

Running Head: COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH

Benefits of collaborative action research for the beginning teacher

Sidney N. Mitchell ^{a*}

Rosemary C. Reilly ^b

Mary Ellin Logue ^a

^a College of Education and Human Development, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469 5749, USA

^b Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

* Corresponding author. College of Education and Human Development, 5749 Merrill Hall, Room 223, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469 5749, USA. Tel.: +1 207 581 3435; fax: +1 207 581 3120.
E-mail address: sid.mitchell@maine.edu (S.N. Mitchell).

Abstract

Beginning teachers are confronted with many issues as they begin their teaching careers, issues, such as classroom management, individual differences, behavior problems, dealing with parents, and so on. Many beginning teachers take professional development seminars in an attempt to deal with these and other issues. Professional development seminars, however, may not address the specific issues faced by beginning teachers but rather focus on approaches that are more global. In this paper, we argue that the best approach to professional development is through a collaborative action research model. By extending the partnerships established between student teachers, mentor teachers and university supervisors during student teaching into the beginning teachers' career, many of the everyday problems can be confronted within a supportive network. Several recommendations are offered for beginning and maintaining productive CAR relationships.

Keywords: collaborative action research; action research; beginning teachers; reflective practice

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The transition from student teaching to a first teaching position can be difficult. Up to this point in time, student teachers were supervised by faculty during their studies, and then by a supervising teacher throughout their student teaching. Once they are in their own classroom, no one will be looking over their shoulder, affirming or second-guessing their decisions, or what they are doing. The new teacher will make all instructional decisions, and will need to grapple with a host of other issues found in day-to-day teaching such as, classroom management, student motivation, individual differences, different learning styles, behavior problems, dealing with parents, and so on. These issues can potentially overshadow instruction and are particular challenges for beginning teachers to overcome (Onafowora, 2005). When confronting these issues, some may ask colleagues for help or quick solutions, some may sign up for professional development seminars, and some may simply imitate what they saw their mentor teachers do without internalizing the reasons behind the teacher's decisions or recognizing the application of theory to practice. Still others may give up and leave the profession altogether. Indeed, school administrators often wonder why so many beginning teachers leave the teaching profession after working for so many years to become teachers. University supervisors wonder why student teachers seem to forget the theories they learned in their courses when they enter their own classrooms. In fact, some research suggests that pre-service teachers only attend to and retain course content that confirms their pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1991).

Recognizing these difficulties, many beginning teachers take professional development courses in an attempt to improve their teaching practice and learn how to deal effectively with

everyday classroom issues. However, the professional development training seminar approach does not always encourage the expert thinking skills necessary to confront the core, ill-structured problems found in everyday teaching: how to get novice teachers started who have limited prior knowledge (teaching as cultural transmission); linking skills to purpose (teaching as skills training); how to enable children to rise above a “natural” level of competence (teaching as fostering natural development); how to get into the learner’s head and make contact with what is there (teaching as promoting conceptual change) (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1989); and how to deal effectively with issues of classroom management. Professional development seminars often take the approach of favoring a particular instructional method, assuming and striving for a universality of approach, or are over-focused on the acquisition of measurable learning outcomes, short-term gains, and priorities that are external to the teachers (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005).

Professional development is a special challenge for novice teachers, who may focus more on coping with a new role, and developing and consolidating their instructional skills, than on growth and new approaches. Since many new teachers lack the extensive knowledge networks, varied classroom experiences, and rich repertoires of strategies for problem-solving along with appropriate mechanisms for assessing and applying these strategies (Ericsson & Smith, 1991; Glaser & Chi, 1988; Johnson, 1988), professional development may not be seen by them as useful to their everyday work life at the beginning of their career. Teachers who left the profession often claimed that their professional development was not effective (Public Education Network, 2002). This suggests that professional development does not always fulfill the goal of retaining good teachers or improving practice. Consequently, there have been calls from various quarters to change the nature of professional development for teachers and to make it more

meaningful and applicable for everyday classroom teaching (Capobianco & Joyal, 2008; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Lasley, Siedentop, & Yinger, 2006; Lieberman, 1995).

