the participants and became an ingrained part of

our conversations, with each addressing the others by their pseudonyms during our meetings. Since the blog could be public, it was necessary to refer to each other, and ourselves, by the pseudonyms there as well. In keeping with this idea of anonymity, during an early meeting, I took a pseudonym, Gerdes.

Early in the project I purchased a small digital recording device with which to capture meetings and observation data. Using this device, I was able to record our conversations and save the recordings as digital files on my computer. I then manually transcribed the files into texts that I could analyze.

First cycle

Diagnosis

Diagnosis involves the naming of issues to study in a collaborative, shared manner (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). This project began by studying the principles of assessment for learning. During the recruitment stage of this project, I had explicitly discussed my reasoning for examining this kind of project. I had explained to potential participants I wanted our students to be more connected to their learning and that assessment for learning held promise for engaging our students more directly in what counted as successful learning. Furthermore, as I have stated in the research questions, I was interested in a project that demonstrated how teachers could make use of classroom assessment to enhance and encourage learning.

As I have documented in Chapter One, our students had not been successful in meeting the standards of learning established by our state and district. Porter Elementary School was declared, by the state department of education, to be in a state of "Needs Improvement". Nor was our school alone in finding itself so labeled. The Spencer School District had already moved to mandate a number of assessments, including monthly computer-generated mathematics

and reading assessment for every student in Grades 2 through 8.   As a school and district, we did

not seem to be improving our status, despite the use of such assessments. In the summer of

2007, our district was one of over 160 in the state to be declared "in improvement" according to

the provisions of No Child Left Behind.

As I described in Chapter Two, using classroom assessment for learning as a set of

instructional strategies had a significant research-based record of improving learning, especially

for students who had not previously been successful at school.   I asked our instructional

specialist (who manages our school budget) to order four copies of *Classroom Assessment for*

Student Learning (Stiggins et al, 2004) for the participating teachers. At our first meeting, our

textbooks had been ordered but had not arrived. Therefore, I photocopied pp.33, 42-45 of the

text and distributed them to the teachers. These pages included a description of how assessment

for learning differs from assessment of learning, and a discussion of the seven strategies

mentioned above. I asked each teacher to examine the seven strategies described above and to

compare their methods of classroom instruction to those strategies. Furthermore I asked each

teacher to determine, privately, to what extent they already employed one or more of the

strategies (Gerdes, group meeting, December, 21, 2006). That is, the participating teachers

diagnosed their own classroom instruction and found subjects, lessons, skills or projects in which

they might apply these principles.

 I also suggested that we might make use of the district's existing assessment data during

the first cycle (Gerdes, group meeting, December, 21, 2006). The district had purchased the

services of a corporation's computer-presented tests for purposes of short cycle assessments of

reading and mathematics achievement. The tests were administered monthly by every teacher in

grades 2 through 8 throughout the district, and were based in the Grade Level Expectations

(GLEs) provided by the state department of education. (The state's testing scheme was likewise based on these GLEs; these tests, then, were employed as a short cycle common assessment designed to prepare students for the annual tests.) These tests provided numerical data to teachers about their students' achievement (a percent correct score on both mathematics and reading) and in the case of math, teachers could retrieve scores by curricular strands. Since the district already required the assessments, I recommended that we should determine if the data from the tests could be used as the CASL strategies suggest. Did the assessments inform teachers about how to alter their instruction? Secondly, could the tests be informative for students? (Gerdes, group meeting, December, 21, 2006).

Our first meeting of January, 2007, was spent discussing the various facets of using the district's short cycle assessments in reading and math. After considerable discussion we could not find an easy way to make the assessments serve the goals of the CASL strategies. And I reiterated again that I wanted the participants to consider their own work and be prepared to discuss how they might use CASL strategies in their own instruction (Group meeting, January 10, 2007).

Planning

The planning stage of the cycle followed from our discussions and conversations in the diagnosis stage (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005). As will be documented in the findings below, the four participating teachers reported their exploration of CASL strategies by employing rubrics in one guise or another for specific lessons or activities. While each participating teacher began at essentially the same point (that is, the four participants each received the CASL materials at the same time and in the same manner), at the beginning of the project each planned and prepared lessons and activities independently.

I did not ask teachers to plan lessons and apply strategies together for two reasons. First, the four teachers did not work in the same grade level, but represented two different grade levels with two different parts of the district curriculum. I could not be sure at the outset that each teacher would be willing to work with their particular grade level colleague in this matter. Secondly, I had already asked the participants to extend their busy schedules to meet with me, as well as write in journals for this project. Since any cooperative planning by pairs of teachers would have required even more of a time commitment, I determined that the teachers should experience applying the CASL strategies individually, at their own pace and within their own classroom contexts. They also sought ways to employ the monthly district assessments to provide the descriptive feedback necessary for student learning. To assist with this initial planning, and because the participants' CASL texts had not yet arrived, I also provided the teachers with a DVD that accompanied the CASL text (Gerdes, group meeting, January 10, 2007).

Acting

By the next meeting, January 17, 2007, three of the teachers (Alice was absent) were able to discuss what they had been planning and were now carrying out. As will be discussed in detail below, the participating teachers differed from each other in their actions through both cycles. That is, each participating teacher chose her own lessons to demonstrate their application of the seven strategies. Denise was able to discuss how she had rewritten a district scoring guide to be more "kid-friendly" (Denise, group meeting, January 17, 2007). Betty described using a scoring guide for an oral report about independent reading that she required during her reading instruction time (Betty, group meeting, January 17, 2007). Cathy discussed the possibility of

using a scoring guide in conjunction with her social studies lessons and units, but could not tell anything specific.

At the subsequent meeting, February 2, the teachers were able to describe their efforts in more detail. Betty mentioned using scoring guides in several areas but only spoke at length only about the lesson she discussed January 17. Alice tried to invent a scoring guide for an alliteration lesson. Denise described how she taught writing according to the district's scoring guide for writing assessments. Cathy could not apply the strategies to social studies, but tried to create a writing exercise. She had no scoring guide to share.

At our final cycle one meeting, February 7, scoring guides and the technical aspects of producing them was the main topic of conversation. Although she could not explain her lesson in terms of the CASL strategies, Cathy was able to speak at length about her end of the day journal writing.

> Cathy: I want to keep their daily journals because of that has value
>
> to it and they're also applying their writing skills I told them I
>
> wanted full sentences and I wanted to make the sentence make
>
> sense and so we'll be covering that as we go and look at their
>
> journals will make their corrections as far as conventions that way
>
> I'm giving feedback on conventions, which is something we
>
> desperately need. (Group meeting, February 7, 2007)

Evaluating

Days out of school due to inclement weather and family emergencies coincided to provide a respite from our work and our meetings. After our February 7, 2007, meeting, we did not meet again for a month. During that time I reviewed transcripts and notes. The nature of

action research gives us the freedom to determine for ourselves those new directions. For my part, I determined, after reviewing transcripts and my own notes and observations, that I should guide the participants toward a more thorough understanding of the text. The project was, after all about classroom assessment for learning, and if I felt that to make the project worthwhile to the teachers, we should spend at least some of our meeting time discussing the actual text. Therefore, I chose to teach, at our first meeting of the second cycle, March 2, 2007, a particular part of the text that dealt with matching assessments to types of learning. Also, as a district administrator, I had a duty to make sure that teachers were applying the district's curriculum and grade level expectations (GLEs). I decided to address this curricular issue as well. For the teachers' part, they moved in a different direction to more thoroughly engage their students.

<center>First Cycle Findings</center>

Findings derived from this action research project are organized around the research questions stated in Chapter One. First, how, and to what extent, do teachers use assessment data and make sense of assessment strategies to inform teaching and improve learning? Secondly, what insights have I gained about my role as an instructional leader and action researcher? Furthermore, to make sense of the project, findings are organized by cycles of the action research project. As noted above, the first cycle included regular meetings held December 21, 2006, January 10 and 17, and February 2 and 7, 2007.

In reviewing and analyzing the transcripts of the first cycle of meetings, findings about learning and leading emerged. These findings include the teachers' reactions to the district's assessment scheme and their frustration with the district's mandated computer-generated tests, what the participating teachers learned from their beginning attempts to employ CASL's seven

<center>- 52 -</center>

strategies, and my experience in dealing with my own struggle between facilitation and direction of conversation and work.

