Leading a Collaborative Action Research Team

Guiding Questions

After reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the benefits of collaborative, school-wide action research?

- What is a community of practice?

- What is a professional learning community?

- How can technology be leveraged to develop a collaborative community?

- What are steps and considerations within the process of conducting collaborative action research?

- What role does the facilitator play within collaborative action research?

Chapter Aims and Goals

This chapter serves to move you beyond individual action research and introduces you to considerations necessary for expanding the action research process to become a collaborative effort. Within this process, you will be introduced to communities of practice, professional learning communities, and specific structures and processes that should be considered to increase the success of the collaborative effort. We also present strategies to leverage technology within the action research process to provide flexibility and alternate means of communication. The structure of the chapter deviates slightly from the CAPES framework, as there will be no specific implementation step that you will complete after reading about the tenets of professional learning communities and school-embedded development, primarily because these processes are context specific. However, we include resources to help you determine if your current setting contains

the necessary ingredients for collaborative or schoolwide action research and to help you plan what actions may be necessary to create the context for this to occur.
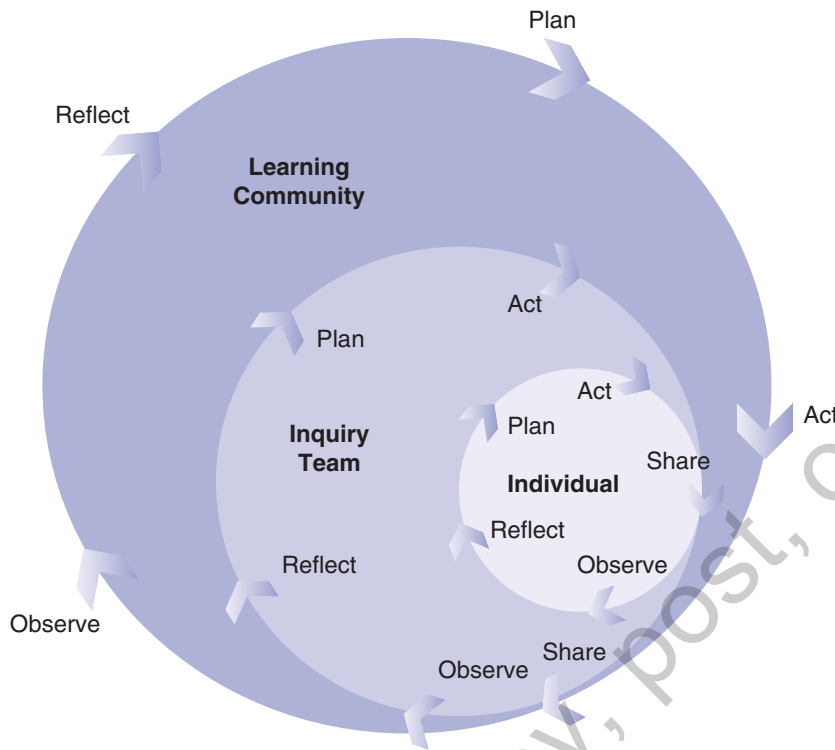
SETTING THE CONTEXT: ORGANIZING FOR COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

Teaching could be characterized as a solitary practice. We go to our classrooms, shut our doors, and go about the tasks associated with helping our students learn. Within the typical teaching schedule, there are few real opportunities to engage with our peers about our teaching practices or the strategies we are using to improve our students' learning, except perhaps through a quick conversation in the hall or teachers' workroom while making copies or preparing something to be used for a lesson. To some degree, the bulk of this text is built around this paradigm as we've helped you to develop the knowledge and skills to successfully conduct your own (individual) action research. However, to have the greatest impact on student learning, teachers "cannot work and learn entirely alone or in separate training courses after school" (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 25). It is now time to begin to think about how to build upon your experiences and extend the action research process to include peers and colleagues. Revisiting several figures introduced in previous chapters, we'll help you think about how to work directly with the people in the sphere that surrounds you (see Figure 9.1) and extend the action research process to

FIGURE 9.1   Audiences for Action Research

Professional Organizations/ Journals

School Leaders and Policymakers

Colleagues Within School/Course

Yourself

FIGURE 9.2   Collaborative Action Research Model

incorporate inquiry teams and learning communities (see Figure 9.2). As we move beyond individual planning for action research, we will begin to consider how teams of educational stakeholders (e.g., teachers, assistants, administrators, and counselors) can partner to engage in the iterative processes that define action research to develop curriculum or implement strategies aimed at improving student learning. Subsequently, through this collaborative activity, the number of students that can be impacted increases significantly, especially as successive iterations of the action research process are enacted.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

How could you connect the action research process to existing structures that support collaborative team efforts at your school?

BUILDING COMMUNITY

There is little doubt that relationships are an important factor within teaching. Our work is best accomplished when we build connections with our students, their parents, and the other adults in our building. This concept is emphasized in Westheimer's (1998) description of the characteristics of community, which encompasses "interaction and participation, interdependence, shared interests and beliefs, [and] concern for individual and minority views" (p. 12). Others (e.g., DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Lave

& Wenger, 1998) echo this idea as they note the importance of opportunities for teachers to engage in processes that incorporate collaboration and reflection as necessary to help teachers to consider new practices. If we seek to build communities of teachers and diminish the sense of isolationism that has been so prevalent in teaching, we need to consider ways for colleagues to interact and engage with each other on a regular basis around ideas, programs, or strategies that have personal relevance to the work completed in our classroom or school. To facilitate this process, we're going to explore the broader notion of community and some of the general tenets associated with community building to help frame the specific recommendations that occur later in the chapter.

We've met very few teachers during our careers that don't value collegiality with other teachers. Whether it is spending time reflecting about their craft, discussing ways they could deliver a better lesson, or simply providing support and understanding, teachers value cooperation and communication with each other, even if it is not often present in the typical day. If you've ever tried to deliver a professional development session to teachers, you quickly realize how much they like to communicate—we've found it's sometimes more difficult to get them to stop talking than the students they teach! Communication and collaboration are also important due to the many positive outcomes associated with relationships among teachers, including more effective decision making, higher levels of trust, improved teaching practices, and sustained professional learning (Barth, 1990; DuFour et al., 2010). The notion of cooperative professional learning, which involves teams of teachers working together to enhance their professional knowledge and skills, is a natural extension of the sense of collegiality teachers value. When we are able to collaborate in work that aligns closely to our teaching, we can focus on sharing expertise and practices, and subsequently, learning from each other. Furthermore, when there is a mutual sense of support, there is an overall positive climate that permeates throughout the school, from the teachers to the students and families.