Recent trends in teacher expertise development have emphasized connections with others, with particular emphasis on highlighting the social dimension (Oja, 2001). McHargue (1994) found that, when engaged in professional development, teachers learn best from other teachers, and that problem solving and creativity are enhanced by diverse groupings, which create collective wisdom that surpasses individual expertise. The “need for others” is particularly apparent when teachers attempt to engage in reflection or conversations about their practice. Others become the listeners to the stories of the classroom, and are witnesses and audience to the reliving and reinterpretation of their stories of practice using reflective dialogue (Connelly & Clandinin, 1995) and critical questioning (Uduari-Solner & Keyes, 2000). This collective approach to the improvement of practice is the foundation of a creative culture of “shared expertise.” Cochran-Smith (1991) argued that, “the only way for beginners to learn to be both educators and activists is to struggle over time in the company of experienced teachers who are themselves committed to collaboration and reform in their own classrooms” (p. 307).

We contend that the many issues confronting beginning teachers can be addressed by creating opportunities that permit and support beginning teachers to become self-reflective and self-evaluative, assessing their performance in relation to their students’ engagement and overall achievement. If teachers want to increase their students’ involvement and engagement and success, and want to solve classroom-based problems, then teachers must investigate and determine what instructional or structural changes need to take place in order to achieve those goals (Gennaoui & Kretschmer, 1996). In reality, however, teachers work in isolation from their peers and most often must solve classroom problems without the benefit of the wisdom and

experience of others (Moore, 1994). We believe that professional development and the search for practical solutions can be improved and pushed forward through a school-university collaborative action research model [CAR]. By extending the partnerships established between student teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors during student teaching to the beginning teachers' career, many of the everyday problems can be confronted within a supportive network. Solutions can be reached, and attempts to integrate theory and practice and to establish an authentic teaching voice can be supported. In so doing, the valuable voices of beginning teachers can be heard. Through this model, beginning teachers develop solutions embedded in everyday practice. These solutions then become part of their growing body of practical knowledge. Finally, the social dimension, coupled with other aspects of CAR can bring novice teachers into the discussions of professional practice and growth. We extend this belief to include school-university collaborative partnerships.

In this paper, we describe the benefits of collaborative action research approaches for beginning teachers; how beginning teachers can establish a successful CAR relationship with university researchers as mentors or critical friends (Kember et al., 1997); how CAR can inform their pedagogic practice in the classroom; and how CAR can provide support for their professional development and learning. The intent of this paper is to introduce beginning teachers to collaborative action research by highlighting the definitions, conceptual and methodological framework, purpose, relationships and responsibilities, and the maintenance of CAR relationships. Finally, this paper is a joint US and Canadian collaboration and is written from the perspectives of researchers in the United States and Canada.

1. Definitions of collaborative action research

Action research is broadly defined as a process through which practitioners study their own

practice to solve problems embedded in their day-to-day practice (Corey, 1953). While encompassing many different approaches, practices, and traditions, such as cooperative inquiry (Reason & Bradbury 2001), participatory action research (Center for Participatory Action Research, 2008), and action learning (Kramer, 2007), action research, in this context, refers to the research by practitioners in order to improve practice (Kemmis, 2001). This form of research is grounded in the practical everyday issues teachers encounter in the classroom (Meier & Henderson, 2007). Within this framework, teachers themselves are involved in researching the relationship between their theories of learning, instruction, and teaching, and their practices in the classroom. The teacher practitioner–researcher is, therefore, cast in a double role, that of “...subject and object of research, at different moments... adopting and alternating between contrasting attitudes of practitioner and critical and self-critical observer of her or his own practice” (p. 91), putting the “I” at the centre of the research (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996). Teacher action research is essentially a formalized and systematic process promoting reflective practice (Schön, 1983), which allows a teacher to move up and beyond an immediately pressing event, into a reflective stance. This change in perspective transforms a teacher’s thinking from the anecdotal to action based on critical professional thinking, from a routine and habitual action to an action based on self-appraisal, flexibility, creativity, social, cultural, and political awareness (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). As designers and stakeholders of the research, they work with others to identify courses of action to enhance teaching practices. As researchers, the teacher/researcher gathers evidence from multiple sources to guide their practice and to make informed decisions based on evidence.

