

Restricting Change? Leadership Influence on Participatory Action Research during Educational Change at a School in Sint Maarten

Delroy Pierre, Ph.D

Professor, Educational Change Researcher at Creative Leadership and Innovation Management Bureau (CLIMB) St. Maarten

**Corresponding Author: Delroy Pierre, Ph.D, Professor, Educational Change Researcher at Creative Leadership and Innovation Management Bureau (CLIMB) St. Maarten*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss a participatory action research (PAR) study conducted during an educational change process and the perceptions of co-researchers on the effect of leadership on the PAR process on the Dutch territory of Sint Maarten in the Caribbean. In relaying our experiences in conducting PAR in such a context, it is argued that leadership plays an important role in realizing the actions that arise from the PAR process. The openness of leaders in accepting suggestions for change from the PAR group may depend on whether they are co-researchers undergoing the reflective process inherent within PAR. In documenting how PAR is conducted within a rigid, hierarchical, colonial power school structure, the paper aims to provide researchers with insights into the limitations of PAR when co-researchers are not given the power to act by leaders. This, inevitably, hinders the ability of PAR to effect meaningful social change.

Keywords: *educational change; participatory action research; leadership; Sint Maarten*

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) can be used as a method for improving teaching practices (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). PAR is an equitable approach to inquiry and action in which participants are engaged as co-researchers where their input is valued at all stages of the research process. PAR allows individuals to make changes in their settings as they address the problems that they face in these settings. When PAR is used in schools, individuals within the school come together as a group to develop research questions and methods, gather, and analyze data and implement actions. However, the action that can be carried out by individuals within a school is determined by the level of authority that they may have. If these actions are not aligned with the mental models of their leaders who are outside of the PAR group these actions may not be carried out. Senge (2006) states that practices that conflict with mental models within organizations fail to be implemented.

In 2021, I started as the interim principal of a school that was undergoing an educational change process. This change aimed to improve the school from a low-performing marginalized school to a high-performing marginalized school. On joining the school, the leaders'

approach towards realizing the change involved the production of a detailed educational change plan and the use of a "think tank". The members of the think tank consisted of one teacher and one school leader from the school. The leader of the think tank was a teacher from another school under the same school board. The change plan was developed in 2018. However, when I joined the school in 2021, the school was having trouble meeting the benchmarks that were outlined in the plan. Many important benchmarks were missed. Therefore, I decided to seek the full involvement of the teachers in directing the change process. I believed that they were not fully included as active participants in the changes and therefore, their voices should be heard. I, therefore, decided to conduct a PAR research project involving these teachers as part of my dissertation.

In this paper, I will describe the perceived impact of leadership on PAR conducted at a school embedded within a wider colonial island setting. To date, little research is available on how leadership may affect the application of PAR and its co-researchers in such settings. Yet if PAR is a suitable tool for advancing change in schools, it is important to understand the impact of change leaders on the process. Therefore, this article describes the PAR process and the

challenges that we encountered as co-researchers during the research process. Specifically, the article examines our perceptions of the influence of leadership style in realizing the goals of PAR when PAR is undertaken in an environment of command-and-control leaders who are not part of the PAR team.

LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Many aspects of a school's successful operation are said to be dependent on leadership (Marzano et al., 2005). A school's capacity to improve is fundamentally a change process towards increased student achievement. Therefore, as schools work towards changes that lead to successful gains in student achievement, effective leadership is vital because of the complexity of the problems that are faced (Fullan, 2020). These problems can be more challenging as the school navigates unfamiliar territory and it seeks out the most effective methods of improving student learning—especially those of marginalized students. Robinson (2010) describes school leaders' abilities to solve complex problems as essential for instructional leadership. Therefore, school leaders must be agents of change who challenge the existing norms (Marzano et al., 2005). School leaders who are successful in this task must inspire, share knowledge, and provide resources as they create a collaborative and creative work environment (Cran, 2016).

The school leader is fundamentally tasked with enabling positive change by supporting the development of the people under their care (Puccio et al., 2011). Teachers' capacities must be developed if changes are required that would increase student achievement, and the overall success of the school. Strong principal leadership can lead to such development of teachers with a strong focus on improving instruction (Bryk et al., 2010). The principal transforms the school. When school leaders function as transformational leaders, they provide teachers with autonomy which allows them to expand their capacity (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In essence, they provide teachers with the freedom to learn.