Going a little deeper, as we consider the joint discussions that can occur within a collaborative environment, we can engage in shared decision making about the skills, strategies, or curriculum that could be targeted within an action research process. This kind of collective dialogue can produce a different kind of accountability and support. Instead of externally driven consequences, we receive supportive and enabling feedback that results from shared inquiry and practices that are publicly discussed among colleagues. Hargreaves (2003) wrote, "Sharing ideas and expertise, providing moral support when dealing with new and difficult challenges, discussing complex individual cases together—this is the essence of strong collegiality and the basis of effective professional communities" (p. 109).

When we focus on co-constructing knowledge within the processes of relationship building and dialogue with our colleagues, there is an increased opportunity to support the development of a community. According to Hargreaves (2003), "It is vital that teachers engage in action, inquiry, and problem solving together in collegial teams or professional learning communities" (p. 25). Others have utilized different terms to characterize groups coming together for collaborative professional growth, including *communities of learners* (Barth, 1990), *instructional communities of practice* (Supovitz, 2002), and *communities of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Regardless of the label, participation within a teacher learning community is one of the five primary propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002). Activities of the community include "engaging in various forms of scholarly inquiry and artistic activity, or forming study groups for teachers" (NBPTS, 2002, p. 19). In our experiences, we have

seen learning communities composed of grade-level teams, teachers of a particular content area, and even some that consist of all of the teachers at a school. For our purposes, we'll broadly define a **learning community** as a group of teachers, whether formally or informally organized, who wish to discuss and improve their practice. The teachers who are engaged in a learning community actively share information amongst the group, implement new ideas and strategies within their classroom, and then engage in conversations with other members about their experiences in an effort to share information as well as receive ongoing support.

■ ■ ■ VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Mary Olson, 12th-Grade Teacher

As a second-year teacher, I am constantly going to the other teachers on my team to ask questions about planning, the curriculum, my students, and a whole host of other things that seem to add to my daily challenges of teaching students who are already beginning to look beyond high school. I probably drive the rest of the teachers a bit crazy, but, truth be told, they always seem willing to help. Recently, I went to the lead teacher of the team to discuss what I saw as a lack of skill in reading and understanding complex text from my students. For some of my students, it's more of an unwillingness, but that is another story entirely. She mentioned that she had observed her students having similar difficulties, including limits on their ability to identify central ideas and use textual citations to support them. Given that two of the five team members were seeing similar trends, we decided to convene a team meeting to discuss the processes and strategies we were teaching students to use as they engaged with complex text.

As it turns out, four of the five us were struggling with this situation, while one teacher felt that what she had in place was working. A quick look at the data revealed that her students were doing better than the rest of ours. Rather than simply implement her strategies, though, the team lead thought it would be a good idea for each of us to observe in her classroom and then reconvene to discuss what we saw. Our plan was to use this discussion as a springboard into developing a plan that we could implement, which included not only what our instruction would look like, but what common assessments we could use to help us examine our data and how often we would examine this data. The general feeling was that a team-based approach would allow us to have additional, deliberate conversations about how we could prepare our students to be successful readers of complex text. We felt that the more we could work together, the greater the potential improvements across our students.

Given that our definition and description of *learning community* is a bit general, we've elected to briefly describe two "models" of learning communities to further help you work through the process of broadening the action research process: professional learning communities and communities of practice. We feel that various features associated with each one are very well aligned with the collaborative action research process. By describing these communities in greater detail, we think it will help build a foundation for the strategies and considerations that we share regarding the specific actions to be considered within this process as teams or communities of teachers are developed. We've included a number of resources about each that you can examine as you consider your developing knowledge about community or as you ponder suggestions we include in the chapter to guide your work.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In Chapter 1, we introduced information on professional learning communities. Take a minute to see if you remember exactly what these consist of or what their purpose is. Just in case, to refresh your memory, a **professional learning community** is "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 223). We also wrote that schools are increasingly turning to developing professional learning communities (PLCs) to create a collaborative, goal-driven atmosphere that is characterized by a focus on improved practices and increased student achievement. PLCs are aligned with the idea that learning is a social activity involving interactions among the participants within a specific setting. The latter is especially important, as multiple studies revealed that teachers seek sustained professional development focused on strategies that would be useful within their specific context of practice, for example, their classroom (Borko, 2004; Leask & Younie, 2001). Professional learning communities address these needs by bringing teachers in a school together to work collaboratively to engage in curriculum development or planning.

Within the development of a PLC, leaders and participants should maintain a focus on professional growth, cultivation of a culture of collaboration, and sustained attention directed toward results (DuFour et al., 2010). Similarly, Newmann & Associates (1996) suggested a PLC is characterized by

- development of shared values that are focused on school values and priorities;

- focus on student learning;

- ongoing reflective dialogue among teachers on curriculum, instruction, and learning;

- public sharing of teaching practices; and

- active focus on collaboration.

Combined, these traits can create a climate that leads toward the collective development of all professionals within a school. When emphasis is directed toward each of these elements within the activities associated with the PLC, the results simultaneously reflect both improvements in practice as well as demonstrated increases in student achievement.

In practice, we have seen the development of a PLC begin as an administrator, a team of teachers, or instructional specialist identified an area of challenge for students in a school. What follows is often dependent upon the individual leading the PLC as well as the context. Teachers can be asked to reflect upon their practices relative to this particular area, followed by a meeting where the staff begins a collaborative dialogue around their reflections. In this meeting, the focus can be directed toward determining new teaching methods or strategies and developing a plan to implement them to collectively address the challenge. Within the implementation process, participants engage in an ongoing discussion of the activities, including formative analysis of examples of student work to determine the effectiveness of the methods, and the teachers scaffold and support each other as necessary. Finally, as part of the overall focus on improving student achievement, the group considers the relationship between the methods and their effects

relative to learning. Similar to what we've presented about the action research process, PLCs involve recursive cycles of inquiry, yet this inquiry is conducted collaboratively (DuFour et al., 2010; Stoll et al., 2006).

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"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

What are some of the goals or objectives in your school's mission or school improvement plan? How could these be used to guide the action research process through the formation of a professional learning community?

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COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Another form of community that can be used to guide teacher-driven professional development is the community of practice, or CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A **community of practice** has been shown to create the collaborative conditions necessary to focus teachers on continued self-improvement, encourage teacher interaction, and facilitate change in teachers' behaviors (Bray, 2002). Unlike PLCs, CoPs are founded within the principle that learning often occurs in informally created groups that are focused on a particular topic or issue. Within the community, there is a sense of shared purpose and "an emphasis on group learning through intentional activity, collective reflection, and participatory decision-making" (Riel & Polin, 2004, p. 16).