Drawing on the principles of action science (Friedman, 2001), collaborative action research focuses on creating climates of inquiry in communities of practice, often with different

stakeholders functioning as co-researchers. The ultimate aim of CAR is to develop sophisticated understanding of the problems, issues and practices of teachers in authentic settings, bridging the theory– practice gap (Stringer, 1996). However, at the heart of teacher action research or collaborative action research between academics and teachers, whether new or seasoned, is a commitment to educational improvement (McNiff, 2002; McNiff et al., 1996).

2. Benefits of CAR

The benefits of CAR have been documented in several studies, such as helping pre-service teachers and in-service teachers develop their intellectual capacities (Balach & Szymanski, 2003); helping beginning teachers develop a sense of identity as subject specialists in secondary schools (Burn, 2007); increasing teachers' levels of self-efficacy and feelings of empowerment (Farrell, 2003); supporting professional development (Capobianco & Joyal, 2008; Gennaoui & Kretschmer, 1996); selecting the best grouping practices (Mitchell, Reilly, Bramwell, Solnosky, & Lilly, 2004); preventing teacher burnout (Allan & Miller, 1990); and developing positive mentor–mentee relationships (Levin & Rock, 2003). CAR has been used successfully to team pre-service teachers with in-service teachers to help pre-service teachers cope with the demands of everyday classroom life (Burn, Childs, & McNicholl, 2007; Burbank & Kauchak, 2001; Burn, Childs, & McNicholl, 2007), and to confront and solve the core teaching problems that are characteristic of expert teachers (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1989). While the benefits cited above are numerous, one of the strongest benefits is the power and voice given to beginning teachers to inform their practice. The power of CAR rests with the ongoing nature of professional development that is situated within real classrooms with teachers confronting real problems. For example, we used CAR with a cohort of student teachers facing problems found daily in classrooms (e.g. classroom management and disruptive behaviors). Through a spiraling process,

we helped the student teachers draw upon what they knew theoretically from their studies and to apply that knowledge to the problem at hand. In contrast, a group of student teachers in another section not using CAR resorted to a complaining session, with no usable solutions generated. The supportive nature of CAR turned their problems into challenges to solve systematically in ways that encouraged them to look for solutions in the theories they studied.

3. Conceptual and methodological framework of school–university CAR

One of the many challenges facing beginning teachers is determining how teaching and educational research fit together and why it should concern them, who the research is ultimately serving, and what is the focus of the research (e.g. what issue is under investigation: Galassi et al., 1999). School–university partnerships have a long history steeped in a rich body of conceptual and methodological literature. Indeed, over 40 years ago, Stephen Corey, at Teachers College, Columbia University, asserted that if professional researchers conducted inquiries carefully, meticulously, and scientifically, and published what they found, then classroom teachers, administrators, and supervisors would read the findings and behave differently (Boostrom, Jackson, & Hansen, 1993). This university-to-school approach to educational change based on the process of hypothesis testing, theory generation by rating, classifying, and correlating observational and verbal report data gathered under highly controlled circumstances has come under mounting criticism for sustaining and promoting the research-to-practice gap. This approach as a way of apprehending and representing teaching and classroom life in general is no longer willingly accepted (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Grimmer, 1998; Halsall, Carter, Curley, & Perry, 1998). Partially, it is because this approach, more often than not, has left teachers out of the knowledge generation process, and relegated them to the category of passive consumers of research or research assistants (at best), not co-constructors of situated practice knowledge. The

need for CAR to inform teaching practice and solve educational problems in situ represents a new way of creating collaborative research partnerships between university researchers and schoolteachers.

A number of reports from a variety of perspectives, including theoretical, descriptive reports of practice and research provide a considerable amount of information regarding the nature and influence of school–university partnerships in solving practical educational problems. The extant literature has shed light on what happens to both teachers and university researchers in these relationships (Capobianco & Joyal, 2008). Through CAR, a zone of proximal development is established during which the novice teacher solidifies her or his own teaching style apart from that of former mentors. The university partner scaffolds the process of using theory to guide decision-making, and by doing so, buffers the novice teacher as she or he grapples with the realities of teaching with tools to solve other problems.

