

“Isn’t This Just MORE Work?”
Collaborative Action Inquiry as Professional Development
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Introduction

In the last decade, North American public schools have been confronted with an unprecedented volume of external mandates for change. Re-development of leadership capacity and re-culturing of schools to accommodate demands for accountability are now among the biggest challenges facing educators. In response to such challenges, a belief has evolved within the education community that *inquiry*, as a method of developing professional responsibility, is a key strategy to help groups of teachers and schools achieve the goal of improved student learning. Almost simultaneously, the concept of the *learning community* has achieved a level of prominence unequaled by any other model for school improvement.

While success in public schooling is not accidental, all its contributing factors are neither clearly understood nor generally affirmed by the educational community. This paper describes a study of professional development and school improvement in one rural school jurisdiction that implemented a collaborative inquiry model. The process involved a variation of conventional action research to collect evidence of school-based accomplishments and current practices that could direct individual, school, and jurisdictional growth. Moreover, a culture of inquiry was promoted in each of seven schools to establish valuable support for professional development strategies that had *learning for all* as the primary outcome.

This paper provides details of the collaborative action inquiry model that was undertaken in seven schools, and offers perceptions of participating teachers about the relative value and challenges of professional development as collaborative inquiry.

The Guiding Question

In school-based research, identifying the “right” question is as necessary as collecting the “right” data. In this study, crafting a research question that was thorough, succinct, and able to accommodate the diverse interests of researchers and school team members was a difficult, but defining, task. The work of crafting the research question helped set key guidelines and directions for data collection while unveiling the values, beliefs, and teaching philosophies of team members. Lengthy, rich, and often challenging conversations were made all the more complex by the context and history of each school. Norms and mores of acceptable professional behavior, the role of professional development, the relative value of collegiality versus collaboration, and the relationship between

professional development and student learning were among the many topics that surfaced when teams struggled to compose a research question that was relevant, unique, and aligned with larger school and jurisdictional goals.

Ultimately, the activities and observations that comprised this study explored a comprehensive answer to the following question:

In what ways, and to what extent, does an increased emphasis on collaborative inquiry-based teacher professional development contribute to improvements in student learning?

Related Literature

This project linked aspects of action research and collaborative inquiry with effective professional development and school improvement. Literature on school improvement and change (Earl & Lee, 1999; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 2000) indicates that schools move forward when they are able to align many *internal* variables such as mission, vision, goals, values, culture, structure, knowledge, and resources with *external* variables such as policy initiatives, funding, expertise, and expectations. This challenge requires commitment, energy, enthusiasm, and strong leadership at all levels of the organization (Lambert, 2003). Schools that progress are most likely to be those that purposefully limit and focus their exposure to innovation, concentrate on carefully agreed-upon goals, and use learnings to guide future action. Such schools are increasingly referred to as learning organizations (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000), learning communities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004), or communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

The term *collaborative action inquiry* integrates action research literature with the work of authors (Barth, 1990; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994) who contend that school improvement can best be achieved by teams of educators working toward improvements in practice in functional teams. The following figure (Adams, 2006) describes the collaborative action inquiry process employed in this study.

Figure 1

A Model of Collaborative Action Inquiry INSERT HERE

Collaborative Action Inquiry

In this project, the term *action research* presented semantic difficulties for some teams because of their experiences with externally mandated school improvement initiatives that prescribed data collection for accountability purposes rather than for growth and learning. Accordingly, the term *collaborative action inquiry* was adopted to describe the activities of teachers-as-researchers.

What is Collaborative Action Inquiry?

This type of professional development begins when a group of educators commits to exploring and answering a compelling question through a cycle of examination, experimentation, exploration, and public reflection (Argyris, 1985; Bray, 2002; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Emihovich, 2000; Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Jarvis, 1999). Common threads such as the value of experience, the importance of relationships, and pragmatic sustainability are woven into collaborative inquiry. All participants bring to the process a variety of experiences that are integral to success. All experiences and knowledge are seen as equally valuable and provide alternative filters through which to view the inquiry.

