

Collaborative Action Research: Cultivating Communities of Inquiry Through School–University Partnerships

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Abstract

This article shares reflections from a collaborative action research (CAR) partnership between a regional university and a rural school in Canada. This partnership involved two university educators, two inservice teachers, and two preservice teachers, all of whom are positioned as knowers, learners, and change agents within this research. Specifically, we worked to center teachers' knowledge through our inquiry into culturally responsive and relevant literacy practices. We highlight some of the affordances of our learning through CAR, including the benefits of learning within a community of inquiry, knowledge generation, and strengthening teacher identities. We advocate for cultivating communities of inquiry through research partnerships.

Introduction

For decades, the role of professional learning during times of education reform has been a central focus in research, government initiatives, district policies, and school practices (Bredeson, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001, 2006; Datnow, 2020; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994, 2005, 2021; Lieberman, 2007). Government reports, educational commissions, and various research studies have highlighted the need for greater collaboration and professional learning among teachers to effect the desired change in practice (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Hargreaves, 2021). However, the kind of professional learning and its capacity to transform practice are contested (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2006; Sarason, 1990, 1998). Some studies have shown that certain kinds of professional learning negatively affect teachers' identities and lives, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and depleted (Comber, 1997; Comber et al., 2004; Little, 2001; Smyth, 2001; Toope, 2008). In contrast, other forms of teacher learning have been found to empower and reinvigorate teachers (Comber et al., 2004; Toope, 2008). In addition, professional learning that positions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents can be transformative (Zeichner, 2003).

The literature suggests that action research can be a beneficial form of professional learning, transforming teachers' practice (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2024; McGrath et al., 2025; Zeichner, 2003). Action research reflects principles of adult learning such as valuing teachers' knowledge, embedded learning, collaborative inquiry, learning over time, and ongoing support within a community of practice (Bredeson, 2000; Burbank & Kauchak, 2003; DeLuca et al., 2014; Hargreaves, 1994, 2021; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2014). Within action research, teachers are positioned as researchers capable of generating the knowledge they need for teaching and learning through inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,

2001). Teacher research is viewed as a means of incorporating teacher knowledge into the educational knowledge base and as a more meaningful approach to teacher learning grounded in local contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Teacher research is endorsed as a way of “promoting change and reform in K–12 settings” (Roulston et al., 2005, p. 169). Also, in Canada, action research has been documented as a path for teacher learning (Clausen & Black, 2020). However, despite over three decades of growing evidence of the benefits of teacher research as an impactful professional learning path (Nichols & Cormack, 2017) for both inservice and preservice teachers, it remains a relatively uncommon practice, at least in rural Canada.

The literature describes a varied history between schools and universities as partners in research (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009). A focus over recent decades has centered on teachers as co-researchers and knowledge generators (Cramp & Khan, 2019). Swabey et al. (2022) outline several benefits for groups within these partnerships and describe the rich professional learning opportunities that arise from them. Additionally, Swabey et al. (2022) purport that one key benefit of partnerships is the generation of new pedagogical knowledge. School–university partnerships enhance learning for all actors, including, in this research, university educators, inservice teachers, preservice teachers, and school students. From a social justice lens, through shared inquiry, there is a shift in power and knowledge relations that fosters more democratic relationships between preservice and inservice teachers (Willekens et al., 2017).

Drawing on individual written reflections and conversations, we highlight some affordances of our learning through CAR, including the benefits of learning within a community of inquiry, the possibilities for generating local knowledge of practice, and the strengthening of our teacher identities.

Background and Context

This research involved a school–university partnership that brought together two university researchers, two teacher researchers, and two preservice teacher research assistants in a rural community in Canada from 2022 to 2023. This research is part of a larger ongoing CAR project that investigates responsive literacy practices in a rural classroom as primary students engage with making digital texts. A primary goal of this research was also to engage participating teachers in reflecting on their practice through collaborative inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). As educators working to foster inclusive spaces, we came together with a common desire to create local examples of inclusive literacies. Here we turn our attention to our own learning experiences with CAR. For this component of our research, we posed the question: What are the affordances of CAR as a professional learning path, and how does learning through collaborative inquiry inform our practice? Through reflective writing and critical conversations, we share our thoughts about learning within a collaborative inquiry community and what it has meant for our work as teachers in the process of *becoming* (Britzman, 2012). We discuss the benefits of school–university partnerships, the supports required to sustain learning over time, and what we have gained from our experiences.

