AR ACROSS CANADA

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Welcome to the first edition of a new feature in CJAR, to highlight Action Research initiatives and experiences from all of our provinces and territories. These are exciting times for action research – teachers (and administrators) everywhere are learning to “own their learning” (Brown & Cherkowski, 2011) with cycles of action and reflection that help them to realize their moral purpose for success for all students (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The effects of the experiences are beneficial for students and energizing for educators. New structures and processes are emerging to support professional learning initiated by the curiosity and commitment of teachers. Innovative partnerships are emerging between schools and across districts, with universities, teachers’ associations, and provincial or territorial ministries finding ways to formalize, support, and share the learning.

With this new feature, AR Across Canada, the CJAR goal is to highlight the personal experiences of action researchers and supporters across the country as well as the structures and organizations that are sustaining the turn toward teacher inquiry. Provincial and territorial jurisdiction over education in Canada has its benefits but one drawback is that knowledge and experience can become localized, exclusive to each jurisdiction. The CJAR mission is to provide a forum for dialogue, to create a common, accessible body of knowledge and experience. With action research as common ground, educators can learn from each other for the benefit of their students. Riffs across jurisdictions as well as between researchers and practitioners will be mended.

In this first issue, I will introduce myself and my own experience and then highlight some of the AR news in the northern and western parts of the country that I know best – the Yukon, BC, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. I am inviting western readers to share their stories with me for the next time we visit this area, next year. Our next issue this year will feature AR developments in Manitoba, Ontario, and the Northwest Territories, followed by an issue with a focus on Quebec, Nunuvut, and the Maritimes. Thus, a new journey across Canada will be completed with each year of CJAR publication, with a focus on north-western, north-central, and north-eastern developments and experiences. In future issues, I will rely on CJAR readers to share their stories to bring the local reports to life – please contact me with yours at brown@unbc.ca!
**PERSONAL INTRODUCTION**

In qualitative research, personal location builds the reader’s trust in the author’s voice, and in First Nations tradition, it is important to begin any dialogue with a personal introduction. As the new editor of the AR Across Canada feature, I introduce myself as a teacher and scholar passionate about learning and about protecting the right to learn – the right of teachers to generate valued knowledge from our own educational practice. Although I am a professor now, I identify first as a teacher who discovered the power of action research in her own classroom. In 1999, I drew on the scant literature available to implement a year-long experiment in student self-assessment in my primary classroom – although there were many adjustments in my strategies, the end result was that my young students flourished and became confident, self-assured learners (see Brown, 2008). And I became committed to action research as a means of translating theory to practice – to bringing words on a page to life in the faces and minds of the real children in my world.

In 2004, I completed a doctoral dissertation with an action research method, once again drawing on the literature for new ideas that would be translated into practice in cycles of action and reflection. This time, I collaborated with an entire school staff to cultivate relationships that support learning (see Brown & Gossen, 2011), and new processes for teachers to work together in a learning community (see Brown & Cherkowski, 2011). The profound lesson of this project was that learning was at the centre of a high-capacity school but *caring* – that deep moral commitment to collective good and to improving the experience of each treasured individual – was at the heart of a daily commitment to learning for every student and every adult.

These projects helped me to find my voice as an action researcher. Now, as a professor in educational leadership, my mission is to live Covey’s (2004) eighth habit, *to help others to find their own voices as action researchers and educational leaders*. I have participated in many action research studies or professional inquiries as a group facilitator or as an advisor to master’s students. The opportunity to be the *AR Across Canada* Editor for CJAR is a new chapter in this adventure. In this role, I envision drawing the Canadian AR community together by helping to facilitate dialogue in a national forum. The common bond in this community, whether we call it action research, reflective practice, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), or professional inquiry, is a commitment to owning our learning in cycles of action and reflection that weave the roles of teachers and researchers together.

**THE YUKON**

This vibrant land attracts innovators and adventurers and so is a fitting setting for action research. This is the site of my own first foray into the world of action research, supported by professors in a master’s program from the University of Alaska Southeast, in Juneau. Since then, master’s programs from Simon Fraser University and UNBC have encouraged local research. The Yukon Teachers’ Association (YTA) Professional Development Committee first established a budget line to support action research projects in 2001. Another group affiliated with YTA, Keyakwadan, sponsored an action research project called *Erasing Racism* in 2002-2003, which brought together First Nations and non-
Aboriginal educators to explore strategies for cultural inclusion. As the facilitator of that group, I know that the commitments I made to my colleagues at the end of our study endure in my practice today – the evidence is in my attention to personal introduction in meetings and even in written work. We look forward to updates on more recent developments in action research in the land of the midnight sun for our next north-western focus issue.

**BRITISH COLUMBIA**

Inquiry in our most western province is thriving, ably led by Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert through their newly-named *Networks of Inquiry and Innovation* (NOII), formerly the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS). These educators have connected the worlds of scholarship and practice by structuring, funding, and supporting inquiry in over 500 schools across the province. Their published work (Kaser & Halbert, 2009; Halbert, Kaser & Koehn, 2011) draws on these experiences to make a compelling case for the need to shift mindsets toward school-based inquiry and innovation that will increase equity and quality for all students. They identify a collective challenge for inquiring educators: “to create the conditions in our schools where educators are open both to challenging long-held practices and to developing new and innovative practices” (Halbert & Kaser, 2012, p. 5). The Network mantra, “every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options”, has become a compelling vision for the teachers who have deepened their spirals of inquiry (Halbert, Kaser & Koehn, 2011) in several years of Network involvement.