Mulford (2006) states that leadership contributes to teaching and learning through organizational learning. The school leader facilitates organizational learning; allowing the school to operate as a learning organization. Senge (2006) defines a learning organization as an

organization where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). When schools operate as learning organizations, the values, and beliefs of individuals within the school are aligned so that there is a culture and atmosphere of learning where everyone is learning how to learn (OECD, 2016). For this to occur, collaboration is needed.

Successful school leadership mainly occurs through collaboration and teamwork (Møller et al., 2007). Fullan (2016) states that leaders must “take action to create focused collaborative cultures” (p. 62). Therefore, school leaders who achieve effective educational change are successful at changing the culture of the school towards one of continuous improvement (Connolly et al., 2000). These collaborative cultures allow teachers to be creative and innovative and can significantly impact student learning (Harris & Jones, 2019). Harris and Chapman (2004) assert that schools that show high levels of collaboration show a high capacity for improvement. However, collaboration can be time-consuming and may cause school leaders to gravitate towards a top-down approach to change as they struggle to use their time more efficiently. For example, school leaders may choose to simply generate the goals for the school and pass them on to the teachers since developing shared goals can be time-consuming (Holmes et al., 2013).

Such top-down approaches to educational change are likely to fail as teachers' ability to improve their capacity cannot be forced. Forcing someone into personal growth backfires (Senge, 2006). Consequently, change leadership involves relationships and learning (Fullan, 2020). For successful educational change to occur, school leaders must allow teachers to develop their leadership capabilities by reacting to the teachers' individual needs and aligning their goals with those of the school (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Graetz (2000) argues that effective change leadership requires leaders who have strong interpersonal skills that are capable of energizing and empowering followers. She states that “effective change leadership involves instrumental and charismatic roles, integrating operational know-how with strong interpersonal skills” (p. 550).

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

The ideas of collaboration, teamwork, teacher capacity development, and organizational learning fit into the underlying principles of PAR as PAR allows teachers to improve student learning through the study of their teaching and learning situations (Johnson, 2019). It allows educational leaders who serve disadvantaged students to produce the results that they desire (James et al., 2008). Bass and Riggio (2006) claim that leadership can occur at all levels in the school which fits the idea of PAR as a non-hierarchical approach. Such an approach is desirable in schools undergoing strategic educational change. When educators use PAR during the change process, they work together to improve student learning (James et al., 2008). PAR is primarily concerned with individuals coming together to examine the problems that they face while working together to solve those problems (Kidd & Kral, 2005).

During PAR people collaborate as they study, reframe, and reconstruct social practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). PAR allows individuals to use their own experiences within their settings to generate their theory of practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Researchers conducting PAR must participate in the experiences of those they are working with or find ways of including them in the research process (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Dworski-Riggs and Langhout (2010) highlight that participation must involve individuals having a say in all aspects of the research process rather than simply working together. Teachers working within the school can collaborate and reflect on their experiences to propose and experiment with solutions to their problems. This means that they must have a say in the actions that should be taken at the school.

PAR can shed light on the intricate power relationships within institutions (Fine & Torre, 2004). Since teachers' actions within PAR may ultimately depend on their authority to carry out their conceived actions, an understanding of the effect of power in the PAR process is important. These power relationships can enable or restrict the actions of teachers in the school setting. PAR takes into account the sociopolitical forces that maintain the status quo (Wright, 2020). Kemmis (2006) believes that action research should generate uncomfortable news about schooling and if this is not done then the required social conditions in our institutions will

not materialize. However, some leaders may not be willing to accept such uncomfortable news and may resist the functioning of the PAR team. In addition, leaders who are outside of the PAR group may demand limited time and resources towards actions that they may consider more important, limiting the availability of these resources to the PAR group.

CONTEXT

This study is part of a larger project conducted for my doctoral studies in which teachers' sense making processes during educational change towards greater equity in mathematics teaching practices were examined. In describing the context of this study, I will begin by first describing the context of St. Maarten as a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands as I seek to place the socio-political conditions at the school within the larger societal context. I will then discuss the relevant characteristics of the school board and the school.

