

University–School Collaborative Action Research as an Alternative Model for Professional Development Through AISI

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Abstract

This article focuses on the nature of university–school partnerships implementing collaborative action research as an alternative model for professional development under the umbrella of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). The main purpose of this report is to highlight features of these successful partnerships, particularly the role of university–school collaborative action research in promoting teachers’ professional development for sustainable school improvement.

Introduction

This article describes the model of university–school collaborative action research as experienced by two francophone school districts from the southern region of Alberta (CSCFSA and CSFSA) and two elementary schools that offer French Immersion programs within the Rocky View School Division. The university partnership with these four entities was achieved through the involvement of Dr. Martine Pellerin, an assistant professor, teacher–educator, and researcher at Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta. Although each of the four initiatives had specific goals that had been established within the respective educational communities, they all had the common goal of promoting the adoption of new pedagogical practices that would further enhance learning in francophone and immersion classrooms. The collaboration action research initiatives were a response to the call made by AISI (PARSA in French) to design school improvement projects that promote pedagogical changes, which would in turn contribute to the improvement of students’ learning and performance.

University–School Collaborative Action Research

The concept of university–school collaborative action research as an alternative model for professional development is at the heart of this report. It is a model that is aligned with the notion of reflective practice and participatory action research described in literature on professional development and school improvement (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Leitch & Day, 2000; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007; Riel, 2010; Schön, 1987). However, rather than focusing on the individual teacher doing action research in isolation in his or her classroom, collaborative action research emphasizes collaboration between teachers and university partners to create an “open[ing] communicative space” (Kemmis & McTaggart, cited in Denos, Toohey, Neilson, & Waterstone, 2009, p. 17). In this type of collaborative action research, members of the group become engaged in collaborative dialogue in order to closely examine their current pedagogical practice and the assumptions or beliefs underlining their choice of teaching strategies. Through this collaborative dialogue, teachers also become aware of their colleagues’ role as “critical friends” (Samaras & Freese, 2006) who can provide alternative understanding and knowledge that will lead to deeper reflection on actions and inquiry into experience.

During the collaborative professional meeting—which corresponds to one of the phases in the “spiral of action” discussed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005)—teachers learn to trust their colleagues enough to share the “evidence” they have gathered through the process of digital documentation. By making their students’ learning process and their teaching practice visible to others, teachers come to share a deep commitment to examining, questioning, evaluating, and transforming their practice, with the ultimate goal of improving students’ learning. This concept of collaboration resonates with indications that when expertise comes from within the community, there is a greater engagement on the part of the teachers toward educational changes (Aulls & Shore, 2008).

Accordingly, the university–school collaborative action research model adopted in the four AISI school improvement initiatives represents a move away from the perception of collaborative action research as another form of research controlled by an academic. However, it does not deny the potential of the university researcher’s external expertise to contribute to the teacher’s professional learning. The form of university–school collaborative action research presented here advocates the notion of a collaborative partnership between two parties: a group of teachers and/or a school community, and the university partner. The nature of the partnership is a key element in this form of collaborative action research. Contrary to top-down models of professional development that involve only the expertise of an outside expert, each partner in a collaborative partnership not only brings knowledge and expertise to the table but also shares in a reflective and critical inquiry into classroom experiences (Aulls & Shore, 2008). As a result, sustainable pedagogical changes emerge that contribute to the improvement of teaching practice, which in turn impacts the students’ learning process. Thus, one of the main roles of the university partner in this partnership is to act as one of the critical friends; the university partner, by sharing expertise as a teacher–educator and researcher, contributes to the process of co-construction of knowledge in the collaborative action research.

Reflection and Inquiry Through the Use of Digital Documentation

Even today, many professional development paradigms for experienced teachers are based on the transmission of a “teaching recipe” designed to improve practice. Unfortunately, such paradigms do not foster a deep commitment to sustainable changes that contribute to school development. The significance of university–school collaborative action research is that it promotes teachers’ professional development through the process of reflection on actions (Schön, 1983, 1987) and inquiry (Aulls & Shore, 2008). This process is made possible by the integration of digital documentation, based on the Reggio Emilia approach (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001) and further developed by Pellerin (2010).

The concept of documentation is a key element in the Reggio Emilia Approach, which is based on the work of Loris Malaguzzi; it was first developed in Italy and later introduced to the North American educational context. This pedagogical model, which is very much aligned with the work of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner and many others, has had an impact in the world of educational reform and is therefore very relevant to the goals of AISI. The concept of digital documentation, which is crucial to the model of collaborative action research presented here, calls on the use of digital technologies to make learning and teaching more visible to the teacher.

Digital documentation is the process by which teachers make use of the emergent digital technologies such as iPod, digital video camera, iPad, and various computer software to capture learning and teaching moments. When revisiting the evidence gathered through digital

documentation, teachers begin to develop a deeper understanding of their students' learning process. By analyzing this evidence, teachers also begin to examine their own teaching strategies and their beliefs about how students learn, and start questioning the impact that they may have on the students' learning experiences.