While not adhering to a formal structure, participants in CoPs often develop identities based upon roles they adopt in support of the goals established by the group. These identities and roles scaffold the learning of others (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999). For example, a teacher experienced in using literature circles may mentor another teacher or small group of teachers implementing this strategy. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "CoP requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation" (p. 101). However, it is important to point out that although there is a need for individuals to be leaders or facilitators to organize work, all members, regardless of their role, help shape the agenda. The role of the leader is facilitative, and effective leaders within a CoP provide opportunities for others to take on this role as the purposes of the CoP evolve within the practices of continuous inquiry. Given the lack of formal structure, communities of practice offer greater flexibility to engage in inquiry without adopting a particular problem-solving process or sequence of organization. A flexible structure encourages discussions about courses of action and encourages the social activities necessary for continuous inquiry. In this regard, Wenger (1998) claims, "What matters is the interaction of the planned and the emergent—that is, the ability of teaching and learning to interact so as to become structuring resources for each other" (p. 266).

The inherent goals within a CoP are that learning and the community are sustained over an extended period of time. The group's purpose evolves, and it adapts the activities conducted as the context changes. The purpose, which is generally referred to as a joint enterprise, is the tie that binds the group together, as it is shared amongst the participants. A mutual sense of purpose and a greater ownership within the context of an

authentic activity legitimizes participation and therefore enhances meaningfulness (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). One challenge that we have noted in examining CoPs is maintaining a focus toward a collective goal, rather than simply individual or course-specific objectives and perspectives. It is easy to become wrapped up in your own day-to-day challenges and realities, and thus the processes and activities associated with the CoP need to be designed to encourage continual engagement, where members regularly interact about the purpose and agenda. In other words, consideration must be given toward the reasons members participate and contribute and the activities or practices that maximize membership and active participation. The capacity of the facilitator and group to respond to these fundamental questions will significantly impact the overall success of the CoP (Riel & Polin, 2004).

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

What similarities do you notice between the professional learning communities and communities of practice? What differences?

VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

We've highlighted two forms of community that are prevalent in the literature on the practice (see Figure 9.3), yet given the availability of technology and the increased access to peers and resources it provides, opportunities to engage in professional learning communities have expanded. The notion of "community" is no longer confined to a single location. Schools, teachers, and facilitators can leverage technology to provide anytime, anywhere connections that stretch across a district and beyond. The emphasis is still on mutual interests and needs, yet the flexibility inherent within the use of technology-facilitated communication allows the various benefits of PLCs and CoPs to be maintained (see Ajayi, 2009; Conrad, 2005). For example, two rural schools that are otherwise geographically isolated may be able to link toward addressing a problem that may be common to them, such as students' preparation for post-secondary schooling.

Ford, Branch, and Moore (2008) referred to technology-facilitated communities as **virtual professional learning communities** (VPLCs). Various forms of technology (see TECH Connections for additional examples) can be utilized to support collaborative learning among participants. This includes learning management systems (Blackboard, Schoology) or freely available Internet sites (e.g., wikis, Nings). Interactions can be characterized by text-based collaborations (e.g., wikis, blogs) or through video-conferencing (e.g., Skype, FaceTime). Each tool allows participants to overcome geographic barriers to engage with each other, and in some cases, the technology can function as a digital repository that allows teachers to collaboratively analyze student work, noting where success has been demonstrated and where additional efforts should be addressed. Given the regular interaction among colleagues necessary within the PLCs, social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) also represent an important medium. They not only provide space for communication but also broaden the potential for the discovery of new ideas through interactions with others outside the PLC.

TECH CONNECTIONS

Learning management systems: Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, Schoology, Edmodo

Text-based collaborative tools: Wikispaces, LocalWiki, Weebly, Edublog

Social networking tools: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Ning

Topic-specific professional social networks:

Classroom 2.0 (http://www.classroom20 .com)—Technology integration

Curriki (http://www.curriki.org)—General teaching

Educators PLN (http://www.edupln.com/?xg_ source=badge)—General teaching (but lots of technology)

English Companion Ning (http:// englishcompanion.ning.com)—English teachers

INFOhio Learning Commons (http:// learningcommons.infohio.org)—Technology

NCTE's Connected Community (http://ncte .connectedcommunity.org)—English/language arts, literacy

As you consider the use of VPLCs as an alternative to developing a site-based community, it's important to highlight one distinction between the various forms of text-based interactions. One form of interaction, referred to as synchronous, represents real-time communication, as would be the case in a face-to-face communication. For example, sending text messages might be considered a form of synchronous communication if the participants immediately type messages back and forth. The other type of communication, asynchronous, involves time delays between responses, as might be the case in e-mail. Participants in the latter are free from the time constraints of responding immediately. Each has its own benefits, yet Shotsberger (2000) notes that asynchronous communication lacks the capability to provide immediate support and may diminish the sense of community present in a group due to delays among responses. Others (see Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Zhu, 2006) would argue asynchronous interactions allow participants to access information on an ongoing basis and reflect upon it for a period of time before participation, resulting in more meaningful responses. We have used both forms of communication successfully, and, rather than belabor the arguments that accompany each, we've provided additional resources at the end of the chapter that can be used to learn more. This will allow you to form your own conclusions about which would be most effective for your purposes.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

Does your school utilize a learning management system? How could it be utilized to start a conversation about a particular topic with like-minded teachers in the school? Otherwise, how could a topic-specific professional social network be used to begin this conversation?

