

Cyclicity and Sustainability: The Role of Collaborative Action Inquiry in AISI

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Abstract

Renewed focus on teacher professional learning and teacher-as-researcher has generated myriad action research projects supported by the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). This paper begins with a brief synopsis of the development of action research as a school improvement research methodology and compares it to an emerging model referred to as *collaborative action inquiry*. Next, selected findings are presented from a study employing the collaborative inquiry process implemented in over 40 schools in four districts. These findings highlight differences between more and less successful school improvement projects and offer new information on the strengths, limitations, costs, and benefits of school-based collaborative inquiry when it is conducted on an expanded scale. The paper concludes by proposing a variation on established theory related to stages of concern for teachers who become engaged in evidence-based practice using a collaborative action inquiry process.

Introduction

The increased popularity of action research as a school improvement methodology has contributed to renewed interest in understand more fully the lived reality of teachers and students, thus giving public voice to those experiences and providing direction---if not solutions---for increased effectiveness of schools and districts. Reason and Marshall (1987) suggest that, notwithstanding the lengthy history of debate about the reliability and validity of action research, it is an important process for “research-as-renewal” (Hunt, 1992, p. 111) which is “for me, for us, and for them” (p. 112). They explain,

It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes which elicit the response “That’s interesting!”....It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns of our praxis, is relevant and timely, and so produces the response “That works!”....It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher’s being-in-the-world, and so elicits the response “That’s exciting!”....Research thus contributes to personal motivation and development. (p. 113)

While still a relatively new addition to the repertoire of scientific methodologies used to explore the teaching and learning aspects of school improvement, action research has already experienced ebbs and flows of favor among members of the research community. Yet, given the current surge of interest in teachers as originators and creators of educational research, new models of action research must not only attend to Hunt’s (1992) me-us-them triad; they must also more accurately capture the increased complexity and diversity of schools and teachers’ professional practices, while offering a vehicle to assist educators in more clearly understanding and effectively acting upon their efforts.

Emily Calhoun (1994) credits Glickman (1993) with renewing a North American interest in action research. She suggests it was Glickman’s promotion of democratic governance principles through action research that provided impetus for a movement that saw, “After almost

thirty years in various stages of burial, action research for school improvement once again receiving national attention” (p. 19). Kember and Kelly (1993) also note an increased North American appetite for action research and, in particular, a focus on human interpretation, negotiation, and biographical narratives as valuable data collection strategies in educational contexts. Moreover, they encourage educators to critically challenge positivist models that do not explicitly and intentionally generate *action* in the form of improved teaching practices. Similarly, Carson and Sumara (1992) suggest several reasons to encourage a shift in education toward action research methodologies. They contend that:

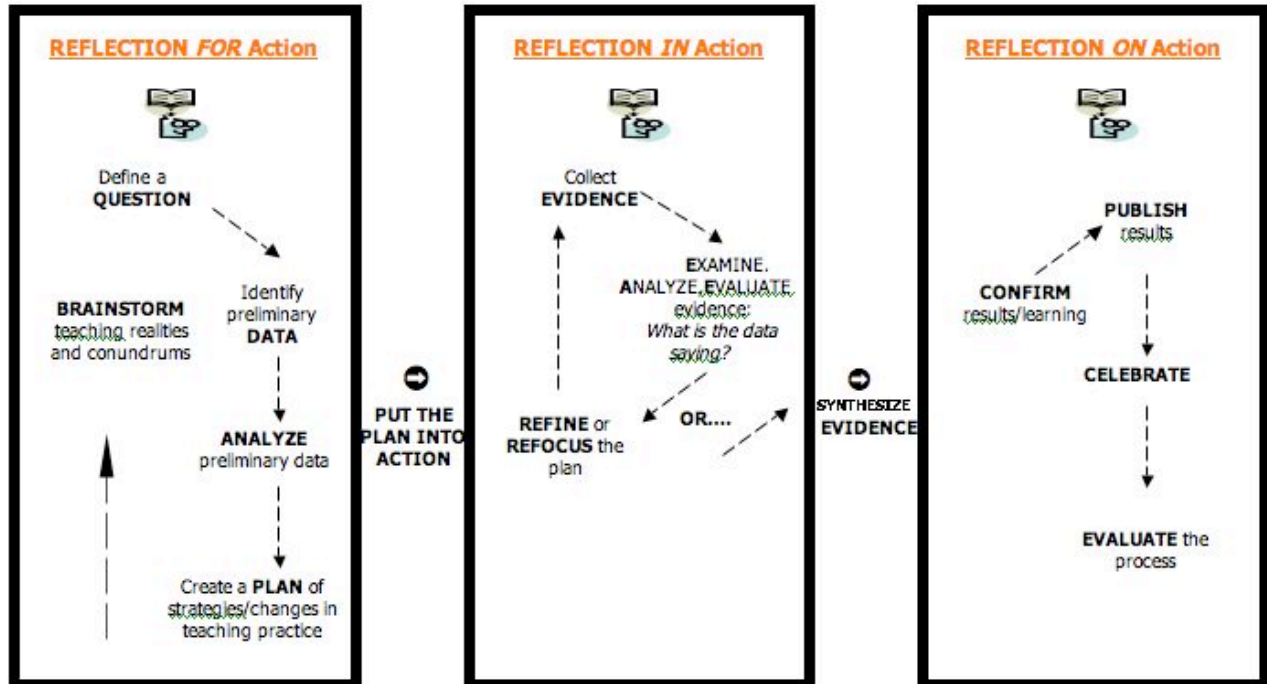
1. The very complexity of education, and social interactions in general, makes problematic other research approaches.
2. Theories derived from strictly quantitative educational research have been generally inadequate in explaining educational phenomena.
3. Action research can provide a bridge across the perceived gap in understandings between educational practitioners and theorists. (p. 37)

From Action Research to Collaborative Action Inquiry

Several models of action research incorporate processes of inquiry that are cyclical and iterative. Frequent reference is made to planning, acting, observing, and reflecting that occur and reoccur in a spiral-like progression (Berg, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Schmuck, 1997). The contention that the single most unique and critical characteristic of action research is *iteration* can be attributed to Lewin’s (1946) early description of stages involving planning, fact-finding, execution, and analysis. Lewin uses the term *reconnaissance* to explain a process in which ongoing fact-finding, reflection, and re-routing are important and unique features. Elliott’s (1991) model of action research incorporates *reconnaissance* as a method for evaluating processes and results. McKernan’s (1996) model is similarly cyclical, while formalizing the research steps associated with hypothesizing. A model of action research proposed by Townsend (2001) describes the activities of groups of teachers as they engage in the process. It identifies 12 steps that occur and recur in cycles, and loops within cycles.

In AISI projects, Townsend and Adams (2002) have observed these 12 steps as falling into the larger stages of teachers learning *for* practice, learning *in* practice, and learning *from* practice. Learning *for* practice involves the inquiry-based activities of readiness, awareness, and training engaged in collaboratively by the researcher and participants. Learning *in* practice includes activities of planning and implementation and the gathering of evidence. Learning *from* practice includes the debriefing and reflective activities necessary to adjust, realign, or refine current practice in order to plan effectively for future inquiry.

The term *collaborative action inquiry* has evolved from these three stages and integrates action research literature with the work of authors who contend that school improvement can best be achieved by teams of educators working toward improvements in teaching practice through a professional learning community structure (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). The following figure describes the cycles that characterize the collaborative action inquiry process.



These stages are also described as learning *for* practice, learning *in* practice, and learning *from* practice. Learning for practice involves the inquiry-based activities of readiness, awareness, and training engaged in collaboratively by the researcher and participants. Learning in practice includes planning and implementing intervention strategies, and gathering and making sense of relevant evidence. Learning from practice includes culminating activities and planning future research (Townsend & Adams, 2009).

