

ACTION RESEARCH: FACILITATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

MONOGRAPH



The Alberta Teachers' Association

Action Research: Facilitation and Implementation

Monograph

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Foreword

Dr David Townsend from the University of Lethbridge has written this monograph for the Association. Dr Townsend has many years of experience conducting and facilitating action research in education in Alberta. The introductory chapter provides the reader with a historical overview of the development of action research in the field of education. This is followed by a discussion of a variety of commonly used action research processes. The monograph concludes with a case study based on Dr Townsend's work facilitating action research projects in Chinook's Edge School Division No 73 1999–2000.

Action research is a valuable professional development strategy that teachers can use in developing their individual professional growth plans. As well, many schools and districts are using action research as a strategy for school improvement activities. This monograph is the third in a series of recent publications focusing on action research. *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities: Grades 7 to 12* is a report of nine action research projects conducted in Chinook's Edge Local No 17 and *Action Research Guide for Alberta Teachers* is a handbook to support teachers in planning and conducting action research. This monograph, *Action Research: Facilitation and Implementation*, is intended to provide background information and support to educational leaders who engage in the process of facilitating action research projects.

On behalf of the Alberta Teachers' Association, I wish to express my thanks to Dr David Townsend for sharing his expertise and offering us some insight into the challenges and rewards of action research facilitation. His enthusiasm and continued work on action research are appreciated by the teachers of Alberta.

Charles Hyman
Executive Secretary

2001 06

Introduction

Action Research in Alberta

In the public school system of Alberta in the last 40 years, action research has enjoyed only brief moments of currency and attention. For example, it could be argued that the sparse curricula of the early 1970s were part of a Canadian reaction to the teacher-as-curriculum-developer and the teacher-as-researcher experiments that were occurring around the same time in the United Kingdom. These were the British initiatives, based in part on the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), that first attracted some of the world's most resilient action researchers to the field. Among them were John Elliott and Clem Adelman, whose works and influence have been recognized internationally for more than 25 years.

Some examples of Alberta teachers exploring the uses of action research were apparent in the jurisdictions that got deeply involved in objective-based education (OBE), again in the 1970s. Teams of educators spent thousands of extra hours trying to create lists of learning objectives for every topic in the core curriculum, particularly in mathematics and language arts. They became co-learners in their own and others' classrooms as they sought to transform curriculum content into student learning through new teaching strategies. Almost simultaneously, many of them had their first pragmatic experience with the political dimensions of action research, so well described in later years by authors such as Wilfred Carr, Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart, John Elliott, John Smyth and Jack Whitehead.

Jack Whitehead (2000, 21) concluded his address to the faculty of education at Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, with a challenge to educators to face "the hard-nosed recognition of the importance of the economic and political context in which your values as educators are being lived." In the early days, few Alberta teachers suspected their sincere and conscientious action research efforts might land them in difficulty with both their colleagues and their leaders.

Most of the introductory Alberta initiatives were short-lived and only marginally successful. They did not promote a generalized interest in, or even much awareness of, action research as a way for teachers to organize important parts of their professional lives. Perhaps, as Christopher Day (1993) observed 20 years later in writing about his experiences in England, limited success and a level of reflection consistent with forms of technical action research were all that could

be expected from the “short-burst learning opportunities” created by most inservice and professional development activities sponsored by central educational authorities.

In Alberta in 1981, the massive implementation of an inquiry-based social studies curriculum once again gave relatively large numbers of educators a compelling reason to try some alternative practices that were just then emerging into the broader public domain. Various forms of inquiry were being encouraged in faculties of education across North America. Terms such as *phenomenology* and *critical theory* were being heard and used for the first time by increasing numbers of graduate students, who took back into their schools a preference for doing things differently.

Even so, changes in practices at the school level caused only faint ripples, which went largely unnoticed by the great majority of teachers. In 1988, for example, when I was engaged by four Alberta school jurisdictions to help initiate action research activities in 34 schools, I found that only a handful of the more than 200 teachers with whom I started to work had even heard of action research. Then, three years later, when most of those projects were winding down, it was as though action research had had its moment in the sun, and it was now time to move on to the next big, new idea, which, I recall, was outcomes-based education in several jurisdictions and inclusion of children with special needs in a few others. In no instance were any serious connections drawn between the new ideas and the potential of action research to play a part in the continuing teacher development that would have to accompany any change.

Of course, action research did not fade away completely. As more and more of Alberta’s educators got involved in graduate studies, both in Canada and the United States, more of them were attracted to action research and became progressively more successful in taking the theory and practice of action research back into schools. By the early 1990s there were pockets of action research functioning in many Alberta school districts. Texts had been published and conferences sponsored by Alberta academics, most notably Terry Carson of the University of Alberta. A few jurisdictions were beginning to use action research as a key strategy in promoting teacher professional development and the publication of action research results by teachers, schools and districts was becoming more commonplace.

Within a few years, most regional educational consortia were offering teachers small financial incentives to start action research projects in their own schools. This strategy was more or less successful, depending on the levels of awareness and readiness of the teachers involved. In one consortium region in 1997–98, for example, one school principal was the only applicant for funding—and was able to secure additional

funding for her school because of that. The Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73 case study, reported in detail in a later section of this monograph, was based on the work that began with that one principal's initiative.

In 1997, the introduction into the Alberta school system of a new teacher growth, supervision and evaluation policy, with its strong emphasis on teachers as reflective practitioners, gave some impetus to action research in schools, but it is the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) that seems to have moved action research, at last, into the educational mainstream. AISI, a project supported by all major educational partners in Alberta, will inject an additional \$66 million per year into the school system, for at least the next three years (2000–2003), for approved projects that show evidence of teacher growth and student learning. At approximately \$120 per student per year, AISI funding is influential enough to ensure that every school district has submitted project proposals and that a majority of schools will have staff members engaged in AISI-related activities over the next three years.

Perhaps for the first time ever in Alberta, funding, readiness, expertise and commitment may all be lined up in support of action research. Certainly there has never been a time of greater professional and financial support for Alberta teachers if they choose to engage in action research, both as part of their professional growth plans and through AISI. Furthermore, knowledge about and interest in action research has probably never been greater. Through AISI, then, Alberta educators may well find better ways to exercise greater control over the agenda of their working lives, greater opportunity to express their individual and collective voices and more effective ways of making their personal contributions to a growing professional dialogue.

Definitions of Action Research

In *How We Think*, Dewey (1910, 98) identifies five phases of reflective thought that appear to parallel the commonly identified stages of action research: suggestion, intellectualization, hypothesizing, reasoning and testing the hypothesis by action. Carr and Kemmis (1986, 162) suggest that action research is simply a form of self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

Carr and Kemmis argue that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: first, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; second, the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing

and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; third, the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control over the process (pp. 165–66).

According to Schmuck (1997, 28), action research is planned inquiry—a deliberate search for truth, information or knowledge. It consists of both self-reflective inquiry, which is internal and subjective, and inquiry-oriented practice, which is external and data-based. Rapoport (1970, 499), on the other hand, describes action research as an activity that aims to contribute both to the practical aims of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable framework.

For Corey (1953, 6), action research is the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct and evaluate their decisions and actions and, to Calhoun (1994, 21), action research is a fancy way of saying, “Let’s study what’s happening in our school and see if we can make it a better place.”

Whitehead (2000, 15–16) offers the following working definition of action research which he attributes to Altrichter and others (1990):

If yours is a situation in which:

People reflect and improve (or develop) their own work and their own situations by tightly interlinking their reflection and their action
And also making their experience public not only to other participants but also to other persons interested in and concerned about the work and the situation, i.e. their (public) theories and practices of the work and the situation

And if yours is a situation in which there is increasingly:

Data-gathering by participants themselves (or with the help of others) in relation to their own questions

Participation (in problem-posing and in answering questions) in decision-making

Power-sharing and the relative suspension of hierarchical ways of working towards industrial democracy

Collaboration among members of the group as a ‘critical community’

Self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-management by autonomous and responsible persons and groups

Learning progressively (and publicly) by doing and by making mistakes in a ‘self-reflective’ spiral of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, replanning etc.

Reflection which supports the idea of the ‘(self-)reflective practitioner’

Then yours is a situation in which ACTION RESEARCH is occurring.

A Short History of Action Research

Who originated the term *action research*? The world's authorities on the subject offer differing answers to this question. Stephen Corey (1953), one of the first authors to connect action research to school improvement, suggests that a former Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the United States (Collier 1945) was one of the first writers to use the expression. Alternatively, Emily Calhoun (1994, 7) states that action research derives from the work of Kurt Lewin (often pronounced "Leveen") and others engaged in the development of a collective problem-solving cycle for improving life in organizations. Richard Schmuck (1997, 20) contends that it was Lewin who coined the terms *field theory* and *action research*. Similarly, Chein, Cook and Harding (1948) refer to Lewin as the founder of action research, while McFarland and Stansell (1993) assert that it is Lewin who is most often credited with its origination.

Other authors offer additional evidence and opinions. McKernan (1996, 8) argues that there is documentation of the use of action research by a host of social reformist initiatives prior to the Lewinian conceptualization and he, too, acknowledges the authorship of Collier. Kemmis (1993), while confirming the role that Lewin has played, posits the notion that when Lewin moved to the United States he may have carried into his work there the influence of Jacob L. Moreno, the inventor of group dynamics, sociodrama and psychodrama, with whom he had developed a close collegial relationship. Moreno is credited by some writers with early uses of the term *action research*. Kolb (1984) is one of many writers who credits John Dewey with an important contribution to the development of action research, although none actually suggests his authorship of the term. Dewey's "five stages of scientific reflective thinking" match quite closely the structures of many models of action research.

Rarely mentioned by North American authors, but well-known to a small and dedicated group of educators in Canada, is the work of Reginald Revans and the Revans Institute in the United Kingdom. Revans (1982) is unarguably the father of *action learning*, a process of personal growth and social action that bears many similarities to some forms of action research and that was first promoted in 1938, several years before references to action research began to appear in social science literature.

McKernan (1996, 9) traces a history of action research from its roots in the Science in Education Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, through experimentalist and progressive schools of thought, as articulated most particularly by John Dewey, and into the Group Dynamics Movement that saw Kurt Lewin and his associates promote action research as a form of legitimate inquiry for social scientists. He goes on to note that a lot of postwar curriculum reconstructionist activity, of the kind led by Stephen Corey, followed an action research agenda and that an intensive period of cooperative action research (Verduin 1967), centred in large curriculum development projects, took place in the United States during the 1950s. McKernan characterizes the latest trend in action research in education (roughly 1967–96) as the Teacher-Researcher Movement.

In its relatively short history, action research in North America has enjoyed times of considerable popularity, often followed by periods of disfavor. Carson (1992a, iii) observes that the early educational action research practices in North America were vulnerable to criticism because, “at the level of its practices school-based action research tended to be reduced to a set of social science techniques employed by teachers who did not have social science research skills.”

Both Carson (1992a) and McKernan (1996) credit Hodgkinson (1957) with effectively attacking action research on behalf of the traditional academic community for its methodological shortcomings and its intellectual superficiality. Kemmis (1993, 3) suggests that it was a shift from its connection with progressive ideals toward a process that was more self-consciously scientific that helped bring about the decline of interest in action research during the latter part of the 1950s and the early 1960s. Kemmis offers the opinion that, when action research began to be seen as amateur research, it lost its attraction for academics and for teachers alike, albeit for different reasons. Stringer (1996, 9), on the other hand, says action research suffered a decline in favor in North America in the 1960s because of its association with radical political activities.

