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From Action Research to Collaborative Inquiry
A framework for researchers and practitioners

Following a brief history of the action research movement in Alberta, including its role in the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), this article focuses on a model of collaborative inquiry that has been embraced by teams of educators in several districts as they support and promote higher levels of teaching effectiveness. Two recent studies that incorporated the collaborative inquiry model are described. Both studies conclude that well-planned, personalized, and coordinated professional learning using a collaborative inquiry approach has a profound influence on district culture, school and district leadership, classroom practice and student learning.

Gordon Thomas, Executive Secretary of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, notes in Collaborative Action Research: Experiences and Reflections that the Association first published a monograph on action research in 1959 – early days indeed for that movement in Canada. But by the mid-1990s, participation in action research in Alberta school jurisdictions remained limited – though some school and district teams were certainly experimenting with the general process of action research. Due in part to misunderstandings and misuses of action research as a social science methodology, the reliability of results varied dramatically across the province, and participants’ claims that they were “doing action research” often did not hold up to scrutiny. Alberta was facing circumstances similar to those described by Kemmis as primary reasons why action research all but disappeared from North America in the 1950s. He contended that when it came to be viewed as amateur research, action research lost attraction for academics and teachers alike, albeit for different reasons. In 2000, the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) contributed to a revitalization of action research as a more respected and appropriately applied methodology for exploring educational issues. For almost 13 years, AISI provided financial support to projects designed to enhance student learning and teacher professional development. In excess of $750 million in additional government funding stimulated a level of interest and engagement in school-based research that many had published findings that impacted educational policy and transformed classroom instruction. (Note: The Alberta government discontinued AISI funding in 2012-2013).

The collaborative inquiry approach
More recently, schools across Alberta have begun using an adaptation of action research referred to as collaborative inquiry. Collaborative inquiry is initiated when teams of educators commit to exploring and answering compelling questions about their professional practice. As a result of engagement in collaborative inquiry, Alberta educators have documented enhanced instructional practices, increased confidence, improved collaborative skills, and heightened empowerment.
Additionally, collaborative inquiry has been found to contribute to a de-privatization of educators’ professional learning. As participants master the skills of collaborative inquiry, they encourage and support each other; they build a sense of identity and belonging that profoundly impacts school culture; they become increasingly efficacious; and they accept greater responsibility for more effectively confronting educational challenges.

**The context**
We have been conducting action research in Alberta for the last 15 years, engaging in studies with 150 schools from 15 jurisdictions. Of greatest importance, we believe, is that we were present in schools, observing educators’ participation in action research and evolving a practical model of collaborative inquiry (see “A Model of Action Research,” p. 15). Our involvement ranged from episodic advice to regular monthly meetings sustained over periods ranging up to four years; from helping with data collection, analysis, and report writing to sharing classroom observations; and from large-scale workshops to intensive mentoring. At its core, our research during this period focused on principles of adult learning, teaching effectiveness, and school improvement. Since 2010, our focus has shifted to several district-wide studies that employ a collaborative inquiry model to build leadership capacity and enhance instructional practice. These have been funded on a cost-shared basis by Alberta Education and individual school districts. A brief description of two of these studies follows.

**Study #1: Using collaborative inquiry to personalize and coordinate professional learning**
From September 2010 to May 2012, over 175 teachers, administrators, central office staff, and student teachers across five school jurisdictions were involved in one of four interrelated collaborative inquiry studies. Consistent with the organic nature of action research, each had a slightly different focus, yet all participants were engaged in generating qualitative and quantitative data to answer the question, “In what ways does implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated professional learning plan impact organizational change, teaching practice, and student learning outcomes in Alberta schools?” Project foci were:

**Principles of Principals’ Inquiry:** School administrators sought to understand how they might more effectively plan, implement, and sustain meaningful professional learning for themselves and how the use of a collaborative inquiry model might support and enhance teaching effectiveness.

**Inquiry into Induction:** University of Lethbridge student teachers completed their final 14-week practicum by participating in inquiry-based professional learning that guided their work as novice teacher-as-researchers, and shared the results with schools and government.

**Curriculum-Driven Inquiry:** Science teachers from three school jurisdictions explored the extent to which a collaborative inquiry process impacted their implementation of new curriculum and alternative instructional strategies.
Mentorship as Collaborative Inquiry: Five curriculum lead teachers at an urban high school assumed the role of cross-curricular mentors, exploring characteristics of peer mentoring most likely to support and enhance teacher professional learning.