One aim of collaborative action research, then, is to connect theory and research with practice in a meaningful way in order to influence teacher thinking and instructional practice, school systems and culture, student achievement outcomes, and to another extent, teacher satisfaction and renewal (Blomquist, 1986; Fox, 2000; Halsall et al., 1998; Knight, Wiseman, & Cooner, 2000; Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1999; Simm & Ingram, 2008).

Novice teachers may need support for engaging in classroom-based collaborative action research based on the actual teaching dilemmas they face because it is the individual teacher who still holds the key to the successful change within his/her own classroom (Halsall et al., 1998). Teaching dilemmas include investigating problematic aspects of the curriculum; attempting to understand learners' conceptions of subject matter content; examining difficult student behavior; exploring the beliefs students bring into the learning environment acquired from their prior

socialization in schools; and how beliefs can affect the student's views of teaching and learning. Addressing these concerns within the supportive framework of CAR, teams can brainstorm, plan, implement, and then critique teaching together (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Fergus & Wilson, 1989; Knight et al., 2000; Villaume & Brandt, 2000). The supportive nature of CAR can facilitate the development of meaningful solutions at a quicker pace than toiling in social and intellectual isolation.

3.1. Setting up and maintaining CAR partnerships

Research with elementary and secondary teachers has shown that when novice teachers are paired with experienced mentors or faculty researchers, CAR helped participants develop meaningful and collaborative relationships that provided opportunities for focused dialogue about teaching and learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Levin & Rock, 2003). However, the ultimate effectiveness of CAR depends upon common project goals among the collaborators, institutional support for collaboration, and similarities in the needs of all participants. This involves determining mutual goals for the research, sharing responsibility for the research product, and building a trusting relationship that permits interdependence and mutuality between all collaborators (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Ulichny & Schoener, 1996). The Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN, 2006) states that “practitioners themselves should be actively and creatively involved in defining and developing professional practice; and that practitioners themselves should contribute to the growth of valid professional knowledge and theory.” In essence, CAR demands that beginning teachers and their collaborators address fundamental issues regarding the co-construction of knowledge, the contextualization of instructional strategies, and the assignment of key and determining roles.

CAR is not an approach all to itself; rather it draws upon various action research traditions,

one being social action research. The basic ingredients of social action research include a humanitarian value orientation, an active role for the scientist, innovation, democratic participation, scientific evaluation, and a multiple perspectives approach to problem solving (Fergus & Wilson, 1989; Villaume & Brandt, 2000). All members share the role of investigator, and they share in analysis and interpretation of the data. It is not the teacher under the magnifying glass that frames the research question but rather, a real dilemma requiring numerous viewpoints and systematic inquiry. CAR, when used properly, removes finger pointing and blame from the research process, thus creating an ongoing climate of collaboration and problem solving.

4. Relationship and responsibilities in CAR: school–university partnerships

Establishing and maintaining a relationship with the CAR framework is the most important aspect of CAR. Indeed, the ultimate success of any CAR process rests upon how solid and open the relationship is. In this section, we discuss the necessary features of successful CAR relationships.

CAR can be successfully implemented in school–university partnerships without any reassignment of teachers or faculty (Feldman, 1992; Herrick, 1992). This is accomplished because the teacher, working in her or his classroom, attempts to solve problems in the course of teaching, and the university researcher is able to conduct research in the classroom. As such, both benefit from this collaboration. However, the success of research collaboration resides within the partnerships (responsibilities and roles) between the university, the teacher, and the school administration (Holm, Hunter, & Welling, 1999). For successful collaboration to occur and meaningful results obtained in school–university partnerships, all involved must address the following areas in the planning stage.

