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Collaborative Action Research in Northern Canadian Rural and Indigenous Schools: Learning about Young Children’s Oral Language in Play Contexts

Teachers in northern rural Canadian communities have unique challenges in collaborating with university researchers on action research projects. Geographic distances between schools within a school district and the thousands of kilometers between northern communities and universities make it costly and time-consuming to bring teachers and researchers together for action research meetings (Peterson, 2012). As documented in previous research (e.g., Azano, 2013; Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Stockard, 2011), these challenges have contributed to a dearth of research on rural teachers’ professional learning generally, and the learning while engaged in collaborative action research with university researchers more specifically.

Addressing the need to learn more about the issues that arise when conducting action research in northern rural and Indigenous communities, in this paper we introduce perspectives and experiences of 20 northern rural and Indigenous educators regarding features of our collaborative action research project that have contributed to and hindered their professional learning. With participants’ input, we have reported elsewhere on a number of the teachers’ specific action research projects (Peterson, 2015; Peterson & Portier, 2016; Portier & Peterson, 2017) and have proposed some needed shifts in research expectations and values when conducting research in northern Indigenous communities (Peterson, Horton, & Restoule, 2016). Taking a different approach in this article we have invited teachers to voice their concerns and suggestions to guide improvement of the overall project, entitled Northern Oral Language and Writing through Play (NOW Play), and to inform future research in geographically remote schools.
Of the three modes of action research proposed by Grundy (1982), the NOW Play collaborative action research methodology fits within the practical action research mode (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1982), as teachers and university researchers co-design and assess the effectiveness of new practices. Although power is shared between participants who are considered equals, the individual teachers determine how the co-designed practices will be implemented. This mode better reflects the practical activities, relationships and goals of our collaborative action research than do the technical mode, where teachers are consumers and supporters of new teaching practices, and the emancipatory mode, where teachers initiate new practices and power resides within the group (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1982).

Indigenous perspectives are at the forefront of our action research, as values taken up by researchers working within Indigenous contexts (Kirkness and Bernhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009), known as the 4R’s (respect, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity), together with the overarching value of relationship, are central to all collaborative action research activities. Recognizing that relationship-building takes time, our collaborative action research, now in the middle of its fourth year, will continue for another two years with all interested educators and communities. We greatly respect and value participating teachers’ insider cultural knowledge about their Indigenous and rural communities and consider them to be co-researchers. Integral to the research design of the NOW Play project is the co-conceptualization of research questions and the particular interventions that Indigenous teacher participants choose to implement as part of their individual action research projects. Relevance is also important, as students’ and teachers’ needs are at the center of all research activities. Additionally, given our view of play as a cultural practice, it is important that the purposes and roles in which children engage should be culturally appropriate. As an example of ways in which the action research projects reflect these
values and theoretical beliefs, participating Indigenous teachers are creating traditional knowledge play centers based on what children learn from community Elders in regularly-scheduled traditional classes.

Participating teachers determine the focus of their action research, take the lead in interpreting the video data that they gather and make decisions, based on conversations with colleagues and university researchers, on how to modify teaching to enhance student learning. Together, participating teachers and university researchers share a sense of responsibility to strive toward positive outcomes for children, teachers, and communities as a whole. There is reciprocity of input and feedback, as university researchers meet with school leaders to keep them up-to-date on research activities and to invite their feedback.

We begin this paper with a short synthesis of research on the role of play in children’s learning to contextualize our later discussion of participants’ focus group responses. We then provide information about participants, our action research practices, and data collection and analysis methods for the findings, discussed in this paper, that address two research questions:

1. How do classroom researchers describe their learning as part of the collaborative action research project?
2. What factors do they feel contributed to and hindered their learning?

Play and Learning

Our choice of play contexts for the action research projects is based on decades of highly-regarded research showing that play is foundational to children’s learning and to their language and literacy development (Bodrova and Leong, 2011; Moyles, 2015). Underpinning this research is the assumption that play “creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child
always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour” (Vygotsky, 1978, 102).
Children make sense of experience, impose structure on tasks according to their funds of
knowledge and engage in ongoing problem-solving and thinking. They construct new knowledge
by drawing on what is familiar and applying it to new contexts created in their play (Whitebread,
2010).

Play is also recognized as a culturally-and contextually-situated practice, where “everything that
children play at, or play with, is influenced by wider social, historical and cultural factors”
(Wood, 2013, 8). Culture contributes not only to conceptualizations of what are appropriate
objects for children to use in play and what is considered to be play, but also to notions of the
appropriate role of adults in children’s play in classrooms.