The Study: Comparing School Improvement Practices in Four Jurisdictions

A team of university researchers was invited to participate in an exploration of four school districts in which AISI projects had been designed to enhance teacher professional development and student learning. A primary task for the researchers was to explore ways that a collaborative inquiry model might help those districts achieve their AISI project goals. The research team was guided by the question “*In what ways and to what extent does the implementation of a collaborative action inquiry process impact school improvement projects?*”

Methodology and Data Collection

In District A, a rural jurisdiction with 18 schools and approximately 5000 students, one third of the collaborative action inquiry process (Figure 1) was implemented over three months. In this District, the research team was not involved further than this *reflection for practice* point of intervention except to gather operational indicator data at the end of the three-year AISI cycle.

In the primarily urban District B, two-thirds of the model was initially adopted by project teams. However, after nine months, only vestiges of participation remained. In this District, the research team visited project sites at irregular intervals, providing assistance with data gathering, analysis, and other activities identified in the *reflection in practice* stage of Figure 1.

Unstructured interviews were conducted with five project participants, and two members of the research team conducted a focus group with district participants to gather impressions specific to levels of success on achieving ten operational indicators.

District C experienced one full cycle of the model over fourteen months. In District C, researchers engaged in all stages of the collaborative action inquiry model for each AISI project, with moderate yet regular interaction between researchers and participants. In this District, where researcher participation was more extensive, data were also gathered after the *reflection on practice* activities through 17 focus groups, 48 structured interviews, 402 surveys, and analysis of over 1000 documents.

In District D, seven rural school-based teams participated in two iterations of the collaborative action inquiry process. Members of the research team were an integral part of each of the district's seven school site projects and participated fully in monthly team meetings, symposia, presentations, and publications featuring project successes over the course of three years. Data were gathered during and after all three stages of the collaborative inquiry process. Additional data included participant written reflections, operational indicator rating scales, analysis of standardized test data, and end-of project semi-structured interviews.

Findings

Literature on school change (Barth, 2001; Bray, 2002; DuFour & DuFour, 2003; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Fullan 2010; Goodnough, 2005; Zeichner, 2003) indicates that slow and purposeful adherence to a rigorous process of inquiry will best encourage the type of sustained action necessary to impact effectiveness. For teachers and school principals unfamiliar with close professional collaboration, the model of inquiry implemented in this study was often bemusing. The process involves a combination of interdependence and independence described by Ridley (1996) as joint responsibility. Those participants who best adapted to the model were those who assumed the roles of teacher leader and teacher researcher.

Discussion and analysis of 10 operational indicators of effective school improvement that arose from the data analyzed in this study is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, all teams in this study confronted challenges inherent in school improvement and have experienced the strengths, limitations, costs, and benefits of this particular process. The following outcomes were consistent among all four participating school districts and schools:

1. The collaborative action inquiry process allowed teacher participants to demonstrate their growing expertise in details of curricula and the potential for interdisciplinary planning and delivery. Participants indicated increased appreciation for in-depth examination of curriculum and attempted to implement a wider variety of strategies for the assessment of student learning, including a re-positioning of standardized achievement testing.
2. Project participants described enhanced collegiality and collaboration within staffs and across the district as a primary benefit of their participation in collaborative inquiry. Most teams in District C and D have implemented models of professional development that are sustainable, site-embedded, and inquiry-based. All team members demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of a professional inquiry process and of the ways it can guide professional development.
3. Teachers in all teams in Districts B, C, and D assumed informal leadership responsibilities to gather data, organize presentations, survey staff members,

disseminate information, and become more knowledgeable about research. District leadership capacity was enhanced and participants demonstrated increased confidence with the use of data.