FIGURE 9.3 Characteristics of Collaborative Learning Communities

	Professional Learning Community	Community of Practice	Virtual Learning Community
Purpose	Formed to improve practices associated with a need identified by administrator, teacher, or teaching team; focus on collective inquiry or action research to impact student learning	Formed to investigate a shared interest in a particular topic or need identified by participants; focus on collaborative development for student learning	Formed to minimize time and spatial issues; focus varies by group (PLC or CoP)
Structure	More formal, goal directed, process oriented	Flexible, informal	Variable (dependent upon leader)
Leadership	Defined leader(s) or oversight	Distributed, informal	Facilitator(s)
Membership	Required; all participate in collective action and reflection within ongoing activities around particular need; roles defined by focus of inquiry	Voluntary; all participate in ongoing discussions; adopt specific roles based on area(s) of expertise within identified areas of focus	Variable; all participate in ongoing discussions and active reflection; roles vary by structure established by organizer
Communication	Face to face	Face to face	Electronic (synchronous, asynchronous)

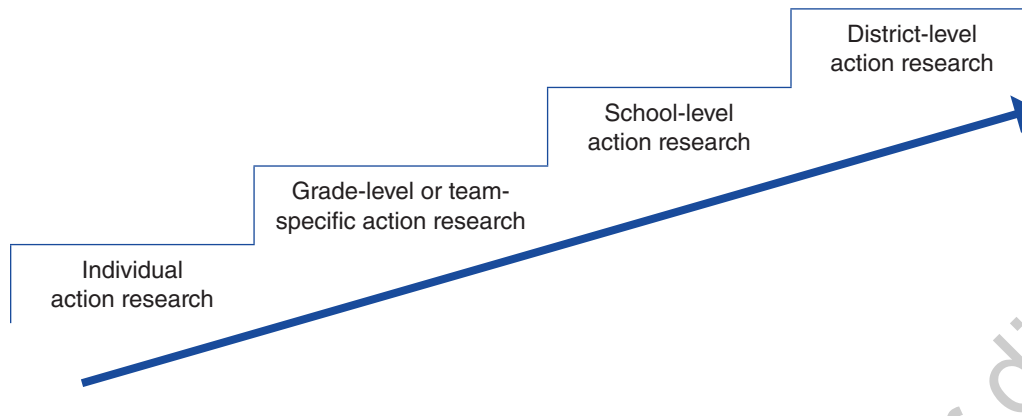## Taking Action: Collaborative Action Research

Considering the information presented thus far, the concepts associated with the various forms of community are consistent with Mills's (2011) expanded definition of *action research*, which encompasses "any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn" (p. 5). Within **collaborative action research**, there is an expansion from the individual teacher to a focus on the practice of multiple teachers, who may represent a grade level, content area, or all the teachers at the school or district (see Figure 9.4). Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) described the process this way:

> Participatory action research establishes self-critical communities of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process: the planning, the action, the observation and the reflection. It aims to build communities of people committed to enlightening themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation. (p. 35)

A variety of positive outcomes have been linked to collaborative action research, from changes in teaching practices and curriculum to renewed vigor toward the profession and related efforts (Phillips & Carr, 2006).

We elected to include the previous descriptions of professional learning communities and the community of practice, as they are well aligned with many of the principles and

District-level
action research

School-level
action research

Grade-level or team-
specific action research

Individual
action research

practices of collaborative action research. In each case, the process is likely to begin as a group of teachers engages in reflection and develops a set of common instructional goals to address an identified need within their practice. Our goal within this section is not necessarily to prescribe a specific process to complete collaborative research activities, as the primary steps do not change from those of individual action research. Instead, we would like to help you examine how the process of action research can be expanded to encompass additional participants, perhaps extending from the small teams to eventually include multiple schools or a district-level focus. To accomplish this, we will describe various factors you should consider as you seek to develop collaborative action research communities. Much of our discussion will focus on various facets of the process that must occur prior to starting the community; however, we will briefly describe additional aspects to think about during implementation and after completion of an iteration of the process.

BEGINNING THE CONVERSATION AND PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Leadership. Leadership is a vital component within any schoolwide endeavor, but especially within our vision of the collaborative action research process. In providing a series of suggestions for implementation of collaborative action research, Kemmis and McTaggart (1992) note the importance of organization, including establishing who will lead the process. We concur and advocate that one of the first steps you should complete within the organizational process should be directed toward identifying who will ultimately guide the process, a position we will reference as the "facilitator" for the remainder of the chapter. Given that you have likely just completed your own action research study, we feel you definitely have the necessary knowledge of action research to fulfill this role and coordinate the planning and implementation. However, we also note that you'll need to assess your own level of comfort with regard to the overall climate of the school as well as your ability to lead prior to taking on the role.

Should you decide that you are not completely comfortable leading the effort, our recommendation is that planning and implementation should occur under the guidance of an individual, such as a building administrator or respected teacher, or a small team of individuals from within the school. Thinking about the latter, you could partner with a

well-respected colleague in your school to engage in the process with you. Sometimes a lead teacher, such as a department head, is uniquely situated to fulfill these functions, as the individual is imbedded within a team and can provide encouragement within the context of practice. It is important that the individual or group of individuals ultimately selected is knowledgeable, not only about the proposed intervention and subsequent analysis but also about the school, including the climate, staff, and student population.

What makes the role of the facilitator challenging is that it is multifaceted and constantly evolving. Responsibilities will range from engaging teachers in the planning processes to providing general oversight of the activity, including maintaining the ongoing practices of reflection and modeling that are necessary as attempts are made to conduct the intervention. For this reason, the individual who is selected to serve as the facilitator must be an effective communicator who is able to consistently engage faculty in ongoing conversations about the activities or intervention. These conversations help establish what Reeves (2006) referred to as internal capacity, which is one factor necessary for successful school growth. The versatility of the facilitator is also necessitated by the fact that there is likely to be an ongoing need to adopt different roles, including coach, cheerleader, or mentor, to ensure others are taking an active role in the process. The facilitator must also possess the skills necessary to mediate attempts by teachers to try potentially new practices within the context of the activities. Finally, the facilitator should be able to communicate in a way that meets the agreed-upon norms that will be established by the group later in the process, periodically challenging members while maintaining a non-threatening, democratic environment.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

Who are some of the individuals that might be best suited to act as facilitators within your school or context? Begin to create a list of these individuals and think about ways that they could be introduced to the action research process or to information about the communities we described within the chapter.

Assessing the climate and inviting critical participants. Once the group or individual that will act as facilitator is identified, the next step involves examining the overall climate for conducting the action research as well as identifying and inviting key participants. Although Lave and Wenger (1998) noted that within a community of practice the participants self-organize, the climate at your school may have a significant impact on the ability to do this. For example, if there is a professional learning community present, there is already an organizational structure in place that may enable the group to quickly progress into the planning of the work. However, when this isn't the case, the individual that is designated as the facilitator will likely have to formally or informally assess the climate in your school to determine the most effective processes for engaging teachers and proceeding with the planning stages of the action research. Ultimately, there must be a balance maintained between the needs of your school and those of the individual participants, who may come from different grade levels and subject area designations.