Many authors (Carson 1992a; Kember and Kelly 1993; McKernan 1996) agree that the centre of action research activity in education moved from North America to Europe and the United Kingdom during the 1960s. McKernan (1996), Elliott (1992) and Carr and Kemmis (1986) are among several authors who note the powerful influence of Lawrence Stenhouse in bringing action research back into public attention. It was Stenhouse, a British educator, who directed the famous Humanities Curriculum Project, 1967–72, and started a sequence of events that saw teacher-as-researcher movements spring up in many countries. In his own view, Stenhouse (1975) believed

that all teaching should be based on research that could be and should be conducted by teachers themselves.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) propose that there were at least seven reasons why Stenhouse and, later, John Elliott and Clem Adelman and their colleagues, were able to stimulate such a resurgence of interest in educational action research in the early 1970s. First, their efforts coincided with growing demands from an increasingly professionalized teacher force for a role in research. Next, for many of these same practitioners, a lot of contemporary educational research was proving irrelevant. Third, there was a renewed interest among practitioners in the practical dimension of the curriculum and, in addition, the action research of the day was seen as part of a broader movement in educational research that gave more of a central role to the perspectives and understandings of practitioners in the research process.

According to Carr and Kemmis, other reasons included the politicizing effects of the accountability movement, increasing solidarity in the teaching profession in response to growing public criticism and, finally, an increased awareness that action research could provide an effective approach to the improvement of practice through critical self-reflection (pp. 166–67).

John Elliott was a key player in the Humanities Curriculum Project and has written of his involvement in many articles and texts (see, for example, Elliott 1980, 1981, 1987, 1988, 1991, 1992, 1993). He refers to the curriculum reform process as it was experienced during the Humanities Curriculum Project as a form of “teacher-based practical inquiry” possessing the following characteristics:

1. It is a process initiated by teachers in response to a practical situation they confront.
2. The practical situation is one in which their traditional curriculum practices have been destabilised and rendered problematic by the development of student resistance.
3. The innovations proposed arouse controversy within the staff group because they challenge the fundamental beliefs embedded in existing practices about the nature of teaching, learning, and evaluation.
4. Issues are clarified and resolved in free and open collegial discourse, characterized by mutual respect and tolerance for each other’s views and in the absence of power constraints on its outcomes.
5. Change proposals are treated as provisional hypotheses to be tested in practice within a context of collegial accountability to the whole staff group.

6. The management facilitates a bottom-up approach to the development of curriculum policies and strategies. (Elliott 1992, 5)

In subsequent years, Elliott was a central character in two other large-scale action research initiatives that built upon the work and the learnings of the Humanities Curriculum Project. The first of these was the Ford Teaching Project, which Elliott (1992, 16) describes as being designed to “explore the possibility of teachers developing a common stock of professional knowledge about the problems of realizing an alternative to . . . traditional pedagogy.” With Clem Adelman, Elliott helped promote action research with 40 teachers in 12 schools. He claims that the Ford Teaching Project generated a more emancipated and developed form of reflective practice amongst teachers but, at the end of the funded life of the project, it was clear to Elliott that “action research would not be maintained . . . in many of the schools once the support structures . . . were removed” (p. 20).

The second initiative, the Teacher-Student Interaction and Quality of Learning (TIQL) Project, ran 1981–83. Centred in the Cambridge Institute of Education, it sought to demonstrate teachers’ ability to “generate, test, and disseminate a common stock of professional knowledge about classroom processes” (p. 21). While the TIQL Project showed that teachers could be supported and encouraged “to articulate and develop the pedagogical theories implicit in their practices” (p. 22), it, too, was not sustained beyond the period of external support. Elliott (1992, 22) speculates the internal facilitators in schools would have needed continuing validation from “a strong external support team possessing influential sponsorship” in order to stay engaged.

John Elliott has continued to promote action research and to support the dissemination of the results of action research through the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) and the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), both of which are located at the University of East Anglia. Carson (1992a, iv) refers to CARE “as a vital source of thoughtfully engaged action research activity.”

McKernan (1996) notes that the First World Congress on Action Research was held in Australia in 1990. That is significant, perhaps, because so much of what happened in the field of action research during the 1980s was driven by a group of educators at Deakin University in the state of Victoria, Australia. While at Deakin University, McTaggart and others (1982) produced *The Action Research Planner*, a document widely adopted by proponents of what has become known as critical action research. Carr and Kemmis’s 1986 text, *Becoming Critical*, one of the most frequently cited texts in the action research literature, was written when Kemmis was on faculty at Deakin, and the third edition of

The Action Research Planner was edited by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and published by Deakin University. John Smyth, another member of the Deakin faculty, is well-known in western Canada and has also contributed extensively to the action research literature.

In *How to Use Action Research in the Self-Renewing School*, Emily Calhoun (1994, 19) reminds readers that "after almost thirty years in various stages of burial [in North America], action research for school improvement [was] once again receiving national attention." Calhoun credits Carl Glickman (1993) with providing much of the scholarly impetus for the current levels of interest in the use of schoolwide action research for school renewal. Glickman's text, *Renewing America's Schools*, has been consistently identified as a foundational document for promoting alternate ways of thinking about school reform, and Glickman's involvement in the Georgia League of Professional Schools, among other initiatives, has earned him considerable national and international recognition. His proposal that the integral dimensions for renewing education must include democratic governance, educational focus and action research has certainly helped reinvigorate particular strands of action research activity in North America.

Lieberman and Miller (1984), on the other hand, suggest that action research did experience something of a revival in North America in the late 1970s, as "interactive research and development" (IR&D). McKernan (1996, 12) identifies a number of large-scale IR&D projects that were reported in the literature between 1978 and 1986.

Kember and Kelly (1993) are among several authors who have noted the changed character of action research as it has regained favor in North America in recent years. They note that in its Lewinian conceptualization action research retained much of the scientific rigor of more traditional research in the social sciences. Under the influence of different groups of European, British and Australian educators, however, an emphasis on measurement and statistical analysis has been replaced by a focus on human interpretation, negotiation and detailed descriptive accounts derived from practical deliberation. Building on the theories of Habermas (1971, 1974), Carr and Kemmis (1986, 209) stress that "emancipatory action research . . . relates critical educational theorizing to a critical educational practice in a process which is simultaneously concerned with action and research." In effect, they challenge practitioners to question the value of positivist models of inquiry that do not lead to action.

McKernan (1996, 33) argues that there has been a shift in the generally accepted views of what counts as science within the life-span of action research even as there has been a move from statistical tests of hypotheses within scientific formalistic models, to empirical

observations, case studies and critical-interpretive accounts of the emerging critical theory of action research.

Carson and Sumara (1992) contend that there are four clear reasons why this move to more qualitative approaches to research seems to have been taken up in education in particular. First, the very complexity of education makes research difficult. As well, theories derived from educational research have consistently been shown to be inadequate for explaining actual questions about teaching. A third reason for the growth of interest in action research is that educators have needed more appropriate strategies for responding to the greater scrutiny to which schools have been subjected in recent years and that action research has offered some answers other forms of research have not. Finally, Carson and Sumara suggest, action research has been seen as a way to bridge the perceived widening gap between educational practitioners and educational theorists.

An excellent example of the growth and transformation of action research over the last decade is provided by the body of work located on the electronic homepage of Jack Whitehead, a professor of education at the University of Bath in the United Kingdom. Whitehead's prolific writing details the personal and professional development that has led him to the creation and sharing of "living educational theories" through engagement in action research. In one of his texts, Whitehead (2000, 18) claims,

One of the four original contributions I may have made to educational scholarship is in establishing the academic legitimacy of including "I" as a living contradiction in claims to educational knowledge. The other three are . . . the use of an action reflection cycle that includes "I" as a living contradiction; the idea that individual educators can create their own living educational theories; [and] the idea that . . . educator[s] can create their own discipline of education as they explore the implication of living their own values in their educational practices.

Types of Action Research

Richard Schmuck (1997) writes that action research can be either proactive or responsive and that either form can be cooperative or collaborative. Schmuck defines cooperative action research as "joint efforts to reach the same end," while collaborative action research is "joint efforts to promote individual ends" (p. 99). Emily Calhoun (1994, 8) distinguishes between three forms of action research—individual,

collaborative and schoolwide. McKernan (1996, 6) has also concluded there are essentially three types of action research. However, he describes Type 1 action research as being more in the scientific tradition, typified by the work of Kurt Lewin and Stephen Corey, and influenced by the writings of John Dewey. Type 2 action research derives mostly from the practical tradition, best exemplified by educators such as Stenhouse and Elliott. According to McKernan, Type 3 action research is more critical in character in that it is influenced by the work of authors such as Carr and Kemmis, Paulo Friere, and the Frankfurt School of Philosophy's Hans Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas.

Terry Carson (1992b), a leader in the field in Canada, categorizes action research as technical, practical, critical or poststructural. Carson and Sumara (1997, xvii) also propose that action research is "living practice" in that it is "understood as something that is inextricably tied to the complex relations that form various layers of communities." John Elliott has written often of "first-order" and "second-order" action research, the latter supposedly being a more advanced stage of practitioner responsibility that sees educators developing their own theories of theory and practice. As well, Elliott refers frequently to "educational" action research. Dadds (1993) resists the notion that "teacher" action research, as she calls it, should be anything other than first-order research. She takes issue with characterizations of action research that tend to view it as "a personally problem-free experience" and challenges "essentially cognitive conceptions of the action research process" that emphasize "steps to be followed . . . in some logical progression that will lead to cognitive enlightenment." In short, Dadds rejects the idea that the action research experience should be "inevitably systematic, linear, cerebral and behavioristic" (p. 230).

Maruyama (1996) draws distinctions between "practitioner-centred" action research and Lewinian action research, arguing that the former correctly ascribes more of a central role to practitioners because they are the creators of knowledge about teaching and learning. Stringer (1996) writes of "community-based" action research.

Dash (2000) claims that participatory action research is by far the most widespread approach in use in the world today and, while it may not be so commonly referenced in education, it is most certainly the strategy of choice in innumerable community development projects, in industrial and commercial change initiatives and in social and political movements in all parts of the world. In Central and South America, the work of Paulo Friere (1970a and b) and Orlando Fals Borda (1990) is near legendary. Closer to home, and on a more modest scale, much of the community health work done in southern Alberta on behalf of the newly arrived Mennonite (Kanadier) people is community-based participatory action research (Babcock 1998; Kulig 1995).

Robin McTaggart, a leader in many of the initiatives developed at Deakin University in Australia, is one of the more prominent educators who identifies his work as participatory action research. Kemmis (1993) notes how the idea of action research has been consistently revitalized and refurbished to meet different needs and changing circumstances over the past 40 years or so. His categories of action research, much repeated by other authors, are technical, practical and critical, the last of which Kemmis also calls "emancipatory," putting it in the same classification as participatory action research. Kemmis explains, "emancipatory action research is always connected to social action . . . the aspiration to change the . . . world for the better through improving shared social practices, our shared understandings of these social practices, and the shared situations in which these practices are carried out" (p. 5).

For readers who prefer classifications of action research that are more complex, those proposed by Masters (1995) should be of interest. With extensive reference to the work of Grundy ([1982] 1988) and Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993), Masters (1995, 6) offers the following typology:

- Type 1: Technical/Technical-Collaborative/Scientific-Technical/
Positivist Perspective
- Type 2: Mutual-Collaborative/Practical-Deliberative-Interpretivist
Perspective
- Type 3: Enhancement Approach/Critical-Emancipatory Action
Research/Critical Science Perspective

Grundy ([1982] 1988) proposes that differences between the three types of action research can be attributed less to methodology than to differences in the assumptions and world views of participants. For Grundy, an understanding of the power relationships among group members will likely provide an explanation of the type of action research in which the group will engage. In technical action research, Grundy suggests, the power is often controlled by the facilitator, with whom the original idea for action resides. In practical research, power can be shared among the participants, with each having the individual power to act. In emancipatory action research, according to Grundy, power resides wholly within the group.

J-C Couture (1992) is an Alberta educator who has also been intrigued by issues of power and control specific to the involvement of teachers in action research. His observations and conclusions about the limitations that are placed on teachers-as-researchers (and students-as-researchers) by the very systems in which they have to live and work should resonate for teachers and university professors alike.

