TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS SUPPORTING AR: MANITOBA, ONTARIO, AND NUNAVUT

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ABSTRACT

In the first Notes from the Field column, I highlighted some supporting structures for action research in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Yukon – regions where I have experience as a teacher or teacher educator. In this second column, I invite you to continue with me across Canada, east from Saskatchewan to Manitoba and Ontario and from Yukon to Nunavut (with my apologies to the Northwest Territories – we’ll come back to you!). Given the vast expanse of our Canadian geography as well as the complexity of the action research landscape, I have focused this column on the support for action research offered by teacher’s professional associations.

I hope to focus on the same regions and programs in this column in the next issue of CJAR – our first in 2014 - but with personal stories from teachers whose inquiries have been supported. If you have a story to share, please email me as soon as you read this: brown@unbc.ca. I think readers will appreciate a brief description of how you chose your topic, what data you collected, and what decisions you made as a result – that is, how were your practices changed and what were the effects for the students and for you? It would be interesting to know how the support provided by your professional association was helpful to you and if you have improvements to suggest. Finally, we want to know what you will investigate next.

One way to prepare this mini-report to be included in CJAR’s next Notes from the Field is to put together the highlights of the report you were required to submit at the end of your project. I could also help you draft a paragraph or two about your experiences, based on a phone conversation. This column was created for your stories – without them, descriptions of programs are incomplete.
LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT GO HAND IN HAND

I do not believe that it is possible to sustain action research for teacher learning without also valuing the goal of teacher empowerment. For teachers to succeed with a cycle of planning, taking action, reflecting, and revising their practice, they must have confidence that the decisions they are making will matter. That is, action researchers need to trust that new practices that earn their commitment will also be respected by administrators and leaders in the district office. Administrators at all levels also need to trust that teachers will, whenever possible, align their most passionate inquiries with the needs of the students as outlined in meaningful school and district goals – or perhaps those goals should be adjusted to include what teachers are most passionate about! Without such mutual trust, professional inquiry can lose its motivational power – the power of ownership – and become just another task to be completed for someone else. When the time comes to sign up for a new project, teachers will be too busy to be curious.

The challenge for professional associations, then, is to build supporting structures for teacher learning and empowerment and to shift the culture and skill set of their teachers toward ongoing, collaborative inquiry. Support programs need guidelines that will provide direction without stifling ownership. The most effective monetary grants are not incentives or ways to obtain materials for the school; these kinds of rewards encourage participation but do not build commitment to inquiry. Financial support is needed to provide the time for collaborative groups to meet during the work day and to travel to share their learning with other teachers.

To support action research in Manitoba, the provincial teachers’ society (MTS) has provided Reflective Professional Practice Grants to a maximum of $800. In Nunavut, teachers who decide to pursue an Action Research Project may be eligible for a grant of $2000 from the Nunavut Professional Improvement Committee (NPIC). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education and the Ontario Teachers Federation have partnered to create the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) that has been reviewed in a recent study by Campbell, Lieberman, and Yashkina (2013). This review emphasized the role of action research and other forms of self-directed learning as a means to empower teacher leaders.

REFLECTIVE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE GRANTS FROM MTS

In Manitoba, the MTS defines reflective practice to include action research and study group projects. Study groups can be thought of as the planning stage of action research, although not all study groups lead naturally to implementation without continued collaborative support. Study groups do offer an increased awareness of possible solutions for a common problem is likely to offer individual teachers some direction for their own action and reflection. And when the action in action research is seen as creating knowledge for future action, as it is by some prominent writers (for example, Sagor, 2010) study groups for teachers actually fit the definition of action research. The important thing about this broader definition of action is that it allows for greater choice in the design of learning projects described as action research – any learning that can eventually be applied to action in the classroom can be included. But the disadvantage is that without a focus on
implementing promising strategies in classroom action and reflection, the knowledge that teachers learn gain may not be applied.

In Manitoba, groups of three or more teachers with an identified project leader may be considered for grants of up to $800. Supported studies are to be completed within the school year. Teachers must submit a written report before the end of May in order to receive the second half of the funds. Topics suggested to focus the studies appear broad enough to accommodate teacher interests. They are also specific enough to connect with professional moral purpose to improve opportunities for students to experience academic and social success and a sense of belonging or inclusion. Approved focus areas include innovation in instruction or classroom management, social relationships or environments in a school or classroom, and equity or diversity issues.

Some rules that seem to have been made to prevent misuse of funds keeps the focus on issues of interest to teachers: funds cannot be used to purchase packaged materials or programs or to conduct research sponsored by other bodies, including graduate programs. The application guidelines indicate that members of the MTS staff will be available to provide advice, particularly related to research methods and ethical concerns. Instructions for the report in the application information are minimal but it must include a plan for sharing results with teacher colleagues. Presentations are expected and publishing is encouraged, with a few options for publication listed.

