DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 705 EA 024 400

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TITLE Collaborative Action Research: A Cultural Mechanism for School Development and Professional Restructuring.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 20-24, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Collegiality; Educational Cooperation; *Educational Environment; *Educational Improvement; *Effective Schools Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Organizational Climate; Professional Development; *School Effectiveness; School Restructuring
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Research

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that identified factors contributing to the maintenance of the collaborative action research process in public schools are presented in this paper. Specifically, the study evaluated outcomes of Project LEARN, the League of Educational Action Researchers in the Northwest, a university-sponsored school improvement initiative. The project is based on the belief that teacher collaboration on research facilitates an effective schooling ethos. Methodology involved two faculty surveys, interviews with teachers, and observation of their principals. Findings indicate that collaborative action research can contribute to the development of a school culture that is conducive to school improvement. Contributing factors include leadership support for group work, high expectations, an experimental school ethic, and a shared focus. One table and three figures are included. (Contains 27 references.) (LMI)

Collaborative Action Research: A Cultural Mechanism for School Development and Professional Restructuring

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Running Head: COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH: A CULTURAL MECHANISM

Introduction

This paper discusses the factors which contribute to the maintenance of the collaborative action research process in public school settings. It focuses on insights obtained from three years of work with a University sponsored initiative which assists school faculties in acquiring skills with the techniques of collaborative inquiry.

The Program and Its Purpose

Project LEARN, The League of Educational Action Researchers in the Northwest, is a collaborative school improvement project that has involved local schools with Washington State University during the three school years of 1989-90, 1990-91, 1991-92.

Although citizens and educators often hold different perspectives on what makes for a good school, for the purposes of our work we here applied a two dimensional definition of a good school. The first dimension is clearly outcome-based. We view good schools as places where one findshigh levels of equitably distributed student achievement. In this regard our orientation is not unlike the one that has framed the "effective schooling" movement. Specifically, when we speak of improved student performance, we mean "growth over time" across the range of a student' socio-economic status. We believe that in schools where kids, regardless of entry abilities, achieve at faster rates than one would have otherwise predicted, then those levels of performance can be logically attributed to the quality of the school.

Another dimension of the quality schools that we have sought to create speaks to something beyond the more numerical achievements of the students. It refers to the culture or the ethos of the school. We have argued that it is the social/organizational features of a school which can make it both an invigorating environment for student learning and a rewarding place for teachers to teach. The work of Judith Warren Little (1982), Susan Rosenholtz (1990), Michael Rutter (1979) among others gives support to the contention that these two dimensions of quality must go hand in hand.

Creating Effective Schools?

Once having defined the outcome we were seeking, we were brought to the key question. If good schools are places where students learn regardless of parental SES, where teachers are professionally invigorated and where students are inspired by their work, then how does one create and replicate such a setting? This question has perplexed and pushed me for years, first as a teacher, then as an administrator, and now as a professor. What are the factors that influence the development of a good school? That question is as complex as it is basic, yet it often seems that the more one looks into it, the more one doesn't know. On one hand we have the effective schooling research. That research clearly describes the characteristics of "good" schools. However, the problem the effective schooling research presents for the practitioner, is that while one can read and believe it, one is still left without any insight into how these "effective" schools were created. That body of research describes schools as if they were static entities. It tells us how they appeared at a given point in time. In spite of this fact, this work spawned a plethora of programs aimed at creating "effective schools." Now after more than a decade of effort, with countless people trying to use the effective schooling research to create effective schools (through the training of teachers and administrators in the use of effective schooling practices) we have yet to learn how to do it! The literature contains very little, if any, evidence of effective schooling training programs which have been successful in replicating the schools that Edmonds (1979), Brookover and Lezotte (1979), and Michael Rutter (1979) discovered. So while we may have a picture of what effective schools should look like, we are apparently no closer to understanding how to create them.

Research on School Change

This is not because we don't understand school change. To the contrary, we have an excellent body of research on change in school settings. Although much of that research was based on school improvement efforts which occurred in the late sixties

and early seventies, the findings are still applicable to today's circumstances. For example, Michael Fullen (1982) examined the characteristics of the particular innovations that took hold and lasted in schools and he was able to discern a set of characteristics that when present make it more likely that an innovation would prove successful. Among these were:

1) characteristics of the change itself; was the innovation a matter of significance,

2) factors relating to the school district; was it an environment that was likely to nurture change,

3) characteristics of the school sites, and

4) forces external to the system

A comprehensive review of the literature by Corbett, Dawson and Firestone (1984) supported Fullen's findings. The pattern of these and other sets of data led us to understand that it was frequently factors residing in the social organization of the schools that existed prior to the introduction of the innovation that most meaningfully contributed to the innovation's continuance.

The extent of faculty factions and tensions and how well a faculty tended to collaborate had a great deal to do with the likely longevity of interventions. Many researchers have stated or inferred that the role of the administrator is a key in effecting school change (Herriot & Gross 1979), (House 19XX). The similarity in these and other reports would have created a virtual blueprint for change were it not for one issue. The research on change in school settings of Fullen (1982), Firestone, Dawson, Corbett (1984), Berman, and McLaughlin (1974), and others all looked at school improvement efforts and innovations that occurred during a period that one might have labeled as an era of "top-down" or mandated change. Throughout North America, the school improvement initiatives of the 70s occurred in schools where the principal was the undisputed monarch in his/her school, the superintendent reigned supreme in

the district, and no one questioned administrative authority to direct improvement work. As a result, this body of research helps us to understand the things that a leader should attend to if they want the schools under their direction to implement particular innovations with some degree of fidelity. For example: if leadership wants to put a particular innovation in place, e.g. implement a whole language program, or implement a staff development initiative (like ITIP), this research will give helpful guidance. However, if one is endeavoring to transform the institution of the school itself, specifically its potential for empowering and professionalizing the teaching staff, then this research may not prove as helpful.