Starting broadly, the facilitator should consider a variety of factors that encompass the climate, including notions of power (e.g., is there distributed or shared power, or is it held by administrator/experienced staff?), perceptions, beliefs, motivation of participants, and individual personalities. Each can have a significant effect on the participation within a collaborative action research study. Acknowledging that all participants within the context should have an active, equal voice in identifying specific areas of focus, Elliott (1991) argues the emphasis should be directed toward conditions that maximize the empowerment of the group as opposed to the individual. This is not always easy. Think about the personalities in your school—is there someone who likes to take charge in conversations or has a strong personality that easily overwhelms other teachers? If so, the facilitator will need to decide upon ways to maximize the potential for

- opportunities for all participants to engage in the discussions;

- processes for distributed, democratic decision making;

- methods for the development of shared goals and responsibility for meeting the goals; and

- mutual accountability. (Morrison, 1998)

When multiple elements in the list are absent, the facilitator will need to determine necessary courses of action to address them early within the planning process. This could include conversations among participants where facilitators define norms and expectations, establish roles and responsibilities for collaborative work, model substantive communication, and provide additional resources (Ross, 2011). You may find it helpful to begin the process with small groups of collaborators, but gradually widen the community to include more and more of those involved and affected by the process. This allows the group to build momentum toward democratic outcomes, while minimizing the likelihood of the participation of strong personalities because you control membership. The key is to work to involve those most directly associated with intervention in the examination of the climate, so that they share responsibility for the whole action research process.

■ ■ ■ VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Mortimer Emerson, Seventh-Grade Teacher

I volunteered to lead my team's effort to address what was becoming a common problem among our students—talking back and being disrespectful toward teachers. At the beginning of the year, this wasn't so pervasive as I think the students were adjusting to being in junior high. However, in our weekly meetings, we've all noted that what began as a problem with a few students has magnified and now it seems most students have to get a few words in when disciplined. We've always used an agreed-upon set of consequences for the grade level, but implementation has lacked consistency. I probably tend to be stricter than Ms. McIntyre, who teaches next door. She tends to let things slide a little more than I would be comfortable with.

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Recently, we held our first meeting to come up with a plan about how to address this situation. I decided to start the meeting with everyone sharing how we viewed the grade-level management plan and how we were using consequences in our classrooms. In these conversations, it became very clear that we needed to come to a better consensus about our expectations and how we reacted when students were disrespectful. Using this information, we began to look at what seemed to be working for each of us as well as what wasn't. During our discussion, Ms. Jackson, one of the more vocal members of the team, kept going back to having students compose a paragraph during recess or their free period about their action each time they talked back to one of us. Our discussion got a little tense as several members of the team (myself included) felt that this might cause the students to view writing as a punishment (most already don't like to write as it is). My focus was coming up with a plan that worked for all of us, and thus I had to keep referring back to establishing a group consensus as the lack of consistency seemed to be contributing toward the current situation. Ultimately, we developed a plan that all of us felt we could implement, including weekly meetings on Friday mornings to revisit successes and ongoing challenges. This included keeping track of the number of disrespectful comments each week. To acknowledge the solution proposed by Ms. Jackson, we agreed to develop a template that could be used to help students reflect on their actions, but that we would examine the data from our initial plan before implementing use of the template by everyone. Overall, I think everyone left our meeting ready to implement the plan as each had contributed to its development. However, I will have to make sure that I am regularly communicating with Ms. Jackson to maintain her continued buy-in given that she expressed the greatest reluctance toward the plan.

Once the climate has been examined and addressed, the facilitator begins to invite and confirm participation of key individuals. Within this prompting, the facilitator should seek to aid teachers in recognizing the importance of developing an intervention to effectively plan and implement instruction that develops students' skills and knowledge as described by curricular goals or student needs. Ownership and involvement are two important variables that influence the behaviors and attitudes of teachers, and thus providing information as to how the actions and interventions they determine to be important within the action research can benefit their students is tantamount. Failure to link teachers' perspectives or chosen activities to the intervention is likely to result in weak implementation.

On the other hand, it is critical that the facilitator realizes that teachers cannot be forced to participate. A variety of factors may influence this, including attitudes, beliefs about teaching and learning, and prior experiences. There is no set formula for obtaining participation, which is why it is beneficial for the facilitator to have established relationships with participants as well as to acknowledge the individual's position. In essence, the person selected as the facilitator must know the teachers well enough to best identify how to communicate with them in a way that will help them begin to think about the proposed action research. Our recommendations include providing relevant literature, scheduling opportunities for modeling by peers or experts, or facilitating the development of small, short-term outcomes that help the teacher(s) see progress and assess

continued participation. It is also important to realize what will not be helpful in gaining support and involvement. Compliance and participation cannot be forced. Doing so will most likely cause resistance and decrease the likelihood that engagement in the process or intervention will occur. Finally, in keeping all things in perspective, we'll be frank—not all teachers need to engage in the research initially. Participation for all is an important goal to help maintain morale and to promote the effort as collaborative, but it is not necessary from the outset. As the intervention proceeds, there may be additional opportunities to engage teachers who elected not to participate, especially as the intervention demonstrates an impact.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

Is there anyone that comes to mind that might be reluctant to participate in this process? How could you work with them directly or through the facilitator to help them see the benefits of engaging in collaborative action research?

PLANNING COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

Once the examination of the climate has occurred and you have gained enough participants for the action research process, it is time to begin the planning process. You are familiar with the process, as it is generally the same one used within your individual action research: an area of focus is selected, goals (or research questions) are established, and a plan is developed for implementation, including processes for data collection and analysis, and so on. Given your knowledge of the research process and the potential for you to share this knowledge with colleagues, we recommend directing your attention toward the conversations among teachers as opposed to the research plan itself. You will need a clear and explicit process for these conversations as well as established expectations for participation within the discussion, as these factors can significantly impact the steps and outcomes of the research. Expanding this to include multiple stakeholders, we recommend incorporating small and large group discussions focused upon jointly planning goals and activities as well as strategies directed toward the goals created during the process.

It has been demonstrated that teachers are not always comfortable challenging or critiquing one another due to a variety of factors, including the collegial relationships that have developed amongst them (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). This presents a potential barrier to your discussions and a truly collaborative effort if not addressed. Thus, we advocate taking time at the beginning of the planning process to establish norms for effective group and individual conversations. These norms will guide the interaction among group members to ensure a nonthreatening atmosphere and that professional courtesy is maintained. We encourage the establishment of the norms for participation by the group as part of a larger conversation to ensure all participants have a voice. In other words, a single individual or small group should not dictate how conversations occur. We've found that generating a list of key considerations and non-negotiable elements of communication is essential. As the elements and norms are established, the facilitator should address and model actions such as pausing (simply

waiting and thinking before speaking), paraphrasing (repeating other individual's words to ensure clarity and understanding), and probing (asking questions to clarify).