Defining the Model

Collaborative action research has been shown to be transformative by engaging teachers in systemic inquiry with the goal of improving their teaching practices (Denos et al., 2009; Dolbec & Clément, 2000). It calls for the teachers' direct participation, which then impacts upon their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, which in turn contribute to a pedagogical renewal (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Nolen & Vander Putten, 2007). This research approach entails a cyclical process of planning, taking action, collecting evidence, reflecting, and taking further action. Each cycle provides greater understanding, which guides the way to improved actions (Riel, 2010).

The model of collaborative action research presented in this article was first inspired by the systemic and cyclical process proposed in the action research spiral, which was concerned with the following actions: planning, taking action, collecting evidence, reflecting, and taking further action (Riel, 2010). Although research has demonstrated that this action research model does promote professional development (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Riel, 2010), the collaborative action research model implemented in the four AISI initiatives modified the “study and plan” phase so that “collaborative professional development” became one of the core elements of the cyclical model (Figure 1).

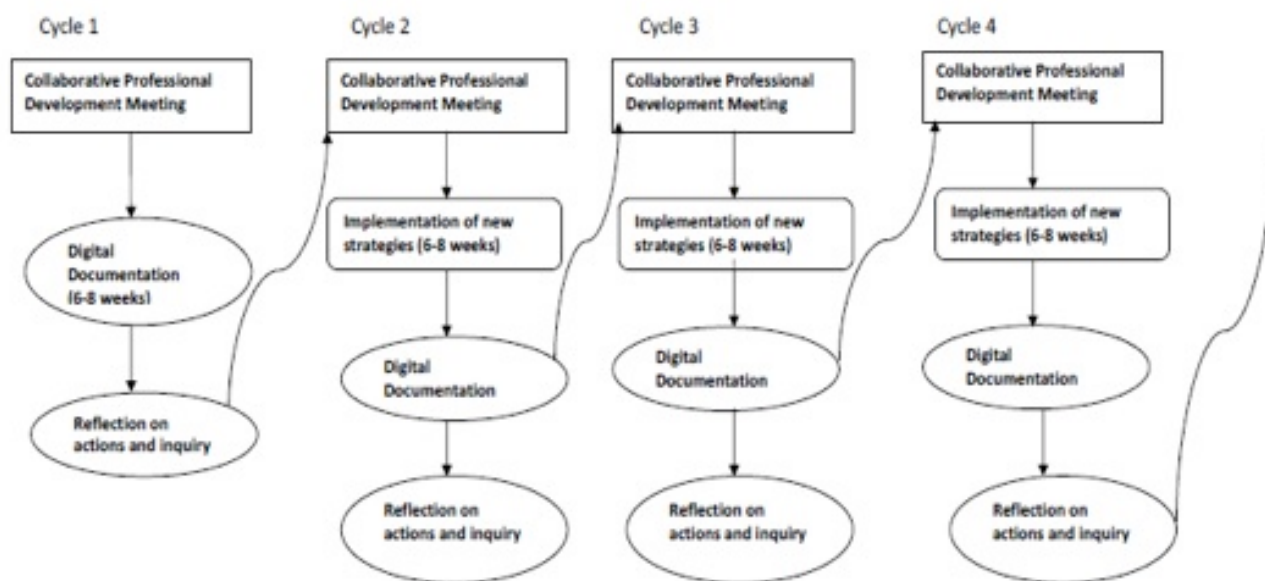


Figure 1: Cycles of collaborative professional development

The collaborative professional development meeting (CPDM), which takes place at the beginning of each cycle, has been perceived by teachers across the four initiatives as one of the critical and successful aspects of this form of professional development. The CPDM facilitates the co-construction of new knowledge and understanding about how students learn, and an inquiry into new strategies they can implement in their daily practice to improve students' learning. It also allows teachers to engage in a collaborative dialogue about their teaching and their students' learning process. The role of dialogue among teachers was central to the collaborative action research model. It is through dialogue that teachers engage in a critically reflective process with their colleagues and develop a commitment to co-construction of knowledge and understanding using the evidence gathered through the digital documentation process. The notion of collaborative reflective action and inquiry is crucial for effective professional development to successfully promote sustainable school improvement. Thus the CPDM implemented in the university–school collaborative action research model plays a central role in the action spiral.

Another modification made to the collaborative action research model was the way teachers were to collect data or evidence about their students' learning and their own teaching practice. Most action research emphasizes a notion of data collection that follows rigid methodological inquiry steps. In contrast, our collaboration action research emphasizes a digital documentation process that makes use of emergent technologies to gather tangible evidence of learning and teaching moments. Making the students' learning processes visible to the teachers is crucial in supporting the process of reflection and inquiry about learning processes and teaching practices. Digital documentation also promotes ongoing assessment, which impacts the teachers' daily teaching decisions. Teaching strategies can be chosen on the basis of what is becoming visible to the teachers, and adapted to better respond to the specific needs of the learners.

How Did We Proceed?