- First, the problem is defined: What is your question? If there are multiple questions, which is the most important one for the investigation?
- Second, a plan is established to collect data: What will you use to investigate your question? Who will do what? When? How long will it take?
- Third, data must be analyzed: How will you organize the information you collect? Will it be put into “plain language” so all partners can discuss the implications using their own expertise?
- Fourth, what practical strategies or solutions were discovered in the data? How can these be implemented? Tested? What are the next steps for practice?
- Fifth, results are reported: How will you share the results with others? A realistic timeline must be discussed. If findings are to be published in a peer-reviewed journal or proposed for a conference, a lengthy period of time will likely elapse between the collaborative research and the reporting of findings. Is there a need to report the findings? Does the teacher want to be involved in the reporting and sharing of data? Should the data be shared? Will this be done in a formal or informal way?
- Lastly, the next steps are planned: Where do you go from here? Will the findings of this inquiry inform another question or does the teacher want to solidify the changes the research informed?

All of these steps are embedded within an explicitly negotiated relationship that needs to balance the tensions that are inherent within collaborative relationships. Some of these tensions were identified by a team of teachers and university researchers and are reported by Bamford et al. (1999). These include:

- *The tension between control and dependence* – This can often be expressed by the

dilemma over how much help to extend to the beginning teacher and how much influence the more experienced partner should exert. How this tension is managed can have implications regarding the collaborative nature and spirit of CAR, a fundamental value within this approach. Too much help may disable beginning teachers from realizing their own potential as researchers and from taking charge of their own research agenda; too little help from the expert mentor may contribute to feelings of incompetence or frustration, and may appear as withholding.

- *The tension between power and authority* – This can be expressed by the dilemma regarding the impact of status especially for university collaborators and how much cognitive authority to assume. How this tension is managed can have implications regarding the direction of the research (how authentic the problems are to the beginning teacher) and depth of conceptualization (how meaningful and practical the results of the research are to the individual educator). Status, and the power associated with it, whether based on educational degree, years of experience or work role, may serve to intimidate or alienate beginning teachers. This will only serve to undermine collaboration and equity.
- *The tension between centrality and periphery* – This can often be expressed by the dilemma of how centralized the research interests and concerns of the more experienced partner are, or whether the partner is just taking up space without making a meaningful contribution to the community of practice. Too much centrality may disaffect beginning teachers from the research process; too much periphery may contribute to feeling non-productive, apathetic, or useless on the part of the partner.
- *The tension between practicing the value-in-action inherent in CAR (teacher authority) and the primacy of other needs* (such as publishing or conflicts in style rooted in value

differences) - This can often be expressed by the value clashes between supporting practitioner autonomy and research authority and the desire to have a research site or the pressure to produce research products.

Addressing these questions and negotiating the relationship at the beginning sets the stage to start the process and facilitates smooth communication between teacher and researcher. We highly recommend that these issues be dealt with up front before any data are collected or observations done.

5. Rapport within CAR relationships

Active teacher involvement is central at all stages of the research process: from planning and preparing the research, through data gathering, interpretation, and representation, finally to reporting and using the outcomes. University partners need to establish trust in the field with teachers, and at the same time, remain detached in order to remain as unbiased as possible.

Traditionally, qualitative researchers have been cautioned that the distinction between friendship and rapport is necessary to clarify because of the hazards of sample bias and loss of objectivity. However, this position has come under criticism precisely because it distances and objectifies the other (e.g. the teacher) in this collaborative relationship (Dana, 1992). In fact, more recently, the researcher-as-human being has been conceptualized as one of the most important identities of the qualitative researcher (Connolly & Reilly, 2007).

Collaborative action research is an action relationship, which employs a recursive spiral of cycles that focuses on planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning, and re-enacting (Kemmis, 1998), all within the context of human relationships. The relationship is based on the attainment of goals and the co-construction of practice knowledge. The teacher's goals often focus on practical outcomes related to the work life of the teacher and how the research can be

used to improve practice. The researcher's goals often focus on how they can study a particular theory, phenomenon, or instructional method. For all, better outcomes for student learners form the basis of the collaboration. Rapport is built and maintained by paying primary attention to the relationship and connection among people involved in the research. This means incorporating voices of traditionally unheard, undervalued members of the educational community into published research. Paying attention to power differences, and leveling them when they appear, occurs through the empowerment of the teacher. Focusing on the process and not the product of the research allows both beginning teacher and researcher to discuss bad news or unknown information about the novice teacher's practice (Ulichny & Schoener, 1996). The data gleaned through the process are to improve practice, not to lay blame.