Authentic collaborative inquiry is most likely to unfold when team members form relationships based on trust and interdependence, and when participants bring with them effective communication skills and a common vernacular that enhances generative conversations. A climate of safety and support encourages risk: sharing new ideas and active engagement in collaborative discourse as opposed to congenial discussion (Huffman & Kalnin, 2003; Sagor, 2000). While differing opinions are inevitable, inherent in the process is the use of gathered evidence to resolve differences of perception. As Huffman and Kalnin (2003) observe “Even in the face of disagreement [researchers] claim their emphasis on data-based decisions and arguments [can refocus] the debates onto evidence to support decisions about teaching, rather than just opinion” (p. 573). Regardless of team composition, collaborative inquiry is most effective when initiated by passionate individuals driven “to learn their way out of workplace difficulties” (Bray, 2002, p. 84). Collaborative groups may include academics, teachers, administrators, and others having various levels of experience.

Since collaborative inquiry is a form of action research, the process follows a basic cyclical format (McNiff, 2002). The journey begins when researchers identify an area of concern relating to their practice. The single biggest challenge is the next step --- pinpointing an unambiguous but deeply interesting research question. Next comes searching the literature, contemplating and communicating personal experiences, choosing a research method, and making decisions about data collection (Argyris, 1985; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). A professional habit of asking questions about---and providing evidence of---teaching practice is formed and, as the process repeats, progress is made towards the goal of school improvement based on student learning.

Why Choose Collaborative Inquiry?

Collaborative inquiry focuses on questions most relevant to the participant-researchers who create them (McTaggart, 2003). By successfully engaging in collaborative inquiry, practioners can

enjoy improved teaching practices, increased confidence, better collaborative skills and a sense of empowerment (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Zeichner, 2003). Additionally, collaboration with other staff members can help break down the walls that often isolate educators from each other (Butler et al, 2004). As teachers master the skills associated with collaboration they begin to function more as a team --- sharing, encouraging, and supporting each other (Emihovich, 2000). This sense of identity and belonging can have a profound impact on school culture. When working together, teachers can overcome difficulties that may have previously appeared insurmountable. This sense of *teamness* impacts the school culture as teachers develop a greater sense of efficacy and, together, accept responsibility for confronting challenges in positive ways.

The Process of Collaborative Inquiry

Teams in this study were involved with three types of professional development experiences: internal team meetings, external team meetings, and district level meetings.

School Team Meetings

School teams were provided one half-day each month to complete tasks related to their project goals, and specific to their focus question. This included activities such as gathering and analyzing data regarding target students, preparing and sharing learning resources, creating instruments for assessment, visiting others' classrooms, planning interdisciplinary and school-wide events, curriculum audits, and developing and updating lesson plans. Most internal team activities resulted from decisions made in previous external team meetings and were job-embedded opportunities to "get the project's work done."

External Team Meetings

School teams were provided an additional half-day each month to meet with university researchers and central office administrators. Conversations in these external team meetings revolved around three guiding questions:

- What have we done to move the project ahead?
- What can we learn from those experiences?
- What will we do next to achieve the project goals?

Each external team meeting resulted in a Record of Decisions that would guide team activities for the upcoming month. These meetings were job-embedded opportunities to "make sense of the project's work."

District Level Meetings

This collaborative inquiry process required opportunities for all participants to share and celebrate their learning and their successes. Accordingly, three district-wide meetings were scheduled at regular intervals in each of the three years of the project.

Participant Perceptions

Teachers and administrators in each school team provided mid-study and end-of-study written responses to the research question.

At the mid-point of the study, a majority of participant responses made reference to the impact of collaborative inquiry on classroom practice. Specifically, teachers commented that this type of professional development helped them understand and implement strategies and programs to meet student needs, informed them of current best practice, and supported them in creating new ideas about effective teaching. For example, one respondent indicated that collaborative inquiry “Helps teachers learn how to create strategies to meet individual student needs.” Another stated “[Collaborative inquiry] helps teachers develop a greater understanding of curriculum and learning outcomes which leads to the development of programs and application of strategies that enhance student achievement and learning.”

Other teachers assessed the impact of the collaborative inquiry process on professional interpersonal relationships. Their responses indicated that this model of professional development helped focus professional conversations and gave direction for teacher growth. They felt that collaborative inquiry increased enthusiasm and confidence. For example, one respondent stated, “It promotes greater teacher enthusiasm which, in turn, encourages greater student engagement in learning.” Another said, “It helps teachers collaborate and learn from their peers” and a third noted it “initiates professional conversations among staff members.”

At the end of the study, participants’ responses to the same question varied slightly. Several references were made to the impact of collaborative inquiry on sustaining positive professional relations. Teachers and administrators noted that this process worked most effectively when “everyone was on the same page.” The opportunity to share ideas and to learn from each other was highlighted by two teams, while one team concluded “more gets done” when schools use the collaborative inquiry process. One school team reported that their involvement helped improve relations with Central Office administration. One principal observed, “Communication is always a big problem” and, on the same staff a teacher noted, “The external team meetings keep us connected with the broader educational

community.” However, several participants noted the difficulty in translating the benefits of the process to other staff members and in convincing other staff members to become involved.