The Reflective Process

Most models of action research follow the steps of social inquiry processes that can be traced back to the work of Hilda Taba, for one, and the principles of learning as first explored by John Dewey (McKernan 1996). A further key element of virtually all models, not yet mentioned in this discussion, is *reflection*, which can be attributed in part to Dewey's influence. What must be noted in this context, as well, is the influence of authors such as Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, organizational theorists and proponents of a strategy called action science which, ironically, Argyris (1999) claims to be in most ways superior to participatory action research. Their text *Theory in Practice* (Argyris and Schön 1974) and their subsequent work have had a profound effect in the field of management. More recently, Schön's texts, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987), have been taken up by the educational community to such a degree that it is now difficult to imagine that there was ever a time in their professional lives when today's teachers were not being challenged to engage in "reflective practice."

What is reflective practice? Schön says that professional practitioners (those who are able to incorporate into their practice the art of transformative learning through reflection) engage constantly in a process of reflection-in-action, which involves thinking about problems and solutions while actually performing the professional tasks that are generating the problems. Further, Schön suggests, professional practitioners experience episodes of reflection-on-action, during which they review and examine past action, to clarify what they have accomplished and decide how things might be done differently in future. Thus involved in the "reflective transformation of experience" (Schön 1988), practitioners are able to carry "a familiar experience over to a new context, transforming in that process both the experience and the new situation" (p. 25). Reflective practice, as Schön has conceptualized it, is a continuing process of refinement of professional judgment.

Kolb (1984) is another influential author who has written extensively about learning through the "transformation of experience." For Kolb, the skills of reflection, deliberation and evaluation are essential to the transformation process.

Zeichner and Liston (1987) describe three levels of reflection that proceed from unproblematic technical proficiency; to situational, theoretical, institutional assumptions and effects of teaching actions; to moral and ethical implications of pedagogy and of social structures and concepts. These levels clearly parallel Carr and Kemmis's (1986) technical, practical and emancipatory levels of action research.

McMahon (1999) poses the question, "Is reflective practice synonymous with action research?", and concludes that it is not, because it lacks "strategic action," something that he says is common to all action research. Alternatively, Hatten, Knapp and Salonga (1997), in their comparison of action research, reflective practice and quality assurance, conclude that action research would be preferable to reflective practice when a social question or problem needs to be solved and, by definition, collaboration and reporting of results are required. Reflective practice, on the other hand, may be better used to help in the refinement of an individual's expertise in practice, because it requires only the commitment of the individual, is internal to the practitioner, can be done in isolation and requires no reporting to others.

Day (1993, 137) suggests the term *reflection* is one that needs to be understood more fully, noting that researchers do not appear to know "how reflection leads to change." He cites Handal (1990) as the author of a structure of reflective practice having the three hierarchical levels of actions, practical and theoretical reasons and ethical justification. According to Day (1993, 138), Handal's study of teachers in Norway found that they, like their counterparts Day studied in the United Kingdom, "were used to talking about their work and deciding what to do, when to do it, and how to do it . . . but rarely explicitly referring to reasons for this, or the justification for the work itself."

In commenting specifically on Schön's notion of the reflective practitioner, Day suggests that it can be criticized for "its failure to deal with the importance of the discursive, dialogic dimension of learning which can only emerge from processes of confrontation and reconstruction" (p. 140). For Day, the kind of reflection that results only in "increased efficiency in achieving ends which are accepted as given" will never empower teachers. He argues instead for research that examines teachers' thoughts and actions "in the context of ends as well as means, and purposes as well as products" (p. 142). Only when teachers can engage in reflection at the higher levels identified by Handal, Day contends, will they be "truly empowered."

Models of Action Research

An element common to most models of action research is the spiral or cyclical character of the process. Authors such as Kember and Kelly (1993), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), McKernan (1996) and Schmuck (1997) make repeated references to the spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that may be Kurt Lewin's single most

important contribution to action research. Lewin's model, as described by McKernan (1996) and as adapted in Figure 1, consists of repeating action steps that include planning, fact-finding, execution and analysis. Lewin uses the term *reconnaissance* in talking about the various processes that help to determine whether or not plans are appropriate and goals are being achieved.

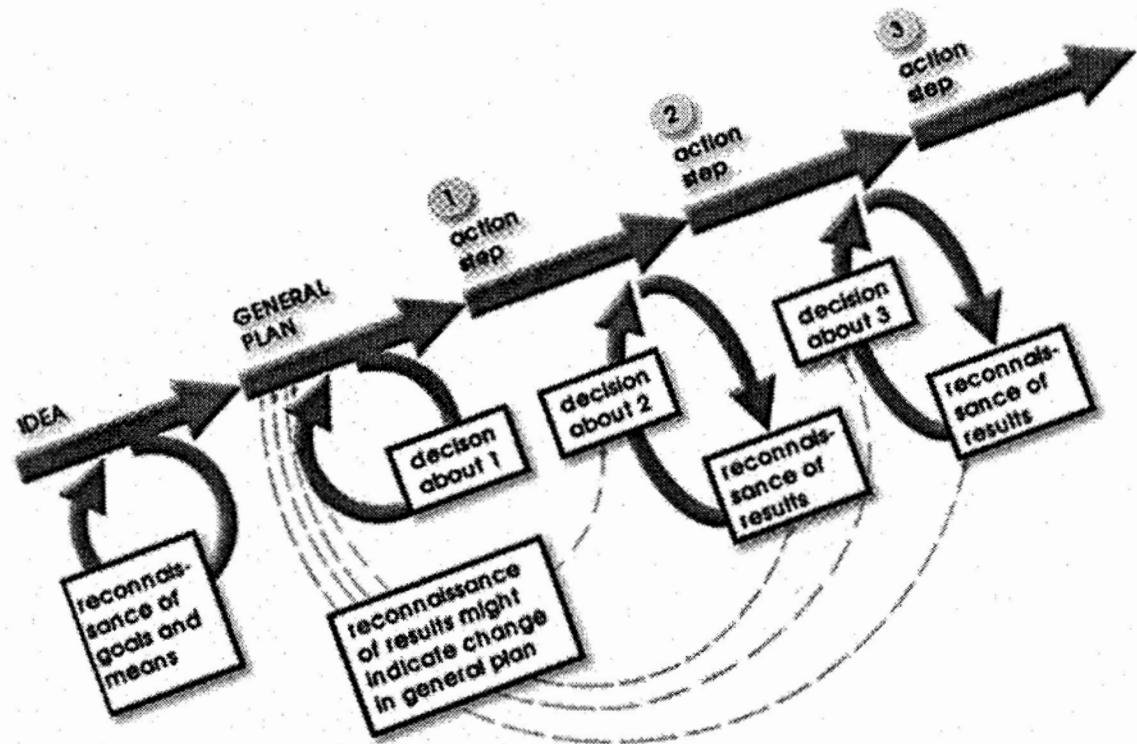


Figure 1 An Adaptation of Lewin's (1947) Model of Action Research

Elliott (1981) and McKernan (1996) have developed more elaborate models based on cycles that follow a similar pattern. Like Lewin, Elliott uses the term *reconnaissance* to describe the various processes of fact-finding, data analysis and the evaluation of both the results and the effectiveness of the actual process.

Elliott's (1981) conceptualization of a model of action research passes through repeating cycles as follows:

1. Identification of initial idea
2. Reconnaissance (fact finding and analysis)
3. Formulation of a general plan
4. Series of action steps
5. Ongoing monitoring of implementation and effects
6. Reconnaissance (explanations of any failure to implement, and effects)
7. A new, revised general idea

As shown in Figure 2, McKernan (1996) has created a cyclical, time process model of action research, with the following components:

1. Definition of a problem
2. Needs assessment
3. Hypotheses and ideas
4. An action plan
5. Implementation of the plan
6. Evaluation of action
7. Decisions (reflect, explain, understand action)

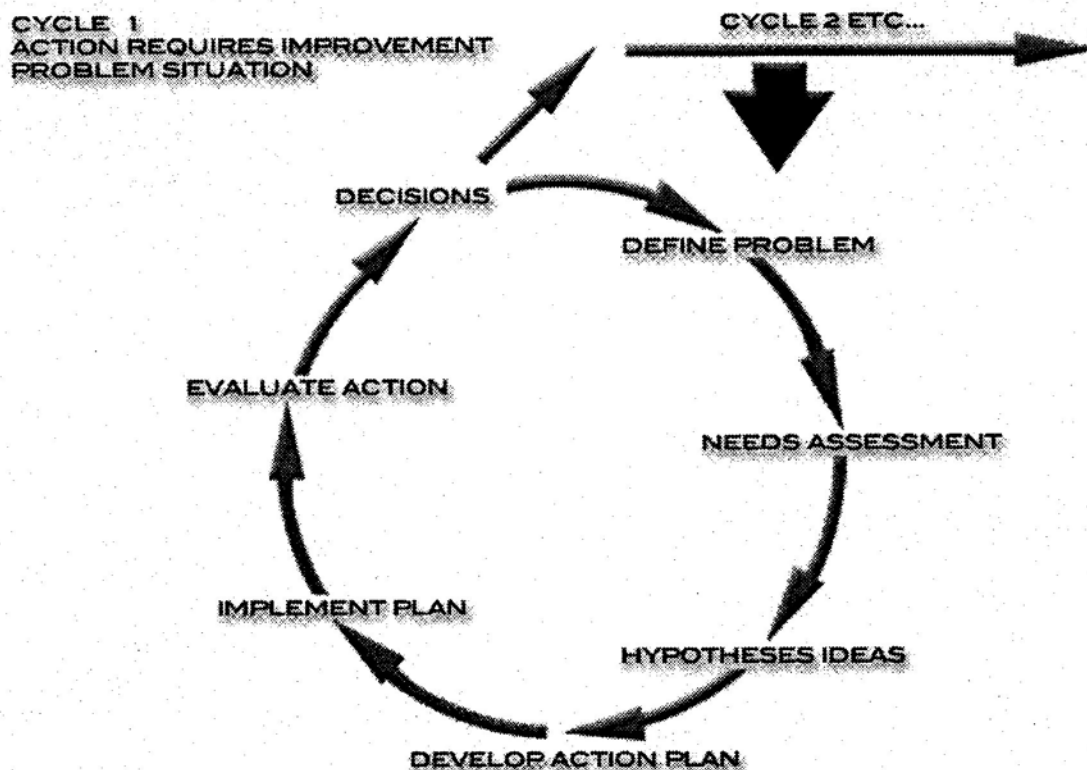


Figure 2 An Adaptation of McKernan's (1996) Model of Action Research

Schmuck (1997, 31) describes a model of proactive action research, in which action precedes data collection and analysis, as having the following six steps (see Figure 3):

1. Try a new practice to have a different effect on others or to bring about better outcomes.
2. Incorporate hopes and concerns into the new practice.
3. Collect data regularly to keep track of the students' reactions and behavioral changes.
4. Check what the data mean.
5. Reflect on alternative ways to behave.
6. Try another new practice.