Assessment Frustration

The Spencer School District provides teachers with a number of district-wide, mandated common assessments. At the beginning of the project, the four participating teachers discussed the sense of being inundated by the assessment requirements of the district, without any of the assessment data being particularly useful to themselves or students. In our final meeting of the project, April 2, 2007, (in which we reviewed the transcripts of our earlier meetings as a means of bringing their work to a conclusion), Cathy, in noting the transcript of our December 21 meeting, remarked about feeling "overwhelmed" by the district's assessment regimen. There are "just lots of assessments and in the same sentence it's never mentioned in including the students in what the targets are…" (Cathy, April 2, 2007 group meeting). Indeed, the thought of this project adding more assessments to teachers' workload had made recruitment of teachers for this study problematic. One Porter Elementary School teacher, in a discussion about the project, had remarked to Alice that she could not imagine taking on another task. (Alice interview, April 16, 2007). Because of the district's demands on teacher time, Denise was skeptical of the practicality of the project at our first meeting: "I think this is all wonderful, Mr. Gerdes, but when it comes to teaching, there's not a whole lot of flexibility….it's the time element…I'm real concerned…" (Denise, December 21, 2007, group meeting). In her journal, Denise mentioned again being "overwhelmed by all the stuff that is due. With all the assessments coming up, it's hard to teach curriculum…." (Denise, journal, February 26, 2007).

Use of District Assessments to Apply Strategies One and Three

Teachers from grades 2 through 8 administer monthly district-mandated common assessments in reading and mathematics. These web-based, computer-generated district-wide mandated assessments provide administrators and teachers with considerable data, without much understanding of how the data could inform students and their learning. As noted above, assessment was not perceived as something useful that could inform teaching and learning, but rather another set of tasks that got in the way of learning and teaching. For teachers in a school on the brink of being declared in "needs improvement" by the state and federal education departments, assessments can be another public mark of their lack of success without providing much direction for improvement (Fullan, 2006).

One of the first tasks participating teachers undertook as part of this project, after discussing the central tenets of CASL, was to make the district's monthly assessments and their resulting data useful to students. Teachers in the district are assumed to make use of this data to inform instruction. Since the district requires these assessments and the data are readily available, this appeared to be the appropriate place to begin the application of the CASL strategies. I suggested as much at our first meeting (Gerdes, group meeting, December 21, 2006). That is, could these computer-generated reading and mathematics tests provide descriptive feedback to students that would inform their own learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis &Chappuis, 2004)? Secondly, was there enough time provided between assessments to give students opportunities to practice skills and learn concepts to allow for improvement? The participating teachers at Porter Elementary School, in searching for ways to make the assessments work for them, found that the answer to both questions was negative.

Denise found that the district-mandated monthly math test was inconsistent and unpredictable. "We'd go over it with the kids to see what you need to do better. But the next

month's questions were nothing like those…it would be for naught…" (Denise, group meeting, January 10, 2007). Likewise, Alice found the tests to be poorly aligned with the district curriculum. "I noticed a question about line plots…I'm not required to teach it…" (Alice, group meeting, January 10, 2007). Cathy found the same issue, "I've taught fourth, fifth and sixth grades, they're giving my kids stuff that is not in any of those grades, none." (Cathy, group meeting, January 10, 2007).

Likewise, Denise found the monthly computer reading assessment to be similarly unpredictable. Referring to the January test, she pointed out that "it had a lot of grammar on it. Well, guess what? We don't teach grammar in this district…I just don't think this assessment is necessary….it just doesn't fit our curriculum." (Denise, group meeting, January 17, 2007)

In applying the seven strategies of CASL the teachers found that the tests and resulting data did very little to inform students about their learning beyond a numerical score. Nor did the experience of the monthly assessments provide students with any ideas about how to improve their learning. The monthly math assessments proved to be moving targets that could not be predicted. If teachers found that students were weak in a particular understanding of a math concept, they sought to remediate the concept, but there was no guarantee that the concept would be tested similarly on the next test. Denise and Alice pointed out this inconsistency in our January 17 meeting.

> Denise: The month of November and the month of December on
> the math was nothing alike.
> Alice: My kids failed it tremendously.
> Denise: It would totally be a waste of their time and they would be
> so discouraged if they actually went through and did all the study

stuff and the questions on the next month's test were absolutely

nothing like the questions from the prior month. Did you notice

that?

Alice: Yeah….

Denise: It upset me greatly

Alice: I've noticed this pattern with my class: good, not so good,

good, not so good, literally every other time, it has gone like that.

(Group meeting, January, 17, 2007)

A fundamental tenet of CASL is that students are educational decision makers that can

use assessment data to enhance and extend their own learning (Stiggins et al, 2004). Given the

learning target and provided opportunities to practice a skill, students' learning would improve.

However, the participating teachers found that the monthly computer assessments did not

provide either the clarity of learning targets to be mastered, expressed in language students could

access, or the means for students to make use of the information derived from the test.

Beginning Attempts at CASL

The district's computerized math and reading assessments were only monthly, and using

the seven strategies required more direct attempts from the participating teachers. The four

participants went about employing these in different ways and with varying degrees of success.

Each of the participating teachers reported that she began their work by devising a scoring guide

for some lesson or unit of study. A scoring guide appeared to be a concrete, visible product

which the participating teachers chose as their beginning point in our work together. But each

participant worked independently to create her own scoring guides for particular lessons or

activities. In their early applications of the CASL strategies, then, teachers chose varied,

concrete, limited projects to serve as the practice I had requested. For instance, Denise had revised the district scoring guide used to score quarterly writing prompts to make in more student-friendly (Denise, group meeting, January 17, 2007). Betty began using a rubric to score oral responses to independent reading, an activity that she employed as part of her reading instruction (Betty, group meeting, January 17, 2007). I had not asked the teachers to plan common units or lessons, but, instead, asked each to apply the strategies as they saw fit in their own classroom. Consequently, their choices and their experience of the application of strategies varied. Nor had I asked that a scoring guide be incorporated into their lessons. However, each had chosen to work around a scoring guide as the concrete expression of the strategies.

As I will show below, their learning, as indicated by their limited application of the strategies, varied as well. Only Denise reported that she had found a way to connect directly to a major learning target on a more substantial basis.   Cathy seemed to flounder. Betty applied a scoring guide to a small, daily assignment. Alice applied the strategies to one brief activity.

Alice reported in meetings her first attempts to employ strategy one (providing clear targets) and three (providing students with descriptive feedback), respectively, involved teaching alliteration by having students write descriptive poems about themselves that contained evidence of alliteration. (Alice, group meeting, February 2, 2007) She struggled to implement the strategy with a scoring guide and asked for assistance. "I had a hard time coming up with a rubric for it….I'm open to suggestions." (Alice, group meeting, February 2, 2007).

Betty invented a scoring guide for a regular daily assignment, also addressing strategy three. During reading instruction students were expected to spend a certain portion of the time reading independently. Betty started asking for students to write in their response journals and report, briefly, about their independent reading. "I didn't include a lot about writing because it's

a response journal…I'm looking for comprehension…" (Betty, group meeting, February 2, 2007).   The scoring guide was designed to reward points for specific tasks such as summarizing or inferring, and could be adapted to stress particular tasks.   I asked when she scored them and whether the students score them first. "I try to look through four or five of them a week…they get a chance to score them before I score them…" (Betty, group meeting, February 2, 2007).

Cathy struggled to apply any of the strategies to anything she was already doing. In discussion, she mentioned trying to use a scoring guide in social studies but was never able to accomplish this. Rather, she created a new, end-of-the day journal writing activity that required students to reflect on the day's learning and how that learning might be useful to them beyond the classroom. "They will need to tell me in their own words what they learned that day." (Cathy, group meeting, February 2, 2007). For this, she provided students with a journal and promised a scoring guide that would give students some direction for writing.

