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Mary-Lee Judah and George H. Richardson

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ARTICLE

Between a rock and a (very) hard place

The ambiguous promise of action research in the context of state mandated teacher professional development

Mary-Lee Judah
University of Alberta

George H. Richardson
University of Alberta

ABSTRACT

Conversations with teachers and professional development leaders enable us, as researchers, to highlight the ambiguous promise of action research within the context of mandated teacher professional development in the province of Alberta, Canada. From this departure, we investigate how educators believe action research projects influence their professional practices and we explore the question of the validity of using state-mandated action research projects as a means of bringing about authentic teacher professional development. Using conversations, we recount the experiences of three teachers who took part in two separate action research projects. As the conversations we present underscore, many teachers involved in state-mandated school-based projects found themselves caught between competing discourses of personal empowerment and individual autonomy on the one hand and externally driven measures of accountability and excellence on the other. In this complex and ambiguous location and within the context of their involvement in action research projects, the three teachers in this study negotiated their own understandings of professional development.

KEY WORDS

- authentic professional development
- conversation
- reprofessionalization
- resistance

By law, Alberta teachers are responsible for searching out and creating ways in which they can fulfill their contractual obligations in the area of professional development. In their pursuit of possibilities for enacting professional development, many teachers are involved in school-based action research groups as part of a province-wide funding program called the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). While in some respects the choice of action research, given its participatory, democratic ethos, may seem entirely appropriate for teachers seeking to meet their contractual obligations, in other respects there are troubling ethical questions that arise in relation to adopting action research in response to external demands for professional development. Most critically, we believe that the central ethical dilemma for those teachers who are required to participate in action research projects under these particular contexts is: How can teachers maintain the fundamental principles of action research when schools and school jurisdictions mandate or impose the use of action research as the only framework used to assist classroom teachers grow as professionals?

In response to this dilemma, this article presents conversations with one classroom teacher and two teacher professional development coordinators who have found themselves exploring the ambiguous promise of action research within the context of mandated teacher professional development. For us, imposed participation in professional development activities calls into question the intended results of action research itself. Considering the epistemological underpinnings of action research where participation is based upon personal choice, we question whether, in such constrained environments, action research can achieve anything like its promise of the transformation of practice.

Our aim here is not so much to offer a critique of the limitations of compulsory action research but rather to highlight, using conversations, how the teachers involved in this research positioned themselves in the complex and ambiguous ground between external mandates versus internal aspirations for meaningful professional development.

Setting the context: the Alberta milieu

Alberta is a province in western Canada that boasts an overall area of 638,233 square kilometers – a territory roughly the size of Texas. Although Alberta's more than 3 million people are concentrated in and around its two major urban centers, Edmonton and Calgary, its resource-based economy is primarily driven by agriculture, oil, and gas production. As is the case in all Canadian provinces, education in Alberta is solely a provincial responsibility and basic education in the province is defined as extending from Kindergarten to Grade 12. The population in the Edmonton region – the area in which our action research project took place – is dynamic and ethno-culturally diverse. For example, 15 percent of the

population of the Edmonton metropolitan census area is composed of visible minorities, and more than 18 percent of its population was not born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2002).

The AISI project initiative

During the 1990s, the province of Alberta produced two variations of a three-year business plan to deal with improving accountability in education. Though not specifically detailed in the frameworks, the province announced the implementation of an AISI program that 'provides funding to school jurisdictions for specific local initiatives and research to improve student learning and performance' (Alberta Learning, 2003).

The AISI initiative was designed and developed in collaboration with the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Association of School Business Officials of Alberta, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, the Alberta Home and School Councils' Association, and Alberta Learning. University Faculties of Education in Alberta have subsequently joined the AISI partnership. Through this project, the Alberta government initially made a total of 63 million dollars available for each of three school years, beginning in the fall of 2000, to assist teachers to create rich learning experiences that would enhance their teaching and, in turn, student learning. Currently, the government has agreed to continue the AISI program for an additional three years (Alberta Learning, 2003).

Why use action research?