6. Issues of partnership in CAR

Many issues in collaborative research present potential threats to the successful completion of the research. These issues include who initiates the collaboration, the reasons underlying the inquiry, the resources available for both instrumental and supportive, teacher workload, the pathways for partners to communicate and expectation for how often communication should occur, and what potential problem-solving strategies are in place to resolve conflict. These issues can be addressed by attending to the school context and building intervention on the teacher's experience, by generating and maximizing resources, maintaining efficient dialogue, and envisioning multiple solutions for conflict resolution (Dyson, 1997).

Cole and Knowles (1993) report that technical issues involving logistics, finances, and the implementation of research design must be considered in order to achieve successful collaborative research. In addition to the personnel issues involving relationships and responsibilities mentioned previously, procedural issues involving time frame, monitoring of

research, and information flow will need to be addressed. Ethical issues involving care, equity, confidentiality, and control of information also could impede process and progress if not considered. The authors also suggest that political issues involving policy, legislative, and curriculum implications and educational issues involving informing and improving practice should also be considered in order to avoid potential difficulties. For example, currently in the United States standards-based assessments are mandated at the State and Federal level under the “No Child Left Behind Act” (2002). The goal of these assessments is to ensure that uniform standards are met for grade promotion and graduation. Hence, under a standards-based curriculum, teaching-to-the-test may undermine teachers’ attempts to deal effectively with issues of individual differences, student motivation, and dealing with parents, to name only a few, as they grapple with the realities of high-stakes testing. Finally, successful collaborative inquiry is mediated by the size of the school, the availability of suitable mentors, and school administrators who recognize the influence of the school’s organizational culture on teacher commitment (Sagor, 1992). Neglecting these issues risks producing results that fail to answer the questions that drove the research and reducing any benefits to the teacher.

7. Conclusion

Collaborative action research represents a substantial shift away from previous models in which research was the purview of university faculty acting as experts, imposing invasive designs to manipulate or judge teachers’ practice. Becoming a reflective practitioner allows the uncertainties of the teacher to be a source of learning and professional development for teachers and students and not embarrassments that should be suppressed or ignored. While this is important for all teachers, it has particular relevance for beginning teachers whose doubts and uncertainties can contribute to the exodus of so many teachers in their first five years of practice.

Collaborative action research will provide a diverse database for training materials, curricula, and theoretical discussions (Valesky & Etheridge, 1992). In one example, the results of one collaborative research project showed that students increased achievement in writing, mathematics and problem solving as a result of the intervention planned, investigated and implemented. These findings provided support at both the school and university levels to justify the expenditure of resources for professional development (Valesky & Etheridge, 1992).

Too often, theory is taught apart from teaching practice in universities, sometimes years before methods classes and student teaching. CAR has the added benefit of being a context and a framework for forming a community of practice (Balach & Szymanski, 2003). Knowledge does not just reside in the heads of beginning teachers, but also in the meanings, relations, activities and skilful executions of praxis. By engaging in the formation of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) focused on collaborative action research, beginning teachers can participate in learning relationships. This allows them to master the knowledge and skill required of newcomers in order to move from the periphery of the system towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of the teaching community. In this way, learning through CAR becomes one avenue for becoming an expert member and a way of being in the social world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CAR can introduce beginning teachers to the personal benefits of research and they can see how research can affect everyday issues in classroom teaching and management. Thus, teacher cognition and expertise become embedded in social relationships situated in authentic classroom contexts and nested and negotiated within a culture of instructional practice.

Another strength of CAR is that it establishes a meaningful and explicit web of connection between research, theory, and practice, as well as a web of relationships upon which to draw. The value of collaborative action research resides in the ongoing improvement of educators'

capability to make instructional decisions and their orientation towards research as a resource for instructional decision-making. It is because of these benefits that teachers become more qualified and connected to their profession. Research becomes a tool beginning teachers can use to continuously inform and improve practice, engage in ongoing expertise development (Sternberg, 1998) and not something student teachers read about in college and promptly forget when entering the world of teaching.

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