John Goodlad (1984 did an excellent job of documenting the sad truth that sometimes the more we do in and for schools, the more they stay the same. Several scholars, Ravitch (1983) Goodlad (1984) have noted that our schools institutionally have not changed very much over time. Unfortunately, if a 1965 retiree returned to their school today, they might not find their school much different from how they left it.

A School Development Strategy Based on Teacher Empowerment

Over the past three years my colleagues and I have been engaged in two things. We have been working with staffs of local schools on the techniques of conducting action research. We did this to foster fundamental school development. Meanwhile, we have been doing our own action research on their action research. Our work with school faculties has been influenced by two things. It was influenced first by work of people like Sharon Oja (1989), Ann Lieberman (1986), Ward and Tikunoff (1983) and Carl Glickman (1990). For several years these folks have helped teachers to explore and create new roles for teachers as researcher, teacher as inquirer. Those efforts are extremely important since contemporary education is different from the other professions in at least one significant way; education is the only profession where *the knowledge that informs practice* has not emanated from practitioners.

While the work of doctors informs the work of doctors, and the arguments of lawyers influence the practice of other lawyers, and the buildings created by architects and engineers influence the next generation of architects and engineers, the journals of education are, by and large, written by professors and scholars who are working outside of the public school system. Asking teachers to follow through on prescriptions that have been devised by others, relegates them to a subservient role more like a "blue collar" worker than a professional. For that reason we have been interested in restructuring the role definition of "teacher" to include the type of professional inquiry and decision making that characterizes the other professions.

A second influence on our work comes from people like Judith Warren Little (1982), Susan Rosenholtz (1989), and Terry Deal (1986). These scholars have traced the powerful connection between the culture of the schools and the quality of the student performance obtained at those schools. The importance of their work is that it paints new pictures and offers different paradigms than emerged from the top-down change models. Their work implies that schools which have a shared ethos, a shared culture, with a set of common beliefs and values which focus on student growth and development, are likely to be places where students will, in fact, learn more.

These two perspectives suggested to us that meaningful school development should come from enhancing the teaching role to include systemic inquiry and creating educational communities with shared cultural perspectives. Specifically, we came to believe that if our purpose was school development, it would be preferable to have *groups* of teachers collaborating on research projects focused on issues of joint concern. We speculated that in schools where every teacher was part of one or more action research teams, cooperatively looking at issues of teaching and learning that were of significant importance, then an effective schooling ethos would inevitably emerge.

The Training Process

The Project LEARN process was a mechanism to test this theoretical conception on school improvement. Our method has been to invite teams of teachers from individual school buildings to come for a series of training sessions that occur over a six month period. We begin in the fall, with two days of orientation to problem identification and the collection of data. All that is required at this point is that participants a) come in teams, b) come without an agenda, and c) come voluntarily.

On the first day, virtually all of our training focuses on answering the question, "What is it about teaching and learning in your classroom or school that falls within your sphere of influence and is of significant concern to you?" It is the teacher responses to those questions which becomes the basis for the research problem they will spend the year investigating. Frequently, participants are surprised that their administrators won't tell them what to do and what to research. As a result of our teacher directed process, the participants usually emerge with a research focus of serious personal concern. One tenent of Project LEARN is that administrators will not impose a project agenda on their teachers.

The second day of training begins with an acceptance of the participants' research focus, but with the additional question "How are you going to go about collecting data on this phenomena?" We then work with the participants on a variety of appropriate field research techniques. At the end of day two participants are sent back to their schools encouraged and (hopefully) empowered to do systematic inquiry into an issue of significant professional concern.

While nothing about this process up to this point seems particularly radical, the response of participants on workshop evaluations has been startling. It is not rare to have teachers say things like, "This is the first time I've been given permission to set my own agenda," and "Isn't it nice that someone is finally asking teachers what matters to them!" These reactions surprised us for two reasons. First, the project was initially serving teachers from some of the reputedly best school districts in Oregon and

Washington (by "better" we mean those districts that had the most generous history of supporting staff development). Secondly, the problems these teachers were choosing to work on were no different from the ones that would have been identified through other, less participatory, processes. Apparently Project LEARN's procedure for identifying ones own problem felt more empowering than had other techniques experienced by these teachers. Our "basic" training program concludes 3 months later with a day of training on data analysis, presentation and action planning. Throughout the first year of participation, teachers are also offered the opportunity to access a cadre of "critical friends." These are educators, generally from outside the school district, who are committed to the process of collaborative action research and who have offered to be available as consultants to teams with technical assistance needs. For example, a research team might become involved in an action research project and realize that they are not sure how to construct a valid survey. They could then call the project office and we would send out a "critical friend" to work with the team. The work of "critical friends" is governed by the following set of ethical guidelines:

- The critical friend will be chosen based upon the needs and desires of the project participants.
- The ciritcal friend will not hold a "stake" or "ownership" in the problem being addressed or in the outcome of the project unless such is granted by the participants.
- The cirtical friend is a positive friend, whose primary agenda is to assist the project toward success.
- The cricitcal friend may have a personal agenda complementary to the project's. The critical friend will share with the participants his/her motives/intents at the time of the first interaction.
- The critical friend is a visitor and only particpates at the continued invitation of the project.
- The critical friend will respond and act honestly at every juncture.

• It is the obligation of the critical friend to declare any conflict of interest or conflict of values with the project focus or methods.

• The critical friend will assume that the project's interactions, work, and findings are confidential unless the project directs otherwise.

• The participants are expected to assist the critical friend by fully informing him/her of all agendas prior to each consultation.

The key point of the ethical guidelines is that the team's problem, their action research project, must stay owned absolutely and completely by the practitioner-researchers. These guidelines ensure that the critical friend serves only as an outside consultant assisting the action researchers to pursue their issue.