From one perspective, the choice of action research to further teachers' professional development appears ideal in both its ends and in its means. The essentially democratic definition of educational action research as 'research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practices' (Corey, 1953, p. 141) and the collaborative and participatory processes (Elliott, 1991; Judah & Richardson, 2002; Lewin, 1948; Whitehead, 2000) that guide action research seem to hold the promise of encouraging teachers' agency and autonomy at a time when it seems these very things have been gradually stripped away from the teaching profession (Apple, 1993, 1998).

However, despite what seems to be the clear promise of resistance and reprofessionalization inherent in teachers adopting action research to further their own professional development, there are equally clear risks of cooption implicit in enacting action research in the context of institutionally mandated practices. While it is true that action research often works in unwelcoming

environments, initial reservations can typically be overcome with careful management. But in the case of action research that carries with it the disciplining power of official mandate, we feel there are particular dangers to overcome. Adelman (1999) warned of these dangers when he noted that the empowering discourse of action research was too easily ‘incorporated as part of the armoury of managerial development for “corporate excellence”’ (p. 16). Acknowledgement of the threat that action research could be appropriated in the service of outside, institutional agendas led The Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) (2000), to caution teachers that embarking upon action research involves no simplistic checklists or pre-determined outcomes. Rather, teachers are encouraged to consider the following ethical questions:

- 1 How might the intended changes from your project affect others?
- 2 Who has an interest in being informed about your project?
- 3 Who will own the information generated by the project?
- 4 How does the project express an ethic of caring for others?
- 5 In whose interest is the change you are proposing being made?
- 6 Who will own the success/failure of the project? (ATA, 2000, p. 10)

Such concerns are not unique to the situation teachers find themselves in Alberta. In a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education Professional Practice Research, Aspland, Brooker, Macpherson and Cuskelly (2002) described how researchers attempting to work with classroom teachers faced difficult questions regarding ‘hegemonic views about research agendas, how they are generated and who owns them (and their outcomes)’ (p. 6). Taken together, concerns expressed in both nations over who controls classroom research and for whose purposes it is conducted suggest the need to understand how teachers position themselves and their practice when embarking on action research in mandated contexts.

Using conversations collected from interviews, this article recounts the experiences of three teachers involved with school-based action research AISI projects. The three participants in this research lived in or near a large urban area in Alberta, and were involved in various AISI associated projects. In our role as teacher educators, we had worked with all three participants in various capacities such as workshop presentations or through our mutual involvement in curriculum development. The teacher participants in this research were considered leaders in their area of expertise and had filled a number of leadership roles during the implementation phase of the latest curriculum changes in their given subject areas.

The conversations were collected over the period of 10 months during sessions in which all participants and researchers were present. In order to create an open, non-threatening atmosphere in which teachers openly discussed their views toward the AISI projects, dinner meetings were held at one of the researcher’s

home. All meetings were audio taped, transcribed, and returned to the participants for their feedback and reflection. After each session, the researchers recorded their thoughts in a research journal. Issues arising from the transcripts and reflections acted as points of departure for subsequent meetings. Questions asked of the participants emerged from the previous discussion group responses.

As the conversations presented in the article underscore, the teachers involved in these projects found themselves caught between competing discourses of personal empowerment and individual autonomy on the one hand and of the need to respond to externally driven measures of accountability and excellence on the other. In this complex and ambiguous location and within the context of their own action research projects, they negotiated the meaning of professional development.

Exploring the rough ground: examining the promise of action research

As we note above, in many ways action research presents itself as a particularly appropriate choice for teachers concerned with improving their practice. However, widely differing and often ambiguous understandings of its promise complicate the selection of action research as a vehicle for professional development (Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Smith, 2004). For us, these differing and ambiguous understandings are not problems to be solved. Instead, they raise complex issues related to how the teachers involved in this research understood the promise of action research as they engaged in externally mandated professional development. In what follows, we briefly explore two understandings of the promise of action research that had particular relevance to our work with the teachers involved in this project.

