



Commentary

The Importance of Generating Middle Leading Through Action Research for Collaborative Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary I connect today's emphasis on collaborative learning with the Nordic tradition of study/research circles and action research. More specifically, I do this by examining three key aspects: the need to understand one's history and educational roots; the importance of fostering and generating middle leaders through action research; and the significance of recognizing middle leaders in schools and pre-schools for the development of collaborative learning.

Teacher research with a focus on collaborative learning has become a major interest in the field of professional learning, and is often discussed in relation to the importance of inquiry and reflection. Sagar (2013) shows that different content in professional learning curricula and experiences can enable or constrain the kinds of learning which occur among teachers. Kennedy (2005) emphasizes that professional learning which starts from teachers' own questions has the potential to change practices, particularly if it is connected to some kind of facilitation. In a literature review, Opfer and Pedder (2011) show that the most effective approach to professional learning is one that relates to teachers' practices and involves activities related to their everyday work; this effectiveness increases even more if the learning is conducted in collaboration with colleagues and takes place over a long time. Campbell (2014) underscores the importance of developing the professional capacity of experienced teachers to evolve their practices further and to contribute to improvements in classrooms, in schools, and across education systems. Similarly, Timperley (2011) argues

that it is important for teachers to focus on the learning of all students, to seek relevant knowledge and skills to achieve this, and to assess regularly and collaboratively the impact of their practices on students in order to make appropriate adjustments.

However, it is easy to fall into the trap of believing that everything will run smoothly and without contradiction if one simply emphasizes collaborative learning (Salo & Rönnerman, 2014). And it is easy to believe that collaborative learning lacks any historical roots.

In this invited commentary I will take the opportunity to relate today's focus on collaborative learning and action research to historic educational traditions in the Nordic countries—and specifically in Sweden, where the era of folk enlightenment, at the beginning of the last century, saw the birth of collaborative adult education in study circles whose purpose was to enlighten people to become democratic citizens.

A study circle gathers a group of people who meet on a regular basis to discuss, reflect together, and thus expand their knowledge on a topic of mutual interest. The idea(l) of a study circle is based on voluntary participation, informal leadership, and open access to all, embodying an informal and non-instrumental view of learning.

Study circles were of great importance in building the Swedish welfare state, and were connected to the democratic project (“study circle democracy”). They aimed, on the one hand, to educate people politically (ideologically) for their functions in local organizations and, on the other, to educate workers in school subjects they had not previously studied. The role of study circles in this national process is discussed by Larsson (2001), who relates them to seven aspects of democracy: equal participation, horizontal relations, recognition of diverse identities, knowledge that informs standpoints, deliberative communication and action, internal democratic decision-making, and striving for action to form society.

Since the era of folk enlightenment, the study circle as an arena for knowledge construction has become an important approach to adult education outside the institutionalized school system. But while a study circle can be viewed as a way to achieve individual learning, it is also a way to create democratic processes for collective knowledge construction and for enhancing social changes—both of which are also features of critical action research (Rönnerman & Salo, 2012). Both study circles and action research use methods based on the ideas and principles of democracy to develop democratic processes for gaining knowledge. One essential democratic aspect is a focus on the group rather than the individual, so that the emphasis is not

on developing the individual capacities of each person through a personal study of the subject, but rather on developing the capacities of the group through collaborative discussion. In this perspective, the participants themselves are an important source of knowledge, and the methods developed for sharing and extending knowledge in the group are based on recognizing and sharing participants' experiences and working lives (Holmer, 1993).

A further development of the study circle happened in the 1970s in Sweden, when partnerships were established between universities and the labour market to increase understanding during specific industrial crises—for example in the shipping and car industries. These forms of circles were named research circles, and also became an arena for developing methods of inquiry for the university researchers involved.