The four AISI initiatives for school improvement were the Greater Southern Separate Catholic Francophone Education Region No. 4 (CSCFSA), the Greater Southern Public Francophone Education Region No. 4 (CSFSA), the Elizabeth Barrett Elementary School (the K-4 Immersion program), and the École Edwards Elementary (the K-4 Immersion program). Each of these entities led the development of its own individual school improvement plan, with guidance from AISI. Each initiative demonstrated variances regarding the planning process, the involvement of the teachers, and the implementation processes, as well as the initial goals for the school improvement plan. However, each school improvement initiative was open to a new form of teachers' professional development that would promote new knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning, and to the implementation of new teaching strategies that could contribute to the improvement of the students' learning experience across the curriculum. Through the establishment of a university–school partnership with Dr. Martine Pellerin, each school improvement initiative (at different points in time) opted for collaborative action research as an alternative model of teachers' professional development to support the construction of new knowledge about teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of bringing pedagogical changes that would contribute to increasing the success rate of the students in their respective programs.

Cycle 1

Initial collaborative professional development meeting (CPDM). The first cycle began with an initial CPDM involving teachers as well as other stakeholders (school and district administrators) and the university partner. The aim of this first meeting was to provide an opportunity to examine the goals of university–school collaborative action research, introduce the concept of collaborative action research as a form of professional development, and give a hands-on introduction to the concept of digital documentation process.

Experimenting with the digital documentation phase. Following the initial CPDM, teachers were invited to start documenting their students' learning as well as their own teaching practice in their respective classrooms for a period of 6 to 8 weeks. To assist teachers with the digital documentation process, each school improvement initiative made various technologies available to their teachers, including iPods, digital cameras, iPads, and computers with various software. The intent of this first cycle was to provide opportunities for teachers to experiment with the use of digital technologies to document their students' learning and their own teaching practice, thus allowing the teachers' own process of reflection and inquiry on practice to take shape.

Cycle 2

Second collaborative professional development meeting (CPDM). During the second CPDM, each teacher was invited to share with the group a few examples of their digital documentation and to engage in a reflection on action with their peers. This was an opportunity to develop a greater understanding about their students' learning process, and to examine their teaching practice with a critical eye. Teachers and the university educator–researcher became active participants and “critical friends” through a collaborative reflection and inquiry process. Together, they were involved in analyzing, questioning, and reflecting on how their students were learning, and inquiring into ways of bringing changes that would improve the impact of their teaching practice on the students' learning process. Together, the teachers and the university partner set up a plan of action for guiding the implementation of pedagogical changes in the respective classrooms, and more specifically for experimenting with new teaching strategies.

Implementation and digital documentation phase. Teachers were invited to implement the plan of action established during the second CPDM in their daily teaching practice for 6 to 8 weeks. It was also crucial that teachers start to document the implementation of new actions that took place in their classrooms, as well as changes in their students' learning process in response to these pedagogical changes. Teachers were encouraged to continue engaging in self-reflection on their actions and to seek opportunities for dialogue and collaboration with their peers. Because the goal of collaborative action research is to promote sustainable professional development, it was necessary for teachers to engage in an ongoing reflective and inquiry process during this implementation phase, instead of waiting for the next CPDM to do so.

Cycles 3 and 4

Cycles 3 and 4 each started with another CPDM, followed by the implementation and digital documentation phase. The action spiral was completed at the end of the year with a final gathering to examine the impact of the initiative on school improvement.

Some schools were able to engage in three cycles during the year, and others completed four cycles. The number of cycles depended on the funds available for substitute teachers, which would free the teachers involved in the initiative to attend the CPDM at the beginning of each cycle.

Conclusion

A Partnership That Promotes Sustainable School Improvement

This article has presented an example of university–school partnership, under the auspices of AISI, that has the potential to help improve education in Alberta. Through their collaboration, the university partner and the teachers created new knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning, which, in turn, can inform the work of other French Immersion schools. This unique university–school partnership represents a move away from the perception that knowledge should be strictly constructed either within an educational community (e.g. a group of teachers or a school), or in academia. This collaborative action research, supported through AISI, calls on the best efforts of both communities to increase our commitment to the improvement of students' learning and performance in Alberta.

Collaborative Action Research as a Catalyst for Change

One of the goals of AISI is to be “a catalyst for change” (AISI Education Partners, 2008, p. 5). University–school collaborative action research responds to this notion by promoting an alternative form of teachers' professional development, one that supports the emergence of pedagogical changes that contribute to sustainable school improvement. Collaborative action research enabled teachers to engage in reflective practice and inquiry that helps them to renew their teaching practice while also examining the assumptions and beliefs that underlie their personal pedagogy. When teachers become more conscious of their own assumptions and personal theories about teaching and learning they are better able to make effective changes in their daily practice. Collaborative action research allowed them to become agents of change in their own classrooms and schools, instead of being mere recipients and transmitters of theories and knowledge distributed through conventional professional development. When teachers become involved in a collaborative action research initiative, they engage in a professional development process that is more likely to promote school improvement on a larger, more sustainable scale.

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