Participants are expected to complete their projects within a school year, to make a professional presentation of their findings (preferably to colleagues within their school) and to make plans for the modification of their practice. To assist with these steps and to provide an incentive to participants, Project LEARN hosts the "International Symposium on Action Research" each April as a venue for research presentations.

Our Research

As mentioned earlier, the Project LEARN staff has been conducting action research on action research. We have found that conducting action research is like peeling away successive layers of an onion. As soon as we peel away one layer, and if we're not crying too much, we invariably discover another whole layer of complexity lying just underneath it. We began our work with a simple construction of what we thought would happen when we introduced collaborative action research into a school. Simply stated, we believed that collaboration on issues of professional concern would automatically create an ethos of collegiality and experimentation which would in turn foster improved student performance. But unfortunately as we peeled away each layer of the onion, we kept finding another set of questions.

Our first study (Sagor 1991) was based upon data obtained four months after our action research teams began their work. A survey was sent to every participant in our Fall training and two questions were asked:

1) "What is the status of your project, continuing, discontinued or on hold?"

2) "What do you believe are the most significant factors resulting in that status?"

We wanted to know, for example, if it was discontinued, what did the participants think most significantly led to its being discontinued. Likewise, if it was continuing and vital, what did the teachers think were the most significant factors keeping it that way. We analyzed results from all the schools with a 50% or better response rate which amounted to 2/3 (N=14) of the schools in the project.

It was interesting to note the factors that didn't seem to account for differences in project status. School size, district size, team size, level (elementary, middle or high), or district weren't predictive of continuation or abandonment. What was, however, more interesting were the factors that participants reported as influencing continuation or abandonment decisions. These data are reported in table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

This table reflects our coding of responses to the question, "What is it that caused the project to be in its current state?" When a supportive factor was cited, it was classified as an "enabler." If the factors mentioned were perceived as contributing to a breakdown of commitment, then the factor was classified as a "constrainer."

The chief factors that kept projects vital were threefold:

1) the ***nature of the project*** itself, its focus. People told us things like, "the reason our project is continuing is because it's so important." "This is what our school's all about." "It's tightly connected to our school's vision." 'It makes such a difference in

students' lives." In sum, we observed that when teachers felt that what they were looking at was important--those beliefs helped to sustain their inquiry.

2) The existence of ***external support***. If people felt that they were receiving support, often simply emotional support e.g., the recognition by colleagues and administrators that what they were doing was important, the projects continued. Also cited were numerous examples of tangible support such as release time, money, and secretarial help. In sum, where people felt they were supported, there was a greater likelihood their projects would be sustained.

3) The experience of ***collegiality***. Where teachers reported things like, "the reason our project is continuing is because these are the greatest people to work with." or "We have such a sharp team, my colleagues put so much pressure on me there's no way I wouldn't continue this project," their initiatives were likely to be continuing.

In sum, successful projects had three dimensions, intrinsic worth, collegiality, and support. When teachers worked together, on something they considered important, felt supported, and did it with people they respected, then the chances of maintenance were strong.

Although we had a much smaller sample of unsuccessful projects (N=4), providing a far less richer data set, the unsuccessful schools did provide an interesting contrast. When we analyzed the "constraining" factors cited by teachers from those schools, they were virtually the inverse of the enabling factors cited at the successful schools. For example, the "nature of the project;" teachers in abandoned projects said things like, "Well, with all the things we have to do, doing an action research project wasn't a high priority. There are many more important things for us to invest our time in." "This project wasn't that important, it was redundant with other things we were doing." They also mentioned lack of support with comments like, "We don't have time to work on our project." "We don't have the resources, etc..." Furthermore, they

mentioned the absence of collegiality with phrases like, "Our team was too fragmented," and "We don't work well together."

The sharp contrast of these responses raised the question: Why did some schools emerge with important topics, ample external support, and nurturing collegial groups, while others did not? It wasn't likely that this was a consequence of the training program, as all the participants attended the same training sessions with the same luncheons, the same refreshments, and the same trainers. They were all provided with the same explanations and had the opportunity to observe each other. Each team selected their own research topics based upon the same reflective interviewing process and no one had a topic imposed upon them. That being the case then, why did some groups generate topics of great importance while others coalesced around topics that they themselves would later declare as trivial? As mentioned earlier, the school district didn't appear to be a factor. For example, we had several teams from one district where all schools were granted equal amounts of substitute and release time. At one building teachers reported that the reason their project continued was because of the support the district provided. Yet at another school, from the same district, participants said things like, "There is no support to do this kind of work--there is no time." Why was it that when the support offered had been identical, it was perceived as being quite different?

That realization brought us to re-examine Susan Rosenholtz's work on the social organization of schools. She reported that the fundamental differences between "moving" and "stuck" schools were one ...

> "teachers' task autonomy and discretion--the sense that achievement work goals results directly from purposive actions, or teachers' feeling that their own intentional efforts cause positive changes to occur. The second condition deals with teachers' psychic rewards. If teachers' rewards do not outweigh their frustrations, particularly in their relationships with students, work tends to

lose its meaning and alienation increases dramatically. The final condition is learning opportunities, opportunities to increase one's talents and instructional strategies to better master one's environment, to repel professional stagnation, and to experience a sense of continuous progress and growth."

It now appeared to us that what was making the difference in whether action research took hold were elements of the pre-existing school culture. This finding discredited our earlier and overly simplistic view that introducing collaborative action research alone would create a a positive culture. Perhaps action research does help create culture, but culture also creates the conditions under which collaborative action research can flourish. Here again, we see how with the shedding of each layer of the onion issues tend to get more complex.

The consequence and power of pre-existing school cultures can be seen acutely in the comments in figure #1. "A Tale of Three High Schools." These are the words of teachers in response to the question, "Why is your project in its current state?" These three high schools all sent teams to Project LEARN training in the fall of 1989, where all three decided to research the same thing (causes of student success and student motivation). These three high schools present an important contrast.