Study #2: Developing school leadership through collaborative inquiry
This study documented best practices in facilitating administrative instructional leadership, highlighting the challenges associated with developing leadership capacity at the school district level. Study findings contributed to the refinement of a model of professional learning tailored to meet the needs of central office educational leaders. The study focused on two research questions: "What school leadership behaviours are most closely associated with teacher engagement in the pursuit of enhanced teaching effectiveness?" and "What do effective central office administrators do to plan, initiate, and sustain professional learning for themselves and for their school leaders?" The collaborative inquiry implemented in this study included 41 school administrative teams (principals and vice/assistant principals). Research was guided by assumptions that the district leadership team could, and should, have a direct positive impact on students’ learning; to do so, central office administrators would have to ensure that every school leader possessed the skills, the knowledge, and the will to lead the learning in schools. Instructional leadership became the organizing theme of this research project.

The process explained
Crafting a research question that is inclusive, yet succinct, is a difficult but essential task in beginning a collaborative inquiry, particularly when team members have diverse interests, roles, and professional curiosities. Lengthy and challenging conversations are often necessary to reach agreement on a question that reflects the values, beliefs, and perspectives of participants. Such discussions are made all the more complex by team members’ levels of willingness to explore direct links between instructional practice and student learning. Beyond that, the process is simple in conception: everyone involved in the collaborative inquiry commits to a research question and a yearly plan that is aligned with provincial, district, school, and personal goals as they relate to student learning. In early meetings, wide-ranging discussions about goals, strategies, and measures helped most participants arrive at a guiding question, the answers to which would provide useful evidence of the extent to which their goal(s) had been achieved. In our role as external researchers, we visited each participant group no fewer than six times every year to provide support and guidance, identify growth, and offer and receive feedback. These sessions used, as an elegant framework for conversation, the following three questions:

1. What have you done in the past 30 days to achieve your goal(s) or answer your inquiry question?

2. What have you learned from your activities specific to the achievement of your goal(s)?

3. What will you commit to doing in the next 30 days to progress toward your goal or to further answer your inquiry question?
A synthesis of findings
It's not hard to imagine how most participants in both studies wrestled with aspects of this process. At times, some felt they were being pushed too hard; some felt they were being evaluated; some became frustrated when their efforts did not produce immediate or discernible results; some thought about disengaging. Throughout, we offered continued support, avoiding unnecessary judgment or criticism, probing for alternative courses of action, and sharing evidence of similar experiences in other schools. Months passed. Trust grew. With more trust came more risk-taking, and more collaboration. Confidence blossomed. New skills were refined. Slowly but inexorably, the focus of each project began shifting to students in classrooms. In the end, participants reported that they came to understand collaborative inquiry as an important strategy that helped them reflect on their practice in an environment of mutual support and respect. They recognized the value of maintaining a sustained and purposeful focus on increasing students' learning. When asked to identify aspects of the collaborative inquiry process most beneficial to their growth, teachers, school leaders, and central office administrators alike identified six characteristics:

- **Sustained rather than episodic**
  At its worst, action research may be synonymous with professional development (PD) experienced as a single terminal event. In these studies, a commitment to sustained learning allowed educators to concentrate on critical areas of exploration long enough to incorporate into practice essential instructional skills, evidenced by enhanced student learning.

- **Shared responsibility rather than external accountability**
  Mandatory attendance at centrally organized PD events offers no guarantee that new ideas will find their way into educators' practice; nor does reading a book selected by the superintendent. During these studies, professional learning occurred under an ethos of shared responsibility, and participants assumed greater ownership of the direction and results of their efforts.

- **Here rather than there**
  It may be argued that the impact of traditional PD models is inversely proportionate to the distance from the classroom or school. The converse seemed to apply in these studies: when collaborative inquiry was site-embedded, matters of context were more fully attended to and, accordingly, professional learning was more likely to be integrated into classroom practice.

- **Differentiated rather than mass-produced**
  Conventional PD efficiently and simultaneously delivers identical content to hundreds of educators. The collaborative inquiry model used in these studies incorporated differentiated and personalized approaches in which small teams of educators concentrated their professional learning on those aspects of practice unique to their contexts and challenges.