> Cathy: What I'm going to be doing is a daily quick write at the end
> of the day and they will need to tell me in their own words what
> they have learned that day…in a particular subject….I'll assign the
> subject….It's a little different than what I originally planned…they
> can think about what they had done…what was one objective they
> had learned….and explain it as much as they can explain what they
> did and how it can be applied in their life….
> Gerdes: They'll know what you expect in terms of product when
> they do this quick write?
> Cathy: I don't have the rubric fully formulated yet (Group meeting,
> February 2, 2007)

Denise, on the other hand, used the district's writing assessment prompts and scoring guides to apply CASL strategies. In the Spencer School District students were assessed in writing four times a year and teachers had time to use the scoring guide as a tool to guide their instruction. Denise found this only to be true when she re-wrote the district mandated six-trait, four point scoring guide in a more student-friendly language. "I use a simplified version of that [district six trait rubric]…I use kid-friendly language." (Denise, group meeting, February 2, 2007). She then taught each part of the scoring guide as if the scoring guide itself were the learning target. "…our word choice lesson…we've talked about synonyms….homophones, homographs, similes and metaphors, figurative language, alliteration…" (Denise, group meeting, February 2, 2007) In this manner, she organized her writing instruction to address each section of the scoring guide.

The Teachers' Learning

In examining the teachers' learning, several issues emerged. First, each learned and applied the strategies one and three without specific directions, schedules or mandates timeline from me. That is, the participants tried to use scoring guides to inform their students to specific learning targets and to provide feedback about the students' work. Their application of strategies three (providing descriptive feedback) came from their own initiative and their own understanding of the CASL text, the needs of their students, the district's curricular demands and their own experiences as a classroom teacher. Secondly, they learned from each other, as well. While they did not plan and prepare lessons together, their conversations about their teaching informed their learning and provided an opportunity to openly discuss their work. This excerpt from the February 7 meeting provides an example of this kind of conversation that the participating teachers found useful.

Alice: I have a question about rubrics…there's two different

kinds….Do you think that one is better than the other?

Betty: The one that's more student-friendly is more specific, that

way they know the learning target, they can see it more

precisely….this will be my outcome…

Alice: Do you think it makes a huge difference?

Cathy: They want to see that overall score and they know there is a

range on each thing. I just thought that was interesting.…

Denise: And I think it depends on what kind of subject it is (Group

meeting, February 7, 2007)

In setting the tone for the first meeting, I had introduced the CASL strategies and the main ideas on which the program was based. Also, I suggested that a logical place to start the project might be how to use the district's mandated assessments to determine if they could be used directly for student learning. (Gerdes, group meeting, December 21, 2006); (Gerdes, group meeting, January 10, 2007). From that point, I left decisions about integrating the program into the daily work of teaching to the individual teachers. No one asked to plan or prepare lessons together, or sought each other out. The work of implementing the strategies was left to the teachers. In terms of the CASL strategies, I gave the teachers an expectation and some understanding of the basic principles of the program, but no clear examples of good or bad work and little or no idea of what might count as success. Nor did I provide any mechanism, beyond our conversations in our meetings, for teachers to self-assess their progress or establish their own personal goals. This lack of structure allowed the participating teachers the freedom to examine their own work and initiate their own changes in their classroom practice.

Although I could not determine that the teachers learned much from me, they did appear to learn from each other. Their conversations in our meetings provided a means of expanding their understanding of the CASL strategies, without much input from me. In analyzing the transcripts of these meetings and conversations, what emerged was that teachers enjoyed the time to talk, and to listen, to each other. Rather than seek the isolation of the classroom, they welcomed the opportunity to discuss teaching issues with colleagues. Our meetings became a forum for teachers to discuss their work. Furthermore, when the opportunity availed itself, the teachers enjoyed explaining what they were working on that was not part of the project. The excerpt below is from the February 2 meeting:

> Denise: We're also doing, Cathy, with the power unit in language
> with math….that would work good too…
> Cathy: I was here for the workshop last week….they taught us to
> have kids act out some words as a live definition from their own
> schema….
> Denise: We're going to have the kids make a picture dictionary of
> these [math] words and give a pretest, have them come up with
> their own definitions, then go back over them to help them correct
> their schema…adjust their schema….and of course practice….
> maybe wrong, maybe right…then we're going to take what we
> know and adjust their schema…(Group meeting, February 2,
> 2007).

The four participating teachers had each volunteered to participate in the project and stayed long after the end of the school day to do so. They were able to share their frustrations and successes in an atmosphere of trust and collegiality. These collegial conversations seemed to mitigate the frustrations they found in their daily work. Even though these teachers occupied a common corridor in the school, their time to share and discuss was limited.

Finally, it should be noted that in each teacher's class, their efforts began with a concrete application of the strategies in the form of trying to develop scoring guides. That is, they shared first a concrete, rather than abstract, expression of their understanding. In the beginning of the project I had not asked that teachers provide students with a scoring guide, but rather to work toward applying the CASL principles in their classrooms. The fact that each sought or created a scoring guide indicated that each participant chose a concrete expression of the first strategy, providing a clear learning target to their students and third strategy, providing descriptive feedback. In addition, by discussing their own work in a collegial, non-judgmental forum, the teachers found support in each other. In learning a new teaching technique, then, the teachers had chosen to begin with the concrete expression of their understanding of the CASL ideas and, as I will show in cycle two, moved to a more in depth understanding of the project as they worked with their students.

Issues for Leadership

Each of these aspects of the teachers' learning had implications for my role as a school leader and my understanding of how I could use that role to facilitate the learning of others. At the beginning of the project, the hierarchical nature of schools and my position at Porter Elementary School as an assistant principal influenced my notion of what leading could mean in this setting. I dealt with an issue of the supposed power of my position in terms of facilitation

versus direction as my proper role in the project throughout the first cycle. I believed that the application of CASL strategies had great potential for improving teaching and learning at my school, and that my efforts to bring these strategies to fruition in classrooms were part and parcel of my role as a school leader. On the other hand, as a researcher, I also knew that I could not learn and apply these ideas for someone else. The teachers who became participants in this project were volunteers (and could withdraw at any time), and were able to use this project to satisfy district and state requirements for their own professional growth plans. Beyond fulfilling these requirements, they had no compelling interest in the project. I could not "boss them around" simply because of my role as the assistant principal. My bossiness might drive them out of the project and all would be for naught. Rather, I had to facilitate the conversations around learning, allow the learning to occur, then observe and report that learning.

On the other hand, I thought that I still had to organize the work and provide the teachers with a starting point from which to begin their learning. Consequently, our first meeting was mostly spent negotiating a schedule that worked for everyone, distributing materials and introducing the subject of the study. (Gerdes, group meeting, December 21, 2006). In reviewing the transcript of that meeting, I noticed that while I did most of the talking, I used a facilitating tone as well as a directional approach. In negotiating a meeting schedule, I addressed the teachers, "Would one morning a week be possible?" "What would be better?" "Would you be willing…?" and "Would that be a problem?" (Gerdes, group meeting, December 21, 2006).

In introducing the subject matter and the project I was much more directional. As I had noted above, textbooks purchased for the participants had not yet arrived when the project began, so I provided the teachers with photocopies of pages 33 and 42—45 of the *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning* (Stiggins et al., 2004). After allowing for almost no discussion

of the salient tenets of CASL by the teachers, I immediately directed the beginning work.

"Maybe taking some of the [assessments] the district has given us would be worthwhile…see if

it would be useful to students." (Gerdes, group meeting, December 21, 2006). I even found

myself saying, "Because this is participatory action research, we have to first…" (Gerdes, group

meeting, December 21, 2006).

After the first meeting, I decided to ask leading questions rather than monopolize the

conversation. My own inputs into the meeting conversations became more facilitating and

diminished as the participating teachers explained their work.   For instance, in our next meeting,

January 10, I again suggested that the district's computer assessments might be a good place to

begin our work. "…does anybody have an idea about how to make [test data] more accessible to

the students?" (Gerdes, group meeting, January 10, 2007). At our next meeting, January 17,

teachers were sharing their own work and describing it with little more than encouragement from

me. My own comments were limited to "Good", "That's good, too." and "That's exactly what I

was hoping to see."(Gerdes, group meeting, January 17, 2007).