Once communicative norms have been established, the group can begin to identify and plan for the primary work that will occur within the action research process. If an area for focus has not been established, initial meetings could focus on identifying a challenge, area of improvement, or potential instructional innovation relevant to "normal" teaching situations that has widespread applicability across participants. The intent is to depart from the compulsion to focus on "quick solutions and immediate results" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 514), allowing teachers to reflect upon their daily work processes and identify steps necessary for enduring change. To maximize the potential for this to occur, it is essential to create consensus and allow the teachers to determine their professional needs or interests in relation to the school or system (Desimone, 2002). Depending upon the size of the group, the facilitator may elect to begin with large-group meetings that include breakout sessions for smaller teams. Initial tasks of the groups can focus on identifying the context for the research, the overall goals of the project, and the primary understandings to be gained. This may also include reconnaissance (e.g., a review of literature) to determine whether comparable examinations have been completed. If they have, the group's focus shifts to discovering the processes used and problems encountered. In this paradigm, teachers and school leaders, including the facilitator, can gather and discuss specific needs and concerns as well as organizational difficulties of implementation. Short- and long-term support and growth can be enhanced through these discussions, as they maximize momentum toward the creation of a community and shared vision. Collaboratively sharing their visions also ensures recognition by the participants that the entire group is responsible for ensuring success. Using the shared vision as a guide, the group can transition into developing a specific plan, which involves crafting the questions to be answered within the research process.

As with the process for individual action research, once the goals, objectives, and questions for the research are established, focus shifts to the methodology and research plan. The type of data to be collected, as you have already learned, is largely informed by the objectives; yet, it is important to consider there are potentially more data sources available, and there will certainly be significantly more data to analyze, especially if the work is conducted at the school level. It will be important not only to review the various data collection procedures that are available but also to consider the usefulness and significance of each form of data within the overall action research process and in relation to the question(s). Once the data sources are identified and methods of collection are documented, there should also be an ongoing discussion about who will monitor the data collection, how information will be transmitted to the group, including feedback about the processes, and how often the group will reconvene to discuss the data. Elliott (1991) identified the importance of the latter, as it "promotes a reflective conversation and is at the heart of any transformation of the professional culture" (p. 60). Regularly discussing data enables your group to reflect on the progress of the intervention toward the intended outcomes and provides opportunities for teachers to voice concerns or questions. As a result, small modifications can be made within the research process to address them accordingly.

The research plan is the guide for implementation of the action research. It should address each of the components identified to this point. We firmly believe that once an

agreed-upon process and organization are in place, it is important to document both the process and deliverables. To enable this, we advocate that you create an action chart and/or checklist to show who has responsibility for the various facets associated with the process (see Figures 9.5 and 9.6). In Chapter 7, we referred to this as a Steps to Action chart (see p. 164), and the overall areas of focus are similar, but this is used as an organization tool for the larger process as opposed to an organizer to plan the steps encompassed within the action plan you formulated based on your results.

FIGURE 9.5 Blank Action Chart

Primary Goals	Actions to Address Goals	Individuals Responsible for Actions	Consultations or Permissions Necessary	Data to Be Collected	Timeline for Implementation	Resources Necessary for Implementation

It is very important that roles are clarified within the plan, as, whenever possible, teachers should be able to utilize their own particular strengths in the research. For example, one teacher may have skills in assessment based on work conducted as a reading specialist or another may have a particular expertise in quantitative analysis given a background in mathematics. Another teacher may have a natural ability to engage in conversations and, therefore, could be a valuable asset for interviewing. On the other hand, there may be instances where training is needed to develop skills and knowledge of individuals who are taking on new or unfamiliar tasks. We recommend that the facilitator go beyond simply "knowing" this information and actually collect data to clarify and define the various participants' skills relative to the procedures that will be carried out within the research.

The facilitator plays an active role in each of these stages, helping teachers identify and establish goals that will guide later efforts and engage them in the sought-after changes in instructional practices. Based upon the readiness for change exhibited by teachers, the facilitator may need to concurrently spark debate, challenge long-held ideals, and regularly pose questions for consideration. The facilitator's role in the process may involve working with the group to help them adjust the scope of investigation, narrowing or broadening it as dictated by the group. Our recommendation to the facilitator is that discussions or meetings should be guided by an agenda whenever possible. When there is a concrete plan of action or series of steps to be addressed within the meeting, it has the potential to increase the level of efficiency and improve results. Regular communication of the objectives and purposes of the research by the facilitator is crucial, as a lack of understanding about what is to be accomplished and how it relates to goals will contribute toward a lack of progress or advancement toward the sought-after outcomes. The facilitator should also help the group continually reflect upon whether small modifications to the objectives or questions are necessary as information is continually examined and the assumptions underlying the action research become more defined and explicit.

FIGURE 9.6 Example of an Action Chart With Preliminary Details

Primary Goals	Actions to Address Goals	Individuals Responsible for Actions	Consultations or Permissions Necessary	Data to Be Collected	Timeline for Implementation	Resources Necessary for Implementation
Students will increase achievement scores in reading and language arts by 5%	• Analyze benchmark assessment results • Identify objectives • Identify students in need of assistance • Develop strategies to improve proficiency and growth on those low objectives by providing extra help opportunities • Create pacing guides to use for all courses that are turned in at the start of the school year	• Teachers • Specialists	Principal, team leads	Benchmark assessment scores	Ongoing, biweekly meetings	• Scores • Meeting spaces • Current pacing guides

IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

As teachers engage in deliberate attempts to implement the collaboratively established goals and plans of the intervention, the efforts should be characterized by the act–evaluate–reformulate cycle that characterizes action research (see Putman, Smith, & Cassady, 2009). As with many of the other steps completed so far, the facilitator is a vital participant in ensuring the plan is carried out effectively. The facilitator must especially demonstrate flexibility within the implementation phase, as different teachers may need varying levels of support, from simple encouragement to expert advice about the ongoing practices. The facilitator must also continually engage the teachers in ongoing dialogue within the iterations of the action research cycle. As individuals and groups come successively closer to the goal(s) identified at the outset of the process, there must be continual guidance within the process of evaluating and reformulating actions on a regular basis to help the teaching team stay on target.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

Which step do you see as most challenging within the act-evaluate-reformulate cycle? Why do you think this? What are some suggestions that you would make to the facilitator to address that particular challenge?

