Into the Center of the Curriculum

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The "Are Two Heads Better Than One Action Research Project" at www.davidvl.org

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Background

As the Lance studies began to demonstrate the link between school library media programs and achievement, the news spread like wildfire throughout the school library community because it was a refreshing piece of good news to be broacast far and wide. And, school library media specialists did just that. The broadcast the news. In some quarters, the link was believed. In others, it was received by local administrators as good news for Alaska or Pennsylvania, or New Mexico…but in our state, in our schools, did the findings really apply.

Some principals who noticed a very traditional program in their school libraries where the facility was ignored by students and teachers had real reason to question whether the investment in their school library was producing anything of value. Reports from many of my students at San Jose State University indicated that a sizeable amount of doubt and obvious lack of enthusiasm demonstrated that something more thank state and national research evidence was needed.

But how should that evidence be collected and disseminated? Frankly, in my travels, school librarians were quick to furnish data about the inputs to their programs including budgets, size of LMC staff, size of facilities and conditions in general. They also could supply data from the emerging availability of their automated systems, but few other data or research about the impact of their efforts to make a difference.

For many years, I have felt, written about, and "preached" that collaborative planning between the library media specialist and the teacher was at the core of making a differnce in achievement. It has been a hard sell. However, the reports of those who took this advice from me and did major experimentation in their own programs was overwhelmingly positive. In other words, when it did happen, it worked.

During the years of the Library Power Project funded by the Dewitt Wallace Reader's Digest fund, I personally traveled to every library power site working to develop collaboration and the reporting of that collaborative experience as a part of the evidence that the national evaluationon team, of which I was a part, was looking for. That large-scale test demonstrated that major headway could be made in the transformation of library media programs from bystanders into the heart of the curriculum of the school.

The major problem was, that Library Power lasted only three years. It was not long enough to get collaboration institutionalized in all the districtus in all the participating schools. However, one can interview those who participated in Library Power and still see remnants of the collaborative spirit that developed at that time.

One of the major effects of NCLB has been to lock down the classroom even more than it has been in the past. Teachers have been told to shut their doors, get control, and teach a lock-step curriculum to guarantee that scores would rise. Many library media speciaiists across the country report that teachers no no longer have time for "library." Such reports seem to say: We have to do what is central and the library is not that central in our teaching. The idea that the library might take away from the central elements of teaching and learning anger no only me but every colleague I talk with.

It is quite certain, that the bird unit practices so common in libraries around the country were and still are zeros when contributing to learning, so I have been banning bird uiits across this country and even internationally every time I could snare an opportunity. If a teacher does only bird units in the LMC, then it is wise to cancel library visits because they are not contributing. That may be a bitter pill, but one that must be faced.

Another strong argument has been that: If I go to the library and we do have a great experience, it talkes too much time and as a teacher I must cover a prescribed amount of content. So, while I love you, librarian, and we have a great time together, I just have to retreat to my classroom and stuff stuff in these kid's heads. No matter that the scores in this country are not rising at the expected rate. The scores would rise if these teachers would put more pressure on skill, drill, and kill. One wonders how long this terrible phase in American education will last.

I reply to such nonsensical arguments by saying: You mean, that given a unit of instruction that can only last from Monday to Friday is better off in the classroom alone with one adult than if two adults were working together for that same amount of time in the library? You have to be kidding! That makes no sense. You mean that you take kids who can't understand the textbook and are bored with the lecture from that environment to the information-rich environment of the library and things are not going to get better? Well, you are right if what happens in the library is a bird unit – a wholesale of copying of facts from one place to the other followed by deadly PowerPoints.

The argument has been: Well, I would rather have them come to the library and do bird units than not come at all. I reply, I'd rather they did not come at all. There is just too much pressure to achieve and the library just cannot be party to activities that retard learning. Those is fightin' words to many.

So, I am now giving the following advice:

1. Cancel all bird units from the library.
2. Ask the teacher who wants to come: How much time do we have for this topic?
3. Then, within that time frame, as two adults, make each library experience a fantastic learning experience.
4. And, collect the evidence that kids learned more in that experience that could possibly have learned had they stayed bac in the classroom.

I am most interested in evidence coming to the principal in such a stream that at school board meetings, at principals meetings, when talking with parents, when writing in the literature that every principal could say: The best learning in the school happens in the library!

Is that unreasonable? Is this just a pipe dream that I, along with other ivory tower school library professors have dreamed up and just used as a stick to beat people over the head and make them feel guilty?

Well, there is my rant. There are a thousand excuses why the best learing does not and cannot happen. I try; I try to ignore most of them and say: Why not?