The Network approach to inquiry focuses on identifying the key needs of learners, innovating or taking new action to address those needs more effectively, and documenting progress with frequent classroom assessments. The BC Performance Standards have been a key to the success of this approach: when teachers innovate, they assess students against criterion-referenced benchmarks to provide information as to whether the action is succeeding in terms of student achievement. Inquiry is seen as an essential function of teacher teams working as learning communities to transform schools from sorting to learning systems. Teachers who participate in Network inquiries are empowered to see themselves as teacher leaders. Written reports of each inquiry have been published on the Network website and in an annual printed anthology.

**ALBERTA**

A prominent action research or inquiry-based initiative in Alberta is the Ministry-sponsored Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) with partners representing stakeholder groups, including the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA). Targeted funding and supportive infrastructure have been developed to support three year cycles of school-based data-gathering, analysis, and reporting focused on the effect of innovations on student learning. To date, there have been more than 1500 research reports published. AIS is now in its third cycle of three-year projects and the first two cycles have been documented by Parsons and Harding (2010) in their book, *Little Bits of Goodness: How the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement Inspires Educators to Explore, Challenge, Inquire and Imagine Better Schools.*
Jim Parsons (2011), director of AISI at the University of Alberta, has described the AISI initiative as “action research at its best” (Para. 4) with final reports providing “a remarkable data set for researchers, as teachers speculate on their learning while they research school improvement” (Para. 4). Perhaps his strongest testament to the benefits of AISI is that it has revitalized Alberta’s learning culture. “Student learning has increased because teachers have worked with and beside other teachers. Teachers have also repositioned themselves in the classroom—moving from being in front of students to being beside them” (Para. 10). Stories of the local impact of specific AISI projects for both students and teachers would be a welcome addition to our next northwestern focus article.

Saskatchewan
The McDowell Foundation, established in 1991, has described itself as “an independent charitable organization...created by the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in response to teachers’ needs for greater involvement in educational research. Its goal is to support inquiry, reflection, and the communication of information and ideas that improve education” (McDowell Foundation Mission Statement). An endowment fund, replenished by corporate and memorial donations, provides grants for teacher research projects and an annual Learning from Practice conference where projects are showcased. The Foundation is named for Dr. Stirling McDowell, a prominent Saskatchewan educator, scholar, and professional association executive who was also active nationally, with the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. The Foundation honours Dr. McDowell’s legacy of leading and caring in education.

Through the Stirling McDowell foundation, Saskatchewan teachers have a professional association that takes “a leadership role in generating research that [is] practical, relevant, and effective in improving teaching practices” (Stirling McDowell History, Para. 1). Their motto, “investing in the power of teachers to improve teaching and learning”, springs to life in the reports written by teachers, sometimes collaborating with academic researchers, parents, or school division consultants, to document their learning journeys. News of how authors of these reports have been affected by their foray into action research would be of interest for our next northwestern focus article.

Final Thoughts
Action research, also known as professional inquiry or reflective practice, is at the heart of school improvement initiatives across western Canada. Cycles of action and reflection carried out in classrooms and shared within and beyond schools are increasingly recognized as a powerful approach to moving toward success for all students and empowering teachers in the process. Structures that support professional inquiry are often described as “grass roots” initiatives but their continued success is precariously dependent on external funding. To achieve the potential of the grass-roots movement to transform schools, it is necessary to maintain funding for supporting organizations, at least until action research processes are familiar to most teachers, accepted as a natural part of their role, and woven firmly into their school cultures.

However, highlighting organizations that support action research in Canadian schools does not capture the fascinating chronicles of professional learning that are found in individual
research reports – I invite you to explore the links provided for yourselves! With the accumulation of reports on the NOII, AISI, and Stirling McDowell websites, as well as in CJAR, there are learning opportunities for teachers, school administrators, and university researchers. Teachers and administrators have ample models to inspire their own school-based studies and their own spiral of inquiry can begin at a point informed by the work of schools struggling with similar problems. Researchers are needed to review reports and develop meta-analyses that reveal trends in problem-framing and the application of research results. Knowledge construction in our time, like leadership, is no longer characterized by hierarchy and position but by collaboration and contribution (Halbert & Kaser, 2012). I invite you to join me in celebrating action research contributions by educators across the country in the AR Across Canada feature of upcoming issues of CJAR. Perhaps you will consider contributing your story: a community, after all, is built on contributions.

**LINKS**

To learn more about the organizations described here and to explore research reports published online, visit:

- the BC Network of Inquiry and Innovation, [www.noii.ca](http://www.noii.ca)
- the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), [http://education.alberta.ca/admin/iasi.aspx](http://education.alberta.ca/admin/iasi.aspx)

**REFERENCES**