4. Participants indicated that collaborative action inquiry teams were effective vehicles for accomplishing provincial, district, and school goals. All team aligned their project goals with professional growth plans and their school's three-year plans.
5. The collaborative action inquiry process takes more time and energy than traditional one-shot, episodic professional development. Team members developed a shared understanding of the process, curriculum content, teaching strategies, and assessment strategies prior to resolving some difficult issues surrounding student learning. All teams wrestled with the research question that guided their AISI work. While time consuming, choosing the right question is an *extremely* important component of the collaborative action inquiry process.
6. Varying degrees of conflict are an inevitable part of collaborative activity. Usually, it is not conflict that causes projects to stall, since the ability to resolve conflict is a critical indicator of team effectiveness. Rather, it is *unresolved* conflict that causes teams to disengage. Over the life of this study, team members became increasingly receptive to the idea that they can be more active in helping to resolve team conflicts.

An Unanticipated Link: Collaborative Action Inquiry and Teacher Development Theory

Hall and Hord (1984) have been influential in adapting elements of change theory to educational practice. Their Concerns-Based Adoption Model highlights the necessity of understanding *stages of concern*, *levels of use*, and *innovation configurations* to ensure the successful implementation of an educational innovation. They identify seven different Stages of Concern, as follows:

These range from early “self” type concerns, which are more teacher focused, to “task” concerns, which address the logistics and scheduling arrangements with regard to the use of the innovation, and ultimately to “impact” kinds of concerns, which deal more with increasing the effectiveness of the innovation. Research has indicated that at different points in the change process, different Stages of Concern will be more intense. (p. 13)

Glickman (1993) describes a three-phase process teachers follow when they seek to implement a change. In the *orientation* phase, teachers are concerned about the new skills and knowledge they will have to learn, and the effects the innovation will have on their current practice. During the *integration* phase, teachers concentrate on exploration, implementation, and feedback. In the *refinement* phase, teachers focus more on exploring, brainstorming, trouble-shooting, and problem solving first in their own classrooms, then in their work with colleagues.

A summary of teachers' approaches to change in the school-based collaborative action inquiry projects of this study identifies variations on the processes described by Hall and Hord (1984) and, later, by Glickman (1993). In virtually every case when teams of teachers were first asked to identify some aspect of their classroom practice to which they wanted to devote more attention, a majority of them raised concerns about student behavior. Their first choices for project focus often featured references to “kids who can't sit still”, or “students who can't follow simple directions”, or “students whose moral development is seriously deficient”.

As most teams moved beyond a concern for behavior, they attended more thoughtfully to curriculum content in particular subject areas. For many teachers, this was the first time they had studied their curriculum in such detail and, for many of them, it was a liberating and empowering experience. Many reported that, until their involvement in collaborative action inquiry challenged them to do so, they had not looked so closely at the curriculum, nor understood it so well. This knowledge, gained and shared through collaborative effort, contributed noticeably to teacher confidence and strongly influenced the quality of subsequent conversations about their work.

In addition, the growth in teachers' confidence with assessment was one of the highlights of this study. As the AISI projects evolved, more teachers seemed more willing to enter into discussions about assessment of student learning, discussions with which they were previously uncomfortable.

In turn, greater confidence with assessment allowed teachers to enter into more productive explorations of student learning. At this stage, conversations began about such topics as learning styles, brain-based learning, multiple intelligences, and the more effective use of Individual Education Plans for unique needs students. Townsend and Adams (2009) noted:

As teams of teachers collaborated to stitch together the tapestry of their practice through experimentation, trial-and-error, regular sharing of progress, and increasingly meaningful reflection, they displayed greater curiosity about the ways their colleagues taught, and expressed more interest in information about teaching strategies. Conversations about such topics as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, inquiry-based teaching, the infusion of technology, and general teaching effectiveness occurred more frequently. (p. 115)

At this stage, classroom observations were seen to be more useful, and more likely to occur. There were many requests for demonstrations by teachers who were known to be expert in the use of certain practices. Inter-school visits were more likely to happen and, slowly, exchanges of visits by teachers in the same school became more common. Nevertheless, this was the one area above all others in which teachers displayed the greatest reluctance. The closer teams moved to being able to observe and share their understanding of the quality of teaching and learning happening in their classrooms, the more likely some team members were to seek to avoid that experience.