This paper unfolds in four sections. First, we provide an overview of the literature informing this research. Next, we discuss the methods, data collection, and our data analysis process. We then present some findings from our analysis of individual reflections, highlighting three main themes that emerged from our data. We conclude by summarizing the mutually beneficial nature of school–university partnerships and the support required to sustain this over time.

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspective

Sociocultural approaches consider learning a social process that occurs through interactions with others in “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). A sociocultural view recognizes that authentic learning happens as teachers engage in practices within situated contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sociocultural perspectives recognize that what one comes to know cannot be separated from one’s lived experiences embedded within one’s practice (Kelly, 2006; Schön, 1983). This draws attention to the affordances of learning within collaborative communities. Within this perspective, teachers have agency over their learning, and there is potential for knowledge production. Learning within our collaborative research community was shaped by our lived experiences within communities (Gee, 1991).

Conceptualizations of Teacher Learning and Knowledge

Numerous studies have examined teachers’ learning within university programs and courses (Day et al., 2021). Studies on teacher learning sometimes focus on the benefits of partnerships and collaboration between university researchers and teacher researchers, either in preservice or graduate education programs (Bartholomew & Sandholtz, 2009). Other studies take a historical look at professional development from a teacher-research or action-research perspective (Zeichner, 2003). Some research studies suggest that deficit approaches to teachers’ learning position teachers as consumers of prepackaged scripted programs, rather than as capable producers of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Parr, 2004). Professional learning resulting from neoliberal reforms has been highly criticized in the literature for its adverse effects on teachers’ identities and work (Zeichner, 2017).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999, 2001, 2021) advocate for an alternative “inquiry as stance” approach to teacher learning. An “inquiry as stance” approach works across teachers’ career span, from early to late career, where teachers continue to generate knowledge of practice in their local context (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2021). This approach to teacher learning positions teachers as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients of knowledge from elsewhere. Emphasis is placed on theory–practice relations and the co-construction of knowledge within communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Action Research as Professional Learning

Dewey (1981) emphasized that reflective thinking, not just experience, is essential for fostering deep learning and transforming practice. This means that in order to transform practice, careful consideration of knowledge must be considered in order to inform action. Schön (1983) introduced the ideas of “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action.” Reflection-in-action refers to the kind of thinking that occurs during an activity, while reflection-on-action focuses on thinking back on an experience after it has happened. Both forms of reflection are significant for professional learning through inquiry and for enhancing practice.

Freire (2005) defines praxis as “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 126). It is through praxis that oppressed people can change and transform their practice. Praxis has also been defined as an “ongoing interdependent process in which reflection—including theoretical analysis—enlightens action, and in turn the transformed action changes our understanding of the object of our reflection” (Torres & Mercado, 2004, p. 60). In praxis theory, practice is understood as relational and interconnected. Teacher research can be a path to praxis and transformation in teacher education and learning (Torres & Mercado, 2004). New pedagogical knowledge comes from praxis through teachers’ knowing, reflecting, and doing.

The transformative potential of teacher research on teachers’ identities and professional practice has been well documented over the past three decades (Black, 2021; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Derakhshan & Nazari, 2024; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008; Nazari, 2021; Nichols & Cormack, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Van Katwijk et al., 2021). In fact, studies have shown how engagement in research repositions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2005).

When examining teachers’ learning through CAR, it is essential to consider the various aspects that shape their professional identities (Goodnough, 2010, 2011). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) point out, different understandings of how teachers learn and what counts as learning can result in significantly varied approaches to enhancing teachers’ practice and identities. In contemporary times, teacher research “is not a tool that can be used by policy-makers or administrators to externally impose particular changes on teachers’ practices” (Zeichner, 2003, p. 321). Instead, teacher research, as professional learning embedded in practice within an inquiry community, can generate knowledge and transform practices in local contexts through school–university partnerships.

Similarly, Burbank and Kauchak (2003) discuss a collaborative action research model of professional development that positions teachers as researchers. They suggest that in traditional models of professional development, teachers often had a “passive role” imposed upon them (p. 500). Instead, they indicate that collaborative action research can be an effective alternative, positioning teachers as “decision makers” and “knowledge producers” (p. 501). They report on the positive effects of collaborative action research that involved both preservice and inservice teachers. What is interesting in their study is that they found inservice teachers believed more strongly than preservice teachers in the potential of action research to improve their practice. CAR has been shown to positively impact teachers’ identities (Goodnough, 2010, 2011).