Insert Figure 1 about here

At school #1 all of the participants reported that the project was continuing and explained it with comments like, "Our district is committed to restructuring," "this commitment is manifested by our getting release time to work on our action research project," and "Our group has a good chemistry and works well together." These teachers consistently reported that the work they were doing was important, was supported, and was being carried out by competent colleagues.

Contrast that view with the data from school #3 where the teachers told us they had discontinued the project. Even though these teachers had attended the same training, done so voluntarily, and came up with their own topic (free of any coercion) they discussed its abandonment in the following ways, "As a classroom teacher I simply do not have the time to do research and prepare to teach. Administrators can be very helpful in finding out what is happening in my classroom from another angle," "There's... not enough time to meet," and "Lack of leadership in this building--no vision." At school #3 it appears that these teachers are willing to delegate responsibility for developing the "knowledge that will inform their practice" to the administration who they are also willing to blame for their lack of vision.

At school #3 we received a split report. Half the people said their project was continuing and half said it had been discontinued. Some of the comments we heard from school #2 were, "It's continuing because of our desire to see the end result and our feeling of commitment to the project." "Because we have a committed and conscientious group," and "Because we have a capable and highly supportive critical friend at the district level." Yet other members of the same team told us that the project was floundering because "The size and the scope of the project is too large," "Some of us find that the time and energy of teaching is a full time job. This is a good reason why teachers can't do their own research," and "There is resentment on my part that I'm doing this job for nothing while administrators whose job it is to do this... take... the credit and then they usually sit on it."

Our experience with these three high schools led us to abandon the view that there was a simple linear relationship between collaborative action research and the creation of school culture. Instead it lead us to the development of a model we called "Collaborative Action Research as Cultural Turbo-Charger" (Sagor 1991). Figure #2 illustrates this model.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The "Turbo-Charger" model agrees with our earlier view that there is a relationship between action research, school culture and student performance, but it contends that pre-existing culture is a mediating factor. That stage of our action research on action research concluded with this claim" "Action Research will probably make no school worse. But it probably will only make certain schools better."

Fertile School Cultures

As we continued to peel away the layers of this onion we were driven to a new question: What was it about certain schools that made them more likely to be places where this type of teacher collaboration would have positive results?

Although we had been watching these schools for three years, our answers to the above question is still speculative. Nevertheless, a theoretical construct is beginning to emerge.

A key factor appears to be the issue of group attribution or "collective locus of control." Our research has begun to confirm the findings of Rosenholtz (1989) and Ashton and Webb (1986). Specifically, we found that where groups of teachers believe that they as a faculty can make a difference, they do, in fact, make a difference (Sagor and Curley 1991).

We found that in schools where student performance was improving, where teachers felt they were responsible for their students' success, and that teachers could make a difference in student learning, action research efforts tended to be long-lived. Conversely, in the schools where action research wasn't sustained, the teachers reported feeling relatively powerless. These teachers reported feeling that there was little they could do to improve education; not given their kids, given their administration, or given their circumstances.

The second factor which appeared to be critical was the dimension of leadership. Specifically, two particular features of the leadership role seemed relevant to project continuation. The first is fostering a vision. Not simply imposing a vision but rather the role that leadership can play in assisting a staff to coalesce around a vision that is both compelling and credible. The second feature that we've observed is that effective leaders are masters at creating cognitive dissonance for staff.

It is unlikely for behavior change to occur when things are going well (Guskey (1986). Openness to change occurs only when one sees a discrepancy between valued goals and present practices. When leaders sensitively surface these discrepancies and keep them in front of the faculty, they are creating cognitive dissonance, which can serve as an impetus for change. However, when dissonance is poorly managed, it can have adverse effects.

The Successful Management of Dissonance

Two schools in our study provide a good illustration of this distinction. The first is led by an administrator who really knows how to manage cognitive dissonance to foster school improvement. The other is administered by a principal who doesn't. Principal #1 works with a staff that had decided to pilot the implementation of mixed aged groupings of students. As one might imagine there were skeptics in the central office and there were vocal parents questioning whether multi-age grouping was a good idea. This principal took the class rosters from the multi-age classes and divided them by grade level. She then prepared side-by-side scattergrams of the achievement test scores of the two age cohorts for each room, placing the graphs directly on top of each other. Without any need for preaching the gospel, observers could see that it was myth, not reality, that was arguing against multi-age groupings. One saw that the performance range of typical third graders was approximately the same as with typical fourth graders. In fact, a substantial number of kids assigned to fourth grade classes were performing at the same level as the students assigned to the third grade, while

many third grade students were achieving at or above fourth grade level. The scattergrams revealed that the range of abilities in a typical fourth grade class was not significantly different from that experienced in a typical third grade class. The only significantly different issue was that the curriculum in schools with multi-age groupings are designed to accommodate this diversity rather than to support the myth of homogeneity. When the parents who had been advocating age segregated classes looked at this data they experienced dissonance. Their bias, that students should be grouped by age, was now challenged by objective data and that discrepant data created an openness for change.

Managing dissonance, does, however, require finesse. At another school we encountered chilling reports from teachers regarding a botched attempt to motivate through dissonance. This occurred at a high school that was conducting an action research project on factors that influence student success. The principal published a list of grades awarded by each teacher. He then put smiley faces by the names of the teachers who had only a few students receiving low grades and frowning faces by the teachers who gave large numbers of failing grades. From the comments we heard, it appeared that it would be many years before the teachers in that school will forgive and forget this insensitive effort at professional motivation. One teacher expressed the cynical view that "If he wants greater performance, fine, we'll give him greater performance. We'll just hand the kids "A's." In the hands of clumsey leadership, this well meaning effort at using data didn't create dissonance, it created anger!