Another set of end-of-study participant responses focused on the role of collaborative inquiry in introducing and sustaining innovative practices. Several teams noted that participation in collaborative inquiry builds teachers’ knowledge, promotes best practices, and generates new ideas. Two teams observed that the process is a sustainable one because it “teaches new knowledge and introduces new teaching practices” in ways that are more likely to encourage participants to try innovations in their own classrooms.

Several participants noted connections between their involvement in collaborative inquiry and changes in classroom practice. For example, one teacher commented, “When students are given more choice and variety, they are more ready to learn.” Another observed, “This process works better when the target students are more clearly identified.” A secondary school teacher stated, “I see the increasing relationships between teaching practice, assessment, curriculum, and reporting.” Yet another maintained, “[Collaborative inquiry] is an effective way of engaging in professional growth and changing professional practice.”

All schools indicated that the collaborative inquiry process had an impact on the school culture, and several pointed out the challenges and difficulties of this type of professional development. One noted, “Engagement in the collaborative inquiry process helps break down isolation and increases team members’ accountability to each other.” An elementary teacher wrote, “Our participation increases our credibility and confidence when dealing with other staff members.” A high school teacher observed that, “Job-embeddedness presents some difficulties....when only one teacher may be responsible for one subject across many grades including grades with [external] exams. Sometimes I wondered if it was worth the time to collaborate.” (In fact, student results on externally mandated achievement examinations improved in five of seven schools).

Conclusion

Any research methodology brought to schools from the outside has the capacity to cause distress. Traditionally, schools have been places where the hard work of teaching gets done on a daily basis, while inquiry and study has been something that gets done *to* schools and teachers by people who stand outside and above the daily grind. The methods used in this study invited teachers and principals to be active participants in the work of school improvement *and* the research that accompanied it.

The collaborative inquiry model asks teachers to *question* some aspect of their teaching practice. Many teachers already have far more questions about teaching than they have answers, and feel uncomfortable casting doubt upon their classroom practices. This is a clear challenge of the research and development model examined in this study. The collaborative inquiry model places emphasis on evidence-based practice, making explicit the expectation that teachers will be purposeful and consistent in gathering and sharing persuasive evidence that the efforts they are making in their classrooms are having a direct, observable, and measurable impact on their students. While most teachers are extremely competent in recording student progress and diagnosing student learning needs, evidence-based practice demands a focus and frequency that is not so common in schools.

The collaborative inquiry model is cyclical. School teams are expected to engage in monthly reflection and action. In this regard, the work of the external team is critical. However, the composition of the external team brings with it some potential to raise the levels of concern of teachers and administrators, along with its ability to provide useful advice, expertise, direction and support. For example, university researchers --- with their emphasis on data, evidence, and publication --- can induce resistance in schools that works against the achievement of project goals. In reality, school teams have to struggle to protect any time set aside for research-related activities against the erosion generated by the random and capricious demands of a normal school day.

Teacher involvement in collaborative inquiry is not without its difficulties. A primary obstacle is the perception by some teachers and administrators that research is yet another addition to teacher workload. Providing sufficient time and dealing with the problem of integrating that time with teaching responsibilities during the workday is the single biggest obstacle to collaborative inquiry. Learning technical research skills while continuing to teach is another common source of frustration. Collaborative research requires a different mindset from that typically required of teachers. Sustaining work on projects for more than one year, collaborating with colleagues, and sharing failures as much as successes can be challenging in the context of conventional schools. Sample retention is yet another reality that cannot be overlooked, as the loss of even one or two key team members can limit success. Finally, collaborative research that is done too quickly does not appear to evolve past preliminary technical exploration into actual improvement of teaching practice. This process requires explicit administrative support in the form of resources, active participation, and job-embedded or release time to ensure quality time and space for research and reflection to occur.

There is little evidence to support a one-size-fits-all model of professional development for school improvement. Approaches that enhance teaching practice and increase student learning are neither expedient nor reducible to simple prescription. However, this collaborative inquiry model

promotes professional development that is differentiated, job-embedded, and allows teacher learning to take place at the school site. It re-focuses the daily challenges of teaching so that professional development does not create *more* work...it *becomes* the work.

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