However, throughout the first cycle I noted that I wanted to be more direct in my

expectations. I had provided the textbooks for the project, provided models of scoring guides

and negotiated a time and space to meet.   Perhaps, despite my best efforts to envision my role as

supportive, I also simply wanted to be in charge, to get others to do as I wanted. In reviewing

my notes I seemed impatient and frustrated with the pace of the project. "We are moving in stops

and starts. We now have not met for three weeks and I am getting concerned" (Gerdes, journal

notes, February 28, 2007) While wrestling with this dichotomy of facilitating/directing as the

first cycle drew to a close, I came to the mistaken conclusion that the teachers' efforts so far had

been unsuccessful (in making the district's computer-generated tests viable tools for students) or

limited (to the application of scoring guides to lessons). In this contest between self-restraint and management, I determined that I should exercise more "leadership." The group should engage more directly in the district curriculum and in the CASL text. (Gerdes, journal February 24, 2007). As I will document later in this chapter, such a struggle was unnecessary. I was already providing the leadership that the participants needed, by simply listening to them.

<div align="center">Cycle Two</div>

Inclement weather (which caused school to be closed), family illnesses, Spring Break and my own conference travel interrupted our regular schedule of meetings. We met March 2 and 7 and April 2 before concluding the project with individual interviews April 10 through April 16, 2007. Nevertheless, as I will show below the participating teachers moved away the CASL strategies to engage their students in the production of scoring guides.

Diagnosis

My own analysis of the first cycle of our project led me to my diagnosis of Cycle Two. As mentioned in the evaluation of the cycle one, the teachers had worked on limited applications of the CASL strategy three during the first cycle. Their small steps had been concrete and limited to targets that could benefit from scoring guides. In my notes I recorded:

> What I see is the teachers have been picking and choosing things
>
> that are… pretty minor…maybe trivial but they're not directly tied
>
> to the GLEs and not directly tied to what they want the kids to do
>
> overall so I think we can need to be more (Gerdes, journal notes,
>
> February 20, 2007).

Applying the strategies of CASL with the district's computer generated short cycle tests proved to be impractical. And while there appeared to be considerable variance on their rate of

learning and the production of work that I had expected, it was apparent that the participating

teachers enjoyed the opportunity to discuss and share their work experiences in a setting of trust

and collegiality.

Planning

For these reasons, I determined that I should provide a little more direction in the second

cycle, while still allowing the time and audience for conversations about the teachers' work.

First, I sought to assure myself that the activities and lessons that teachers were using to practice

the seven strategies were aligned with the district curriculum and the state GLEs. Secondly, I

was sure that the teachers were not fully embracing the CASL strategies. Hence, I decided to

directly teach Chapter Four, a section of the CASL text that dealt with choosing the appropriate

means to assess specific types of learning targets (Emails, February 21 and March 1, 2007). The

teachers, as I will show below, having already found success with scoring guides as a means of

engaging students, had moved beyond my thinking. The participating teachers moved to perfect

their use of scoring guides as a means of engaging students, without expanding their actions

beyond strategy three (providing descriptive feedback).

Action

I had made a point to observe each teacher and note which curricular objective that they

were teaching just before the first meeting of the second cycle, March 2, 2007. At the meeting I

addressed the issue by noting the curricular goals I had witnessed and asking each participant to

share their ideas and practice about them.

> Gerdes: We ended our last meeting, as I recall, with a conversation
>
> about scoring guides and rubrics. I thought we should get back to
>
> the textbook, especially Chapter 4, because it addresses this issue

of how you should assess different assignments…. Today I went

into everybody's classes and I was looking at that issue….(Group

meeting, March 2, 2007).

Obviously, I thought that the teachers could benefit from this intervention, a conversation about the CASL text. However, as I will show below, the participating teachers had moved on without my "leadership" to more thoroughly engage their students in their own learning in larger projects. Their actions varied again, but exhibited a deeper understanding of the CASL goals, although not the strategies, than I had assumed. Alice and Denise were not only using scoring guides for their students to fully understand what was expected, but they reported involving students in the creation of those scoring guides, thereby more thoroughly engaging their students in their own learning.

Alice had planned a unit of study about animals that required students to produce several assessable products.

Alice: My kids are doing a zoo-a-paloosa….they have to pick an

animal and we had a rubric for that, a planning rubric so that they

could check off what they needed for the report at the end as they

researched. It had writing as well as content guidelines…so that

would be...there is a third part to it because they have to present

orally…it's a written response and performance assessment as well

(Alice, group meeting, March 2, 2007).

Alice's animal unit required students to research a specific animal, to write a paper about the animal, and to create a poster about the various aspects reported in the paper. Finally, her class created a living museum in which students stood or sat in front of their respective poster

and explained their animal to passers-by (Alice, group meeting, March 2, 2007). Alice reported

that in preparing the students for this unit, she sought their input in creating scoring guides for

each assignment. In this way students became knowledgeable about the learning targets

(strategy one) and the resulting expectations. Furthermore, she reported that students had

become much more engaged in their subject when they clearly knew what was expected of them

(Alice, group meeting, March 2, 2007).

Likewise, Denise created a nutrition unit of study, based in the health curriculum, with

multiple parts and learning targets

> Denise: For example, in health, we're doing nutrition and I'm
>
> having the kids work in groups to create a menu, then they have to
>
> write an essay explaining, and it had to be a balanced
>
> diet….instead of a test, I know this is a project ….we're making a
>
> scoring guide next week because they will decide what a good
>
> project will look like.   I want the kids to tell me what part of the
>
> body it helps and what it does. For instance, carrots have Vitamin
>
> A which is good for your skin and eyes…I want them to be very
>
> specific and use information from the text that we have gone over
>
> (Denise, Group meeting, March 2, 2007).

Denise reported that students were much more engaged in their own learning of the

nutrition unit when she sought their input into the scoring guide. Her students were to create a

poster encouraging others to eat appropriately, prepare a written assignment and give a short talk

(Denise, group meeting, March 2, 2007). All of these activities and products were aligned with

the district's curricular goals and addressed district and state GLEs.

Betty continued with the same basic generic scoring guide that she had used in cycle one, but sought to extend its use to other curricular goals by adapting it to stress specific skills that she wanted students to practice. She, too, sought student input in weighing the various parts of the scoring guide. She reported that students became much more engaged in the activities of the class when the scoring guide was, at least in part, their own construction (Betty, group meeting, March 2, 2007).

Cathy's attempts at implementing the CASL strategies continued to be limited to the journal writing, which provided her with information about the students' perceptions of their learning, without truly providing the students learning targets based in the curriculum or descriptive feedback about their learning (Cathy, group meeting, March 2, 2007).

Evaluation

Our final meeting was scheduled for early April, 2007, and involved asking the four teachers to review the transcripts of meetings and to summarize their work. I asked the four teachers for their input in analysis of the transcripts as a means of getting at their own reflections of our work together. I also asked for those specific reflections in a culminating individual interview as well as the journals I expected to collect at the time of the interview. I also used this final group meeting to schedule those interviews. And I used the interview and journal writings to seek a final evaluation of the project.

<div align="center">Second Cycle Findings</div>

In analyzing the transcripts of meetings, observations and interviews in light of the research questions listed earlier, findings about how teachers use assessment to create a closer connection to student learning emerged. As the four participating teachers more successfully engaged their students, they too became engaged in their own work. The meetings continued to

provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss their work and share ideas with colleagues in a safe environment.

Using Assessment to Engage Students

Throughout the second cycle, participating teachers reported that students became much more engaged in their work when they had a hand in the development of the scoring guide. I had shared that a scoring guide is not in itself a learning target. (Gerdes, blog, March 1, 2007) Rather, the scoring guide should delineate and describe the learning target (Chappuis, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappuis, 2005).

Denise had first mentioned the use of student-developed scoring guides in the first cycle (Denise, group meeting, February 2, 2007; journal, February 2, 2007). By March, Alice had begun involving students in developing the scoring guide as a means of introducing the unit of study. "What I have found is that they [students] have become much more perceptive about what it is that's expected of them" (Alice, group meeting, March 7, 2007). Her students were more attuned to their work. "One of the kids [referring to another assignment] said, 'Do we get a scoring guide? How do I know what this is worth?'" (Alice, group meeting, March 7, 2007).