Sint Maarten

Sint Maarten is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It is located on the Southern half of the island of St. Martin which it shares with the French territory of St. Martin. The term "St. Martin" is the spelling designated for the island and the French territory which is located on the Northern part of the island while "Sint Maarten" is the spelling of the Dutch territory which makes up the Southern part of the island. The two parts of the island are separated by an open border which allows for the free movement of people between the two territories. Sint Maarten was governed as part of the Netherlands Antilles with Curacao, Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius until October 10th, 2010, when it became an autonomous country within the Kingdom. The country is legally Dutch. However, a large portion of its population either originated from or has historical roots in the English-speaking Caribbean and do not speak Dutch. Therefore, English is the most widely used language.

The complex political, social, and cultural history of the country has had an impact on the development of its educational philosophy and educational leadership. Being part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, educational leaders are more likely to harbor educational beliefs and attitudes from the Netherlands where they were more likely educated. There remain strong education links between Sint Maarten

and the Netherlands although the social context is very different. For example, the Sint Maarten Country Reform Package considers improvements in education as facilitating and increasing the flow of students from Sint Maarten to the Netherlands. Historically, and most recently in the Sint Maarten Educational Review of 2022, research on St. Maarten's education system was a joint effort between the Sint Maarten and Dutch inspectorates. Therefore, power positions within education may not easily identify with average citizens- especially the marginalized as mastery of the Dutch language contributes to the creation of an upper class. These conditions form part of a pervasive colonial influence on education which is replicated in the leadership relationships within education, especially that of school boards and their teachers.

The School Board

The school board indicated its intention of changing the school toward greater inclusion and equity. A plan was produced, and my appointment as interim principal was largely based on facilitating the changes. The responsibilities of hiring, firing, and the type of personnel at the school were strictly those of the school board and were sometimes done without the school principal's input. It was not unusual for personnel to be shared amongst the schools or for teachers to be moved from one school to another. In addition, the ultimate decision of purchasing resources and materials was controlled by the school board- not the principal. My direct contact with the school board was through my superintendent who indicated to me the importance of realizing the educational change plan.

The School

The John Ford Primary School (JFP) was founded in 1988 in Philipsburg, Sint Maarten as an elementary school where Dutch was the language of instruction. In February 1993, it was relocated to a district with a large, marginalized population where it served as the main educational option for the predominantly English-speaking children in that district – although the language of instruction remained Dutch. The population of the school is made up of a large proportion of students who require social-emotional or academic care. Approximately 67% of the students at the school required academic, behavioral, or social support. The school building was destroyed by Hurricane Irma on September 6th, 2017, which led to its

students being housed at one of its sister schools located miles away from the original building. In a positive move at addressing the needs of the student population, the school recently phased out Dutch as the language of instruction; the last group of students who received Dutch as the language of instruction left the school in June 2021.

The school is a small school with 143 enrolled students in the 2021/2022 school year. The school admits four-year-olds in kindergarten and provides education up to grade 6. Due to its small size, each grade level consists of only one class. Recent declines in enrollment, however, have led the school board to combine classes. At the commencement of this study, kindergarten 1 and 2 were combined into one class taught by a single teacher. As the study proceeded, kindergarten 1 and 2 and grade 1 were combined into one class as the new school year began; this class was also taught by a single teacher. However, the school does not have teachers with experience or training in multi grade teaching.

At the end of grade 6, students at John Ford Primary sit the Foundation Based Education (FBE) exit exam which determines the high school that they would continue to. These exams are administered every year, and the results are also used to determine the high school students attend; students who perform better are awarded space in academic high schools. These academic high schools are generally of better quality and provide pathways for advanced education. It may be argued that the exam itself perpetuates social inequities because it restricts the access of low-performing students to the more desirable secondary schools. John Ford Primary was the lowest-performing school under its school board with an overall average performance of 51% in the 2021 FBE exit exams. This meant that most of its students were denied access to higher-quality secondary education as these schools generally require averages of 70% or above on the exams for entrance.

Conditions at the school are very dynamic. During the study, I voluntarily ended my role as school principal, and during the concluding phases of this study, one co-researcher's teaching relationship with the school ended. There was a 50% turnover in classroom teachers at the school during the time of the study, and an individualized education (IE) class for students with behavioral and academic issues was created and disbanded within seven months of

this study. These conditions motivated us to explore our sense making of the changes taking place at the school as we focused on providing quality mathematics education for all students.