First promise: action research as self-improvement

From its inception, action research has been primarily characterized by a 'culture of self-improvement' grounded in the modernist drive towards increasing the degree of influence its practitioners have over their working environments (Judah & Richardson, 2002, p. 18). The notion of action research as self-improvement dates to Kurt Lewin and the origins of the field. As viewed by Lewin, action research had as its focus the improvement of both the work environment and the degree of control workers had on that same environment (Lewin, 1948). In a North American context, in many respects, this modernist orientation remained fundamentally unchanged as action research moved from industry into the field of education (Corey, 1953; Noffke, 1997; Smith, 2004). As a modernist project,

the culture of action research as self-improvement can be described as resting firmly within an Enlightenment paradigm that is founded on notions of control, improvement, and progress (Borgmann, 1992; Habermas, 1970).

Second promise: action research as self-awareness

Although the notion of self-improvement certainly remains one orientation in the field of action research, the idea that action research can lead to a more profound level of self-awareness has taken on a much greater significance in recent decades (Smith, 2004; Stringer, 1999; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). On the one hand, this self-awareness has a critical dimension that draws on Freirean notions of ‘conscientization’ and is directed towards social change (Atwah, Kemmis & Weeks, 1998; Fals-Borda, 1990; Freire, 1982; Greenwood & Levin, 1998). On the other, self-awareness draws on post-structural thought and hermeneutics to suggest that action research is a form of ‘lived practice’ in which personal and professional identities are bound together in a complex web of social relations (Carson & Sumara, 1997). As Carson and Sumara note, action research viewed as a ‘lived practice’ is an attempt to discover ways in which ‘teachers might see themselves as part of complex, intersecting and entirely interdependent communities of practice’ (1997, p. xvii).

Drawing on Sumara and Carson’s work, linking identity formation and social relations suggests that action research, viewed as a lived practice, can act as a conduit to authentic professional development. But what remained unclear to us was how the teachers in our research positioned themselves between action research viewed as mandated self-improvement and action research considered as a living practice.

Conversation as research

In this article we use conversations we recorded with three teachers who had been involved with action research projects either as project facilitators or as action research project participants as the prime source for highlighting teachers’ ambiguous experiences of action research. As researchers who work within the common framework of action research and teacher identity issues, we have come together through our ongoing, common concern regarding how teachers situate themselves as teachers and learners in the context of their own professional development. This common concern led us to engage teachers in conversations about how they believed action research projects influenced their professional practices and to open up the question of the validity of using externally mandated action research projects as a means of achieving authentic teacher professional development. Conversations as a means of data collection and as a methodology

have been used extensively across many research methodologies. Conversations are a dialogue between individuals, in which each participant brings unique views to the research and situates her or himself within the research. The idea of conversations as acts of communication make understanding possible and offer opportunities for critical reflection (Smits, 1997). Davey (1999) reminds us that in order to take place ‘conversations require participating subjects’ (p. 17). For Minnich (1990), conversations offer new beginnings as we ‘open ourselves to responses, questions, and challenges’ (p. 191). In the case of action research, conversation has increasingly been used to enhance the collaborative environment. As action researcher Alan Feldman notes, conversations ‘always lead to new understanding’ through a process of ‘talking, listening, reflecting, and responding’ (1999, p. 137). It is his belief that to engage in conversation is to engage in inquiry in an effort to learn something new.

Drawing on Feldman, our goal here is not so much to examine the use of conversation as action research but rather to underscore, using the conversations presented, the shift action research considered as a lived practice has undergone toward developing a more situated understanding of the complexity that is characteristic of teachers’ personal and professional lives. This shift became central to the teachers’ conversations as they discussed their views regarding the changes they should make in their teaching practice as well as the ways that they evaluated the effectiveness of changes they instituted. From the point of view of data analysis, we reduced the data by looking for ‘patterns, categories and themes’ (Creswell, 1994, p. 154) in an attempt to interpret and dissect the data as a means to ascertain how teachers viewed the ability of AISI projects to allow for authentic professional development, create improved teaching practice, and increase student learning. Using the conversations we held with them over the course of 10 months, in what follows, we evaluate how Kate, Bruce, and Tammy, the three teachers involved in this research, used action research AISI projects as a means to grow as professionals.