A research circle is not a uniform concept, but can be described as a meeting in which participants conduct an organized search for, and development of, knowledge in co-operation with other participants. The ideology behind the research circle encompasses both the creation of a social practice and the development of concepts about that practice. Analytically, Holmer refers to the researchers' role in this process as "research praxis" and the participants' role as "participant praxis." From a participant perspective, the process of developing knowledge could be seen in three ways: gaining knowledge, developing knowledge, and participating in the social production of knowledge (Holmer, 1993). The research circle is described as involving issues about the workplace and professional skills, the organization, and strategic planning (Holmstrand & Haraldsson, 1999). A research circle always involves a problem which has been jointly decided upon and which should be scrutinized from all sides. The intention is not to solve the problem, but to examine it in detail and thereby widen participants' knowledge about it. Although the way of dealing with identified problems differs, Holmstrand and Härnsten (2003) nonetheless point out that in all research circles some specific resources are signified such as: the participants' knowledge and experiences, the researchers' knowledge about the identified problem, the researchers' competence as researchers (systematic knowledge), and other researchers' knowledge which might shed light on the problem.

Considering this brief outline of the Swedish tradition of study/research circles, it is interesting to see how similarly professional learning communities (PLC) or teacher learning communities (TLC) are described. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) as well as Nehring and Fitzsimmons (2011) summarize the importance of collaborative structures, shared values and visions, collective responsibility, shared leadership, reflective dialogues, and questioning one's own practice with a

focus on new knowledge for teaching and learning. In both study/research circles and in TLCs/PLCs, participation, responsibility, reflection, and dialogues are emphasized in nurturing learning based on shared values. Notably, these are also important features in action research as part of the development of the practice, as explained below.

In the development of Nordic action research (Rönnerman, Furu, & Salo, 2008; Rönnerman & Salo, 2014), the Nordic traditions were taken into account and have been of great importance, alongside influences from the Anglo-Saxon traditions. In this way, reflections and dialogues among researchers, teachers, and school leaders have been put to the fore. Through establishing school-university partnerships within which the inquiry stance is emphasized, action research projects have been initiated in pre-schools and schools with the purpose of developing practice via a focus on creating dialogues among participants and a researcher. Following many projects over time reveals that a particularly interesting development occurs among teachers as they discover that this is the way to improve quality in practice. One such aspect is taking on a leadership role as facilitator for their colleagues.

In a recent study, Edwards-Groves and Rönnerman (2013) found that teachers involved in a program of action research, which included doing their own action research projects over time and facilitated by a researcher, experienced a transformation of leadership in their own practices—with the result described as a generated leadership. The study used data from two action research programs—one in Australia and one in Sweden—and similarities were found in how the two programs were organized. Both were conducted over 12 months, including participants doing their own action research and incorporating eight sessions of group meetings. Groups consisted of about 10-12 teachers and were facilitated by the same researcher for the whole program. During smaller facilitation groups with an emphasis on sharing experiences in dialogues, the facilitator also used specific ways of asking questions to challenge the taken-for-granted thinking of everyday practices. In the findings of the study, it became evident for the teachers to present their work to other teachers by leading their own colleagues. The role of the facilitator was taken on by the teachers, enabling agency and encouraging them to organize and set up similar groups in their own schools and preschools. However, the study also showed that building leadership capacities through professional learning requires certain conditions to be fulfilled in an individual's practice. The principal at each school or preschool needs to support and recognize the leading practices at each site so that they are nurtured and can be sustained as collaborative learning.

Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, and Rönnerman (2014) found in their study that one of the crucial tasks for middle leaders or teacher leaders in schools is to find the time and space for collaborative learning among teachers for sustained development in schools and preschools. Teacher leaders or middle leaders, identified as teachers who are leading their colleagues, but also working with them as colleagues (Grootenboer et al., 2014), are essential in action research, because they also know what it is to be a teacher. In the literature there is a wide range of concepts trying to define this leadership, such as: teacher leader, distributed leadership, shared leadership, and dispersed leadership; but none of these captures the closeness to the classroom and the impact on teacher professional learning. Middle leaders are in a unique position where they can bridge between the principal and the staff, and since they are close to the most important site in education—the site where learning takes place—they can also exercise their leadership from a place of great proximity and relevance.

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