All co-researchers had been part of the school for more than one year and were familiar with the culture and challenges at the school. One co-researcher had been part of the school for more than three years. I had worked with two of the co-researchers in my capacity as mathematics coach and with all in my capacity as the interim school principal. I started working at the school as a mathematics coach in January 2019 and added the position of interim school principal in January 2021. All other co-researchers have taught more than one grade level at the school; some have taught multi grade classes.

Reflexivity of the Facilitator

During the study, I was fully aware of the impact that my biases and values could have on the research process and its findings. Therefore, I acknowledge my engagement in the research as someone who has been intricately connected to the education system in Sint Maarten. I have worked in education on the island as well as internationally for 22 years. Concerning FBE, I was involved in the retraining of teachers to use the current school curriculum during its initial implementation in 2002. I have also written a mathematics workbook that is widely used by students preparing for the FBE exit exams. Before taking up the role of interim principal, I served as a mathematics coach for JFP and two other schools under the same school board. In my role as mathematics coach and interim principal, I worked collaboratively with the members of the research team in the setting for approximately one year before the study began.

My role as interim principal ended contractually and voluntarily in July 2022, while the study was being conducted. I did not reapply for any of these roles. Therefore, my positional power changed during this study in a way that enhanced equity between me and the other members of the research team. This also allowed us to compare the effect of leadership on the PAR team when the designated school leader is a co-researcher or not.

Members of the research team felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me due to our past relationships. All co-researchers were encouraged to contribute to the questions used in the focus group discussions and interviews. Co-researchers were also free to engage in discussions outside of the prepared questions

during the focus group and individual interviews. Furthermore, I worked with all co-researchers in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding of their perspectives.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTION

The study was a natural progression of the work that we had already started at the school. Before the study officially began, we had already collaborated on improving our literacy and mathematics programs. We had collaboratively produced a curriculum map for mathematics instruction and were actively exploring ways that we could teach mathematics with greater equity as we tried to cater to the needs of all our students. However, we did not understand the conditions that may be unique to our context that facilitated or hindered educational change.

The purpose of this paper is to document our experiences and the role of leadership in conducting a PAR project during educational change at a marginalized school in a unique colonial Caribbean context. I will reflect on the relationships between co-researchers and our perceptions of school leadership's role in facilitating the PAR process. Therefore, the following research question will guide the study: How do co-researchers perceive the effects of leadership on the PAR process? The hope is that such an exploration will lead to conditions that will contribute to successful educational change in such contexts.

METHODS

Research Design

The study used a PAR design of *Look, Think, and Act* as described by Stringer (2014), which allowed for collaboration among the co-researchers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) as we searched for suitable solutions to the problems we faced (Stringer, 2014). This design allowed for flexibility as the circumstances at the school were ever-changing. In addition, PAR was selected for this study because we were interested in creating more equitable teaching conditions for our students. Therefore, it was only fitting to use a research design in which equity is a central principle.

Co-researchers

The PAR group consisted of three elementary school teachers and me as the facilitator. To protect the identity of these teachers, given the small size of the community and the school, individual demographic descriptions will not be given. Instead, I will give a collective demographic description.

The three classroom teachers were female, of Afro-Caribbean descent, and ranged in age from 25 to 37. All spoke and understood English fluently and all possessed university degrees. In keeping with the convention of addressing teachers at the school by their first name preceded by the word “Teacher”, the teachers who served as co-researchers during the study will be called Teacher Beth, Teacher Sandra, and Teach Daisy. Attempts were made to enroll six classroom teachers from the school. However, due to teacher turnover, this was not possible. During my time as interim school principal from January 2021 to July 2022, the school lost six out of eight teachers due to resignation or termination.

At the time of the study, I was the interim school principal and a doctoral candidate at the University of the Virgin Islands while the teachers were all teaching at the school. To be part of the study, co-researchers were required to be teachers who were involved in changes at the school during the time of the study.

Procedure

Members of the research team were recruited after permission was granted by the school board director and approval for the research was given by the Institutional Review Board of the University of the Virgin Islands. Once approval was received, potential co-researchers were sent a letter requesting their participation in the study and a consent form. Both were sent via email using non-work email addresses to protect confidentiality. One day later, a one-on-one meeting was held with each prospective co-researcher to address any issues or concerns that they may have had about the study and to discuss the contents of the information and consent form. Potential co-researchers were not familiar with PAR. Therefore, I described PAR and other aspects of the research process. I described possible data collection methods and risks of participation. Any questions that potential co-researchers may have had were addressed. We came to a consensus on the aim of the study. The conditions for participation, including their right to withdraw from the study at any time, were also made clear.