Likewise, Betty found that students were more engaged when they had a scoring guide to clarify the particular learning target she had chosen. "It makes the learning target much clearer to the student….they really get involved" (Betty, group meeting, March 7, 2007). She mentioned in that meeting that she had invited students to help produce the scoring guide for lessons and units of study (Betty, group meeting, March 7, 2007). She also wrote in her journal that her students had "shared in the production of the scoring guide" (Betty, journal entry, March 9, 2007). In her interview, Betty again found value in scoring guides. "The students are relying

[on the scoring guide]…to guide their work….because they know what is expected of them." (Betty, interview, April 13, 2007).

Furthermore, this engagement, according to Denise, led to more sophisticated work, especially in the poster project. She reported that students were able to produce superior work the first time, without requiring extensive revision, when they knew the expectations "The quality is up there the first time around because they know…" (Denise, group meeting, April 2, 2007).

In answer to the first research question, the teachers in the project believed that they had extended their use of assessment as a means of engaging students more directly in learning. They each extended the application of CASL strategies to directly involve students in developing scoring guides for larger projects that included more curricular objectives. As a consequence of these actions of including students in decision-making about how projects would be assessed, three of the four teachers also became more confident and empowered in their work. They had taken back assessment as an instructional tool and added it to the repertoire of instructional strategies. This confidence in their teaching was evident in their interviews.

When asked during the interviews about how working on this project had altered the way they saw their practice, each discussed the value of classroom assessment. Denise realized that the district curriculum provides her with 'what' to teach, but that her own assessments help her "modify and adjust according to the kids' needs." "What I've learned is that it takes a little longer to teach the same topic, and that assessment should be the means to the end. And also, for everyone to be successful, they have to have the opportunity to improve. So by knowing what they need to improve on, they have that opportunity." (Denise, interview, April 12, 2007)

Cathy raised another issue. "What I have found is that assessing is a whole lot easier when they [students] are involved. They really like to earn those points. I get a real quick feedback about whether they understand what we talked about. (Cathy, interview, April 10, 2007). When asked how she might teach differently in the future, Cathy responded that she would continue involving her students in the CASL strategies. "I think involving the kids more…giving them more of a say-so in how they improve….This way they become more invested in the process of learning…taking that knowledge as part of them." (Cathy, interview, April 10, 2007).

Alice found the CASL strategies informative to the point of changing the way she should instruct students. "This project has altered the way I need to teach and of course how I assess…. It causes me to make sure I have the assessment in mind before you teach…it also needs to be flexible because there are things you adjust and change as you go….(Alice, interview, April 16, 2007).

In the interviews, Betty was the only one of the participants who stated that what to teach came from the assessments that she had already completed. "I know what to teach based on prior assessments. They guide me into what I should focus on…the weak areas that I pick up from scoring assessments…and I let that drive my instruction…." (Betty, interview, April 13, 2007).

Our four month project had a positive impact on the teaching of the four participants. Concluding interviews indicated the teachers felt that our project had been constructive. I asked each participant whether our meeting together had proven to be useful to them. Denise, for instance, reported that our meetings "reinforces [sic] what I'm doing….oftentimes as teachers, because we are so secluded that we don't always know…."(Denise, interview, April 12, 2007).

Cathy, a veteran teacher, found the experience worthwhile as well. "New teachers look at my years of experience and think I've got all the answers….it's such a dynamic profession that you need to collaborate and get ideas and share…just to keep your teaching fresh" (Cathy, interview, April 10, 2007). She found our conversations helpful for her teaching. "…ideas I got from everyone else in the group." "I used it [CASL strategies] a lot in writing…I liked Denise's idea…no it was Betty's idea about changing the goal from week to week" (Cathy interview, April 10, 2007). "I felt like it was teamwork, even though we were working on it individually. I think the meeting and sharing ideas. It felt like a team because if I said something, there were suggestions and if somebody else said something, there were suggestions from that…" (Cathy interview, April 10, 2007).

For Betty, her colleagues provided a source of support. "…I was listening to the other teachers and I learned that some of the things I was having difficulty with at the beginning, the other teachers were [also] and they offered a lot of suggestions…" (Betty, interview, April 13, 2007).

Likewise, Alice found the collaboration useful. "I think the most major benefit of this kind of collaboration is that in just having that third person point of view…it caused me to think in another realm…that wouldn't have happened if I was doing it by myself..." (Alice, interview, April 16, 2007).

Leadership Issues

These two issues, collaboration and empowerment, had direct impact on my view of school leadership and my role as a school leader. First, the learning team approach to professional development worked for these teachers. As noted above, they did not plan together but did share their stories and found each others' stories informative for their own work. They

each reported in their interviews that the sharing of ideas and stories had positive influences for their teaching, and that they welcomed the opportunity to discuss their work with colleagues. Secondly, the project empowered teachers in that they were able to use some forms of assessment as a tool with which to engage their students in their own learning. At the beginning of the project, teachers reported a sense of frustration with the assessment and the district's assessment instruments. By the end of the project, the four teachers were using teacher-created assessment to drive their instructional decisions.

The teachers believed that they had learned from their practice and from each other. As the administrator, I did not need to direct or assign the learning for the team. They were all willing participants in their own learning. From this experience, as I moved from my posture, at the beginning of both cycles, of needing to feel in charge of the project to one of watching others learn, I have come to realize that my role is relatively minor. I had provided a purpose and focus, which the teachers had voluntarily accepted and agreed to pursue. In addition, I provided a limited number of material resources, such as the textbook and some sample rubrics. With the exception of the first meeting of each cycle, I did not direct or require conversations around either. Our focus was on what each participating teacher was doing in their respective classrooms to encourage learning.

My "leadership" was actually a matter of providing a fundamental idea about teaching that the participants found worthwhile. The teachers had found an instructional strategy that worked for them, and they did not need my 'leadership' to follow it. But, they did want an opportunity to share it.

Consequently, the language art that proved to be most powerful for their professional development was listening. Listening (on my part), rather than talking, gave the participants an

open-ended opportunity to express themselves about their work. Listening provided the teachers with a comfortable location for their discussions. By listening, I was able to generate a trusting climate. The trust necessary to successfully engage in a meaningful professional development/school improvement project such as this works both ways. The teachers had to trust me to provide a meaningful project that would serve their own practice. I learned, by listening, to trust them to apply the strategies as they saw fit in their respective classrooms.

The Limitation of Time and this Action Research Project

Throughout this project, I was acting as a researcher, observing and recording the work of others while examining my own actions and reactions. At the same time that I was organizing and arranging that work, I was attempting to encourage the already busy participating teachers to reflect on their work. But every day, I was also the assistant principal, acting as a disciplinarian and applying the district's "code of conduct" that specified consequences for various student behaviors. For instance, during the four months of this project, I prepared documents for, and arranged, six discipline hearings for dispensation by the superintendent. In addition, among other duties, I supervised our lunch periods for two hours every day, evaluated half of the schools' teachers and frequently rode the school buses that transported our children back to their section eight apartment complexes. I was conducting action research in my own workplace, banking on the goodwill and relationships that I had established with the participating teachers. But, I was also daily pulled away from more effectively conducting that research by the various other duties that were required of me. For instance, during one meeting which I had arranged for a Friday afternoon in March, Alice and I were both absent because she had to meet with the parents of an especially troubled student.

These constraints on the time we had together limited my effectiveness as an action researcher. In a perfect situation, I would have observed every teacher every day, had time to converse informally and individually about instruction and the sense each participant made of the work they did. And perhaps the participating teachers would have had the time and peace of mind to more fully engage in the study of the CASL and reflect more deeply on their work. Unfortunately, that was not the case here. I was not the only one pulled away from the research. Teachers are busy people, engaged in the learning of their children, but also burdened by their school and district in any number of ways. Indeed, upon finding out that Alice was working in the project, one teacher commented "I couldn't imagine doing more on top of what I'm already doing" (Alice, interview, April 16, 2007).

From these findings, themes have emerged and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. These themes include how the teachers' collaboration impacted their learning as well as the personal learning of the teachers as they integrated new knowledge into their existing practice. Finally I will discuss how the project impacted my own knowledge, as I learned to more fully appreciate the power of listening and its importance in school leadership.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

My original idea was to get teachers to use CASL because I believed the program held promise for the students in our school. I had hoped that the four teachers would find skills and strategies that could inform and improve their professional work and the learning of their students. Over the course of the project, I witnessed, as I have described above, teachers applying new strategies, beginning with the small concrete step of using scoring guides, to the more extensive engagement of student-designed scoring guides. As teachers involved students in developing scoring guides and planning how students would display their learning, the teachers

found students much more engaged in their own assessment. Assessment became a tool that teachers could use to engage students in their own learning.