As we've mentioned previously, within the evaluation cycle examinations of data should occur within regularly scheduled meetings under the guidance of the facilitator. This ensures successful movement within the three phases. The teachers involved in the process must maintain active participation to ensure they are able to provide input on the modification of any goals, which preserves support for the process and allows examinations of whether the goals continued to be aligned with the targeted outcomes. Throughout the action research process, the group must concurrently consider teacher behaviors and student achievement, as both are relevant to continued progress toward the intended outcomes. Student data is likely to be readily accessible; however, the facilitator may need to consider informal observations amongst peers to note individual needs and progress within the process. Success should serve as a tool to create confidence in participating teachers. Furthermore, as the process continues, success could be leveraged to overcome the reluctance of those teachers who chose not to initially participate in the activities. Results may be just the prompt they need to join!

We've written about ongoing dialogue, action cycles, and observations as necessary with the collaborative action research process. However, it is also critical to note that teachers receive the opportunity to apply the proposed changes associated with the action research intervention in an environment that has very low or no anxiety associated with it. This may mean that the initial implementation cycles of the action research process are focused on small goals to enhance confidence and increase the likelihood that teachers will continue to engage in the interventions as student success is noted. These initial attempts can lead as a springboard into conversations and analyses that examine the successes and disappointments associated with the efforts. Effective leadership on the part of the facilitator can enhance the outcomes throughout the iterative processes of evaluating and reformulating goals and help the teaching team stay on target.

As mentioned previously, the facilitator may need to adopt a coaching or mentoring model to ensure consistency of implementation of the proposed intervention in individual classrooms. Within the model, the facilitator or a designee works with specific small groups over the course of time established for the intervention. Participants meet and are encouraged to share and reflect upon their practices. As relationships are established and comfort with practices increases, the facilitator can create opportunities for small-group members to begin observing each other teaching with the facilitator present. Once all team members are observed, the team reconvenes to provide feedback to each other based upon observations. Under the facilitator's guidance, the group then identifies strategies and methods for maintaining momentum toward the goals established within the research. As ongoing meetings occur, the relationships built enable conversations necessary to promote the sought-after behavioral change in teachers.

EXAMINING THE RESULTS AND PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ITERATION

Within the cycle of the action research, participants actively reflect on the results and use this reflection to plan the next iteration (Craig, 2009). While ongoing reflection helped inform practices, summative analysis can be utilized to better consider and understand the patterns and relationships that emerged within the action research. In this process, the group examines the data together and attempts to generate multiple interpretations of the results by actively generating as many different ways to connect and explain the data as possible. Looking at data from multiple angles may lead to a discovery of new information that can be used to develop new ways of responding and improving teaching practices as part of the next iteration. The facilitator can ask the group to consider questions such as the following:

- How do these patterns within the data reflect change as a result of . . .

- What might explain . . .

- What do these interactions tell you about . . .

- How does the data connect to current literature about . . .

- How does the data support implementation of . . .

- What additional data would address . . .

Generating and acknowledging multiple explanations or solutions may provide additional research possibilities for other groups of interested participants or strategies to use in various situations that occur later. As reflection provides the direction for the next action research process, it offers opportunities for more people to provide input regarding whether the individual acting in the role of a facilitator remains the same. Participants can take turns leading the efforts completed in various iterations of the action research. In fact, we encourage thinking critically about how best to develop the leadership capacity among the various participants in the research.

After discussing these various perspectives and arriving at conclusions, Stringer (2014) recommends "writing reports collaboratively" (p. 157) to ensure the multiple views can be maintained. We agree and reinforce the need to disseminate the results beyond those

that participated directly in the process, especially if there are individuals who did not participate out of choice or if you plan to expand the process to additional teachers or schools. According to Hacker (2013), this dissemination may influence this participation and can stimulate implementation of the intervention into practice. Chapter 7 introduced you to various considerations within your dissemination efforts, including multiple reporting formats, and thus revisiting the chapter as a group may be necessary to create the collaborative reports.

"NOTE"-ABLE THOUGHTS

How could you connect the action research process to existing structures that support collaborative team efforts at your school?

Developing the Product: Forming the Collaborative Action Research Team

You've now moved from considering action research as a process that you complete individually in your classroom to one that can involve multiple stakeholders that share similar needs or interests. Peterson (1992) wrote, "When community exists, learning is strengthened—everyone is smarter, more ambitious, and productive." Creating a collaborative action research community can enable teachers to view teaching and learning in new ways and play an instrumental role in improving student outcomes. Given that the context for collaborative action research plays a significant role in the potential for success and that we lack a prescriptive process for carrying it out (beyond the general action research formula), we've structured the "Note"-able Thoughts to help you consider some of the common situations and factors that will likely need to be addressed. With the knowledge you've gained throughout the process of reading this book, we're confident that you can play a vital role in helping to create the climate for successful collaborative action research to occur in your context of practice. Take the first steps in the process by bringing together your colleagues and having those initial conversations about how the team can work together to start investigating a topic of interest. We leave you with the strong encouragement to now go and be the change agent within your classroom or school!

Summary

In this chapter, we described the importance of rethinking the solitary nature of teaching, in general, and within the action research process. You were introduced to professional learning communities and communities of practice to help you develop conclusions regarding the importance of collaboration as well as to help you begin to formulate ways to bring teachers together. The notion of community can be extended with various technological innovations that are readily available, and we provided various tools that may assist in the process. Planning collaborative research involves considering more than simply bringing people together directly or virtually, however. Teachers and instructional

leaders who wish to create opportunities to work together must engage in thoughtful planning that involves many of the steps described within the individual action research process; yet, a great deal of focus must be placed on identifying a leader or group of committed individuals who will act as facilitators in the process. The facilitator plays a vital role throughout the process, from planning through reporting, considering the climate, personnel, and process for completing the action research. Engagement, involvement, and empowerment are three key pieces of the process that will be critical in achieving the ultimate goals of the action research process: improvement in practices and increased student learning.

Key Terms

Case in Point: Developing a Collaborative Action Research Study

As we've noted multiple times in the chapter, developing a plan to conduct collaborative action research is context specific. Different teams or schools will have different needs, and thus it's difficult to establish a one-size-fits-all formula for implementation. For the Case in Point example in this chapter, we are going to deviate slightly from the elementary and secondary teacher examples that we've presented in our previous chapters. Instead, we will focus on providing a description of the preliminary considerations and steps taken in one school to engage in a collaborative action research project focused on decreasing management issues at the school. In this case, the staff, teachers, and administrators had noticed an abundance of discipline referrals at common times and in specific areas in the school (e.g., hallways during dismissal) and wanted to address the situation.