School–University Partnerships

Research on school–university partnerships, particularly those focused on shared teacher learning, can be significantly beneficial (Burton & Greher, 2007; Hamilton & Margot, 2024). These partnerships have the potential to enhance professional learning opportunities for teacher educators, inservice teachers, and teacher candidates. Several conditions are necessary to ensure the success of a school–university partnership, including establishing trusting relationships, maintaining ongoing collaboration, and prioritizing professional learning (Burton & Greher, 2007; Swick et al., 2022).

School–university partnerships enable preservice, inservice, and university educators to engage in reciprocal peer mentoring (Boyer et al., 2004). Teacher candidates report feeling more confident and indicate that such partnerships help them develop deeper connections between theory and practice, enabling a stronger focus on students' learning (Fang & Ashley, 2004; Castle et al., 2006). Research also suggests that preservice teachers who have been involved in a partnership are more likely to remain in the teaching profession (Burton & Greher, 2007).

School–university partnerships that focus on professional learning offer enhanced opportunities for all community members (Hamilton & Margot, 2024). Learning within partnerships is enhanced when systematic inquiry through action research is the learning path (Crocco et al., 2003; Levin & Rock, 2003). Also, through collaboration, partners come to value shared learning experiences, which are crucial in ensuring mutual benefit (Hamilton & Margot, 2024). Another mutual benefit is that universities can share their resources and expertise with schools and, in turn, schools can provide practical experiences for preservice teachers and teacher educators (Swick et al., 2022).

Studies have shown that school–university partnerships can positively impact student achievement in participating schools (Burton & Greher, 2007). Partnerships can provide students with access to university resources, as in our research with digital tablets. Further socioeconomic and educational disadvantages are often associated with regional or rural contexts (Corbett & Forsey, 2017).

Research Design

This study draws on the written self-reflections from six co-authors in this CAR project. This research is supported by funding from an Inter-University Research Network grant that provided release time for inservice teachers (approximately five days each) and pay for preservice teacher research assistants (approximately six to eight weeks). A qualitative research methodology, utilizing individual teacher reflections on their learning experiences through CAR, was employed to understand the perspectives and experiences of co-researchers learning within an inquiry community of practice. This involved analyzing both our written and verbal reflections of our individual and collective learning experiences. This approach can help us better understand the affordances of collaborative inquiry and gain insights into how to cultivate and support school–university partnerships.

Author Positionality

This study was a collaboration among two university teacher educators (Deborah and Marie-Christina), two in-service teachers (Darlene and Nisha), and two preservice teacher research assistants (Emily and Jessica), all of whom are authors of this paper. Our research team has diverse representation, comprising early-, mid-, and late-career teachers with distinct knowledge sets. Collectively, we bring together various perspectives of families experiencing poverty and lived experiences of being part of a minority group.

Deborah is an associate professor (literacy) with the faculty of education at a rural university in eastern Canada. She has been promoting teacher research as a form of professional learning for over two decades, facilitating teacher research programs through school–university partnerships. She brings extensive experience working in the public school system, having held various positions before transitioning full-time into academia, including classroom teacher, literacy specialist, principal, district program specialist, and director of schools.

Marie-Christina is an assistant professor in the faculty of education at the same university as Deborah. She has a wealth of experience with over 27 years in teaching and leadership roles in elementary and middle schools in both Canada and Australia. She is an advocate for Shanker Self-Reg, a framework for understanding and managing stress and energy flow, and cares deeply about the well-being of teachers and students.

Darlene is a late-career teacher with over 27 years of classroom teaching experience in rural Canada. Over the last 16 years, she has worked in P–2 classrooms as a teacher, math coach, literacy mentor, and technology integration mentor. She has completed a Master of Education degree and other professional learning certificates. She spent several years facilitating professional learning for other teachers. She has written a series of culturally relevant picture books depicting rural life for young readers.

Nisha is a mid-career teacher with 15 years of experience teaching in primary schools. She is currently a Kindergarten teacher at a rural school in eastern Canada. She holds a Master of Education degree in Curriculum Studies, with a focus on integrating technology. She has significant experience working with young children in the early grades and brings this knowledge to her research. She is passionate about learning and creating inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive.