In terms of my own learning, it became obvious over the course of the project that the teachers did not need my guidance as much as my listening. I had provided a place and time to meet and an audience for their conversations about their work. Their collaboration came from their own engagement in something that they found successful in helping their students learn and the opportunity to compare their stories of that success. I did not need to direct or manage their learning, but to listen and encourage their work.

Chapter Five

DISCUSSION

Four teachers agreed to practice an instructional method designed to connect students with their learning through specific classroom assessment practices. The source of this instructional method was *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning* (Stiggins at al, 2004). In addition to agreeing to practice the CASL strategies, teachers also agreed to meet and discuss their work over a period of four months. From the transcripts of these meetings, as well as interviews, journals, and my own observations and notes of the project, I have documented in Chapter 4 how the teachers had learned and partially applied strategies that, as they reported, more directly engaged their students in their own learning. In the course of engaging students more directly in their learning, and reporting together about their work, the teachers became more engaged in their own professional practice as well. I have also documented how I came to realize that any personal power of school leadership that I might exhibit lies more in my capacity to listen and support, rather than tell and direct.

Through subsequent analysis, themes emerged about learning and professional development, and leadership. These themes provide insight into the research questions. How, and to what extent, do teachers use assessment data and make sense of assessment strategies to inform teaching and improve learning? What insights have I gained about my role as an instructional leader and action researcher?

At the beginning of the project, I had shared the CASL goals or principles. These included having clear purposes for assessment, clarifying learning targets, designing sound assessments, communicating results effectively and involving students (Stiggins et al, 2004). To

reach these goals, I had asked the participating teachers to examine their own practices and begin applying seven recommended strategies: (a) providing a clear and understandable learning target, (b) providing good and poor examples of anonymous student work, (c) providing students with descriptive feedback, (d) involving students in tracking their own progress, (e) focusing lessons on one aspect of quality at a time, (f) teaching students to learn to focus their revision, and (g) teaching students to reflect on their learning and monitor their own progress (Stiggins et al, 2004).

In Chapter Four, I have noted that the participating teachers did not explore the power of all the CASL strategies as much as refine one particular tactic, using scoring guides. By using scoring guides, the four teachers did attempt to get at the goals of providing a clear target for what counts as successful learning. Furthermore, the use of a scoring guide also provided students with feedback on their learning. In the second cycle, the teachers reported that they had advanced their use of scoring guides by involving students in the production of the scoring guides, hence, engaging student more directly in assessment. What emerged from analyzing the data and findings are themes about the power of collaboration to further the learning of teachers, how teachers construct new learning, and about how my perspective of leadership was altered during this project.

<div align="center">Themes</div>

The Value of Collaboration

Collaboration among the participants, rather than assessment expertise, was the most salient outcome of the project. The participating teachers valued the opportunity to share their work in a non-threatening environment. Klinger (2004) suggests that the conditions necessary for successful professional development include opportunities for collegial discussion.. Projects

that permit teachers to take ownership of the change and share it with others produce successful outcomes (Klinger, 2004). This project documented how teachers took ownership of a tactical change in practice through their own collaborative efforts and shared their experiences with each other as a means of developing their own skills as teachers. The interviews with teachers indicated that such outcomes included more empowered teachers and more engaged students.

The value of collaboration is the focal point of professional learning communities. Fullan (2003, 2006) maintains that as educators we have a moral imperative to provide for the education of every child. Hence, the central goal of public education is to teach everyone and reduce achievement gaps between student groups (Fullan, 2003). Fullan (2006) presses for the kind of school-based professional learning community that allows teachers to de-privatize their work in a purposeful way to achieve this goal. Likewise, Chappuis and his colleagues (2005) argue that professional development is best carried out in learning teams that meet regularly in order to share team members' mutual professional development.

Furthermore, such collaborative learning can be motivating for teachers. "There is nothing that better motivates people to make more investments of time, energy and commitment than to grow better at something that had importance. Failure may be the initial motivator, but it is increased competence that leads us to do more and more" (Fullan, 2006, pp. 57-58). As the participating teachers more directly engaged their students, sharing this engagement sustained their enthusiasm and encouraged their work.

Although the teachers shared their work and their successes in involving students in their own learning, I could not document that this project created a professional learning community as defined by Louis, Kruse and Marks (1996). These writers define such a community as one in which such reflection and sharing of practice is part of the normative culture of the school. Our

project did not reach the level of whole school involvement required for such a designation, or that level of reflection.

Rather than sustaining teacher isolation, teachers in learning communities open their practice to their colleagues (Wood, 2007). The four participating teachers did exactly that. Their conversations about teaching and learning, as described and documented in Chapter Four, indicated a shared responsibility for studying the central tasks of education; that is, learning and teaching. The teachers took advantage of the time and opportunity this project afforded them for reflective dialogue about that work. As documented in Chapter Four, contrary to the notion of teacher isolation, these teachers took advantage of the opportunity for collegial discussions to share and refine their own work and thinking.

Glickman (2002) describes this arrangement of teachers as a community of learners, and notes that such groups can become "critical friends" (p. 17). In this project, the four teachers came together to share information, strategies, issues and concerns. This added perspective provided each participant with the necessary distance to examine her own work without the glare of administrator evaluation. Our meetings and conversations focused on the real issues of how teaching and learning could be improved through specific instructional strategies.

Teachers' Learning

A theme that runs through this project is that learning (at least for the participating teachers and me) includes a reasonable expectation of successful achievement. This concept is elemental to all learning. Learning is more likely to be successful when it is intentional and the learner has both long and short term goals (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). The participants expected that, in joining in this project, they would find a contribution to their instructional practice. For myself, I hoped for a better understanding of how my own professional practice

could improve as well. Indeed, the idea of a reasonable expectation of successful learning is central to the CASL principles. Assessment for learning argues that students learn best when they know what is expected and required for success, and they understand how to close the gap between their own work and the standard for success (Stiggins, 2004, 2006).

While the participants were veteran teachers with considerable experience in public school education, this project's assessment intervention involved a substantial change in the way they regarded and used assessment. As noted in Chapter Two's discussion of learning, each learner is unique in experience, development, and emotional state (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). In this project, each participant came to the project with her own identity as a teacher, but with a common set of experiences from our school and district. Furthermore, they came to the project ready to learn. To learn and apply new ideas, the participants in such a project must be open to the learning and feel empowered enough to attempt something new (Reynolds, Murrill and Whitt, 2006).

Our teachers, of course, came to the project with their own repertoire of skills and knowledge of how to teach. They each had considerable experience in working with our student population and with the Spencer School District's curriculum. The participants developed their own responses to my request to employ CASL strategies. They brought to the project their own practices and strategies. In applying this new strategy, they had to connect to what they had experienced before the project. In the words of Denise (in describing a new method of teaching vocabulary to her sixth graders), they needed to "adjust their schema" (Denise, Group meeting, February 2, 2007).

In applying the CASL methods, learning became a constructive process in which the participants connected these strategies to their own prior knowledge of teaching and experience

in meaningful ways. Various writers have explained this construction and I have noted several in Chapter Two. This application of assessment strategies was a matter of creating models or metaphors, based in the personal experience of teaching. We understand something new only when we create a model or metaphor derived from our own personal experience (Jensen, 1996). Bransford, Brown & Cocking (1999) regard this construction as a matter of structure, arguing that the mind imposes structures, based on experience, on the new information. The four teachers in this project did not construct a new paradigm for the application of assessment. Rather they adjusted their practices to include a successful tactic, based in part on what they had always done but also based in part on what they had learned in the project.