Kate and Bruce

Kate and Bruce were hired as consultants by a large city school board in Alberta after their school board had received a sizeable sum of money for AISI project funding. Both held positions that involved submitting proposals, reporting progress to Alberta Learning, and co-ordinating all AISI projects accepted by Alberta Learning. Although Kate found the work challenging, she stated that she was ‘enjoying it. I’ve learned more in the last little bit about, about the district, about AISI, which is good’. Kate was a senior high mathematics teacher while Bruce had been a junior high school mathematics teacher. Kate and Bruce had shown exemplary work with practicing teachers and the leadership roles they had

filled during their teaching careers. They both viewed their work as AISI coordinators for their school board as an extension of the professional development work they had previously undertaken. Bruce felt that:

There has been nothing more successful in terms of bang for the buck, as the AISI project funding. It's because it's directed right at the grass roots. It's talking to consultants, dialoguing with teachers, working with teachers in our school division who are involved in AISI projects, collaborating, looking at the curriculum in depth, innovating, trying, being receptive to others and so forth . . . There's follow up but it's very costly and it is not really collaborative. Sometimes I feel like they look at me to bring them the knowledge and then the teachers take it from there, but they always come back to me. To me it is important to get the teachers to fly with the project; that is our mandate.

Kate agreed with Bruce's comment by adding, 'We want to bring teachers to their own learning by getting them to outline the terms of their projects. We constantly find ourselves in situations where the teachers are asking us for our opinion, even though it is their project'. For Kate and Bruce, bringing teachers to the action research process seemed to be the most important aspect of their collaboration with the teachers. Their intents mirror closely Lewin's (1948) vision of action research as 'a means of systematic enquiry for all participants in the quest for greater effectiveness through democratic participation' (cited in Adelman, 1993, p. 7). Furthermore, Kate's notion of 'bringing teachers to their own learning' which we cite above corresponds to the understanding of action research as a means for self-improvement described by McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) as 'a form of practitioner research that can be used to help you improve your professional practices in many different types of workplaces' (p. 8).

The teachers Kate and Bruce worked with approached the AISI projects from two conflicting positions. On the one hand, as Kate noted, they 'wanted to improve their teaching by engaging in action research projects', while on the other hand they entered into action research because they 'were mandated to do so because of a school administration based decision'. Given these conflicting contexts, it is hardly surprising that Bruce voiced ethical concerns over his role as facilitator.

I feel guilty that it always seems to be my agenda that dictates how the group is going to proceed. I feel that if I talk too much that my ideals are going to take over the project. How do I get the job done without influencing the group? The process I am involved with seems to fly in the face of everything that I have learned.

Regarding the teachers that she worked with, Kate felt she had 'missed the mark' when it came to using action research. She believed she had 'not been on the ball when all of this started. I did not feel adequately prepared to go out and get teachers involved in action research projects. I really feel like I failed the teachers'. When we asked Kate where she thought that she had failed, she indicated, 'I just

didn't understand how action research might work and I feel like the teachers might have missed out on a powerful professional development experience.' When pressed further about what she would do differently, Kate responded that she 'would push the participants to take more ownership of the project'. Kate's observations suggest she feels unable to reconcile her desire to achieve a clear and measurable outcome to the action research project with her lived experience of the ambiguous and non-linear reality of the process of action research. Taking up the issue that Kate raised regarding the lack of clarity of purpose she felt, Forester (1999) describes the messiness of complex issues and embraces the power of disorder as a means to achieve a desirable end. Educators, Forester explains, 'face a pressing and central challenge of making public deliberation work, making participatory planning a pragmatic reality instead of an empty ideal' (1999, p. 3). For Forester, when actions become deliberate or thought through, the results are illusionary and meaningless when extended beyond the political landscape; it is the intended goal that drives the process. There are no centrally located answers, only those that are arrived at within the context of where the participants find themselves.

