

## **CAPACITY BUILDING IN COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH** **An *Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)* Initiative** **Editorial**

**Doug Franks, Daniel Jarvis, and Ron Wideman**

Guest Editors

Welcome to the second of two special issues of the *Canadian Journal of Action Research* (CJAR) arising from the *Teachers Learning Together* (TLT) project of the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). Over a period of three years, ETFO supported teams of teachers across Ontario who conducted action research for the purpose of improving teacher practice and student learning. Education faculty members from a number of Ontario universities provided facilitation and guidance to these teacher teams. Faculty members also conducted in-depth interviews with the teams and this research has produced a great deal of evidence regarding the experiences of those teachers. Currently, ETFO is compiling the knowledge drawn from the TLT project into book form. We look forward to its publication in the near future.

These are pretty exciting times for action research in the province of Ontario. In September 2010, the Ontario Government published number sixteen of its Capacity Building Series entitled, *Collaborative Teacher Inquiry* (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2010), which stated, "The role of teacher inquiry is emerging as a critical part of the daily work of teacher. In effect, collaborative teacher inquiry is rapidly becoming a commonly-held stance within professional practice in Ontario as we transform our conceptions of professional learning." (p. 1)

The Ministry of Education has recently supported a number of formal teacher collaboratives including the *Kindergarten/Grade 1 Collaborative Inquiry*, the *Collaborative Inquiry for Learning in Mathematics*, and, the *Student Work Study*. However, in addition to large-scale system projects, there are also many examples across this province of teachers, either individually or in groups, working proactively, tirelessly, and in an empowered manner to improve their teaching practice and hence the learning of their students in their own schools and communities. They are doing this through a process of *knowledge creation*, where teachers are actively developing educational knowledge for themselves in

their own contexts (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2010). All of this begins to confirm Marks' and Lewis' 1999 prediction,

[We] contend that a unified organizational culture built around ongoing inquiry into the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning depends on the collective influence of teachers who function as empowered professionals. We view the intersection of teacher empowerment and the capacity for organizational learning as a central thrust for future school reform. (p. 708)

For teachers, collaborative inquiry involving cycles of planning, action, and reflection is exhilarating and rejuvenating. It restores our faith in the values for which we entered the profession. It makes ongoing school improvement viable, compelling, and immediate. It puts teachers and schools at the forefront of educational change. It empowers teachers by combining action to improve student achievement with self-directed, professional learning, so that we see ourselves not as passive recipients but as people empowered to make a difference. Further, it gives teachers a measure of choice and control over their own professional learning. As Jane Bennett indicated in the interview published in our previous special issue of OAR, one reason ETFO launched the TLT project was that,

[W]e wanted to honour what our teachers needed, and what teachers had been saying over and over again was that they were tired of being provided with top-down professional development. They weren't given any chance to actually have choice over what their professional learning was, and so we wanted to find a model . . . to actually empower them and give them choice.

When Ruth Dawson of ETFO was asked if she thought that the collaborative action research element of the TLT project was successful, she answered, "YES—capitals on all three letters." There is substantial evidence that teams of teachers conducting collaborative action research for the purpose of improving student learning are able to engage in collective action, for an agreed-on purpose, and with enough belief in attainment that they're able to go forward together toward the goals they have set for themselves (Wideman, Franks, & Jarvis, 2009). These three abilities taken together, i.e., agreed-upon purpose, collective action, and belief in attainment, form a powerful basis for educational improvement. They are, as Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009) pointed out, an "organizational phenomenon" shared by all successful schools.

Based on our observation of teachers during the TLT project, we believe that capacity building in collaborative action research should be a priority in Ontario education over the next five to ten years. Literature on adult education indicates that the effectiveness of learning projects increases as participants enhance their learning skills (Mackeracher, 2004). Learning how to learn effectively involves development of **intrapersonal** and **interpersonal** skill sets—both of which can be enhanced through capacity building activity (Smith, 1990).

- The **intrapersonal** set includes the thinking skills to conduct an inquiry-based learning project—skills such as how to: frame, review, and update a research question; develop an hypothesis about where to begin; design and modify a study; collect and analyze data; use “triangulation” to check results; keep a reflective journal to record the study; and, develop and present a research report (DeLong, Black, & Wideman, 2005).
- The **interpersonal** set, on the other hand, includes knowledge, skills, and values that teachers use to work on a learning project *collaboratively* with others. These include the ability to promote democratic collaboration, professional dialogue, and trust-based relationships within the team. Trust appears to be pivotal in creating collaborative teams that can engage in deep and meaningful professional learning. The degree to which teachers trust each other in the team governs the extent to which they will share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout the project.

While the development of the intrapersonal skill set is important, the interpersonal skill set is essential if colleagues are to work together successfully in professional learning activities. Such skills include an affective dimension that makes many educators nervous. Traditionally, the Education profession has been hesitant to address the impact of the affective domain as experienced by teachers on student learning. More attention needs to be given to the affective domain and particularly on how it impacts on team-based professional learning.

In this second special issue of CJAR, we include a book review by Shields in which she critiques a recent and related text, *Professional Learning to Reshape Teaching* (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2010), in which the authors highlight key aspects of successful professional learning initiatives. We then present a collaborative action research teacher team report by Inglis and Miller entitled, *Problem-based Instruction: Getting at the Big Ideas and Developing Learners*. As a result of their team’s investigation into problem-based mathematics learning (PBL) in light of *big ideas* found within the curriculum, they reflectively conclude, “We have become more passionate about problem-based mathematics instruction because we (not just the students) were more engaged.” This sentiment speaks to the rich capacity building demonstrated by teachers who have experienced the empowerment of the action research cycle. We then include the creative documentary by Windle and Sefton entitled, *Montage: Improvising in the Land of Action Research*, in which two university faculty researchers have assembled an arts-based, multi-layered video montage (including still images, audio clips, and scrolling text) to more accurately capture the complexity and synergy inherent to the collaborative action research process.

Throughout the ETFO *Teachers Learning Together* project, Lead Teachers were established for each of the teacher teams. Based on interviews conducted with these Lead Teachers before and during the project, and on eJournal reflective entries collected from the LTs throughout that year, Bruce, Jarvis, Brock, and Flynn explore the significance of the perceived and enacted roles/responsibilities of the Lead Teachers throughout the initiative. Finally, we include the full manuscript of a powerful and related keynote address, *Empowering Teachers and Schools to Play their Key Role in Improving Education*,

which was delivered by Wideman at the North Eastern Ontario Education Network Research Symposium in February 2011.

We are pleased to have presented these two special issues of CJAR to the readership and we trust that the content will serve to encourage further rich conversations and investigations in Ontario and beyond.

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