Well, Loertscher, if you expect people to be able to demonstrate that learning in the library with two adults at the helm is better than classroom only learning, then you had better have a plan to show it. Don't just tell us; show us.

Thus was born the action research project, Are Two Heads Better Than One?

During the Fall semester of 2006, I was granted a faculty research grant from San Jose State University to carry out this action research plan. So, in the spring semester of 2007 I had a course release to do so.

I designed the action research project and then tried to beg, plead, and encourage folks to participate. It has not been easy. Many of our professionals in the field are just not accustomed to examining learning at the learner level. They know how many books they circulatate. They don't know how many are read. They know how many information literacy lessons they teach, but thoey don't know how much the kids learn. Some express the idea that they are too busy teaching the next class and have no time to follow up on the previous one. My question is: If I don't know how effective I am, why do I keep doing what I am doing? The geranium on the window sill just died, but the teacher went right on. Professor Binns of Harry Potter fame died one day, but he just kept on lecturing. Why do I remain a prisoner of what I may suspect is incompetence? Those are tough questions for any of us to face.

Enough of that.

Methodology

In the action research, I have tried to make it as simple and as time efficient as possible. Here is the method.

1. Before the collaboration, the teacher takes out a class list and predicts how each student would usually do on a unit in the classroom when they are alone. Does Juan or Maria or Girard usually excel, meet, or exceed unit objectives?
2. The teacher puts that list away.
3. The collaborative unit happens. Both the teacher and the library media specialist team teach the unit in the library. They plan the unit together; they teach the unit together; they assess the learning together.
4. The teacher pulls out the prediction sheet and sits down with the library media specialist to fae the music. How did Juan, Maria, and Girard actually do? Who did better? Who did worse? Why? What could we do better next time to get a better result?

Is that too hard? Does that expect too much? Could a principal expect a report about this? What would the likely results be? How many units like this could each library media specialist be expected to report? I would be happy if they reported one such experience and build from there. And if we don't, I fear for our role, our jobs, and the existence of school libraries in this nation. It is as simple as that. Simplistic? Well, the trend in hiring clerks instead of professionals is ringing very loudly across this land.

Results

Participants were and are encouraged to write a few paragraphs about their action research projects. They can report them to David Leortscher at reader.david@gmail.com or, they can actually post them on theaction research wiki at davidvl.org.

A few reports are "ready to read." Others have been promised.

I am reprinting several here as examples.

Our Elementary School Research Project Together
Sally Daniels
Currently working at Cicero-North Syracuse High School
Formerly at Cicero Elementary School Cicero, New York
(last year when this took place)
Reprinted from: Action Research on www.avidvl.org
(ed. Note: This was a longer than expected report but welcome)

Each year my school district requires teachers to identify and work on specific professional development goals. During the 2005-2006 school year I identified assessment as the area I wanted to work on. For several years I had been wondering if the students were really getting what I was teaching and I came to realize that assessment was the piecethat I was missing in most of my lessons.

I spent a great deal of time reading and learning about assessment during the year, so when it came time to do the 4th grade research papers in the spring I was ready. I had worked closely with one 4th grade teacher in the past and decided to pilot my assessment piece with her class. We got together to schedule the lessons in the library and I asked her if she would be interested in including more higher level thinking skills in the assignment and adding some assessment pieces. She wanted students to research a famous New York State person. We developed an assignment that centered on the essential question "What was the person"s contribution to his/her community, state, country, or world." Students had to tell how experiences in their person's childhood, education and work impacted their person's contribution.

I used two tools to assess what the students were learning during this research assignment. One was a rubric that we developed based on an idea from Violet Harada and Joan Yoshina's book Librarians and Teachers as Partners: Assessing Learning. Students knew that I was going to grade their notes on four criteria: Accurate and complete; related to my topic; meaningful to the student and well organized. The second assessment was a three part reflection sheet that I found on the CISSL website: http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~tgera/new_cissl/research/imls/

This reflection sheet was given to students at the beginning of the research, during the middle of the research, and at the end of the research.

After an introduction to the project and the research process students were given the first sheet to fill out. The questions asked students to tell what they already knew about their topic, how interested they were in the topic, what they find easy about doing research and what they find hard about doing research. Most students knew something about the person they were researching and were interested in them. Students thought that reading and finding information was easy and that taking notes and understanding the questions was difficult.

The second reflection sheet asked the same questions in relation to what they knew now. Most still felt that finding and reading information was easy but it was hard to figure out good information to put down in their notes. I started noticing some higher level thinking with some of their responses.