**NIPC Action Research Grants**

A Nunavut Professional Improvement Committee (NPIC) policy document (2013-2014) defines action research for its members as self-directed and classroom-based professional development. It is also described less formally as "supported questioning and thinking time" (p. 7-3), with support in the form of a $2000 grant as well as guidance from the PI Coordinator. As in the Manitoba document, action research and reflective practice are referred to as similar approaches to improving teaching practice. However, teachers in the territory are also encouraged to think of themselves as designers who continually create and re-create enriching teaching environments for themselves as well as effective learning environments for students.

Instructions include a request for applicants to state how their proposed project relates to personal professional goals and if possible, school goals. The application process guides teachers to begin with a central question and include a vision of what they expect will be different as a result of the study. Students or community members as well as colleagues may be included on the study team. Plans for materials, budget, and timeline through the school year are also required.

The Nunavut document outlines the report that successful applicants must submit at least two weeks before the last day of school. Outcomes or results are to be followed by recommendations, including possible areas of related inquiry. I did not find a link to reports from completed projects or any mention of conferences that were held for action researchers to share their learning.
Learning and Leadership Grants in Ontario

The first cohort of teachers participating in the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) began their work in 2007. The program has been described as “a project-based activity for selected experienced teachers whose choice of careers is the classroom” (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2013, p. 6). The size of the grant varies with the project but averages over $10,000. The overall goal of the annual program is to develop teachers as leaders of learning – learning for their students and also for themselves and their colleagues. Participants in the TLLP are expected to learn to lead their peers by sharing the exemplary practices they have developed in their own studies.

Project Proposals for the TLLP program may be submitted by individuals or groups of teachers. Projects are not limited to cycles of action and reflection within schools or classrooms; examples of projects include lesson study, resource creation, deepening teaching expertise, and learning about and sharing new methods or technologies for special needs students. When action research is mentioned specifically, there is an expectation that the results will be published in a professional magazine, although project reports are also available online in the Project Archives. Each year since 2007, TLLP teachers have been invited to Sharing the Learning Summits, which participants consistently describe as “the best professional development ever” (Campbell, Lieberman, & Yashkina, 2013, p. 2). Speeches by high profile guests at the 2011 summit, Andy Hargreaves and Ann Lieberman, are available on the TLLP website along with support videos for applicants and documents to answer the questions frequently asked by teachers, principals, and school boards.

And Next Time – Your Story!

In their study of the Ontario TLLP, Campbell, Lieberman, and Yashkina (2013) found that teachers were universally enthusiastic about their participation in the project and that many of them found it energizing. This is a remarkable response, given that a common challenge of action research for teachers, in this program and others, is to find time to add yet another responsibility to planning, teaching, marking, meetings, playground supervision, coaching, and organizing extra-curricular events. We can trust that these findings are accurate because the study was conducted by experienced researchers who took care to present reliable data to support their conclusions.

The overwhelmingly positive response of teachers to this program may be due to the success of the TLLP application and screening process and the quality of the guidance that teachers receive as their projects proceed. Teachers who are selected for the program begin with an eagerness to own their learning and to contribute valued knowledge to the profession. Therefore, when their ambitions are well-supported and ultimately accomplished, the teachers feel fulfilled and rejuvenated. If this is your story, whether you are in Manitoba, Nunavut, or elsewhere, sharing your experience will be inspiring. As long as other teachers are not pushed to follow your learning path without developing their own convictions through experience, the overall effect on professional learning culture is likely to be positive.
However, another challenge occurred when non-participating teachers resisted the efforts of TLLP teachers to influence them to adopt new practices. It is important to include these challenges in the stories of your action research experience, to provide a balanced perspective that will be taken seriously by skeptics. It is also important to examine challenges and how they might be overcome to learn about the conditions in which a learning culture for professionals is likely to thrive beyond a small pocket of teacher leaders. Campbell, Lieberman, and Yashkina (2013) recommended tracking the spread of changes that were initiated by action research projects as a next step in program development, as well as expanding the online presence that makes research reports widely accessible.

My recommendation for the next wave of action research is to find ways to respect the choices of teachers who choose not to change. The challenge of program developers and researchers will be to listen to the stories of teachers who do not engage in action research and learn from them as well. The challenge for teacher researchers will be patience and persistence with an invitational approach to protect themselves from the inevitable and disappointing resistance to change and leadership burnout. When windows of opportunity for change do open, patient leaders will not have given up.

The vision for action research and other self-directed learning programs sponsored by professional associations is that they will be empowering and energizing for teachers as well as their schools and districts. When these programs are well-supported with appropriate guidelines, adequate funds, and knowledgeable mentors, this vision can be realized, as we have seen in the Ontario experience. Another important key to this positive effect is in sharing the process, the results and especially, the personal stories that give the projects meaning for teachers. CJAR wants to be a part of this! Please send us your story and revisit our next issue to be inspired.

**References**