Figure 2 describes the progression of concerns for teachers participating in the collaborative action inquiry projects of this study. Regardless of experience, subject or grade specialization, gender, or size of school, the stages of concern demonstrated by teachers in this study were remarkably consistent.

MY OWN TEACHING

How does constructivist teaching affect my students' engagement levels? What do I do during class time to minimize the gap between high and low achieving students?

OTHERS' TEACHING

How do successful teachers get all students to achieve? Who are some of the teachers who are successfully differentiating their instruction?

CURRICULUM CONTENT

What are the essential learnings in my content area? How can I ensure my students are ready for standardized tests?

ASSESSMENT

What is the difference between assessment for and of learning? How can I be sure that using a variety of assessment strategies will positively impact my students' test scores?

STUDENT LEARNING

How does brain-based teaching impact my students' learning? How do individual learning styles impact my subject area?

Adapted from *The Essential Equation: A Handbook for School Improvement*, Townsend & Adams, 2009

Figure 2: Progression of Focus and Concerns for Teachers Participating in Collaborative Inquiry

From Others' to My Own Teaching

Teachers' concerns about their own classroom practice, their overall lack of willingness to let others see how they teach, their lack of trust, and their limited confidence in any process that places attention on the quality of teaching and learning occurring in any one classroom all point to the resilience of norms of isolation and privatism that have characterized public education for generations. Some teams were seen to go to extreme lengths to avoid any form of classroom exchange.

Less than half the teachers in this study were open to sharing their classroom practices with colleagues. Those teachers were fairly evenly distributed among schools, grade levels, and subject areas. Clearly, many teachers still believe that any form of classroom observation is a

form of teacher evaluation and, even within a collaborative action inquiry structure, seek to avoid processes that threaten to impose changes in teaching practice.

Conclusion

Many teachers in this study of AISI projects and processes increased their exposure to alternative forms of professional development through collaborative action inquiry. They accepted greater responsibility for demonstrating connections between changes in teaching practice and improvements in student learning. In doing so, they expanded their professional knowledge and skill, contributed to an exponential increase in professional reading, and helped produce an impressive array of new learning and teaching resources.

Of course, evidence shows that the rate of change in teaching practice and other aspects of school improvement is uneven, generally slow, and difficult to sustain. Evidence also shows that collaboration within the school site may be more fraught with difficulty than has previously been identified. More positive findings show that involvement in school-based collaborative action inquiry promotes greater awareness and use of curriculum documents and assessment strategies. In addition, participating teachers express increased confidence in their roles as researchers in their own schools and classrooms.

Finally, many teachers do not welcome exchanges of classroom visits when they are trying to adopt new teaching practices in a collaborative action inquiry process. While accepting demonstrations by experts as an appropriate learning strategy, they tend to resist group sharing and peer coaching models in favor of individual trial-and-error methods. Apparently, many teachers are more willing to rely on external or standardized measures of student learning as evidence of their teaching skill than they are to share their evolving practice with other interested educators. Those colleagues who were not part of collaborative action inquiry teams often viewed with suspicion those teachers who engaged in exchanges of classroom visits. Even in schools where classroom observations have been made an integral part of evidence gathering, questions of sustainability remain.

In summary, collaborative action inquiry and other forms of action research are complex, collaboratively facilitated processes with student and teacher learning at the heart, and the quality of relationships as one yardstick of success. While, in practice, the process may not often achieve the levels of critical analysis that some promote, it frequently succeeds in providing participants with intellectual experiences that are illuminative rather than prescriptive, and empowering rather than coercive.

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