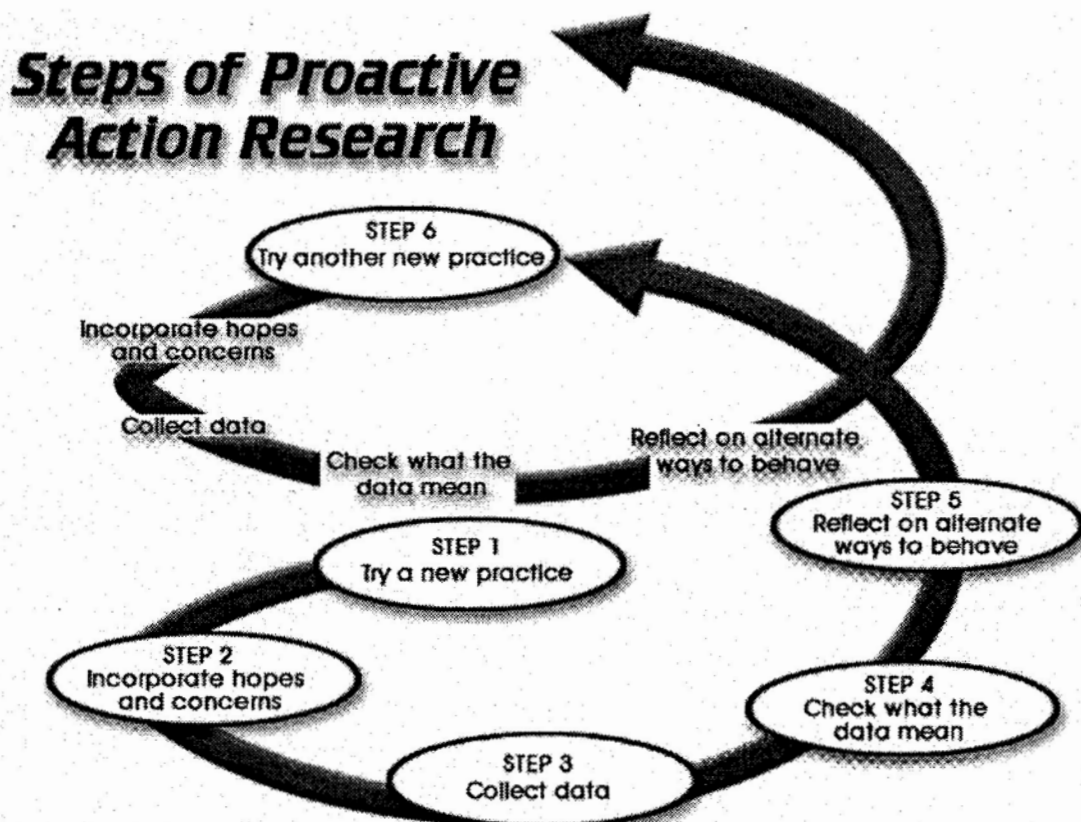


Figure 3 An Adaptation of Schmuck's (1997) Proactive Action Research Model

Schmuck's (1997) model for responsive action research differs only slightly, in that data are collected and analysed before action is taken. Responsive action research incorporates the following six steps:

1. Collect data to diagnose the situation.
2. Analyze the data for themes and ideas for action.
3. Distribute the data to others and announce changes that will be tried.
4. Try a new practice to have a different effect on others.
5. Check to see how others are reacting.
6. Collect data to diagnose the situation. (p. 34)

Richard Sagor (1992) promotes a five-step model of collaborative action research:

1. Problem formulation
2. Data collection
3. Data analysis
4. Reporting of results
5. Action planning

Hilda Taba's (1962) action research model, based on John Dewey's process of scientific reflective thinking, contains the following six stages:

1. Problem identification
2. Problem analysis
3. Hypothesis formulation
4. Data gathering and interpretation
5. Implementation-action
6. Evaluation of the results of action

Emily Calhoun (1994) describes a cycle of action research that moves through five stages:

1. Selecting an area or focus
2. Collecting data
3. Organizing data
4. Analyzing and interpreting data
5. Taking action

Ernest Stringer (1996, 16) proposes a model of community-based action research with the following elements:

- LOOK - Gather relevant information. (Gather Data)
- Build a picture: Describe the situation. (Define and Describe)
- THINK - Explore and analyze: What is happening here? (Hypothesize)
- Interpret and explain: How/why are things as they are? (Theorize)
- ACT - Plan. (Report)
- Implement.
- Evaluate.

A model of action research that I have used and tried to refine in several Alberta school jurisdictions in recent years has 12 stages that occur and recur in cycles, and in loops within cycles. It has been developed to describe, rather than prescribe, what groups of teachers actually do as they engage in collaborative action research. The 12 steps are these:

1. *Define the focus or the problem.* Ask the right questions (for example, "What's the next thing I have to know more about in my classroom or in my teaching?"). Reflection begins.
2. *Collect information.* (Read the literature, consult with colleagues, talk to experts and others with experience.) Reflection continues.
3. *Make sense of the information.* What is relevant? What is possible? What can be modified and adapted 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 within the group.
5. *Plan action.* A written plan should be one of the products of this stage.
6. *Take action.* Put plans into effect. Reflection in action and on action, alone and with colleagues, can make efforts more purposeful, but taking action is the key.
7. *Collect information.* Document carefully. (This is the stage at which many teachers gain new insights into the meaning of evidence-based practice.) Meet regularly to share information.
8. *Analyze and evaluate in a continuous way.* Try to make sense of what is happening, and why. Refocus, as necessary. Persevere.
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 results within and beyond the group, beyond the school, beyond the district.
11. *Celebrate.* Celebrate not only at the end, but at all appropriate times. Take time to relax. Consolidate learnings and gains.
12. *Future action.* Begin the process again.

How Does Action Research Work?

I begin this section by restating something, probably not very original, that I say to most groups of teachers with whom I share efforts to bring about change in schools—things do not work on their own: people cause things to work. So it is with action research. As a method or a strategy, as an ideology or a movement, or as a fad, action research can offer only so many ideas, words and diagrams. The people who take what it has to offer and make of that their best interpretations and applications determine whether or not action research works.

If, as McNiff (1988, 38) says, action research is “a way of using personal understanding to look at personal understanding,” then it follows that its effectiveness will be either enhanced or limited by the skills, knowledge and commitment each person brings to an engagement with it. My experiences with action research in Alberta schools, during the past 12 years, lead me to the conclusion that most action research in most schools has not developed beyond what the world’s authorities on the subject choose to call “technical” action research. Similarly, most teachers, when they have engaged in reflection associated with their involvement in action research, have seldom done so at a level that could be called “critical” on the scale of technical, personal, problematic and critical, as proposed by Louden (1991).

Dadds (1993) offers some reasons why this might be so. In explaining a teacher's reluctance to share her research with others, Dadds notes that

it cannot be assumed that sharing and dissemination of research in the cause of school improvement is a straightforward and unproblematic task for the teacher. Laying one's work open and public for others' benefit is an act of personal and professional exposure. Feelings about oneself are in that work, and in the textual products of that work. [Teacher-researchers risk] judgment on many levels when their work becomes public. And it cannot be assumed that all teacher action researchers feel comfortable and confident in that position. There may be attitudes and feelings to be mastered which do not come readily and easily to all. Where self-identity is closely bound into the research and its products, public judgment and critique affects that sense of self. Work made public is self made public. Work under scrutiny is self under scrutiny. . . . [F]or many, such evaluative exposure is emotionally taxing and, often, threatening. (pp. 235–36)

Most teachers with whom I have worked have been unaware of any generally accepted standards against which the work of teachers can be judged. Most do not know how their colleagues actually teach, and most are not confident in their ability to talk to colleagues about their own and others' teaching in productive ways. As Dadds suggests, most teachers are apprehensive about what others will think of their teaching, at least in early stages of collaboration, when levels of trust may not be high.

In an action research project in an urban Alberta jurisdiction in 1991, six junior high school teachers planned to team-teach the health curriculum, using the cooperative learning strategy. It took several exchanges of classroom observations, and several debriefing conferences, before the teachers were sufficiently confident that they could teach the content and achieve the learning outcomes while working as members of a team. Even then, some group members were never fully comfortable sharing videotapes of their teaching with colleagues, or having them observe teaching episodes. One conclusion of their project was that they were all much more certain of the learning outcomes when they worked as a team. Another outcome was that, given the choice, all but two of the teachers would opt to teach their health classes on their own the following year. The pressure of sharing something as personal as how they teach was almost certainly a factor in this disengagement.

In a different district in 1992, when 18 schools had action research initiatives under way, the external facilitators found that the closer the process came to looking at the actual teaching and learning that

was happening in particular classrooms, the more likely the teachers in those classrooms were to disengage or withdraw from project participation. Their reluctance frequently took the form of an absence from a meeting, an unwillingness to share information or resistance to discussions that sought to promote deeper analysis or reflection. In this project, differences in teaching knowledge and ability became especially apparent among one group of 12 teachers in one school, who taught themselves and each other how to use Writers' Workshop more effectively to help their students develop language arts skills. One technique they used to improve their teaching skills was to take turns demonstrating particular parts of the Writers' Workshop method for their colleagues to observe and discuss. For some, that proved to be more than they could handle, and those teachers backed away.

It is still true in Alberta, although it is changing, that the most common way for action research and teachers to come together is through graduate-level university courses. That is one reason why so many reports of action research activity cover the 12 or so weeks of a regular semester course or the one year (or less) of research involvement that allows a graduate student to complete a thesis or creative project.

Since 1995, several regional educational consortia across Alberta have promoted the idea of teachers-as-researchers by offering small amounts of money to support classroom research projects. Several school superintendents have tried similar strategies to encourage principals and teachers to collaborate on action research designed to help staffs achieve school goals. In Wolf Creek School Division No. 72, for example, the direct involvement of the school superintendent is a key reason so many schools in that district have had experience with at least one form of action research. Edmonton School District No. 7's Project Pegasus, which has used action research to help teachers achieve important technology goals, is another excellent example of different ways of thinking about the place of action research in the public school system. In 1995, Golden Hills School Division No. 75 was the site of a successful pilot study involving 17 teachers in learning about action research by doing it. The teachers were strongly supported by their principals, by the senior leadership of the district and by the school board, and the results of their work continue to influence the way professional development is done in that division.

Frequently, schools and districts have contracted external consultants to facilitate action research initiatives. More recently, school districts have been increasingly able to develop people within their own jurisdictions to take on the challenge of leadership in action research. With the introduction of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) in 2000, it is reasonable to expect that expertise and interest in action research will grow in direct response to the great demand that

AISI will generate, because many AISI projects, as they are being developed in school districts, have at their centre an action research methodology.

Typically, action research projects begin with invitations being extended to potential participants. A preliminary awareness session then quickly ascertains the willingness of a school or a group of teachers to get involved. If there is interest, a readiness workshop often takes place soon after. This can be an occasion for facilitators and others to explain the action research process, to provide examples of work that similar groups have completed, to answer questions and to begin to build commitment to achieving the goal, solving the problem or resolving the issue that will be the focus of the initiative. For example, most AISI projects focus on some aspect of teacher growth or student achievement or, often, a combination of each. Readiness activities can offer such things as preliminary skill training, new knowledge, choices of strategies, assistance with writing plans and proposals, relevant reading material, examples of available resources for particular topics and the names of people who can be contacted for ideas and information. Readiness workshops should also emphasize how action research differs from other forms of teacher inservice education and, in particular, clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of all participants. There should be no surprises later, when the work gets harder, perhaps, or when responsibility for results must be accepted.

Readiness activities should conclude with all participants knowing and having committed to what it is they will do between the end of one meeting and the start of the next. In reality, readiness and continuing training are terms that can be applied to much of the preliminary work that helps participants reach the stage of having developed a plan that will guide them through the action research process. Some groups reach that point quickly. In my experience, many get there knowing the tasks that they want to accomplish but not knowing, or being committed to, the action research process in which they are supposedly engaged. It is not unusual for groups of teachers to see the cycles of action research as an add-on, a barrier, a hindrance or an annoyance, as something that slows them down or even as something that people external to the place where the "real work gets done" inject into the process to justify their continued involvement. For a lot of teachers, reflective practice is a luxury their busy schedules cannot accommodate. Moreover, many teachers see little value in examining work that has already been completed. Keith Acheson, a senior professor from Oregon, says that, in his experience, some phrases rub teachers the wrong way. He puts "supervision and evaluation" at the top of the list, but he believes that "teachers-as-researchers" and "reflective practice" are fairly close behind.

On one level, action research works when groups of practitioners are able to work together to achieve agreed-upon goals. As well, it can work as a problem-solving strategy, a process that helps practitioners develop skills and acquire new knowledge, a way of verifying that change has taken place and a method of documenting that professional growth and refinements of professional practice have occurred. It works on a different level when practitioners commit to evidence-based practice, when they make some critical aspect of their practice the focus of purposeful investigation and when they share the results of that investigation with colleagues. Some differences between these various approaches can be seen in the following two examples.