One School's Journey: Preliminary Steps in Developing the Collaborative Plan

Given the context of the management issues, the two administrators at the school, Dr. Milkens and Mr. Roos, spent several weeks gathering data from referral forms, observing, and talking to teachers and staff. What they found confirmed suspicions: common situations and locations were problematic, including arrival and dismissal times, and areas such as the hallway, the gym, and the cafeteria. An initial meeting with the staff was held by the administrators to present the gathered data. It produced a consensus that a plan needed to be developed and implemented and that data needed to be continually collected to examine the impact of the plan.

Rather than dictate specific actions, Dr. Milkens felt that the intervention plan should be developed by the teachers, as they would be the ones who would be most responsible for carrying it out. Wanting direct engagement of the staff, she deliberately selected two teachers whom she felt would be capable of leading the efforts to create and provide oversight of the eventual plan. The first teacher, Ms. Boston, had been at the school for 14 years. She was well respected by everyone in the school and was widely known for her commitment to her students. Teachers were willing to go to Ms. Boston for advice and recommendations on a variety of topics, as she would listen closely and provide honest feedback or

suggestions. Her colleagues trusted her and knew that she would ultimately opt for the best course of action based on evidence, regardless of whether it was counter to what she wanted or believed. The second teacher, Mr. Tobin, was only in his third year at the school, but he had previously worked for four years in another school in the district. At his other school, Mr. Tobin had been involved in a professional learning community focused on classroom management and had been on a team that developed a school code and set of behavioral guidelines, and thus he was seen as a resident expert on management. Mr. Tobin's classes were also consistently cited as some of the best performing in the school, both academically and behaviorally, reinforcing his standing.

After an initial meeting with Dr. Milkens, Ms. Boston and Mr. Tobin decided that they were going to recommend the creation of a schoolwide management program that included specific plans and procedures for the areas in the school and times of day that appeared to be the most problematic. The goal of the plan was to diminish the number of discipline referrals during those times and in those locations. Both Ms. Boston and Mr. Tobin agreed that it would be necessary to involve their colleagues right from the beginning to create the buy-in necessary to ensure consistent implementation of the program by teachers, staff, and administrators. Given the necessity of gathering data for any intervention, the facilitators also wanted the teachers and staff to discuss various forms of data that could be collected, considering what would be meaningful to the school as well as manageable in the day-to-day activities associated with teaching.

In the first meeting with their colleagues, Ms. Boston and Mr. Tobin reviewed the data that had been gathered to re-establish the context for the necessity of the intervention that would be developed. They also presented the tentative plan of forming schoolwide procedures. In breakout groups composed of grade-level teams, the teachers were asked to discuss the data and the potential for schoolwide procedures, acknowledging that all teachers would be asked to adhere to the plan that was developed. The facilitators then used the jigsaw approach and shifted the groups to multigrade-level teams to discuss the same topics, sharing information from the original grade-level groups. The whole group reconvened, and Ms. Boston and Mr. Tobin facilitated a conversation across the group. Within this setting, several teachers expressed concern that the schoolwide procedures would supersede what they currently had in place. While acknowledging this position, the facilitators noted that the group should look at successful practices to determine if they could be used as a potential model for procedures that would be implemented at the school level. The initial meeting ended with Ms. Boston and Mr. Tobin agreeing to examine all of the information that was compiled, and to disseminate it to the teachers and staff.

Over the course of several meetings, the facilitators helped refine and shape a vision for the schoolwide procedures, introducing literature and information gathered from other schools to provide additional foundational knowledge for the process. What began as a focus on simply creating procedures for specific areas of the school and times of day gradually shifted into a set of behavioral expectations directed toward all areas of the school that would be used throughout the day. While this didn't match the original idea of the facilitators, they were able to leverage the buy-in from the teachers to create something that was actually more encompassing than the original intent. The teachers and staff came together and developed a plan that included, among other aspects, specifically teaching expectations to their classes, weekly references to a designated expectation over the announcements with reinforcement of the expectation by teachers in their classrooms, and a system of consequences and positive reinforcement. The expectations were also to be posted throughout the school, especially in the identified areas, and in every classroom. Enforcement was distributed throughout the teachers and staff, as was the newly established focus on positive reinforcement. In the latter system, teachers and staff

could give students tickets for good behavior that could be accumulated and used toward purchases from the school spirit store or entered into a weekly and monthly drawing for various items.

More challenging for the facilitators were the conversations around the data collection necessary to verify the success of the intervention. Many of the teachers felt that the number of discipline referrals and positive reinforcement tickets were all that was necessary to determine success. However, while the facilitators agreed that these were acceptable measures, Ms. Boston showed her colleagues that these were insufficient in their current form, as there was no information regarding the location where the referral or ticket were issued and, though the time of day was listed, it was often left blank. The facilitators also felt they should have some form of data from the teachers, either interview or survey data, to determine whether the teachers were teaching and reinforcing the expectations in their classrooms. They also wanted to access the teachers' and staff members' perceptions regarding whether the intervention was successful. The position of the facilitators was supported by the administrators. This created tension, as there was some interpretation that the proposed methods would be a way to track teachers' actions. In the end, compromises were struck: the forms were revised to include location and the teachers agreed to fill in the time, and the teachers and staff agreed to complete biweekly surveys for the first eight weeks of the intervention. The plan also included the provision that at the end of the four weeks, the facilitators and teachers would discuss formative data and whether modifications needed to be made, based on the teachers' experiences and an initial analysis of the data. At the end of eight weeks, all teachers and staff would gather to examine compiled data, considering emerging patterns and what additional data might be necessary to assess the success of the intervention on changing students' behavior. With a plan in place, the staff and teachers began implementation of the intervention.

Activities and Additional Resources

1. A colleague comes to you with an idea for a collaborative, schoolwide action research study. She wants you and your colleagues to examine ways to introduce the use of science journals to improve conceptual understanding about the phases of the moon. Assess the viability of this suggestion. What information would you need to accurately assess whether the topic lends itself to collaborative action research? What are the first steps in the process of developing the group that will conduct the research?

2. Gather a group of peers and develop a list of potential topics for collaborative action research. Choose one from the list and use Figure 9.5 to develop a tentative plan of how the research to address the topic could be collaboratively conducted.

3. You've engaged a group of teachers in examining topics that may lend themselves to the collaborative action research process. However, there is one teacher in particular who continually disagrees or challenges the rest of the group that there is a need for an emphasis on the identified areas. Discuss how you might handle this situation and what actions might be necessary to move forward within the action research process.

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Student Study Site

- Take the practice quiz.
- Review key terms with eFlashcards.
- Explore topics with video and multimedia.

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