Emily was a preservice teacher at the time of this study and was working as a research assistant on this project. She had already completed a Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology and was working on a Bachelor of Education. She had completed one language arts course with Deborah and was in the process of completing her second one. She had also completed a course from Marie-Christina on principles and practices. She had a keen interest in literacy learning and was excited about working on the project.

Jessica was a preservice teacher at the time of this study and was working as a research assistant on this project. She had completed her undergraduate degree in psychology with a focus on neuroscience and a minor in biology. At the time of this study, she was working on a Bachelor of Education degree. She had also completed one language arts course with Deborah and was in the process of completing her

second one. She had also completed a course from Maria-Christina on principles and practices. She enjoyed working with and learning from children and creating inclusive learning experiences.

Data Collection

Data for this paper emerged organically from an ongoing CAR focused on inclusive literacy practices, as the six of us engaged in a full-day planning session to prepare for a local conference presentation. As we analyzed classroom data and talked about our experiences, we began reflecting on our own learning. During our conversation, we documented key points in the minutes and in the notes section of our slides. We recorded our thoughts to share with other teachers and conference participants. Following our meeting, we each wrote individual reflections on the affordances of learning within a collaborative inquiry community. Within a week, we had each posted our individual reflections to a shared Google document. Together, the six individual reflections totaled 13 pages, with a word count of just under 3,600 words. These reflections, along with our subsequent conversations, served as the primary data for this paper.

Data Analysis

Working from a shared Google Doc, we individually read and commented on each other’s reflections to begin our analysis of our self-reflections. Deborah and Marie-Christina reread each reflection with our research question in mind: What are the affordances of CAR as a professional learning path, and how does learning through collaborative inquiry inform our practice? They highlighted words and phrases that stood out and made notes in the margins. Then, we employed a general thematic analysis, identifying initial categories, color-coding them (green for community, blue for knowledge, yellow for identities), and grouping them into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Next, we identified and renamed themes, selecting three themes to discuss in this paper: learning within a collaborative inquiry community, relations with knowledge, and transforming teacher identities. Then we selected excerpts from our reflections and moved these under one of the corresponding themes. Taken together, they represent our collective story about the affordance of learning within a CAR community.

Findings

In this section, we discuss three significant themes that emerged from our analysis of individual reflections and conversations about our experiences learning through CAR: learning within a collaborative inquiry community, relations with knowledge, and transforming teacher identities in the process of *becoming*.

Learning Within a Collaborative Inquiry Community

Studies of professional learning and teacher research programs often lack clarity regarding the contexts and conditions under which teacher researchers conduct their inquiries. While the personal dimension of action research is essential and can lead to personal transformations, it is not sufficient to address larger social issues, such as “power and privilege in society,” which are integrally connected to personal identity (Noffke, 1997, p. 329). Noffke (1997) argues that promoting the personal dimension of action

research in the absence of a political context can lead individuals to learn in isolation and may fail to address larger social issues that require collective agency to effect social change. From a social justice lens, and central to our CAR partnership, was a focus on privileging teachers' knowledge within the field of education. Teacher voices are often absent from scholarly work, curriculum development, policy decisions, and educational reform. To achieve this, we recognized that teachers, both preservice and inservice, require opportunities to develop trusting relationships over time, in which they feel comfortable expressing their concerns about regional demands, raising questions about their practice, and engaging in critical discussions with university partners that are essential for deeper learning. This kind of learning environment takes time to cultivate, especially given the inequities of power-knowledge dynamics among teacher educators, preservice teachers, and inservice teachers. Early-, mid-, and late-career teachers coming together with a common goal to improve literacy learning for all students through culturally relevant and responsive practices produced more egalitarian relationships and brought together different yet equally valued ways of knowing. This became evident in our reflections and conversations about our learning experiences through the CAR process.