In an early action research project in Alberta, two Grade 9 teachers became concerned that several of their female students were losing interest in school and were encouraging others to go along with them. The students' attendance had grown progressively worse and their behavior outside school was the focus of much attention from worried parents and representatives of community agencies. The teachers thought that if they could have more one-on-one time with the five female students, they might be able to encourage them to stay in school. They drew up a plan, in consultation with an administrator, that gave each of them two half-hours per week with each girl. In addition to using all their preparation time for this purpose, the teachers were given one other class period every week when the assistant principal agreed to take those classes for them. The intervention was planned to last 10 weeks. During this period, the two teachers met three times with external facilitators and 12 colleagues in their school, during the school day, to talk about their progress, their concerns and their learning. They kept journals of their experiences, as well as detailed notes on each conversation with the students.

This experience captured the interest of every participant. It seemed that everyone was learning something of value from the work these two teachers were doing. One of the most revealing findings for all the educators involved was that the five girls mostly wanted someone to listen to them, without judging them. The more the teachers listened, the more willingly the girls attended their meetings. Not surprisingly, our own action research meetings during this period produced more reflection, more affirmation of colleagues' efforts and more commitment from participants generally. In the end, there were no wondrous transformations of behavior or attitude for the five Grade 9 girls, but more regular school attendance was one observable outcome, while many small improvements in attitude and self-concept were also reported.

For the participants in the action research project in progress across the district at the time, this experience provided some important lessons. Most of us became more comfortable with the idea that an action

research initiative did not have to focus on big goals and big outcomes in order for it to benefit teachers and students alike. From this initiative, too, came an enhanced sense of the teacher's central role in action research, the notion that teachers really could set the research agenda. Many teachers did look more critically at their own behavior and values and talk more openly about what they could do differently in their own practice to assist students whose needs may have been overlooked in their own classrooms.

Something quite different happened in another jurisdiction in which a whole school staff agreed to try action research as a way of improving student-to-student and student-to-teacher relations in the school. The principal appeared quite reluctant in initial meetings, not comfortable with the staff taking things into their own hands. The staff clearly wanted a project in their school and, because it was an initiative sponsored by the superintendent, they were able to overcome the principal's resistance and attended the first meeting with the external facilitators with a rough plan already formulated. When it came time to decide how they would organize themselves to pursue their goal, however, the staff produced a surprise for their colleagues in other schools and the facilitators alike, as not one teacher chose to focus his or her efforts on teaching practice. Rather, the staff formed 15 committees, each with responsibility for some aspect of the day-to-day operations of the school. There was a committee for determining what kind of student work could be displayed in the hallways, one to create a new discipline policy, another to plan field trips and yet another to reorganize playground supervision duties. There was even a committee to supervise the weekly hot-lunch program. With only 30 teachers on staff, most teachers were on at least three committees. They were stretched way beyond what most educators would think reasonable by a set of add-ons of their own design but they seemed determined as a group to see their project through. When the staff decided times and dates for meetings with the external facilitators, they chose five Friday mornings at seven o'clock. After the third breakfast meeting, however, the staff decided they would not need the final two. The report they presented to their school board at the end of the year provided thorough documentation of their successes in making their school a "more caring place."

In this second example, action research was not working. Rather, what was at work was a not-so-subtle attempt to control and even usurp the power of the principal with the power of a united staff organized into enough working committees to have influence over virtually every aspect of the decision-making process of the school. Staff members were able to use the existence of the action research project to further their own ends and the external facilitators were not able to do much about it.

The Chinook's Edge Case Study

Jacqueline Skytt, a professional development consultant with the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) had a lead role in compiling a text entitled *Action Research Guide for Alberta Teachers* (ATA 2000). Skytt and her colleague, J-C Couture, have produced a document that is easy to read and full of useful ideas. They have taken a subject that has been increasingly obscure for classroom practitioners in recent years and made it simply more understandable. For beginners and for experienced action researchers alike, the ATA's guide is a valuable addition to the action research literature. The basis for the text is the work that has been done in action research in Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73, which is located mostly south of Red Deer and which includes the towns of Olds, Innisfail, Sylvan Lake, Sundre, Cremona, Delburne, Elnora, Penhold, Spruce View and Didsbury, as well as two schools within the corporate limits of Red Deer.

Action research in Chinook's Edge had fairly humble beginnings. When Dot Negropontes, now the division's assistant superintendent, was principal of Deer Meadow School in 1996, she responded to an offer from the Central Alberta Professional Development Consortium to try action research in her school. Several teachers joined Negropontes in a research project that sought to improve teachers' mentoring of student teachers. They were sufficiently successful in their efforts that, when Negropontes was promoted to the division office in 1997, she immediately encouraged teachers in several schools to use action research to explore more effective teaching practices for students with learning disabilities.

At this point, representatives of the ATA offered to work with Chinook's Edge, to see if there were lessons to be learned in that situation that could be shared with teachers in other parts of the province. A very productive personal collaboration between Dot Negropontes and Jacqueline Skytt grew out of this initiative. In 1998, the Chinook's Edge action research teams produced learnings in teaching practices and in jurisdictional organization that led to two publications—one dealing with special needs and the other detailing an organizational structure for the facilitation of staff development—both of which have since been shared extensively with other jurisdictions. By early 1999, Jacqueline Skytt had begun putting key sections of her text in order and school-based action research was continuing but, according to Dot Negropontes's reflections at the time, there was "something missing."

What was it? In part, it was the feeling that teachers were already beginning to act as if “they’d been there and done that.” There was not as much energy in the group’s efforts as there had been the year before, and there was virtually no increase in the number of teachers wanting to try the action research approach. The same busy teachers and administrators who had first become involved were the ones who were still doing most of the work.

By chance, I was in the Chinook’s Edge offices in January 2000 and met Dot Negropontes. Within minutes, I had a clear picture of the history of action research in Chinook’s Edge, and her role in it. Before the meeting ended, I agreed to mentor her in action research for the following six months so that she could develop the skills and knowledge she felt she needed to move the district program forward. I was on study leave, travelling to various jurisdictions in my efforts to determine just how much action research was being conducted in Alberta, so it was a timely opportunity for me.

Dot and I spent the rest of the afternoon planning an information workshop and composing an invitation to teachers and administrators to come and find out whatever it was about action research they wanted to know. We asked potential participants to come ready to plan a project that would engage them from January until June, and to come as a team, including at least one administrator. Finally, we described the incentives that were available, according to division policy, to encourage participation. It was not much, but each team could access up to \$1,000 to support its project.

Getting Started

The first workshop gave all participants a chance to ask questions, to see an overview of the process that would be followed in the next five months and to see what finished projects looked like. These examples were taken from the work other groups had done in the previous eighteen months. As tentative plans were shared, participants were offered sources for gathering additional information, frequently from members of other teams, many of whom had been involved in the previous year. In the afternoon, a lot of time was spent negotiating how Dot and I would be available to school-based teams for the duration of the initiative and what the expectations were for continuing participation. Before the workshop finished, we all seemed to know what we would do once we left the session. Everyone had to identify what it was that would be done first, and what would be done before Dot and I visited each school site for the first time. Agreement was reached on what

documentation would flow from the meeting and how subsequent records of activities and learning could be developed and maintained by each group. In short, we progressed through various stages of awareness and readiness in that first meeting so that, before its conclusion, most of us were able to describe a personal commitment to future action in pursuit of one or more goals of our projects.

Sixty-five educators, representing staffs of nine schools, took up the challenge and worked with Dot and me until the end of the 1999–2000 school year. School projects, some of which are discussed later in this monograph, included such diverse interests as Brain Gym in Grade 3; high school students' attitudes and out-of-school responsibilities; the incidence of Irlen's Syndrome among Grade 1 students; junior high school social studies reading skills; graphing calculators for Grade 7 students; technology outcomes for Kindergarten students; improving reading achievement in elementary grades; and the enhancement of reading skills for learning disabled students. One project featured a collaboration of teams from three schools.

The Process at Work

At the end of the first and all subsequent meetings, our itinerary for school visits was confirmed. After the second meeting, the dates and times of all our school visits throughout the initiative were agreed to by school teams. Each team was responsible for securing substitute teachers, as necessary, using some of the funds provided by the jurisdiction to support the initiative.

Typically, Dot and I met with each team for half a day or less, once a month. All our meetings had the general purpose of encouraging and supporting educators as they strove to achieve their project goals but, more specifically, we had three agenda items for each meeting:

What has been done since the last meeting?

What sense can we make of what has happened, and why?

What will be done between now and the next meeting?

Our facilitator goals were to promote reflection, to encourage educators to take increasingly greater responsibility for what did and did not happen, to help make explicit the learning of the group, to model effective communication skills, to assist in the affirmation of sincere effort and good results, and to help participants find more of those things in their daily work that are worthy of celebration. We tried to listen more than we spoke. We tried to ensure that the voices of the educators were heard at least as often as the voices of the outsiders.

We documented, we asked to see the evidence of teams' purposeful efforts, and we encouraged as many different ways of recording what was being accomplished as we could.

Often, we would not need to spend all the allotted time with a team. On those occasions, team members would have some extra time to plan together or to complete other work, a small compensation for the extra work that came with being part of a team, even though we all tried not to make project participation too much of an add-on.

Dot had begun the project wanting to become more skillful at asking questions, "the sort of questions that get teachers to reflect." As the project progressed, she came to see how her need to understand exactly what participants meant when they explained what they were doing led to the sort of questioning she had been seeking. We both learned how our genuine curiosity would lead teachers to go much further in such things as their descriptions of their work and its effects on student learning. In addition, we saw increasingly how the curiosity of colleagues could stimulate deeper levels of reflection. Chinook's Edge is a jurisdiction in which the work of Stephen Covey (1989) has received considerable attention. Most administrators have taken some form of Covey training. More than once, when we were looking back on an interaction that had occurred in a meeting, Dot would observe that facilitating action research was like "putting Covey into practice in the real world," particularly when we were "seeking to understand." In fact, at one point during the project we concluded that Covey's fifth habit (Seek first to understand, then to be understood) should be modified to state "Seek only to understand."

Trust

As so many authors have noted, at the heart of this form of research is trust. Participants have to learn to feel safe as they expose their actual levels of craft knowledge and skill specific to teaching and learning to their colleagues and their administrators. Participants have to trust that there will be no negative consequences if they engage wholeheartedly and openly in all the activities of their projects. At first, it was not an easy thing for many educators in this initiative. For some, simply identifying what it was they wanted to know more about in their teaching practice felt risky. For others, sharing their successes and failures with their administrators was an uncommon or even new career experience. Some teams dealt with this issue by selecting projects that did not focus so directly on classroom teaching, but most projects did have student learning outcomes as an integral part of their measures of success.

The trust issue had to be dealt with on many levels. For example, as teams made their monthly presentations, it was apparent that some teachers were progressing more quickly than others in the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. Both of us had to be alert to the often unconscious messages that can be delivered when comparisons arise. Our favored way of dealing with this phenomenon was to reinforce at every opportunity an idea I first encountered in a 1985–92 project that had run in Medicine Hat School District No. 76. We encouraged participants to focus their attention on what they *would* do, rather on what they could not or would not do. In that way, we really did come quite close at times to the ideal that “the success of one is the success of all,” because the work of the team was almost always more frequently recognized than the work of any one member. Of course, there were occasions when outstanding individual effort was acknowledged and celebrated by the whole group. Equally, there were occasions when people did not fulfill their commitments and chose not to take responsibility for their actions to the extent that most other participants did, which led to some group discomfort that we as external facilitators were not always able to handle as productively as we should have.