Potential co-researchers understood there were no repercussions for non-participation; neither were any incentives given for participation. After these discussions, potential co-researchers were given one week to complete and return the consent form if they ultimately decided to take part in the study.

Sources of Data

The data collection methods that were used in the study were individual interviews, co-researcher journals, focus group discussions, and document reviews. All interviews were conducted via recorded Zoom calls with the cameras turned on. Focus group discussions were held face-to-face.

Individual Interviews

Individual interviews allowed the co-researchers to describe their views and provided insights into their perspectives (Stringer, 2014; Patton, 2015). The use of interviews in this study allowed co-researchers to engage in a reflective process (Stringer, 2014) as we explored our perspectives on the change process in detail. Because the study assumed that we viewed our worlds in our ways, the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews worked best (Merriam, 2009). The interviews allowed us to reflect on and share our beliefs about the change process while assuming the normal conversation-like feel that we were used to (Taylor et al., 2016). A single one-on-one Zoom interview was conducted with each teacher, outside of school hours, at a time that was most feasible for them. The semi-structured interviews were conducted during a period from August 20, 2022, to October 22, 2022. These recorded interviews ranged in duration from 26 minutes 48 seconds to 48 minutes 17 seconds. During the interviews, both parties had their cameras turned on.

Focus Group Discussions

We decided to use focus group discussions as another method of data collection because they closely mimicked our normal group discussions. The purpose of the focus group discussion was to produce a range of views and perspectives about the topic, rather than the attainment of consensus (Hennink, 2014). The debate and discourse in our focus group discussions allowed various ideas and opinions to surface (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). The use of focus group discussions as a data collection method utilized the social interactions that are necessary during PAR. One focus group discussion which lasted approximately 40 minutes was conducted face to face. The focus group discussion was also used to suggest actions that could be taken based on our interpretations.

Self-reflective Journals

Initially, we agreed on keeping self-reflective journals since these journals facilitated

reflexivity by allowing us to examine our values, biases, and assumptions through writing (Ortlipp, 2008). The format of the journal was flexible; the only requirement was that it be typewritten. In addition, there was no predetermined amount that had to be written in the journal. We decided to be as open as possible during journaling and expected to spend approximately 30 minutes per week writing in the journal. However, time constraints at the school severely limited the number of journal entries that we produced.

Documents and Artifacts

Due to the unexpected challenges of time that arose during the study, we decided to add a fourth method of data collection, namely documents, which included both printed and electronic materials containing words and/or pictures (Bowen, 2009). The documents that were reviewed were the school's educational change plan, the current and previous school development plans, lesson plans, tests, Facebook posts from the school's Facebook page, newspapers, and function interviews. The school's educational change plan and school development plans were used to determine the values and beliefs of the school. Facebook posts and newspaper articles were used to gather data on the image that the school projects into the community. Function interviews, which are interviews conducted with superiors to describe how you are performing in your specific function at the school, were used to gather data on practices taking place at the school.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed simultaneously with data collection as this allowed for better data collection because co-researchers thinking about the current data were used to generate better strategies for collecting additional data (Miles et al., 2013). The raw data from field notes were converted into text. Field notes taken during the individual interviews and focus group discussions were formally written up so that additional events that were observed by the facilitator, but absent in the raw notes, could be included (Miles et al., 2013). The recordings were transcribed into text using Otter.ai, and the written files produced were reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were produced verbatim from the recordings to maintain the cultural feel and to avoid distortion (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Once the data was transcribed, the transcriptions were read and re-read to gain greater immersion into the data. At times, the

audio files were also listened to while reading the transcripts so that the intended meanings, through changes in tone and pauses, could be gained. Notes were made and meaningful chunks of information were written in my journal. Reflective memos were written for all interviews, and my reflections and interpretations were reviewed with each co-researcher as a member-checking procedure.