As preservice teachers, Emily and Jessica reflected on their learning within an inquiry community and highlighted how this experience benefited them as early-career teachers. For example, throughout their time as research assistants, they participated in every research team meeting, worked alongside Darlene and Nisha in the classroom, posed research questions, generated classroom data, initiated and planned learning activities, participated in classroom events, made field notes, sat side-by-side with children, and shared stories about what they were noticing. In their reflections, they noted that CAR enabled them to "take an inquiry approach" and to learn to "observe" children's literacy learning. Being part of an inquiry community also informed their relations with children in the classroom. They talked about learning to listen, ask questions, and respond to students, and valuing "students' voices." They discussed the importance of networking and collaborating with experienced teachers. They shared the importance of "beginning with a question" and having time to "step back" and get "feedback." Importantly, they highlighted learning about the "processes of becoming a reflective practitioner." This included taking action based on ongoing data analysis. Another example that illuminates their learning is that they took the lead in designing and redesigning an observation checklist that outlines specific early reading and writing behaviors. They continued to revise and refine the list of indicators as they began noticing new behaviors.

As experienced mid- and late-career teachers, Darlene and Nisha valued and sought out opportunities for professional learning throughout their careers. They often discussed the difference between learning through CAR and other professional learning experiences they had. For example, they compared attending a half-day session offered by their region, where they sit and receive information about the latest curriculum changes, to learning that comes from their interactions with each other and children in their classroom. For them, learning through inquiry was ongoing, relational, embedded in their practice, and intimately connected to student learning. They noted how they felt supported within this community, which enabled them to gain new insights and "new ways of seeing and doing." They reflected on the impact of conversations that "build on each other's noticings," the power of receiving "near real-time feedback" from other co-researchers, and how they used this information to make changes to their

practice. For example, Darlene had written a series of culturally relevant informational books about rural life, and Nisha decided to use them in her classroom as well.

As teacher educators, Deborah and Marie-Christina reflected on the importance of making connections between theory and practice, inservice and preservice teachers, school and university classrooms, and ways of knowing, doing, and being teachers, who are always in a process of *becoming* (Britzman, 2012; Dall'Alba, 2009). Rather than being positioned as university experts, teacher educators adopted a stance as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-producers of knowledge. They noted a connection to classroom practice by being able to “pose critical questions” from a “position as co-learner” rather than as a so-called “expert.” For example, during team meetings, we usually begin with each of us sharing updates on what is happening in our practice. Then we articulate our current wonderings about what we are noticing in the classroom data (photos, videos, interview transcripts of children, children’s digital books). Being part of a teacher research community added credibility to their work with preservice teachers, providing local examples of literacy and learning from a local classroom. For example, Deborah used Darlene’s book series in her literacy courses along with photos of children reading these texts from Nisha’s Kindergarten classroom. As noted in their reflections, learning within an inquiry community also enables these teacher educators to gain a deeper understanding of the “complex, demanding, relational, and multifaceted” nature of teachers’ work and to “critically examine” practice concerning work in schools.

Relations With Knowledge

Where does knowledge for teaching come from? How is this knowledge produced? Whose knowledge is valued? How does this shape teachers’ identities? These are questions we continue to grapple with throughout our ongoing CAR project. Learning within a CAR community means that, as practitioners, we take the position as knowers, capable of generating the knowledge we need to inform practice through inquiry, while also thinking critically and making judgments about knowledge from elsewhere (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). This is different from the kind of knowledge teachers acquire through more traditional forms of professional learning, where teachers often receive information from “experts” outside their context. When teachers adopt an inquiry-based approach, their relationship with knowledge shifts. Rather than something to be implemented, it becomes a way of knowing, doing, and being that originates from within; it is knowledge that is local, situated, embedded, and intertwined with their values and those of others. Theory is not separate from practice; rather, theory is practice, and practice is theory. Within this phase of our project, we generated new knowledge about technologies, pedagogies, and literacies.

As teacher candidates and early-career teachers, Emily and Jessica are beginning to consider what they need to know in becoming literacy teachers for social justice. At the time of this study, they had already completed one degree and were working towards a second degree in elementary education. As research assistants, they learned to conduct close, intentional observations of students’ learning. They documented their observations through field notes, photos, checklists, artifacts, and video recordings. They paid close attention to primary children’s interactions with one another, technology, and other materials during digital bookmaking. They listened carefully to what students had to say during focus groups and individual interviews. They listened to audio recordings multiple times and transcribed their