Authority

Dot and I continue to talk about all the other lessons that we learned as we collaborated on this initiative. Some revolve around the issue of authority. For example, during the project we tried to understand more clearly how external facilitators gain enough legitimacy to be permitted to comment on the work of teams, even to ask questions, to make summary statements and to challenge participants on such things as the evidence they are gathering and the conclusions they are drawing specific to their work. If ever the point needed to be confirmed, we were certainly shown, often, that institutional expertise such as might be claimed by a university professor has limited utility in this process. Similarly, the organizational authority that attaches itself to Dot’s position as a central office administrator was also quickly relativized as Dot conducted herself according to the ways that were set out when we first invited teachers to join in the initiative. (We suggest, however, that without the certainty of support from the superintendent and the school board the initiative would have encountered many more difficulties than it actually had to face).

We have reached a tentative conclusion that authority in action research derives, first, from agreed-upon goals; second, from agreed-upon ways of doing things (protocols); third, from the genuineness of commitment of participants; and fourth, from the usefulness that individual

participants demonstrate in helping teams achieve their goals. Moreover, we think, authority is fairly fluid in such contexts and, just as it has to be negotiated in advance, so it has to be renegotiated almost constantly. As this happens, a creative tension develops between external and internal participants and among the internal participants themselves. Each can come to recognize more clearly that individual success increasingly depends on group success. In the Chinook's Edge initiative, we reached that point several times—once when a team wanted to disengage from the project, again when it seemed to members of one team that their goals were being made subservient to the goals of the facilitators and, finally, when almost all the teams came together at the end to write their final reports.

In the case of the team whose members felt the external facilitators were hijacking their project, Dot and I each noticed after the first meeting of the group that there appeared to be multiple agenda operating. As we discussed the events afterward, we concluded that one subgroup wanted to complete a student questionnaire that would provide direct evidence of the extent to which high school students were using a set of study skills that they had been taught and on which a considerable amount of time and money had been expended. Another subgroup seemed to want a much broader questionnaire, one that would look at student attitudes and lifestyle as well as academic data. A few members seemed unsure of what they wanted. What we did not know was that this group had worked together quite successfully the previous year but was resisting participation in the action research project because some members saw it as their principal's idea, not theirs.

In the first session, Dot and I asked a lot of searching questions. We thought we were seeking clarification, doing some of the things we thought we had negotiated in the first information workshop. Many participants, however, felt that we were directing the planning process in favor of a more comprehensive questionnaire. In the large group, it proved beyond our ability to get team members to reveal exactly what they wanted to do. At one point we acknowledged our awareness of some resistance but we could not encourage members to disclose its source or any reason for it. Later, we were told privately that we were causing some discomfort among group members, that some people felt we were leading the team away from what they wanted to do and that we were favoring the ideas of certain group members over others.

We were perplexed. We felt that we had not done well at facilitating what was an obvious conflict within the group, or between the group and us. Yet we both wanted the group to pursue whatever it was the members could agree upon. After much introspection and brainstorming, we decided to attend the next meeting and put on the table our willingness to help, to work directly with the team on whatever tasks

members wanted to undertake. That decision of ours apparently coincided with some other decisions the team had taken outside the monthly meeting structure. The next session, under the direction of the administrator on the team (not the principal), focussed almost exclusively on work. Subsequently, the administrator explained that he decided to keep the focus on work because he was worried that, otherwise, the group would break apart.

We all helped prepare sections of a most comprehensive student questionnaire. As well, we all shared ideas for distributing and collecting the questionnaires, for organizing focus group meetings with selected students, for organizing and analyzing the data and for producing the final report. Almost no time was devoted to anything other than work and planning. There was no discussion of what had been done to date, no attempt to explore its value or its meaning. The message was clear: "Let's get the job done. We won't be spending any time reflecting."

The fourth session was a marathon, with every available participant hard at work, making sense of all the data that had been gathered, preparing tables and charts, and writing sections of reports. In all this activity, Dot and I worked as members of the team on whatever tasks we were assigned. The information that was eventually gathered was extremely detailed. Many team members expressed their genuine surprise at what they were able to learn about their high school students. As time-consuming as it was, it seems to have been time well-spent for most team members.

When it came time for the final meeting of all the action research teams, members of this team presented their results in similar, business-like ways, with virtually no references to action research or the process of inquiry. They offered a brief, point-form description of all the things they had done. They talked of the benefits their work would bring to decision-making at the school and they answered a few questions. Then they left, because most had made commitments back at the school.

At the time, Dot and I felt we had done the least harm by acting as we had. We backed away from a doctrinaire approach to "one kind of action research only," not because we did not want to confront the team but, rather, because we saw continuing evidence of teachers engaging in inquiry, learning from their inquiry and taking action based on what they had learned. No, they did not do it according to the way we thought that they had agreed to do it, but that was as much our responsibility as anyone else's. Nor did they have much time for the formality of group reflection as it was practised so successfully in most other teams, but that did not stop them from collaborating with intensity and achieving some impressive results. We saw their

efforts as fairly typical of the way many school staffs go about getting particular tasks done (high energy, clear task, fixed time period), and there was no arguing with the conclusion of one group leader that "they did what they set out to do." Nor was there any doubt that their efforts and their ways of working together carried over into the next school year. The reports they produced have been used effectively in their school. Moreover, the reports have been shared with several other schools and have been identified by many educators as particularly useful documents.

Another dimension of authority that must be understood and constantly negotiated, especially by educators external to a school site, is the authority of those who live and work in the school. Mostly that can mean the administrators, but it often means classroom teachers who have informal leadership credentials in the school and it may sometimes mean secretaries and janitors, librarians and chairpersons of school councils. Projects such as the action research initiative in Chinook's Edge can cut across lines of authority and important elements of school culture. Something as simple to the external facilitators as arranging substitute teachers for project participants can develop into a power struggle in the absence of clear communication.

Dot prevented conflict that might have arisen over arrangements for substitute teachers by calling a day or so in advance of any meeting to clear the process with building administrators and by keeping in touch with them on a planned, regular basis. Nevertheless, sometimes our project demands and the other demands of the school made it difficult for the school administration to find enough substitute teachers and, on those occasions, we would hear from them. At other times, staff members' attention to project goals would appear to conflict with their other school responsibilities and principals would be inclined to see the action research initiative as causing them additional, unnecessary worry.

Many years ago, John Wallen, an author and researcher in the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, observed that, "In education, misunderstanding is the normal state of affairs." In the rush of early morning activity in a typical school, when it seems that there could be no such thing as a "typical" day, it should come as no surprise that some messages would be misdirected, others would be undelivered and still others would be misunderstood. In a few schools, it seemed that messages or requests that originated outside the normal authority structure in which school people exercised their strongest influence were those that would cause them the most distress.

A request from the research project for a substitute teacher, a change of room or the purchase of supplies or equipment would sometimes elicit from a school administrator a negative response vastly out of proportion to the importance of the request.

Celebration

Much of the action research literature promotes the importance of the celebration of success, learning and working together. One of our goals was to foster a spirit of celebration through this initiative and to find as many ways of doing that as possible. On a personal level, we were able to support each other at all times, maintaining our enthusiasm and our commitment for the duration of the initiative, learning from each other and from the work of the project teams and staying clearly focussed on our goals. We celebrated our own successes through such things as exchanges of e-mail messages after each set of school visits, treating ourselves to sub lunches on the drive from Innisfail to Sylvan Lake, affirmation of any useful contributions we made to teams' successes and acknowledging each other's efforts when we had to deal with matters that were potentially sensitive or disruptive. In particular, we learned the importance of celebrating little successes as they occurred, rather than saving up for one big celebration at the end of the project. We saw again and again how curiosity can lead to occasions for celebration and how the authentic affirmation of the work of a colleague can contribute to celebration as well. Along with members of project teams, we saw how celebration can lift the spirits of a group of educators, can inspire them to take on greater challenges and promote higher levels of acceptance and respect.

For some project teams, celebration occurred every time they got together and shared, along with what they had done over the past month or so, an ever-increasing variety and quantity of food. For others, the achievement of a project goal was itself an act of celebration. Their own learning was celebrated by almost all participants, as was the success of students. Many participants acknowledged that the interest and attention of the external facilitators were key elements in the celebration of success.

Professional Growth

It is probably true that the biggest successes of this initiative were found in the professional growth of participants. Most participants, in their end-of-year commentary, made some positive reference to their own professional growth. Typical of these statements was one from a primary teacher who concluded, "I can see myself becoming a more professional teacher because of my involvement in this project." From the documentation gathered during each site visit, we had a growing

awareness of such things as increases in professional reading, participation in professional workshops and attendance at conferences. We frequently recorded, shared with participants and discussed at length—often on our drives from one school to the next—examples of teachers using a common language to describe their work and its results. One simple example of this is found in the following excerpt from the report of the Poplar Ridge team that studied the incidence of Irlen’s Syndrome in Grade 1 students:

Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (SSS) is a visual perceptual problem that keeps many people from reading effectively, efficiently, or from reading at all. Until now, it has baffled educators and medical scientists because it is undetected by standard visual, educational, and medical exams. Individuals with Irlen’s Syndrome (SSS) perceive the printed page differently and must constantly adapt to distortions from print or the background. They may suffer from slow or inefficient reading, poor comprehension, eyestrain, or fatigue.

The students were assessed for tracking, convergence, saccades, accommodation, and possible Irlen’s Syndrome, including colored overlay preference. The screeners were present for two half days in the morning in a pull-out situation.

Saccades determines if there is sufficient development of eye muscles for back and forth movement required to read.

Tracking measures the smooth eye movement from left to right and diagonally.

Convergence is the strength of the eye muscles to focus on an object that moves towards the student’s face.

Accommodation is the ability to follow in a circular motion with the eyes.

A further example was seen in the work of the three teams that focussed on guided reading for elementary students. The growth in their collective use of terms and concepts specific to students’ acquisition of reading skills is documented in considerable detail in their final report, from which the following brief statement is taken:

Data Collection: The Alberta Diagnostic Reading Program and the Developmental Reading Assessment were used for the baseline measurement and post evaluation. The data collected was used in instructional planning, in developing homogenous groupings and in assessing reading achievement. In addition, River Glen used Marie Clay’s Observational Survey, CTBS results, and informal reading checklists. The Reading Celebration Daily Log, students’ work, daily observations and classroom progress reports were used to monitor progress.

Student Perspective:

- * The small group reading instruction allowed for a safe environment that fostered self-confidence in students observed through increased interactions, risk-taking, verbal discussions and body language.
- * Other noticeable behavior included increased fluency rate, good expressive oral reading, increased self-correction of reading miscues, reading levels increased by approximately 5–6 levels, an increased commitment to home reading, increased use of reading strategies (read ahead, flexing, sound it out, word clues, memory, re-read), comprehension question level increased because of the comprehension checks of short sections, and an increased familiarity with story structure (setting, character, plot conflict and resolution).

Research Perspective:

- * Teachers must have training in taking running records of children's reading before they begin the process.
- * Developmental Reading Assessment is a valuable, yet time-consuming resource.
- * Diagnostic Reading Program (Alberta Learning) requires a greater variety of passages and more selections are needed at the lower levels.
- * Teachers must ensure that they are using current assessment tools congruent with current teaching practices. (For example, one of the 1997 resource texts was promoting a reading diagnostic test that was in common use in Alberta in 1965.)
- * Self-assessment, student and parent surveys should be included as part of the evaluation.
- * Assessment should include informal measures such as running records with anecdotal comments and a record of growth in word identification skills.

We recorded and returned to the groups numerous examples of teachers engaged in "educative dialogue" as they sought to understand or make clear some aspect of practice that had challenged their curiosity. We referred to instances of teachers taking responsibility for learning outcomes in their classrooms every time we heard such comments during group discussions. Many teachers saw themselves becoming better questioners. Many others became better listeners, or better explainers, and were able to see quite clearly that such growth had occurred for them. Some noted eloquently that they could see that they had become better teachers.