- **Inquiry-based rather than didactic**
  Most PD has relied on a "telling curriculum." Alternatively, collaborative inquiry is predicated on an organic, curiosity-based curriculum evolving from the pressing questions to which educators in these studies were most immediately seeking answers.
• Shared rather than private
Ironically, mass-offered PD opportunities tend to intensify norms of isolation and privatism among educators. Conversely, educators in these studies engaged in and shared professional learning in diverse, yet collaborative ways.

The impact of collaborative inquiry
Over the four years of these two studies, participants improved their ability to work as a team, to listen, help solve problems, and deal with conflict. They strengthened their professional relationships, became more knowledgeable, and were able to demonstrate improvements in practice. At the level of the school, effective leaders promoted and supported the formation and development of teams of teachers in response to needs identified through the collaborative inquiry process. Schools in this research also showed the capacity to create more functional teams, confirming that shared leadership grows in a culture of collaboration driven by purposeful inquiry. Furthermore, these studies have demonstrated that well-planned, personalized, and coordinated professional learning using a collaborative inquiry approach has a profound influence on district culture, school and district leadership, classroom practice and student learning. As the superintendent of one jurisdiction explained: “We are no longer focusing on certain students. They are all our students, and we want success for all of them. It’s coming. Our high school completion numbers have risen steadily, starting around 72 percent three years ago, and reaching 81 percent right now... As well, on every measure on provincial achievement tests in Grades 3, 6 and 9, our students have shown improvements against the provincial averages over the last two years, and our improvements in literacy are a driving factor. I expect all those averages to keep rising. Finally, in the area of inclusion, and personalized learning, we have never been more successful.” The quality of collaborative inquiry continues to improve for educators who are willing to commit to a process of learning that is characterized by professional discipline, respect for colleagues, and a genuine curiosity about evidence. Successful projects in Alberta are clearly evidence-generating, contributing valuable and useable new knowledge about this process to an ever more receptive field in which the continuous improvement of schools — not simply student scores on external exams — is the ultimate goal.

A Model of Action Research

1. Define the focus or the problem. Ask the “right” questions (e.g. What is the next thing I have to know more about in my work, or my classroom, or in my teaching?). Team membership begins to take shape, as common goals and needs are shared. Reflection has already begun.

2. Collect information. Read the literature, consult with colleagues, and talk with experts and others with experience. Reflection continues.

3. Make sense of the information. What is relevant? What is doable? What can be modified to suit particular circumstances? What must be done with conflicting information?

4. Report and discuss. Preliminary conclusions and potential courses of action need to be shared.
5. **Plan action.** A written plan should be one of the products of this stage. Team members make more purposeful decisions about goals, strategies, measures, and evidence of success. Each plan is guided by a question.

6. **Take action.** Put plans into effect. Reflection in and on action, alone and with colleagues, helps clarify provisional answers to the guiding question.

7. **Collect information.** Document carefully. Meet to share information regularly.

8. **Analyze and evaluate in a continuous way.** Try to make sense of what’s happening, and why. Refocus as necessary. Persevere. In effect, each meeting of the team attends to the following three questions: What have we done? What can we learn from that? What will we do next?

9. **Assess achievements.** Use all the evidence available to determine what has been accomplished, what may have gone wrong, and why.

10. **Publish results and conclusions.** Share within and beyond the group, beyond the school, beyond the district. Let other educators know what’s happening.

11. **Celebrate.** Not only at the end, but whenever it is appropriate to do so, honour the learning and the successes of adults and students alike.

12. **Future action.** Move the process into its next logical phase, in harmony with the rhythms of the school year and the needs of participants.

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**About the author(s)**

**Pamela Adams**
Pamela Adams, PhD, taught in junior and senior high schools for 17 years before being seconded to the University of Lethbridge in 1997, where she is presently an Associate Professor. Pamela has conducted several research studies throughout Alberta in over 100 schools on leadership, teaching effectiveness, and essential conditions for professional learning. Her recent book with David Townsend is entitled *The Essential Equation: A Handbook for School Improvement*.

**David Townsend**
David Townsend, PhD, was an Associate Professor at the University of Lethbridge and has been involved in school improvement initiatives in Alberta since 1985. His current work in Chinook’s Edge School Division and Red Deer Public Schools has produced rich findings on the many different ways school and district leaders can influence student learning.