conversations with young children. They inquired about the children's reading and writing preferences, topics of interest, and preferred learning methods. They attended research team meetings, listened to others, engaged in critical conversations, organized data, analyzed data, posed questions, shared ideas, and reflected on practice. These practices shaped *what* they know about literacy teaching and learning, how they know it, and whom they are becoming as teachers. From a pedagogical perspective, both preservice teachers reflected on the importance of students' agency. Emily said that CAR enabled her to "step back and learn from my students, encouraging student agency." Jessica wrote that she "gained better insight into how to provide opportunities for students to enact their agency." They also learned new technologies and how to navigate "the ins and outs of introducing iPads and Book Creator" while making connections to global competencies such as "essential graduation competencies (communication, collaboration, technological fluency, creativity, critical thinking, and citizenship)." They also noted gaining a deeper understanding of literacies across the curriculum. For example, after listening to children talk about their writing preferences, Jessica noted that "it became clear that students were interested in writing about a wide range of topics that pulled in many integrated subjects." Another example that illustrates this is how Emily and Jessica revised the observation writing checklist based on their conversations with children to include specific examples related to purpose and audience.

As mid- and late-career teachers, Darlene and Nisha still view themselves as *becoming* teachers and continually seek ways to improve their practice. Through their inquiries, they have become more confident in trusting their knowledge to inform their practice. They both highlighted how inquiry enabled them to make explicit connections between reflection and action. Nisha noted that CAR allowed her to "reflect on my planning process and use of explicit instruction in my practice." Darlene discussed how she now reflects on her "teaching practices daily" and has become comfortable making "immediate" changes to her lessons. They both reflected on using new content and pedagogical knowledge to improve their practice. For example, Darlene wrote that her inquiry "led to improvements in the way I plan, the methods I use for instruction, and the support that I offer my students." Nisha said, "I learned that what works well for one group of students may not always work for the next, and I need to be prepared to adapt my teaching." This is evident in the changes Nisha made to her guided and shared reading instruction. Based on new knowledge generated through inquiry, she confidently used this knowledge to change her practice by incorporating more culturally relevant informational texts that reflected their interests.

University teacher educators also generated new knowledge that they used to inform their work with preservice teachers. Marie-Christina said that "this research gave me a window into teaching and learning contexts and practices of primary teachers, allowing me to bring this into my university courses." Deborah noted that "it informs my teaching of inclusive literacies with preservice teachers" and "provides examples of how I am living my values in practice." Deborah reflected on how knowledge is generated when we "theorize our practice together, we contribute to the knowledge base in education" and reported how "being able to provide evidence and knowledge from their research inquiries is empowering." Marie-Christina pointed out that with CAR there is a connection "between the community members and diverse perspectives and knowledge brought to the table that sparked and enlivened conversations and learning." As an example, the knowledge generated through this CAR project continues to be shared with other inservice and preservice teachers, and continues to evolve.

Transforming Teacher Identities of *Becoming*

Teacher research can shape and transform teachers' identities in productive ways (Black, 2021; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kitchen & Stevens, 2008; Nichols & Cormack, 2017; Van Katwijk et al., 2021). As discussed earlier, teacher research positions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2005).

Emily and Jessica are just beginning their careers and learning what kind of teachers they are becoming. Emily wrote about how being part of a CAR community was significant in shaping her “professional identity as an educator” and that she sees herself as a teacher and researcher. Being a researcher and adopting an inquiry-based approach to her practice will remain integral to her teacher identity. Emily also wrote about research as integral to her development as a teacher and how it will continue to shape her practice: “As I continue to grow as an educator, I will seek out opportunities to expand my experiences as a teacher researcher, which will simultaneously strengthen my teaching practices and benefit my learners.” For both of these early-career teachers, being a researcher means talking with children and listening to what they have to say. It requires close observation and intentional action. It involves reflexivity and a desire to change in the interests of social good. Jessica alludes to the idea that inquiry repositions children as agents in their learning, enabling them to make informed decisions. For example, Emily wrote about seeing children with agency and valuing the expertise they bring to learning. She said that “many of our young learners know more than we do about navigating technology,” and talked about continuing to learn from her students.