School Culture

The cultural turbo charger model was based upon data we collected from teachers who were themselves involved in conducting action research. What we didn't take into account was the larger context of their schools. Because school context variables were now appearing to be critical to our perspective on school and teacher development, we wanted to delve into the larger cultural context of the school site. To

accomplish this we examined six schools were teachers had remained involved in our project for at least two years. While the action researchers may have only numbered a few teachers in the school, we suspected that there must be something about these sites that supported them in their pursuit of action research, otherwise why had those people continued participating after the initial training year? To find out about these schools we went on site and collected data from all faculty members on a written survey regarding 14 elements of a school culture. These elements were adapted from the work of Jonathan Saphier and Matthew King (1985) which argued that a set of 12 norms distinguished schools that were more successful than others.

The title of Saphier and King's article "Strong seeds grown in good cultures" provides a wonderful metaphor for our inquiry. Their metaphor suggests that if one puts a good seed in rich soil (good culture) one should expect to get a beautiful flower. However, if instead the seed is placed in sterile soil, absent necessary nutrients, then even the world's best "award winning Burpee seed" is unlikely to prosper.

In addition to the culture survey, we randomly interviewed teachers on those dimensions of collegial work that Judith Warren Little (1982) argued differentiated between schools where teachers feel enriched, successful, and growing. We also inquired about the administrative behaviors that Leithwood and Janzi (1990) noted in the work of principals in successful schools. Finally, we spent time shadowing the principals at each of these schools.

This data allowed us to peel down the onion one more layer and when we did what it showed was yet another layer of onion. What we discovered was a distinction between schools where culture was tight and where it was loose. At this point it is important to define "tight culture." Operationally, we define culture as a set of shared values and beliefs backed by consistent behavioral norms. For example, when we asked the staff of a school, "Are the goals in this school clear?" and 100% of that faculty said, "Yes, we have clear goals," while the other half responded, "We don't" then we concluded

that the culture was loose. The cultural profiles of the six schools in the sample reflected some sharp differences on cultural tightness. Three years after beginning their involvement with the project three of these schools continued to be actively involved with action research, while at the other schools these collaborative efforts had been abandoned or moved to the back burner.

In examining the data from these six cases a set of four mutually reinforcing relationships emerged as discriminating between the successful and unsuccessful schools (Figure 3). The application of leadership, the pervasiveness of an experimental ethic, the presence of high expectations, and the sharing focus appeared to be central to the cultural fabric of the schools where action research was sustained.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In trying to understand the relationship between these factors the concept of gestalt seemed helpful. None of the key factors worked or was experienced in isolation from the others. Each factor had a multiplier effect (either positively or negatively) on the other dimensions. We saw evidence and heard testimony that leadership influenced focus, expectations, and experimental behavior. Likewise, we were told that the experimental behavior of faculty had an impact on the performance of leadership, the emerging focus of the school and high self-imposed expectations.

To illustrate how this gestalt is experienced in a school, I will contrast two schools that differed markedly on these four dimensions.

Two Culturally Different Schools

We asked the faculty at Riverfront Elementary and Milltown High School to rate the following 14 norms (adapted from Saphier and King's 12) regarding their school.

1) Collegiality

2) Experimentation

3) High Expectations

4) Trust and Confidence

5) Tangible Support

6) Reaching Out to the Knowledge Base

7) Appreciation and Recognition

8) Caring, Celebration and Humor

9) Appreciation of Leadership

10) Clarity of School Goals

11) Protection of What's Important

12) Involvement in Decision Making

13) Traditions

14) Honest, Open Communication

The strength of each norm was rated by the respondents as *characteristic, occasionally characteristic, seldom characteristic* or *not characteristic.* The relative strength of the four key factors (experimental ethic, focus, high expectations, and leadership) were inferred from composites created from the ratings on the 14 cultural norms. 75% of the faculty had to agree that a quality was *characteristic* or *generally characteristic* for us to consider it normative for the school.

Experimental ethic.

Judith Warren Little (1982) found two norms to be crucial for school success: collegiality and experimentation. We combined the ratings on these two qualities to create a score for "experimental ethic."

Only 70% of the teachers in Milltown High rated their school as strong on collegiality. By contrast, at Riverfront Elementary 100% of the faculty considered collegiality normative.

The second portion of the "experimental ethic" composite was the norm of experimentation. On this dimension, 75% of the Milltown teachers thought

experimentation was at least occasionally characteristic of their school, while one out of every four teachers felt experimentation was not characteristic. Although we categorized this as normative, it appeared comparatively weak when compared to Riverfront, where 100% of the teachers reported that experimentation was characteristic of their school.

Acceptance of Leadership.

To construct a score on this factor we looked at two school norms: the degree to which teachers reported that "trust and confidence" and "appreciation of leadership" were characteristics of their school.

Regarding "trust and confidence" only 65% of the teachers at Milltown rated its presence positively, while at Riverfront 96% of the teachers said trust and confidence were descriptive features of their school.

Ratings on the "appreciation of leadership" were quite interesting. Both schools had similar histories. The principals at both schools were in their second year. Both chose to involve their staffs in action research at the outset of their tenure because they viewed "collaborative action research" as a means to fuel and energize a new school improvement agenda. Both told us they saw collaborative action research as a way to get teachers participating in setting a vision for improvement.

These similarities not withstanding, what we found at Milltown was again in sharp contrast to Riverfront. 67% of the Milltown teachers rated the norm of "appreciation of leadership" as characteristic, while a full third thought it was not. However, at Riverfront the faculty was unanimous in viewing "appreciation of leadership" as normative.

Focus.

Observers of organizational culture including Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982), Shien (1985), and Glickman (1990) have concurred that one of the most powerful influences on school performance is the phenomena of shared focus.