In Chapter Two I described how McLeskey & Waldron (2004), conceptualized teachers' professional learning through three perspectives: knowledge for practice, knowledge in practice and knowledge of practice. Briefly, the perspective of knowledge-for-practice is the most commonly associated with traditional professional development, holding that the more teachers know about subject matter, instructional strategies, etc., the better they will teach. Knowledge-in-practice suggests that teaching is a craft, that knowledge of effective practice is what good teachers do, and that that knowledge is embedded in the experiences of their day-to-day work. Knowledge-of-practice does not draw a distinction between the formal knowledge of knowledge-for-practice and the craft knowledge of the knowledge-in-practice. Rather, this perspective sees all learning as constructed in a context, directly connected to the knower but also relevant beyond the immediate environment.

For the four teachers involved in the project, their experience can be seen as moving through two of these perspectives. They began the project with the knowledge for practice perspective. As noted in Chapter Four, I assigned reading and provided a rationale and

framework for understanding a specific practice, which they agreed to use in their classrooms. As they proceeded, by employing strategies of engaging students directly in their own learning, the teachers began to embed them in their day-to-day work. That is, by the end of the project the participants' interviews indicated that they were immersed in employing a knowledge-in-practice perspective that provided insight into teaching for them, and learning for their students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004). The teachers' experiences, as they reported, indicated that they had gained a craft knowledge that they could use to engage their students.

This craft knowledge of using scoring guides and having students assist in their creation is a significant strategy. Scoring guides in and of themselves have a considerable potential for improving learning of students. Clear, accessible instructional scoring guides or rubrics can provide students with important information that can lead students to become self-regulated learners (Saddler & Andrade, 2004). Such scoring guides can serve as teaching tools as well as tools of evaluation and accountability (Andrade, 2000). Furthermore, Andrade and Ying (2005) studied undergraduate college students' use of rubrics to guide learning. Their findings indicate that using scoring guides supported the process of formative assessment (Andrade and Ying, 2005). However, Andrade's 2005 reflection of using scoring guides in her own teaching cautions that the value of employing scoring guides is dependent on the quality of the scoring guide (Andrade, 2005).

To move beyond craft knowledge into a knowledge-of-practice understanding would require a much more involved, long-term project, one that would require much more in-depth understanding and engagement of the teachers involved. For these teachers, this would mean playing a central role in generating knowledge by creating sites of inquiry within their classrooms and schools, connecting their own work to broader issues and critically examining

their own assumptions and theories as well as those of others (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004).

Teachers then become participants in the transformation of school practices. All of this was

clearly beyond the scope of this project.

However, the project revealed that the teachers' approaches to teaching and the resulting

practices are resistant to change (Swanson & Stevenson, 2002). Rather than completely

transform their instructional practices, assessment for learning was employed as an added part of

their instruction. What the teachers produced was a tactical, concrete expression of the

strategies. Their efforts were not about fully embracing a change in their teaching. In terms of

the research questions, their efforts did not result in using assessment information to guide their

instruction. Instead, their application of the strategies involved using scoring guides to engage

their students in the activities at hand. The scoring guides provided the students with a learning

target, and the use of the scoring guide might have provided feedback to their students. On the

other hand, even this limited successful application of two of the CASL strategies gave the

teachers a reported sense of accomplishment.

The very structure of the project may have limited the participants from not moving

beyond the level of craft knowledge that they achieved. The participating teachers knew, for

instance, that this was a short-term four month project. It would not last past April, 2007, unless

they made it their own. Furthermore, I did not have the authority to compel their learning or

application of the goals and strategies of CASL. The teachers were allowed to try and fail or

succeed. If they failed to comply with my requests, they would not be penalized. There was no

urgency and no commitment for an overhaul of the foundations of their teaching. Consequently,

while the participants enjoyed the benefits of moving their teaching forward, no comprehensive

immersion into the CASL strategies was witnessed.

Learning for Leadership

For my own learning, as I have documented in Chapter Four, I was first caught in the dilemma of directing the work of others or facilitating conversations and observing the work of the four teachers during the first cycle. As the cycle drew to a close, I was convinced that my input, my "leadership" was needed to push the project forward. Instead, what I discovered was that the four teachers, having found success in the application of the tactic of scoring guides, and having been buoyed by the chance to share their work with each other, moved on without me. They succeeded in engaging their students directly in their own learning of the curriculum without my insistence, my direction, my "leadership." All they needed was a general focus and an opportunity to share their stories, compare the experiences and generally converse with each other. By arranging a time and place to meet and a welcoming audience, I encouraged their collegiality. I demonstrated to the four participants that, by listening to teachers' anecdotes, I valued their efforts and empowered their work.

Blasé and Anderson (1999) described how teachers were empowered (or disempowered) by the way that school leaders valued their contributions and their work. In their study of 700 principals, they found that those leaders who created collegial relationships among and between teachers also created productive school cultures.

Blase and Blase's (1999, 2000) study went further, demonstrating the empowering nature of talking with teachers and listening to their discussions of learning and teaching issues in a non-threatening environment. According to their data, principals' dialogue with teachers promoted reflection by providing feedback, making suggestions and using inquiry, among others. School leaders promoted the professional growth of teachers by emphasizing the study of learning and teaching, and supporting the collaboration of teachers (Blase & Blase, 2000).

Principals who solicited opinions and provided advice encouraged the kind of empowerment witnessed in this project. The minute to minute work of teaching is always close and intensely personal. The experience of this project, the sharing and opportunity for reflection, provided the participants with another perspective from which to view their work, "another set of eyes" (Alice, interview, April 16, 2007; Blase and Blase, 1999, p. 360).

Zepeda (2004), in a case study of a Midwestern urban elementary school, likewise indicated the power of dialogue with teachers to encourage teachers' reflection of issues of teaching and learning. The study further details how the principal in the study struggled with the paradoxical nature of leadership in such a climate of dialogue, having to relinquish the top-down control of her role as principal in order to promote the learning of the teachers in the school. Negotiating this path between directing and telling, and facilitating and listening was part of the experiential learning that occurred for me in this project. Likewise, Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell and Valentine (1999), in their study of three middle schools involved in maintaining professional learning communities, found that principals must "locate a balance that provides for the communal characteristics while attending to the bureaucratic imperatives…"(Scribner et al, 1999, p. 154). As noted in Chapter Four, I struggled to find that balance, in part because I believed I needed to be in charge.

Kouzes and Posner (2006) describe the need to be in charge, as I experienced, as one of several possible problems for leaders in general. Quoting without citation their friend, Kirk Hanson, (a professor at Santa Clara University)….the "Achilles heel of leaders can be found when they…believe they are in charge" (p. 159). This was certainly the case here. While I felt I was in charge—the project was my idea and my dissertation, after all—I could clearly not be in charge of someone else's learning.

What was revealed about my "leadership" was that listening and questioning—getting others to discuss their work—was more powerful than telling and directing. However, to move the teachers to question their own assumptions would require more intensive questioning and listening on my part. To get to the kind of growth that would have led to more sophisticated instructional practices would require more time, closer examination of the daily work of teaching (with more questioning) and more commitment on everyone's part. The teachers' collaboration might be worthwhile and serve their needs of validating their efforts, but to be effective in improving instruction, I would have to facilitate a deeper, closer examination of instructional practices. A more intense project might have still have been accomplished if we could have engaged in a third cycle of action research.

Possibilities of Cycle Three

As noted in Chapter Four, things have changed at Porter Elementary School. The Spencer School District has opened new middle schools and Porter has become, like the other twenty elementary schools in the district, a Kindergarten through fifth grade school. Denise is still teaching sixth grade, but in a new middle school. Cathy moved to fifth grade in order to avoid the move to a middle school. Alice took an instructional specialist position at a neighboring school. Only Betty is still in the same grade level situation. Had the four teachers stayed at Porter Elementary School, a third cycle of this research project might have been viable. However, things have changed in the district.

The state's testing scheme has again produced low scores for the district's children. Furthermore, the state department was forced to designate over a 160 districts within the state, including Spencer, as "in improvement" as required by the federal No Child Left Behind statute. For the 2007-08 school year, the district now requires grade level, "data team" meetings weekly.

These mandated "data teams" are to compare results from a number of district-mandated assessments. Pre- and post-tests are to be given in every subject area, with the resulting scores turned into bar graphs for display. All of this district-directed assessment is to prepare students for the big assessment, the state's high-stakes testing program. Moreover, lesson 'protocols' and planning guides have been issued to specify what is to be taught when in each subject area.