In action research, facilitation can take on many forms within the realm of professional development as the facilitator can take on many roles such as acting as a conduit for resources, having the capability of answering questions, raising questions for those involved in the professional development activities, being a 'sounding board' and functioning as an intermediary (Tripp, 1990). Bruce asserted, 'The hardest thing I found with working with teachers in action research projects was to bring them around to taking control of the projects. It happened, but man was it ever a laborious process'. Tripp (1990) further reminds us that in action research, egalitarian relationships must be constantly negotiated and renegotiated and that the issue of the facilitator offering critique raises practical and ethical issues. In such negotiations, the affective reactions of the teachers involved are more important indicators than what the teachers actually said at a given moment. Hargreaves (1988) argues that the relationships that are built are more important than the outcomes of the research in that the relationships foster discussion and collegiality. As far as her action research projects results were concerned, Kate felt that teachers involved in the projects did take responsibility for their own professional development. She also felt that they were able to strike a balance between the pressures placed on them because of their leadership positions and those associated with accommodating the needs of the teachers:

I know that it hasn't been perfect, but man, I sure can see that the teachers I've worked with have really taken a hold of the AISI projects. I didn't think that it was going to happen when we first started working together.

Bruce was not quite as optimistic regarding the outcomes of the projects he worked with. At the end of the study, Bruce commented:

I still feel like it was me who was driving the projects. I don't know if it was because I was overly sensitive to influencing the group or if I really did influence the group. I think that the truth lies somewhere in between the two ends of my feelings. It's strange, I feel empty about the whole process.

Although Bruce agreed that the projects did reflect upon some of the underlying tenets of action research – they took part in a defined community and involved active involvement on the part of participants – that Stringer (1999) notes are central to action research, he was not convinced that teachers took part in the projects of their own volition. For this reason, he felt that the teachers were unable to become completely engaged in the work and that they did not fully benefit in terms of their professional development. In terms of his role in the action research projects in which he was involved, Bruce's dilemma is not unlike that described by Sumara and Davis (1997b) in which the two researchers engaged in facilitating an action research project struggled to build a collaborative environment with their research participants. Teachers, along with Sumara and Davis (1997a), invited parents to attend an informal book reading group meeting where all read and discussed *The giver* (Lowery, 1993), a book considered inappropriate by the teaching staff who found it too controversial due to the 'graphic depictions of infanticide and euthanasia, as well as its allusions to the sexual awakening of adolescent characters' (Sumara & Davis, 1997b, p. 407). The group was brought together in a 'commonplace location' where all benefited from the building of relationships and shared understandings. As Sumara and Davis note:

We deliberately inserted ourselves into the space that Jerome Bruner calls 'cultural making' through such actions as suggesting the reading of the novel, explicitly implicating parents, and introducing some notions of complexity theory as a means of making sense of the unfolding events. (1997b, p. 309)

For Sumara and Davis (1997a, 1997b), overcoming this dilemma only occurs when action research is situated as a complicit activity, thereby creating a common place in which all participants can find a shared sense of meaning and purpose. The emptiness Bruce felt at the end of the research projects he facilitated suggests both the complexity of managing the action research process and the difficulty of achieving authentic participation in environments in which collaboration does not freely emerge, but is part of an externally mandated contractual obligation.

Tammy

Tammy worked in a small rural Alberta town. When the AISI program was announced, her school, an 'outreach school',¹ submitted a proposal whereby a 'technology literate' person, Miranda, was hired to infuse technology into distance learning materials used for instruction and to mentor Tammy and her co-worker in using various types of technology and technology applications.

Tammy worked with one other teacher, Penny, and one school secretary. Her responsibilities were to offer students instruction in all mathematics and science courses, while Penny was responsible for all humanities courses (English, language arts, and social studies). As part of the AISI project, Tammy, Penny, and the school's principal hired a teacher, Miranda, on contract, for six weeks. Miranda's responsibility was to write tutorials, work with the staff to improve their technology skills and, in consultation with Tammy and Penny, decide where technology could be best used to enhance student learning. Miranda agreed to familiarize herself with the principles of action research before commencing the contract at the learning centre.