This was the most profound distinction betwen these schools. At Milltown, 80% of the faculty reported that their school often lacked clarity on its goals. At Riverfront, the entire faculty felt that goals were clear.

To create a composite score on focus we included another quality, what Saphier and King called "protecting what's important." This norm is closely aligned to "clarity of goals" since one has to know what their goals are in order to protect them. For this reason it came as no surprise that at Milltown only 25% of the faculty felt that their school protected what was important, while at Riverfront 95% of the faculty said that "protecting what was important" was a school characteristic.

High Expectations.

On the ratings of high expectations, we observed the same contrast. At Milltown, 60% of the respondents reported that high expectations were characteristic of their school, while at Riverfront, "high expectations" was considered normative by everyone.

Numerically, all four of these factors presented a sharp contrast between the schools. In addition, we utilized interviews and observational data for triangulation. Here again, the cultural dimensions of the two schools appeared to differ markedly. We kept encountering evidence that each of these four elements (experimental ethic, leadership, focus, expectations) built on each other to build momentum at Riverfront which made the school an exciting environment in which to work and learn. Yet at Milltown the culture was stifling for many teachers. The words of teachers at Milltown and Riverfront give graphic testimony to the contrast.

When asked *"What factors, strategies or structures influence collegial work at their schools?"* A Riverfront teacher responded,

"Personality, motivation and leadership. (Having) teachers who are comfortable with what they are doing, comfortable with their own skills. It comes from inside, from being told that you are doing a good job, (from evidence of) success of students..."

Another Riverfront teacher offered this explanation,

"The principal encourages and models collaboration. (We) do it in spite of huge class loads (and a) district that does not give us release days."

But at Milltown we heard a different story,

"The district offers (staff development). Some teachers seem to be out of the classroom more than in it. They have us going in so many different ways we are not doing anything well. Nothing is perfected. Every year means something new....I just go into my room and shut the door where I am doing some neat things."

Those same negative sentiments were echoed by another Milltown teacher who told us,

"They (the administration) want to use some of our release time, the little that we have...but it seems right now that there are so many things going on at this school, it is hard to know what you are doing...I'm not sure if there are any common threads running through any of these projects."

Even the "collaborative action researchers" from these two schools told radically different stories. When visiting with Riverfront's action research team (now two years into their project) we heard a consistent perspective. We were told,

Our "leadership allows for teamwork. The staff is secure with what they do and how well they do it so that makes it easier to share, easier to cooperate. We have planning meetings and committees, everyone is involved and everyone agrees." Another action researcher added,

"As long as we see success and student accomplishment, we'll keep at it (action research)."

At Milltown, even after two years of working together, the action researchers held a divided perspective. One said,

"Other schools have teachers who initiate changes, stay after school, we don't have that staff. Most of our restructuring comes from the top down." A colleague disagreed saying,

"Action Research last year resulted in the advisory class...the beginnings of sweeping changes....As a faculty we are struggling...some teachers are trying to make it bottom-up and this administration would relish that."

But that positive viewpoint was challenged by another member of the Milltown action research team who claimed,

"When we did initiate changes we didn't get supported at all!"

A third member summarized her perspective with,

"Well some of it is top-down, but I think that if a teacher takes something and runs with it, they will be supported. (The problems is) some teachers want to take leadership roles and others don't want to."

Our discussion ended with member of the team providing the last word,

"Teachers here can hardly keep their heads above water, 150 kids, paperwork, plus we are expected to participate in restructuring."

Now three years after commencing their work with Project LEARN, the contrast between these two schools is as great as it was when this data was first collected. With each successive year, Riverfront has trained more teachers on the collaborative action research process and now most of their staff has been through our training. Action research has become an integral part of their site-based leadership program and the results of their research influences each of their "district mandated" school improvement plans. Most importantly, measurable student performance at Riverfront has continued to show steady increases. Interestingly, the principal and the faculty credit the action research process as a key reason for their school's success.

Unfortunately, but predictably, the picture has been quite different at Milltown. The action research team there never expanded beyond the initial cadre and finally disbanded after year two. Many faculty members even reported being unaware of the existence of the project. Of those who were aware that "collaborative action research" was occurring, many perceived it as a mechanism being used by the principal to push his own agenda. The school's teacher advisory program which was an outgrowth of the first year of the project ultimately became the focus for significant staff divisivenessand was abandoned. Not surprisingly, multiple measures of student performance at Milltown have also exhibited a general downward trend.

Summary

The evidence from our three years of work is that collaborative action research can contribute meaningfully to the development of a school culture conducive to school improvement. It seems to strengthen many of the norms which make for a productive

school culture. It can contribute to increased teacher efficacy, a more productive collaborative work environment and consequently to enhanced student performance.

However, and in spite of all the positive things that collaborative action research has going for it, it is not a technology that seems to be able to sustain itself in a hostile environment. In unfocused school cultures where teachers do not feel supported, and where expectations for performance are low, collaborative action research will probably be seen as just another duty or obligation being placed upon teachers. Not surprisingly, in such an environment this innovation (as all others) can be expected to be short lived. It will take more than action research to turn a bad school environment around. However, where leaders provide enough support for group work, foster high expectations, and help staff members to coalesce around common goals, collaborative action research can become a significant factor in school improvement, professional development,and workplace enhancement.