Rigor and Trust Worthiness

Rigor in PAR involves checks to verify that the study's findings are not based on limited views or biases and are not merely a simplistic analysis of the data (Stringer, 2014). The primary method by which rigor was achieved in this study was through conducting a study that was responsive to the research questions, goals, research team, and any new findings that emerged from the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The use of triangulation also added to the rigor of the study in that the accuracy of findings is greatly increased if they are supported by multiple data sources (Yin, 2018). We further ensured rigor in the study by critically reflecting on how our biases can affect the data (Orange, 2016). In addition, the focus group discussions provided a social check on the data that contributed to its accuracy (Hennink, 2014). Many statements made by co-researchers during their interviews were repeated during the focus group discussion. This study aimed to achieve trustworthiness by ensuring that the members of the research team were familiar with the context and challenges of the school. Member checks were also used to improve the accuracy of the findings by allowing the co-researchers to correct any errors that may have been made in interpreting the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Members of the research team also checked the accuracy of the transcripts that were produced. Our prolonged interactions with each other and the study site further ensured the trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

This study was conducted using participatory action research- a methodology that was relatively new to all co-researchers. As the facilitator of this study, I had exposure to the PAR methodology during my doctoral studies and was aided by my committee chair and committee members during the execution of the study. In this section, I will discuss our perceptions of the effect of the school's leadership on our ability to operate using the

principles of PAR. I will then reflect on our PAR process.

PAR and School Leadership

Although leaders at the school board level had expressed their interest in achieving educational changes at the school, we believed that their leadership styles affected our ability to carry out the actions that we felt necessary from our reflections during the PAR process. Therefore, we felt that the school's directive leadership style limited our actions. Teacher Sandra described the current school leadership's disposition as that of "my way or the highway". There was a reluctance to release power to members of the PAR team which meant that the actions that we considered to be necessary were not executed.

Members of the research team were able to describe their feelings of freedom by linking them to different styles of leadership. More importantly, they were able to differentiate between when the leader is a member of the PAR team, and when the leader is outside of the PAR team. When I functioned as the interim principal and as a member of the PAR team, teachers felt greater power in executing the actions that the PAR team considered necessary. Teacher Daisy described it this way in her interview:

One of my biggest...(pauses to think)...surprise was the effort or, I'm looking for the better word, the response for help? Or should I say from the assistance that I get? Based on what I've seen the year before? The willingness, the cooperation, the know-how. But now, this year it's, it's more of me dealing with an adult [who is] not being cooperative.

There, she is describing her ability to carry out the actions that she felt are needed after her reflection. For her, she had more freedom when I, a member of the PAR group, functioned as school principal. However, my ability as a school principal to carry out the actions that we thought were necessary was restricted by my leaders who were not part of the PAR group. Yet, I still did what I could within the power that I had. We recognized the reluctance of superiors to release power to their followers if they did not accept the general principles that govern PAR. In my role as the school principal, I felt the pressure of doing things the way that my superior wanted it.

Such directive leadership meant that we felt that there was little support. While leaders at the school board level granted permission for the study, support in terms of resources and a willingness to move away from the status quo was lacking. We felt like leaders outside of the PAR group did not fully understand the situation at the school. Teacher Sandra made the following statement while referring to the new school principal and the school board:

And I think people.... don't understand what we as teachers go through in the classroom with the children. It's a class of 23 children, and at least 20 of them have behavior issues, and academic issues, and it's a lot. And then on top of that, you [school leaders] want to put a lot of administration works and stuff that we can't always implement right now because we're dealing with so many other things in the classroom.

One of the characteristics of PAR that allows it to be effective is the actions that are taken by members of the research team. To conceptualize and carry out action, the creativity of team members must be stimulated and used. We felt that the leadership style severely restricted our creativity. Teacher Daisy described how she felt about this issue:

That [effective use of teacher creativity] is a challenge that we are experiencing as well. I would term it 'micromanaging' ...the delegating is there but the freedom is not there.

As a result, the leadership culture affected the teacher's willingness to take the lead during the research and the implementation of actions. Moreover, teachers' lack of trust in the leadership affected their willingness and ability to openly challenge ideas from their leaders. Teacher Beth described how cautious she felt she had to be when asked to do something she did not fully agree with. She lamented, "So be careful what you say and try not to say no to [the school board]... because they will hold that against you." Anderson (1998) speaks of limitations on teacher autonomy as being a form of inauthentic participation in PAR. It is important for all school leaders to adopt and promote the critical skills needed to sustain reflective practice (Hord & Sommers 2008). Therefore, the level of participation by all members of the research team varied at different parts of the study. Participation as a group was stronger during the *look* and *think* phases than during the *act* phase, which supports Herr and

Anderson's (2005) contention that the relationship amongst co-researchers during PAR can shift as the study progresses.