When our study began, Tammy indicated that she had not used computers to do anything else but to read her email. She believed that 'in an outreach school like ours, I don't think that we need to make computers a priority. Kids will learn the skills they need in their regular classrooms.' Tammy also felt unable to help students should they encounter technology related problems. She stated, 'I don't have a computer at home. I hardly know how to turn the computers at school on! I don't know what I'd do if a student got stuck'. As the study continued, Tammy commented to the group:

It's funny, every time that Miranda would ask me to review something for her, I felt that rather than just reading the tutorials she was putting together that I wanted to make sure that they would work. I felt as though it was my duty to run them through. I can remember thinking; 'I don't want to give the kids something to work on, if it has mistakes or holes in it.'

As the AISI project continued, Tammy's negative experiences with computers began to shift. She attributed this to Miranda's presence and support during the six weeks duration of her contract. Tammy underscored this by explaining:

I would be working at my desk and I would hear Miranda giggling because she found something new that she did not know the computer could do. It was crazy . . . one day she downloaded 'The Tigger Song' into a PowerPoint tutorial. I thought that was so neat; I just had to learn how to do that, so Miranda showed me. All I could think was 'wow!' Miranda had a different approach toward teaching Penny and myself how to use technology . . . we would talk about it and how we could vision technology integrated into the various modules. Then she would ask how we could help students accomplish the tasks.

At the end of the six-week contract, Tammy announced that she was going to be buying a computer for home. She concluded that she realized 'how powerful a tool a computer can be. Using one makes it so easy to alter the distance learning materials to address the individual needs of our students'. During a chance encounter with Tammy in March 2004, she mentioned that she had recently purchased a laptop computer and was the official PowerPoint presentation guru for her family at all celebratory gatherings.

Tammy's experiences exemplify how one's own 'lived practice', as described by Carson and Sumara (1997), is altered as a result of engaging and working with others. In this case, it was clear that Tammy gained a more situated understanding of the complexity of using computers. We feel that in achieving this situated understanding, Tammy's experience mirrored the observation that Clifford and Friesen (1997) brought forth in a post-structural action research project where teachers changed the way they presented the novel *I heard the owl call my name* (Craven, 1973). The researchers indicated that, 'we cannot show them [the students] that the genuine understanding is always *self understanding*, a matter of becoming worked out in relation to particular situations, particular places, in community with others' (Clifford & Friesen, 1997, p. 94). Just as the students could not be shown that 'genuine understanding is always *self understanding*' neither could Tammy; instead she reconciled her own experiences.

In the context of our work with the teachers in this research, Tammy's experience was a strong reminder that action research need not always be directed towards external (and measurable) improvements in practice. In fact, such instrumental benchmarks may be more harmful than beneficial. As Jean-Claude Couture of the Alberta Teachers' Association Professional Development staff notes, AISI action research projects that were prescriptive in their ends and methodologies tended to be less fulfilling for teachers and tended to fall away from the tenets of action research. On the other hand, those that were supported by school administrators who allowed teachers to make changes as the projects unfolded, produced a greater amount of teacher support and satisfaction with the AISI project initiative. Couture's involvement with numerous AISI action research projects led him to conclude:

Successful projects can be summarized in two points. First, if teachers find themselves confused while undertaking action research projects, it must be action research. Second, it is imperative that teachers and administrators alike feel secure with the knowledge that it is okay to fail; when failure occurs, teachers are more willing to look at what went wrong and how they might change what they do . . . The major roadblocks teachers face are the government's expectations that change must be measurable in some form and that some projects are too contrived to allow for the action research spiral to occur. (personal communication, 28 March 2004)

In reviewing Tammy's story, her initial resistance to using computers underscores the tensions with which teachers frequently live. It is something like being in a space somewhere between wanting to control all events in their world and the realization that such desires are, ultimately, unrealizable. Jardine (1997) explains that through action research, our search for change and truth ultimately brings us to a place where we did not want to go, a place in which we find ourselves 'deep into communities of lived relations that are prior to the deadliness of "research subjects" and tape recorders' (p. 164). For this reason, we feel that action research acts as a powerful way for opening spaces in which teachers can interro-

gate the conflicting beliefs that shape both their pedagogies and their sense of self.