Teachers, having been left out of the negotiation of these initiatives, have experienced a loss of morale. District-wide, the resistance among teachers to these top-down initiatives has come in the form of a new "blog" created by district teachers for discussing their complaints. (A number of other issues have surfaced as well and school board meetings have become regularly attended by the local television news outlets.) In this climate, it is difficult to imagine continuing a project that valued teacher-designed assessment strategies. Recent studies have shown that efforts to advance teacher efficacy appear to be inhibited by such large-scale reform efforts (Wood, 2007; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

Nevertheless, had the four teachers remained together at Porter Elementary School, a third cycle of the project could have been employed in the 2007-08 school year. The district's data teams could become the site of conversations around how to connect our children to their learning. I could facilitate these conversations around the issues of how to further employ the CASL strategies, or the teachers involved might have taken their prior experiences in the project in an entirely new direction. For instance, during a third cycle, we might have examined more closely the relationship between assignments, objectives and assessments, and more deliberately engaged students as educational decision-makers. The participating teachers might have moved beyond perfecting the use of scoring guides and closer to creating the sites of inquiry in their classrooms that the knowledge of practice perspective suggests (McLeskey & Waldron, 2004).

The teachers could have expanded their use of the strategies to include every subject area and each lesson. Perhaps we would have examined quantitative research ,utilizing various assessment data to statistically validate the interventions the teachers employed. A year-long ethnographic study of the teachers' experiences could have been pursued. A critical ethnography examining the nature of being a subject in one's own education, either from the teacher's viewpoint or mine could have been started. Or the project might have expanded to include more teachers in a broader study group.

Even without the four participating in the same school, the issue of teacher collaboration in professional development could have been explored as a new thrust during cycle three of this participatory action research project. As noted earlier in this chapter, collaboration among the teachers was a major outcome of the project, an outcome that the teachers came to value and one that was obtained despite district and school cultures and practices that do not regularly encourage the degree of collaboration experienced in the project. This collaboration led to change, in the ways that teachers learned on the job and with each other, in the ways I worked with the teachers, and in the tactics they employed to assess students and engage students in assessment and their own learning.

Implications for Research

In designing an action research project, this experience suggests that successfully conducting research within an organization in which you work has several sets of issues. On the one hand are matters of relationships between the researcher and the participants as well as how the project can serve the needs of both the researcher and the participants. On the other hand are technical issues of facilitation, negotiation and data management.

First, any project that requires the cooperation of colleagues and co-workers, some of whom may be subordinate to the researcher, requires a certain depth of personal relationships as a prerequisite to proceeding. Relationship-building takes time and the nature of the project may require the researcher to invest considerable time in close working conditions with the participants. The project that I have described at Porter Elementary School was possible because the four participating teachers and I had labored together for several years. Over those preceding years, I had occasion to work in the many ways of school life with each participating teacher. At times, I had supported each participant in a variety of ways: at parent-teacher conferences, with their children's discipline problems, and collaborating in committees for school events. This personal history provided me with a relationship with each participating teacher that allowed me to ask for their assistance with the project.

Secondly, the project should provide some benefit to the working conditions of the participants. Action research is about participants solving problems of practice. As noted earlier, if the project asks working teachers to practice a skill or employ a particular strategy, the project will be more likely to be successful if the work provides teachers with a reasonable expectation of worthwhile accomplishment. In this case, the teachers believed that CASL had potential to improve their practice of teaching, and the learning of their students. While the relationships allowed me to ask for their cooperation, the promise of improvement brought the participants to the project.

As regarding technical matters of action research, the researcher, must negotiate and facilitate the production of data. Whether in a school situation or a different work place, the participants should be actively involved in the production of data. Since the researcher is asking participants for something beyond their normal work, that data-production should be as simple

and direct as possible. As I will discuss below, the number of venues for teacher-participants' reflective writing in this project may have limited the amount of data the participants produced.

During the project itself, of course, any number of issues may arise. As noted in Chapter Four, the plan for action research that I had charted in Chapter Three did not unfold as I expected. Time and circumstances prevented us from meeting as regularly as I had planned. Our meeting times and days were always open to negotiation. Furthermore, the daily busy-ness of schooling made observing and discussing with teachers outside our meetings difficult as well. I suspect that any action research plan in an elementary school, conducted by someone embedded in the site with the participation of working teachers, would face similar obstacles.

To deal with these obstacles, two recommendations come to mind. First, in working with teachers in such a circumstance, action researchers should keep their projects as simple and flexible as possible. Again, researchers must keep in mind the expected workload of their participants and not overburden them. Should meetings of participants be part of the scheme, times and places must be negotiated and accepted by all. Expectations should be clear and limited to what is truly feasible to ask of a teacher already working long hours.

Secondly, two sources of data that I had hoped to employ, the 'blog' and the journal writing, did not produce the quantity of data that I had anticipated. The teachers were just too busy to participate in this manner. They discussed their work freely, but daily reflective writing proved to be unworkable, at least in this case. The project would have been better served had I provided fewer avenues for reflection. In retrospect, I could have asked for a weekly entry on the blog, gone to each teacher's classroom and established the website on their computer. By making the technological aspects of reflection as simple as possible, it is more likely that the teachers could have produced more regular reflections of their efforts. For action researchers

hoping to gather data from the reflections of busy participants, the scheme of producing and gathering data should be kept as simple and direct as possible.

Implications for Practice

At my office, there are nameplates above my door. The original one, of course, is assistant principal, but the custodians and maintenance workers have added others over the years. Sometimes I am the school nurse, other times I become the secretary, frequently the custodian. I have name plates for each. The top name plate was removed from a church property the district had purchased. My office is also now designated as a confessional. During our project, all but one of our meetings was held there.

I suspect most assistant principals play as many roles. The first word of our titles, after all, is "assistant." And while we may have many roles and take on many tasks, our first calling is to provide the best possible education for our students. In doing so we must work with teachers, students and parents. What I have learned from this project is that teachers hear the same calling, and they benefit when given the opportunity to confess it. To hear such confessions—conversations about teaching children—requires the most powerful of language arts, the capacity to listen. While my spoken and written words may convey meaning, it is by listening that we have the capacity to empower others. But having the relationships necessary to hold such conversations, hear such confessions, takes time and effort.

Secondly, to help teachers learn something new and different requires that the new idea be feasible, aligned with the goals of the school, and provide teachers with a reasonable expectation of worthwhile realization. Teachers work hard and their time is education's most precious resource. We cannot ask them for their time for the sake of the new idea or initiative unless that initiative carries with it the capacity to materially address their calling. However,

when we provide an initiative that holds that possibility, and teachers have the opportunity to apply it to their own situation, they will respond appropriately.

Final Reflections

Since the end of the project, I experienced another example of how my listening can encourage learning among teachers. During a professional development day, I was asked to meet with teachers in each of two grade levels to review how each teacher taught reading in their own classroom. Instead, I asked the six teachers, three from 4th grade and three from 5th grade, to meet together to compare and discuss how they taught reading. I knew that one of the 5th grade teachers and one of the 4th grade teachers were new to our district, and that two of the 4th grade teachers were accomplished in organizing the teaching of reading. I arranged the meeting time and place, and deliberately arrived fifteen minutes late. The teachers were huddled together around a table, with one of the 4th grade teachers sharing her organization of her instruction. I listened until a sufficient time had passed to allow everyone to ask a question or suggest an idea from their own experience. Once everyone else had had a turn to talk, I asked two questions, one of which I knew the answer to. I knew that one of the other 4th grade teachers had a particular seating arrangement that supported her reading instruction. I asked her about that, how it worked in her classroom. She had not yet shared that, but did so after my question. This seemed to stimulate more discussion among the group. The second question was more open-ended. Since reading is taught by grouping the students by their own reading level, how static are the groups? The new 4th grade teacher was able to share how she had already re-organized her reading groups three times due to diagnosed progress in reading ability. She talked at some length about her teaching, as did the three 5th grade teachers. The meeting continued without further input from me, except for my reminding the six teachers to complete an exit evaluation of the session for

our professional development chairperson. Later, I was told that each of the teachers found the session very helpful and instructive. The teachers did not need "leadership" as much as an opportunity to discuss their work.

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