As practicing teachers with significant educational backgrounds (both with BEd and MEd degrees) and years of experience as primary teachers, Darlene and Nisha reported that their identities were also enhanced through CAR. Even with 27 years of experience, Darlene reflected on a shift in what she was noticing in her students and responded by making changes to her practice. She talked about being able to “carefully evaluate the function of the writing tools I was using and make improvements that better reflect the learning preferences of my students.” She also underlined the importance of learning from her students, noting that through “close observation and listening to students, I learned that as teachers, what we offer students can evolve in response to their strengths and interests.” Darlene noted how inquiry enabled her to change her practice. An example she provided in her reflection captures one of these changes. She wrote that “over the course of our research, I slowed down to notice that the vocabulary I used when introducing the characteristics of fiction and informational texts, was not as easy to take on as I thought, and I changed my practice based on this finding.” Similarly, Nisha highlighted how inquiry caused her to rethink and change in response to students' learning. As an example, she reflected on how she was “able to try various teaching strategies, fostering an environment of experimentation and reflection with my students” and how feedback from co-researchers “helped me to gain further understanding of how they learn.” She also noted that she learned “to be prepared to adapt” her teaching in response to students.

For teacher educators, this experience shaped their identities in different ways. As an “emerging” scholar, Marie-Christina talked about how her CAR experience informed her work as a researcher and teacher. She highlighted how it enabled a “deeper understanding of what it looks like and feels like to be a teacher in schools today” and how this supports her work with inservice teachers. She also said that this experience enhanced her “understanding of research processes.” For example, she became familiar with processes of applying for ethics approval and obtaining informed consent from parents of children. Deborah shared how CAR enables her to live her values in practice and to continue working for social justice. For her, this “means addressing inequities, contradictions, and complexities” within her work as a teacher educator. For example, as a literacy educator, it is a way to raise awareness of inequitable literacy practices through one-size-fits-all resources and to advocate for more inclusive literacies by providing local examples of what is possible. She wrote that inquiry positions her as a learner “alongside both preservice and inservice teachers,” and that this is a powerful way to generate knowledge about culturally relevant and responsive practices. Deborah views CAR as a means to transform her practice as an advocate for teachers’ knowledge with both inservice and preservice teachers.

Discussion

Our reflections on the affordances of CAR illuminate some of the benefits of learning through collective inquiry and contribute to the field. Preservice teachers discussed the impact of CAR on their learning to teach, shaping their professional identities, adopting an inquiry stance towards practice, learning from students, and developing content knowledge through data collection and analysis. Inservice teachers shared ideas about a different approach to professional learning that is embedded in practice and responsive to students’ learning. Teacher educators noted the depth of understanding of theory–practice relations, particularly how they are intertwined through inquiry and interconnected with knowing through lived experiences.

It is important to note that positive outcomes were mutually beneficial. Preservice teachers took on roles as research assistants, affording them a deeper understanding of teaching and learning through their school-based activities, including data collection and support for students with new technologies. University researchers gained insight into current practices in local classrooms and a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities that inservice teachers face. In this research, university researchers also gained unique, regionally specific, and culturally responsive resources created by teacher researchers for use in their classrooms.

Financially, teachers benefited from release time to engage in critical dialogue and collaboration with colleagues from other schools and university teacher educators. Primary students benefited from access to digital tablets and other technologies for bookmaking. Preservice teachers were employed as research assistants and paid for their work and time on the project. Preservice teacher researchers, inservice teacher researchers, and university teacher researchers mutually benefited from learning from one another through engagement during site visits, interviews, data analysis sessions, and opportunities to

experiment with new pedagogies and technologies. This worked to enhance our content, as well as our pedagogical and technological knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

Collaborative action research has the potential to foster more egalitarian relationships, empower teacher agency, and enhance teachers' identities. Teacher research supports curriculum practice and repositions teachers as researchers, knowers, and change agents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Comber, 2006). Rather than each person feeling alone, our interactions provided us with opportunities to listen, question, respond, and encourage one another. Our teacher research community brought our learning, knowing, and being together through a network of social practices (Wenger, 1998).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research suggesting that a much broader view of professional learning is needed to reignite teachers' passion for their work by enabling agency. Action research can be transformative and viewed as a way to bring about both personal and social change (Dusty, 2024). It shows what is possible when teachers have autonomy, ownership, and control over their learning and practice. In the current era of substantial literacy reforms, when it seems that training teachers to follow scripted, prepackaged programs developed elsewhere is becoming more common, it is more important than ever to support ongoing teacher learning through collaborative inquiry embedded in teachers' practice and responsive to students in local contexts. In this paper, we highlighted some of the affordances of our learning through collaborative action research. We have outlined some benefits and the potential for knowledge generation through local university–school partnerships to inform, enhance, and transform our practices as teachers in our local context. We have shown how CAR can serve to connect teachers' voices, generate local knowledge, and shape teachers' identities.

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