At our last meeting, Tammy indicated:

I totally agree that the AISI project influenced me far more than I had ever thought it would. I think that it is mostly because I was able to work with a teacher who became more of a mentor for me. It was strange because I was really resistant at first, but I really feel like Miranda and the AISI project were really beneficial. I know that Bruce doesn't think that he had much impact on the teachers that he worked with, but maybe you just need to have some blind faith that something has changed for those teachers even though you might not be able to see it.

Tammy's experiences remind us that, 'teaching takes place in time, learning takes place over time' (John Mason, personal communication, 6 June 1999). Statements such as Mason's suggest that learning, by students and teachers alike, occurs within the context of situations and experiences. As Carr, Jonassen, Litzinger and Marra (1998) note, 'knowledge is a product of activity, not a process of acquisition' (p. 6).

In terms of the importance of 'living the experience' we note above, it was evident that our participants entered and left our conversations with different understandings of using action research based projects. For us, it is important that all participants arrived at their own conclusions from their involvement in their respective research projects. Although we believe Tammy, Bruce, and Kate left the process changed in some ways, we question the soundness of mandating the use of action research projects for promoting professional development. If the context is artificial, how authentic can the experience be? Despite the fact that mandating action research projects might well be a means of bringing teachers to explore new ways of teaching, the dilemma remains: How does such an external mandate affect the likelihood that participants can achieve personally relevant and sustainable changes in their teaching practices?

Conclusion

We began this article with the question of how teachers conducted meaningful action research in an environment of state-mandated professional development, but in the wider context, we believe the dilemma represented here is not solely confined to education. In other institutional settings, and particularly in the context of international development projects, it is possible to see the same tension between mandated participation and authentic collaboration (USAID, 1998; World Bank, 2000) Because of the similarity in context if not in setting, we feel that the two key understandings we came to as a result of our conversations with Kate, Bruce and Tammy have important implications for mandated action research being conducted in institutional environments. The first understanding was that many of the teachers involved in AISI projects were deeply influenced

by their involvement in ways that went far beyond initial notions of self-improvement. Researchers and participants alike lived in a context of ambiguity where the end was always beyond reach. Viewed in this light, rather than attaining a definitive concluding point, the ambiguous promise of action research led to countless possibilities for personal and professional growth. This widening of possibilities can be seen not merely in Tammy's growing confidence in the use of computers, but in the new ways she conceived of herself as a teacher resulting from her involvement in the AISI project.

The second understanding suggested that in action research the criteria by which the outcomes of the research are measured must emerge from the participants themselves. Given this internal measure of success, we ask whether the sense of failure Bruce experienced was, at least in part, the result of his unsuccessful attempt to 'sell' a project in which he had little sense of personal or professional investment. Certainly for the teachers involved in our research, and, indeed, for all those who take part in participatory research in similar contexts, the 'living criteria' they used to judge their own development in the AISI projects (Whitehead, 2000) are far more important than any 'objective' measures of success imposed by external authorities.

Note

- 1 An 'outreach school' is an alternative school designed to offer students and adults courses in an alternative educational environment. Typically, students do not fit into mainstream classrooms, require course upgrading, or cannot fit a given course into their time schedule. Outreach schools offers a wide variety of Alberta Learning approved courses in a flexible, student-centered environment in stand-alone schools rather than within the walls of a regular school.

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Mary-Lee Judah, a Career and Technology Department Head, is currently employed by Rockyview School Division No. 41. She recently completed her PhD in the area of professional development for mathematics teachers at the University of Alberta, Secondary Education. *Address:* University of Alberta, Department of Secondary Education, 341 Education South, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5. [*Email:* mljudah@shaw.ca]

George H. Richardson is the Faculty of Education's Coordinator of International Initiatives and an associate professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. His research interests include action research, global citizenship education, national identity formation, multicultural education and international education. *Address:* University of Alberta, 845 Education South, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G5. [*Email:* ghr@ualberta.ca]