As the study proceeded, members of the research team felt an increased loss of power within the organization. We felt that leaders outside of the PAR team did not appreciate or consider the ideas or options for improvements generated by the research team. Towards the end of the research, Teacher Sandra left the school. She explained that she was terminated due to a power struggle (not related to any action of the PAR team) between herself and the current principal.

Although her termination occurred close to the end of the study and was not directly related to the study, it may have affected the participation of other members of the research team. This allowed us to only complete one PAR cycle. The decrease in participation may have also been due to a lack of trust in leadership and the fact that one member of the team was "terminated" from her professional position at the school. However, teachers explained that they felt more power in implementing actions within their classrooms compared to those throughout the wider school environment.

Finding time to participate in the PAR process was a serious challenge for the research team. As supported and reported by Mackenzie et al. (2012), we found the PAR process to be time-consuming, and the workload at the school left very little time for reflection and full engagement in the PAR process. The workload on members of the research team who were still in the classroom made it difficult to find time for meetings and reflection. Teacher Sandra expressed her feelings:

I don't want to commit to the research and not be able to give it my full attention and commitment because I'm simply drained. I'm not sure if this is something that we can postpone until we are a bit more above water, but this is a lot!

The research team members were only able to meet on weekends.

Reflections on the PAR Process

PAR provided the ideal methodology for this study because the study itself was geared toward equitable practices. The use of PAR permitted flexibility that allowed us to adjust to the ever-changing situation at the school and our positions. It provided co-researchers with opportunities for learning as well as a support

structure. This support allowed free expression of ideas and allowed co-researchers to gain emotional support from team members who they believed understood what they were going through.

PAR Provided Flexibility

Throughout our focus group and individual interviews, the ability of the PAR process to allow flexibility was revealed. Initially, we intended to make equity in mathematics central to the study. However, our experiences at the school prompted us to place a greater focus on how we made sense of the change process occurring at the school.

During my interview with Teacher Daisy, we discussed the challenges of the research process and how events that were occurring in real-time at the school had an impact on the research process. There, we spoke about the flexibility of PAR in being able to consider these unexpected events.

PAR Provided Learning Opportunities

The use of PAR allowed all members of the research team to learn. The open sharing of knowledge allowed me to provide the teachers with knowledge of PAR, equity, and mathematical practices. In turn, I learned of the diversity in teachers' experiences and their insights. The learning that occurred through our engagement in this research project provided a basis on which the school might develop into a learning organization with increased chances of realizing its goal of providing equitable and inclusive education.

We found that PAR allowed us to address our unique problems as we perceived them. We felt able to openly share our views and felt that the research was ours because it directly tackled issues that we were passionate about. We felt that our participation in the PAR process gave us a better appreciation for mathematics. Teacher Daisy commented that mathematics "*is the only subject that I think that I place a lot of emphasis on now. Like it is not equal.*"

PAR Provided a Support Structure

The PAR process allowed us to describe our experiences with others who we felt understood our situation. It also allowed us to be critical of one another and to gain a different perspective on how to handle similar troubling situations. During our focus group discussion, Teacher Beth described how good it felt to be able to discuss events that were occurring at the school with us. During her interview, she used the first

15 minutes simply to vent as she expressed her emotions. She capped off this highly emotional discussion by summing up how she felt at work:

It's pissing me off... I ain't gonna lie... It's too much for me. I am finding it's too much for me...

CONCLUSION

This study supported the idea that educational change is a difficult and complex endeavor. Although Wright (2020) contends that PAR can transform teaching practices, the results of our study show that leadership is an important factor in realizing that transformation. Our findings show that leaders create the conditions that allow PAR to be effective. Specifically, leaders provide the resources, support, and time for PAR to occur while distributing leadership that allows members of the PAR team to execute the actions that they deem necessary. In a sense, the equity of PAR goes against the normal power structure of the traditional, colonial school leadership structure. However, if the change is to be realized using PAR within a traditionally hierarchical leadership structure, it may be important to include upper leaders as co-researchers. The reflective and collaborative processes that occur during the PAR process may allow them to provide more supportive leadership that harnesses the creativity of teachers in realizing the change.

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