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(Figure # 1)

SCHOOL #1

70101-Assistance by administration in central office.
70101 Available time to commit to project.
70101 Our district is committed to restructuring; this commitment is manifested in our getting release time to work on our Action Research project.
70201 and a good deal of encouragement from the administration.
70201-Administration support
70201 Administrative support
70201--Administrations willingness to give us time.
70201--the support from our administration.
70201 administrative concern and support which has encouraged our ownership of the question and desire to formulate an action plan.
70301-"Project Learn" fit well into our needs as a tool for school restructuring.
70301 We are working on restructuring and the plan fits right with our goal.
70301--Connection with other programs/projects (appropriate overlap).
70301--Focus question ties in closely with our school's restructuring effort.
70301 a clear vision or mission by the district for continued improvement through restructuring efforts, it links nicely with 21st century project.
70401 the importance and timeliness of our topic.
70501 Our project is continuing for several reasons, including these most important ones:--the drive of certain individuals in our group to keep it going.
70501--Determination of key members of project team.
70601 1.Rose. 2. Principal.
70701 The commitment by the district building principal to help facilitate the research process, providing release time and training.
70701 Staff support
70901-Our group has a good chemistry and

SCHOOL #2

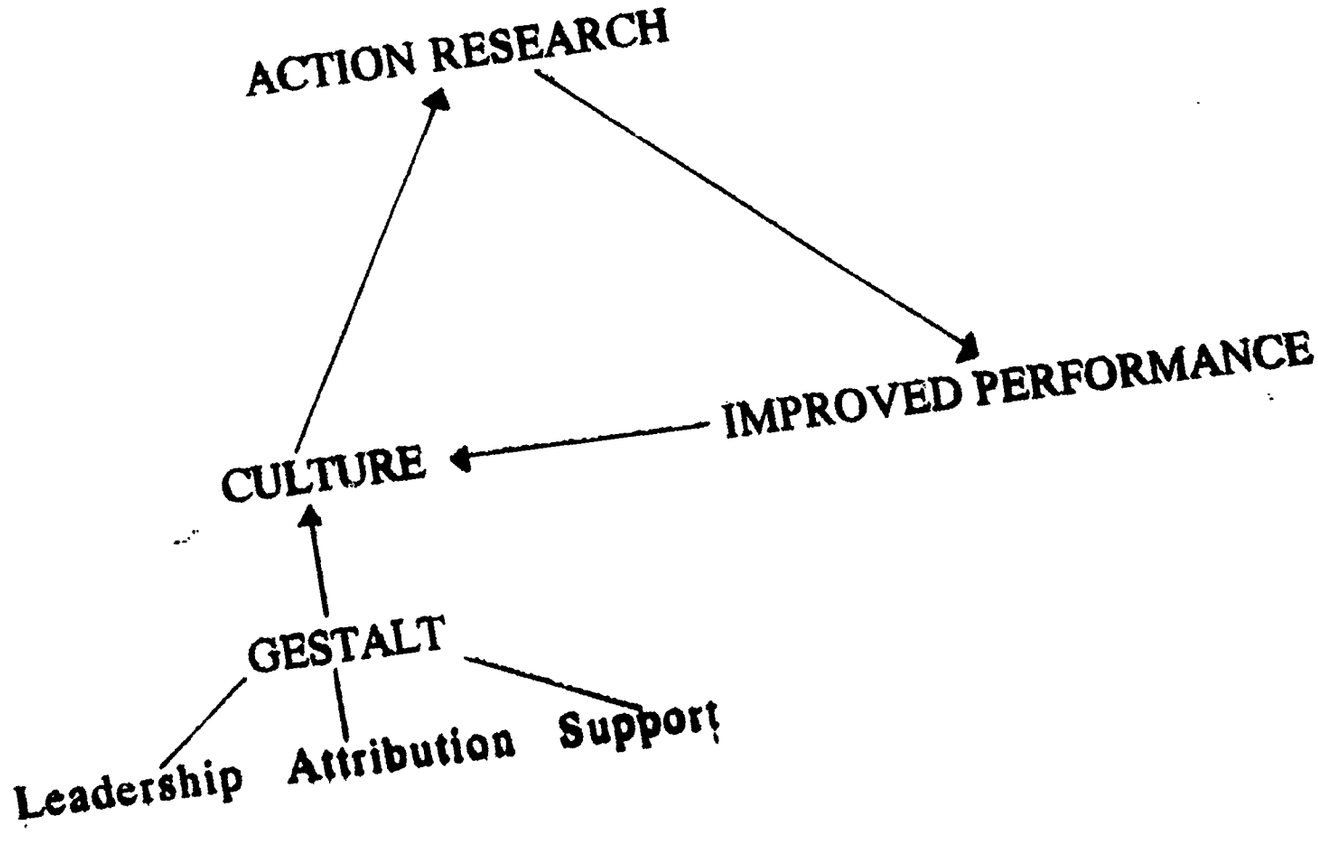
70106--A supportive district.
70206 and a principal who continues to get us together
70406--A worthy project.
70406 Earlier interest in students lack of performance.
70406 our desire to see the end result and our feeling of commitment to the project.
70406 the commitment to, and concern for, the problem we have defined by all the members of our team.
70506 A committed and conscientious group.
70506 individual teacher efforts
70806 we weren't backlogged with the tallying of all our data (presently being done by central office staff)
70806--A capable and highly supportive "critical friend" at the district level.
70806 and a significant helper who knows one hell of a lot about surveys and research
70806 Tremendous help from our critical helper.
70906--Good thinkers in the group.
71106. The fact that we were given quite long blocks of time to work as a team at the October meeting (and directions on how to work as a team) gave us a chance to reach a level of communication that was much more productive than where we were as a team when we started this project.
80206 The size and scope of the project is too large.
80206 We are currently waiting for the data from an extensive student survey which was our primary means of data gathering. I think we did not delimit our problem enough...we have this mountain of data. Therefore, our project seems to be "bogged down" in data gathering at this point.
80406 We chose a large survey which put the results and the potential change at a point in the future which seems very far away. This is particularly true of any impact in the classroom. So there has been some frustration because there seems to be such a long time between how and when we set results.
80506-Time and energy: Teaching is a full time job. This is a good reason why teachers don't do their own research.--Related to #2, this is another obligation, another committee related to improving teaching that I have taken on (this is just one of six curriculum committees I belong to--Burn Out)--There's a resentment