The third reflection sheet was given after completing the research paper and asked them to answer the same questions again by thinking back on their research. It also included a final question: What did you learn in doing this research project? Please list as many things as you like. Some of the responses were:
* How to take notes

- I learned how to correctly do a research report
- I learned how to research things, how to look up things, and how to have an organized research.
- The process of making a research report is harder than it seems, and it takes a long time to make.
- I learned how to do research so it wasn't so hard.

When I finished reading their reports and marking their notes I called the teacher and asked if I could come right down and speak to her class. They looked at me kind of nervously as I walked to the front of the class with the packet of their papers. I began by asking how they thought they did on their papers, did they learn about their New York State person, did they learn the steps of the research process, and how do they feel about their final report. Then I told them they should feel very proud of themselves and what they accomplished. We asked you to do a very hard assignment and every one of you succeeded. In fact, these are the best 4th grade research papers I have ever seen. There is not one plagiarized word in any of them. They include the facts about your person as well as your own ideas about their contribution to society and New York State history. Outstanding job!

Although I didn't keep track of the students' grades I knew that every student had succeeded in doing a difficult assignment without plagiarizing and I know they learned about how to do research. In contrast, another 4th grade class also completed their research papers that week. Other than scheduling the class for lessons on resources and how to do a bibliography I did not collaborate with this teacher. I did get a chance to read and review their finished papers and I was very disappointed in them. Most had many passages of words taken directly from the encyclopedia or the Internet. Yes they cited the sources they used, but did they really learn anything about research or their topic? I think not!

Are two heads better than one? Absolutely! Does full collaboration lead to student achievement? This evidence tells me it does.

Assessment can make a huge difference in what we do. I no longer wonder if what I am doing is making a difference. I know it does!

If you want to learn more about this research lesson look for a longer article about it in an upcoming edition of Knowledge Quest.

Of this project, the teacher said:

"Sally and I had simple goals for our 2006 NY State biography research. They were efficiency and quality. We divided the teaching tasks accordingly. Through Sally's teaching expertise, students learned numerous relevant skills along with benefiting from her follow-through. Being realistic with our goals for fourth graders, students researched print and on-line sources with both our assistance. I shared the tasks of guiding students with note taking and writing process skills to the final draft. The process was a valuable one for me. Sally offered solid feedback, positive suggestions, while boosting my confidence level along the way." Anne-Marie O'Connor Cicero Elementary School Cicero, N.Y."

Unit done with 9th-11th graders.

To begin the unit, the teacher and I gave a general overview of each of the four topics: Electronic Privacy, Internet Bullying, Social Networking Sites, and Internet Safety-Protecting Yourself and Your Computer. Students were put in groups and each was assigned one of the topics. Each group had a scenario that included an ethical problem related to their topic. Using pre-selected websites and online resources, each group researched their topic and used their research to look for solutions to their problem. After coming up with an initial solution as a group, students swapped groups and presented their problem and solutions to member of other groups. The other groups added their own possible solutions and viewpoints. Students from the original group used these new opinions and insights to possibly modify their original solution. The original groups then re-formed and created a new and final solution, combining their original idea with those of the other groups. Each group then presented their final solution to the class.

The teacher and I found that students performed better than was expected. The class is comprised of many low-performing students who often have trouble staying on task and concentrating. For some reason, the format of switching groups and talking with member of other groups really worked well. Many "trouble" students who usually have behavior problems were able to stay on task. In fact, when I mentioned to one group, "Did you guys realize you have been staying on-task this whole hour?" not even the students could hardly believe they were able to do it.

There were also several students who were high-performing students. Most of these students naturally acted as the leader in their groups. I saw many of them coach their lower-performing groupmates towards ideas and also play devil"s advocate, pointing out problems or weaknesses in a suggested solution. The format of this assignment really seemed to lend itself to groups of mixed-level abilities.

Reflections and Next Steps

If it were possible to collect 200-300 of such reports, some short, some longer, we woud be able to see patterns across schools and begin to build solid theories and questions for both scientific and qualitative research. Perhaps those who self report only want to be known as successful so do not report their failures, although there is one major challenge reported on the wiki. Even in the absence of negative reports, be begin to study higher-level learning as it plays out when two heads really collaborate.

If only:
1. Many such reports were available.
2. We could start a major conversation on listservs about the challenges and opportunities of learning rather than: Should we put special stickers on AR books?
3. Professors had a wealth of such examples to draw upon.
4. We could do some major research for the educational community and government policy makers on this topic.
5. Principals could read 20 or 30 of such reports from their own school librarian.

I can only dream and challenge all of us to participate to answer the question: Are two heads really better than one?