Collaboration

Collaboration was at the heart of most school projects, and it was identified by many participants as adding value to their work and enhancing their commitment to project goals. Collaboration appeared to have different characteristics as Dot and I observed it. First, there are teachers who are natural collaborators, typified by those who cannot imagine doing this kind of work alone and who cannot wait to share any new insight or small success. Alternatively, as Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) have noted, there are teachers who collaborate in a “contrived” way, just as there are administrators and external consultants who promote forms of contrived collaboration. We noted that there were a few teachers (only a few) and a few administrators who did not appear to value collaboration as highly as the majority of participants did, and we recorded a couple of examples of teachers who collaborated well with the external facilitators but not with staff members. More positively, we observed how teachers can learn about collaboration by doing it, can see the greater benefits of collaboration by reflecting on their work and by taking ownership of what they have accomplished with the help of others. In their summary reports, many teachers provided examples of learning that occurred as a result of collaboration that they claimed would not have occurred in isolation.

Leadership

On the question of leadership and collaboration we have concluded that most school administrators formed productive collaborative relationships with their teams. They were able to put aside administrative power and promote the sharing of authority and responsibility within their teams. They modelled shared leadership. They invited initiative. They showed respect for colleagues’ efforts and took risks themselves. They disclosed as openly as they expected other team members to do, and they took on their share of different roles in the interest of helping their teams achieve team goals. The incidence of conflict between administrators and other team members could best be described as minimal.

One principal (in the final year of a career!) supported the work of the school team simply by attending every meeting “to observe and learn.” Another principal earned the respect of team members by always asking thoughtful questions, accepting team members’ answers and being seen to be useful to them at every stage of the project. Still another principal brought a high level of intellectual curiosity to each team meeting, while another brought energy, enthusiasm and

encouragement in abundance. We saw how the leadership of school administrators can be crucial to the success of school-based projects, in part because they have the power to foster or hinder the development of collaboration. We concluded that most teachers would prefer to engage in forms of inquiry in their school or classroom if they had the certainty of administrative and collegial support.

Like many educators, at times I have been a part of a staff that was good at making decisions but not nearly so effective at ensuring that the work that then needed to be done as a result of a decision actually got done. A former dean of the faculty of education at Lethbridge often used to ask, after a decision had been made, "Now, tell me again, who is going to do this work?" In the Chinook's Edge initiative, there were few such problems, largely because so many participants were ready and able to take on additional responsibility as required. The incidence of examples of informal leadership was so high as to be almost commonplace ("part of the way we do things around here"). From requests for external assistance to the distribution of relevant articles, from filling in for colleagues to presenting information to parents, from scheduling meetings to purchasing texts and other materials; from designing templates to raising ethical concerns—in these and many other ways, classroom teachers took increasing responsibility for their work and for the success of the initiative.

Incentives

We began this initiative with fairly modest hopes. We hoped we would be able to help all the teams work towards their goals but we were not sure that the available incentives would provide sufficient motivation. In fact, we believe the incentives alone did little. Rather, we think this group of educators got caught up in the excitement and, perhaps, even the novelty of the experience, and they were inspired to do much more than could have reasonably been expected. Small successes encouraged them, perhaps disproportionately, as did the positive focus that grew out of collaboration. Their own learning motivated them, spurring them to additional effort. Some may argue, then, that what we have seen as positive outcomes is nothing more than Hawthorne or halo effect. Possibly. But Mark Gall, a well-respected researcher and author from Oregon, has suggested that one of the things we do too often in educational research is to try to control for too many variables in advance when we should be just doing everything we can to get the best possible results first. We can then try to work out later why those results occurred. The opportunity the initiative afforded for these educators to have a little bit more control over their work lives was noted by many participants as a positive aspect of their involvement in the initiative.

The results of this initiative show that a small amount of external support, combined with purposeful leadership, a reasonable level of expertise, genuine commitment on the part of most participants and a focus on both evidence and results, can help groups of educators achieve agreed-upon goals.

Student Outcomes

As the external facilitators in this initiative, Dot Negropones and I saw student learning as one of the big successes. The improvements in learning that resulted from all the reading skills projects, from the junior high social studies intervention and from Brain Gym, for example, showed how quickly well-planned and well-supported interventions could influence key student outcomes. Many teachers in this initiative were reluctant, at first, (and some remained so) to use student learning gains as measures of project success. It is as if the heavy emphasis on achievement test scores at the provincial level has made teachers a bit fearful of the whole concept of results. One unanticipated outcome of this initiative was that, as projects progressed and their confidence in what they were doing increased, many teachers became more certain in their uses of student data in explaining the results of their efforts. In fact, it was through their enhanced awareness of different kinds of student outcomes that several teachers were able to begin to articulate their concerns over what they saw as a provincewide overemphasis on achievement test results alone as measures of student ability and, in effect, teachers' ability, too.

Another important facet of student involvement in this initiative was the very low incidence of student withdrawal from any project. On only a few occasions did groups report that students had been excluded or had withdrawn. The opposite was more frequently noted—most projects were inclusive in character, seeking to add students or accepting requests to add students, as team members became more confident in their ability to achieve their goals.

Documentation

From the start, we were determined that the documentation of these projects would be as authentic as possible. We were willing to provide some assistance but we encouraged teams to use their own words and their own voices to describe what they had done.

Initially, teachers' commitment to documentation was weak. Many teachers did not consider report writing to be an important part of their project involvement. Several teachers told us they hated writing reports, while others made pointed references to their displeasure at having to produce a "university term paper."

Accordingly, the idea that a report should be written at all, or that it should be done in a particular way or that all the reports should follow a certain format had to be carefully renegotiated as the projects neared completion, even though we knew that all participants had agreed from the beginning that reports of their work would be written and published. We solved the problem first by getting agreement on a format for the final report. Next, each team prepared a first draft, which was followed by an afternoon workshop devoted to draft refinement, using a strategy of peer editing. Dot and I then took another day to look at each draft and edit it for consistency of format and language. Final reports were shared with teams before they were posted on the school division's website and on the Action Research in Alberta website at the University of Lethbridge.

We agreed that each report should consist of an informative summary, a complete text and a listing of what we called "artifacts" that were developed or produced by each project. The following example of a summary was first drafted during the half-day writing workshop:

Title: Action Research: More of a Good Thing

Author(s): Catherine Moir, Karen Sveinson, Sandra Summers

School: Poplar Ridge School, River Glen School, Steffie Woima Elementary School

School District: Chinook's Edge School Division No. 73

Type of School: K-6, K-12, K-3

Project Grade Level: various grades

Number of Teachers Involved: 5, 5, 2

Number of Students Involved: 90, 90, 45

Description: Because the action research initiative in Chinook's Edge was organized through the district office, an interschool collaboration such as the one described in this report was fairly easy to arrange. Of course, the real task of keeping up to 20 teachers in three different schools all adequately informed, engaged and interested for a six-month project could never be said to be easy, no matter what administrative arrangements were in place. It seems to happen only if the participants have a strong commitment to their work and their goal.

Members of this group were most aware of their own learning and used the regular action research meetings for discussion and reflection that was nearly always purposeful and productive.

They rotated meeting sites from school to school, fed each other every session, and never seemed to lose their enthusiasm for this form of collaboration. Everyone who was involved with this project is anxious to see what the student learning outcomes will be. As they become available, they will be added to the report.

Keywords: Guided Reading, Early Literacy, Literacy, Students at Risk K–6, Students at Risk 7–9

The preparation of an accurate, detailed report and the subsequent publication of that report proved to be satisfying experiences for most participants. Participants had a more certain sense of accomplishment and also a sense of closure to their involvement. The following example of a final report was developed by the Guided Reading Team, which had representatives from three schools:

Collaborative Action Research Report

Title: Action Research: More of a Good Thing

Schools: Poplar Ridge School is a K–6 school that offers many educational opportunities for all students from kindergarten to grade six. The students have the opportunity to learn, to think, to grow and to become responsible and productive individuals. The school is located in a rural setting with a beautiful playground, a large forest area with trails, an amphitheater, and a tobogganing hill.

River Glen School is a K–12 school with a student population of 613. It is situated in the rural area around the city of Red Deer. River Glen has a high population of special needs students (approximately 25%) who receive individualized programming and support.

Steffie Woima Elementary School is a K–3 school located in the popular resort town of Sylvan Lake. There are 500 students attending and the population is rapidly increasing.

Project Team:

<i>Poplar Ridge</i>	<i>River Glen</i>	<i>Steffie Woima</i>	<i>Coordinators</i>
Catherine Moir	Karen Sveinson	Sandra Summers	Dot Negropontes
Mark Davidson	Pam Wolfe	Betty Welch	David Townsend
Beatrice Mayberry	Nancy Read	Level 2 students	
Margaret Downey	Tania Richmond		
Pamela Dudar	Sharon Sims		
Brenda McDonald			
Level 2 students	Level 3 and 5 students		

- Question:** To ascertain if the implementation of a *Guided Reading Program improves reading comprehension, word accuracy and fluency of emerging readers in a small group setting.
- *Guided Reading is a program that promotes small group reading instruction with children reading at similar instructional levels of text. The focus is on supporting each reader's use of reading strategies and metacognition at increasingly higher levels of reading text.
- Goal:** The goal was to increase students' reading level, comprehension, word accuracy and fluency, using sequenced literature in a small group setting.
- Literature:** Alberta Education (1986) Diagnostic Reading Program: Instructional Strategies
 Alberta Education (1986) Diagnostic Reading Program: Reading
 Alberta Learning: English Language Arts (ELA)
 Beaver, Joetta (1997) Diagnostic Reading Assessment
 Bright, Robin (1999) *From Your Child's Teacher*
 Bureau of Education and Research *Current Best Strategies for Helping Your Emergent, Early and Fluent Readers*
 Burton, Wilfred "Leveling Text for Guided Reading Programs" (ATA Library)
 Clay, Marie M. *An Observational Survey of Early Literacy Achievements*
 McCreath, Joan "Guided Reading: Are We Going Around in Circles?" (ATA Library)
 Miller, Wilma H. (1993) *Complete Reading Disabilities Handbook*
 Pinnell, Gay Su and Irene Fountas (1998) *Word Matters: Teaching Phonics and Spelling in the Reading and Writing Classroom*
 Nosbush, Linda L. "Guiding Their Progress: The Path to Literacy" (ATA Library)
 Orescanin, Joleen "Early Intervention Dilemmas: A Resource Teacher's Perspective on 'Inclusive Guided Reading'" (ATA Library)
 Schmoker, Mike (1996) *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement. "Effective Teamwork"* (ATA Library)
 Scholastic Guided Reading Book Series

Method:**Why**

We saw this research project as a way to acquire quality resources to share among the participating schools for a minimal amount of money.

What/How

The first step was to purchase and distribute appropriately leveled books. From there, the ABC levels of the books were matched with the students' reading ability.

The reading program itself was implemented in two distinctly different learning scenarios. Both Steffie Woima Elementary and Poplar Ridge Schools incorporated guided reading into a whole class setting. River Glen School utilized a pull out program for small group instruction with a 4–5 student maximum in each group.

I. Poplar Ridge School

The classroom was organized to accommodate a center-based approach to reading. The cross-curricular activity centers allowed the teacher to focus on the small group guided reading lessons. Activities were chosen based on the following criteria: of high interest, different learning styles, and a high degree of independence. Literature circles were added to challenge the more fluent readers. Students were held accountable for their daily activities through the use of a peer-monitoring sheet to assist them with tracking of their on-task time. Leaders of the groups were chosen in conjunction with the Literature Circle roles. A small amount of time was set aside each day for groups to report on their activities. A choral reading component fostered group discussion surrounding comprehension and metacognition skills.

II. River Glen School

Strengths and needs were assessed for each student involved. Areas assessed included reading comprehension, spelling, word identification, reading fluency, attitude and interest levels in reading. A daily lesson plan and home reading log were designed. Students were encouraged to self-monitor their reading using a strategies chart. A student data profile was created to summarize

pertinent information, running record observations, and both pre- and post test data.

III. Steffie Woima Elementary School

Similar to Poplar Ridge, a center-based approach to reading was used. The goal of each literacy center was to allow students to practice their skills independently, providing practice rather than new learning. The activities also provided opportunities for students to work within the comfort of their preferred learning style/modality and to learn and benefit from other learning styles/modalities. The focus of the activities was changed weekly.