SCHOOL #3

70422--We continue to be interested in the topic we have chosen to explore. an interest in our research topic.
70422 our desire to find out more information. It has also given faculty a focus.
70622 The principal has taken the initiative to put our plan to work. the principal
71122 We have an interest in the concept of action research, and are most eager to pursue that interest.
71122 questions lead to more questions.
80122 Time needed to meet, to reflect, to generate more ideas.
80522 As a classroom teacher, I simply do not have the time to research and prepare and teach...Administrators can be very helpful in finding out what is happening in my classroom from another angle.
80622 More teachers need to be involved in identifying the areas of concern.
80922 More skill needed to create good questions and collect data.
81122 Questionnaire tended to alienate some staff members. We all could benefit from a "This is a good experiment. What the heck!" attitude.
81222 Lack of leadership--not enough time to meet. Lack of leadership in this building--"no vision"

Figure #4

ACTION RESEARCH AS CULTURAL TURBO CHARGER



(Figure #3)

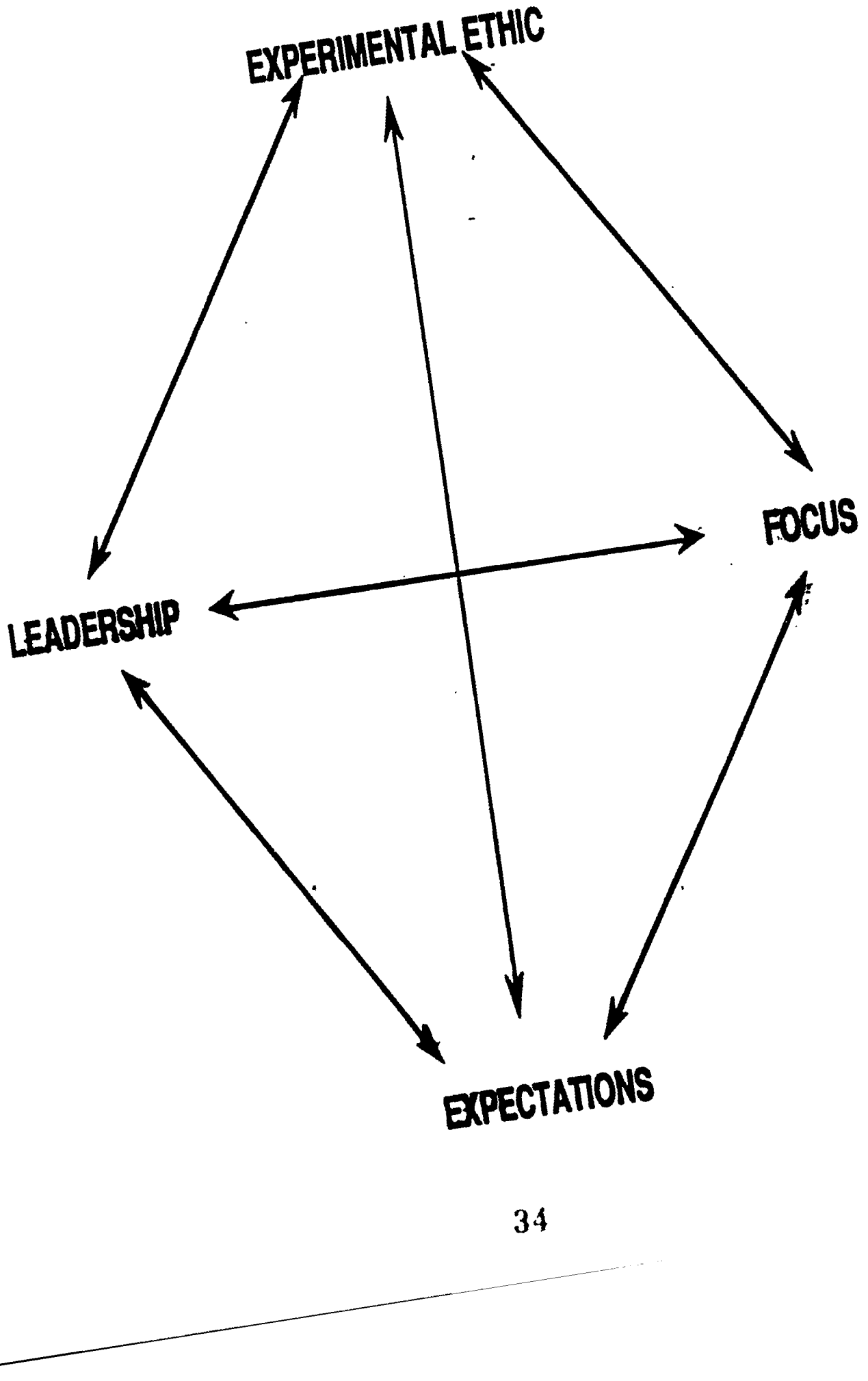


Table #1

ENABLERS

	TOTAL
Nature of Project	
*Importance/Interest in Topic	34/17
*Action Research Process	21/15
School Mission/Connectedness	11/6
Impact	2/2
Clear and Focused Goals	3/2
Support	
*Release Time	19/11
Administrative encouragement	18/9
Support	11/7
Critical Friends	7/4
Leadership	6/6
Collegial	
*Personal Drive/Commitment	19/13
*Nature of Team	21/12
Other:	
Pressure	5/4

CONSTRAINERS

Time	
Too busy	19/10
Too long term	3/2
Inability to meet	2/2
Nature of Project	
Redundant	6/3
Too wide a topic	4/3
Not urgent issue	2/2
Collegial	
Lack of leadership/teamwork	7/5
Lack of commitment/no buy in	7/6
Support	
Lack of resources	5/5

Numbers indicate (times mentioned/sites where mentioned)
*Cited in 50% or more of schools in sample