When

The amount of time spent on the program varied from 3 hours/week to 75 minutes/day, depending upon the format of the program established in the school.

Data Collection: The Alberta Diagnostic Reading Program and the Developmental Reading Assessment were used for the baseline measurement and post evaluation. The data collected was used in instructional planning, in developing homogenous groupings and in assessing reading achievement. In addition, River Glen used Marie Clay's Observational Survey, CTBS results, and informal reading checklists. The Reading Celebration Daily Log, students' work, daily observations and classroom progress reports were used to monitor progress.

A student data profile was designed to synthesize the following information:

*academic history, current grade level, special needs, reading ability grouping, total books read, and participation in a home reading program.

Data Analysis: The individual comprehension scores will be assessed in June to determine improvement. The students will continue to be monitored to determine progress in their reading comprehension scores. An informal analysis of student work will be completed to establish the level at which students are generalizing the learned skills. Students will also complete an interest assessment to determine if any changes have occurred in their attitude toward reading.

Results and Conclusions:

Although the final student results have not yet been established, there are many discoveries that have already been made regarding guided reading, assessment and the process of collaborative action research.

A. *Student Perspective*

*The small group reading instruction allowed for a safe environment that fostered self-confidence in students observed through increased interactions, risk-taking, verbal discussions and body language.

*Other noticeable behavior included: increased fluency rate, good expressive oral reading, increased self-correction of reading miscues, reading levels increased by approximately 5–6 levels, an increased commitment to home reading, increased use of reading strategies (read ahead, flexing, sound it out, word clues, memory, re-read), comprehension question level increased because of the comprehension checks of short sections, and an increased familiarity with story structure (setting, character, plot conflict and resolution).

B. *Teacher Perspective*

*The knowledge acquired through professional readings and the sharing of ideas in the seven collaborative research meetings provided the confidence and skills to design an effective program (grouping, classroom management, center based learning).

*The teacher assistant time allowed for the monitoring of center activities and on-task behavior which increased student productivity.

*Reading the book, *Guided Reading* by Fontas and Pinnell, is a recommended prerequisite.

*Individualized teacher-student interactions increased.

*Grouping students according to instructional levels decreased the use of frustration level materials.

*Teachers focused on teaching specific reading strategies and metacognition.

C. *Research Perspective*

*Teachers must have training in taking running records of children's reading before they begin the process.

*Developmental Reading Assessment is a valuable, yet time-consuming resource.

*Diagnostic Reading Program (Alberta Learning) requires a greater variety of passages and more selections are needed at the lower levels.

*Teachers must ensure that they are using current assessment tools congruent with current teaching practices. (For example, one of the 1997 resource texts was promoting a reading diagnostic test that was in common use in Alberta in 1965.)

*Self-assessment, student and parent surveys should be included as part of the evaluation.

*Assessment should include informal measures such as running records with anecdotal comments and a record of growth in word identification skills.

D. *Program Considerations*

*Scholastic Guided Reading materials provide an excellent literature-based program. However, a need for in-depth comprehension questions was identified resulting in the development of questions modeled after the Alberta Diagnostic Reading Program and Bloom's Taxonomy. The literature was also lacking a word count and page count, which was completed with the assistance of high school students. It was noted that some levels had a high American content (Scholastic has agreed to provide Canadian content books) and more theme books at the various levels were needed.

*Other book series will also provide the materials required to develop a Guided Reading program provided adequate quantity of each book and leveling of series is available.

Teachers' Comments:

Action Research is "a fancy term for a really great way for teachers to demonstrate their commitment to lifelong learning, satisfy their curiosity, collaborate with colleagues, inspire their students and document their successes. See, for example, authors such as Richard Sagor, Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis, John Elliott, and Robin MacTaggart" (David Townsend 1999).

- "I feel more empowered, more professional. I can look at issues, think critically, assess them with my professional judgement, and feel personally and professionally accountable."
- "We had more ideas, more expertise, more opportunities to grow as we visited each other's schools."
- "You must choose the topic yourself—no one can make you do action research."
- "Rarely did anything turn out to be 'absolutely.' It was 'messy,' not 'tidy,' 'usually,' not 'always,' allowing for continued creativity and reflective thinking."
- "We benefited from administrative support. Dot Negropontes, curriculum director at Chinook's Edge No. 73, provided us with excellent leadership. Her knowledge and expertise in action research assisted us in the entire project."

- “The support of the group and the comfort of sharing with my colleagues was similar to the comfort and the support the students felt in the guided reading group.”
- “David Townsend, a facilitator from U of L, encouraged self-evaluation and reflective thinking. He listened, heard at a higher level, and encouraged us to take the next step. He asked three pertinent questions that empowered us and encouraged accountability: What have we done? What are we going to do next? How are we going to do it? He has mastered the art of being a facilitator.”
- “It didn’t feel like an add-on. We were already interested in trying guided reading so this gave us a supportive environment in which to try it.”
- “I thought more and reflected more in-depth about my teaching practices because I knew I would be reporting to the group.”

As teams undertook their changes in practice and moved closer to the achievement of project goals, they accumulated varying amounts of evidence of their efforts and results. We referred to much of this documentation as “artifacts” of the research. As we have shared examples of these documents with educators across the province, we have found that this outcome of the action research initiative is the one that receives the most favorable attention. The following examples of artifacts were also produced by the Guided Reading Team. In all, the team members created seven documents that helped them record their efforts, inform their parents and colleagues, gather necessary data, evaluate learning materials, assess and record student learning, and package units of work. Of the two examples included in this text, the Student Profile was developed by a teacher who volunteered to help the team organize important student information on to one form, even though he was not a member of the group. The Child Survey was adapted from a textbook the team was using.

Guided Reading Action Research

Student Profile

First Name Teacher

Last Name School

Grade

Age

Gender

Special Needs

Learning Disabilities

Reading Group ...



Reading Interests

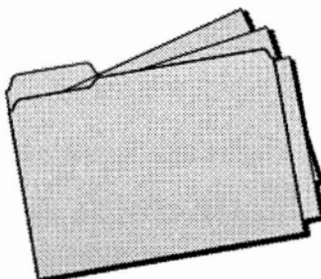
Books Read

Total:

Home:

School:

Comments for D.R.A.

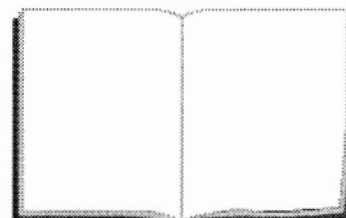


Guided Reading Level:

March

April

May



Program Satisfaction

Student %

Teacher %

Parent %

Interest Inventory

	P	N
Pre:	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Post:	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Diagnostic Reading Program

Passage
















Date	Level	Frustration	Instructional
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Developmental Reading Assessment

	Date	Level	Score
Pretest	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Post Test	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Child Survey

Name: _____

	Yes	Don't Know	No
1. I enjoyed reading with my reading group.			
2. Books are interesting to me.			
3. I liked re-reading my story with my family.			
4. I am able to answer questions before, during and after reading a book.			
5. Using my strategies card helps me figure out unique words.			

Additional Comments: _____

Child Signature: _____

Summary of Participants' Perceptions

At the final meeting of action research teams involved in this initiative, all participants were asked to write summary statements, sharing their ideas about action research and their projects with other educators. Most team members recorded their comments as part of their final reports. The following is a sampling of those observations:

- * I feel more empowered. I can look at issues, think critically, assess them with my professional judgment, and feel personally and professionally accountable.
- * We had more ideas, more expertise, more opportunities to grow as we visited each other's schools.
- * The collaboration times were productive as everyone shared their work, thoughts, questions and results.
- * This collaborative stuff was motivating for me. . . . I was rewarded with strategies and ideas to help overcome some serious issues I had to deal with in my own teaching assignment.
- * [The teacher] has become something of an expert in his field . . . even more enthusiastic and determined to achieve his goals.
- * This year of action research has been a journey from curiosity to skepticism to belief and advocacy. Although it has not been an easy journey, the destination has been worth it.
- * We feel the project was an add-on. However, it was very motivating for the teachers and we, in turn, motivated our students.
- * We enjoyed the teamwork aspect of the project. By being part of a team we accomplished more in less time.
- * This has been an enriching experience for teachers [seeking to promote] the acquisition of literacy for at-risk students.
- * The collaboration among staff members was a productive experience.
- * Working as a team with an administrator and other teachers provided a clearer perspective on the power of collaboration as professional development. The cooperation among the people involved was fantastic.
- * The importance of journalling has been confirmed in the action research process. Reflection and questioning are skills [that have been further developed] during [the] action research project.
- * The knowledge acquired through professional readings and the sharing of ideas in the seven action research meetings provided me with the confidence and skills to design an effective [guided reading] program.

- * You must choose the topic yourself. No one can make you do action research.
- * Rarely did anything turn out to be “absolutely.” It was “messy,” not “tidy,” “usually,” not “always,” allowing for continued creativity and reflective thinking.
- * The action research project didn’t feel like an add-on. We were already interested in trying guided reading so this gave us a supportive environment in which to try it.
- * I thought more and reflected more in-depth about my teaching practices because I knew I would be reporting back to the research group every month.

Summary

The Chinook’s Edge action research project has been a low-cost initiative generating high levels of educator interest, commitment and participation over the course of nearly two school years. It stands as a fairly graphic demonstration of the kind of research school-based educators are willing to undertake if they are appropriately encouraged and supported in their efforts.

Other conclusions may be drawn from this experience. For example, while there are many ways of promoting professional growth, the collaborative action research strategy is one that appears capable of serving the needs of a broad range of educators. Teachers and administrators at all career stages, from various positions and discipline areas, were able to get involved in the many projects that the Chinook’s Edge school teams completed.

Within the action research strategy that was followed in this study, such things as regular meetings, planned reflection, reflection that leads to action, and documentation have been shown to help participants in the achievement of their goals. The small financial incentives that allowed teachers to pay for substitutes and the extra funding that covered the costs of external facilitators appear to be investments that can offer a disproportionately large return to the district, the school and the individual educators who make up each team.

Action research (also referred to as “school-based inquiry” and “teachers-as-researchers” at times during this study), while it may still be an idea that is initially foreign to many teachers, has been shown in this case study to encourage educator persistence in pursuit of professional growth goals. The Chinook’s Edge experience has

shown that learning communities can be nurtured in a district's schools when appropriate methods are used. Learning—of educators and of students—was used as a measurable outcome of many of the action research projects.

Moreover, the larger question of sustainability of professional development and school improvement initiatives was partially answered by the results of this case study. Educators were seen to maintain high levels of enthusiasm and commitment over extended periods of time. Changes in teaching practices occurred as a result of collaboration, research and what has most recently been called "evidence-based practice." Educators accepted increasing responsibility for what worked and what did not work in their projects. Teacher efficacy increased, as did the confidence of many administrators in their own ability, and the ability and professional judgment of many of their teachers. In part, because of the increases in teacher responsibility, because the quality of leadership in the district is quite high and because of its purposeful use of resources, this school district has been the beneficiary of the value-adding practices of several teams of educators, most of whom are following through on their intentions to continue working in such ways.

Conclusion

This monograph has been prepared for practitioners who want to engage in action research as they pursue professional growth. The references to the research and the literature have been provided as a source of verification and as evidence that there is much about action research that remains to be discovered and understood.

The case study of Chinook's Edge is presented as an example of what groups of typical educators can do when they take up the challenges of everyday practice in purposeful and innovative ways.

Action research is not advocated here as the way to classroom success and school effectiveness. Rather, it is offered as one way, among many, that may help educators gain greater control over their professional lives and provide the quality of service to students that all committed educators strive to provide.

Note

All the Alberta action research projects cited in the case study can be found at the following website: <http://www.edu.uleth.ca/arnia>. Once you access the homepage, click on the Active Researchlink to access the eight summaries of the Chinook's Edge projects. At the end of each summary, you may click to view the whole report. All relevant artifacts are appended to each report.

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