**Collaborative Action Research Methods**

**Participants**

Pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, grade one, and Aboriginal Head Start teachers working
with children aged three to five years old took part in focus groups. For the most part,
participants are experienced female educators. Eight participants are Indigenous educators and
twelve are non-Indigenous. Table 1 details demographic information about participants.

| insert Table 1 here |
The three provinces in which the project takes place span thousands of kilometers. Researchers and graduate students from the western province of Saskatchewan work collaborate with teachers from the Saskatchewan school division. Researchers from the central province of Ontario collaborate with participating teachers and early childhood educators in Ontario and in Alberta. Each university team has received ethics approval to conduct the collaborative action research and to conduct the focus groups. University researchers have academic expertise and school-based teaching experiences in the fields of literacy education, speech-language pathology, and play-based pedagogy.

**Action Research Activities**

Common to the collaborative action research activities in the three provinces are four or five visits during the school year by university teams to participants’ schools. During these visits, individual teachers meet for 30-40 minutes with university researchers to discuss the questions and issues that are important to teachers and possible initiatives that teachers might undertake to address these questions. Over the course of six-eight weeks, teachers carry out their initiatives and video-record students’ interactions while engaged in the initiatives. When teachers and university researchers meet, we view the videos and teachers tell stories of the play and learning activities that have been taking place in the classroom. Together, teachers and university researchers discuss what we see in the videos as children respond to the new practices. We talk about teachers’ goals for students’ learning and how these goals are or are not being achieved, as evidenced by children’s interactions captured in the videos. We also discuss ways in which teachers might modify the teaching practices to enhance their support of students’ language, literacy and conceptual learning. These practices are repeated throughout each school year. Based on observations and discussions, teachers may continuously work to tweak one practice or
they may develop new initiatives when they want to move their action research in a new direction over the course of a year. This dialectic process provides a vehicle for teachers and university researchers to share feelings, ranging from frustration to excitement, as well as perspectives, envisioning and ponderings (Himley, 2000; Nicholson and Kroll, 2015).

The topics of participants’ action research, which arise from the questions and issues salient to their classroom contexts and which they feel are important, range from introducing writing in children’s play at dramatic play centers to creating a playful theme that was threaded throughout collaborative writing projects across the school year. Table 2 details some of the action research initiatives.

We also hold whole-group meetings of all participating teachers from a northern school division, where teachers share stories of their individual action research initiatives with each other and with university researchers, a practice that has been documented in previous action research projects (Bleicher, 2014). Through these collaborative conversations, teachers and university researchers “come to new understandings that shape their responses and the direction of the conversation, which leads to different understandings” (Feldman, 1999, 134). Together we develop theoretical understandings of what the video-recorded play interactions show about young children’s language, social, and conceptual learning. In addition to discussing the data gathered in teachers’ classrooms, we have conducted professional learning community
discussions (Dufour, 2004) with articles on topics, requested by participants, about practices and issues that teachers use to shape their research questions and teaching initiatives.

An important part of the collaborative action research is the collection of video-recordings of children’s play. Participating teachers collect data using iPods set up on tripods to record their students’ play interactions while engaged in playful curriculum-oriented activities. These activities vary across participating teachers’ classrooms, as they reflect each teacher’s action research focus. The rhythms of each classroom determine the frequency of recordings, but teachers generally record children’s play five to six times each month between October and May. Teachers upload the videos and pictures to a university site where the videos are transcribed to be used in conversations among participants and university researchers.

In order to build relationships across the three provinces, participating teachers, researchers, consultants, and administrators from participating schools have met at one of the participating universities four times. The content and activities of each meeting reflect the needs and interests of participating teachers. The first meeting involved numerous activities to introduce participants to fellow participants across the country, to the university team members, and to the project. University team members presented a session on what to expect when participating in collaborative action research and distributed the iPods with a demonstration on their use. The second meeting included new relationship-building activities across provinces and workshops on supporting young children’s writing and oral language. Additionally, creative, collaborative curriculum activity, a new concept of playful learning that teachers participating in the first year of the project collaboratively developed with researchers based on needs identified by teachers, was introduced in a workshop (Portier & Peterson, 2017). The workshops were based on participants’ requests for more information about oral language and play, and intended
to provide content on which teachers could build their action research projects, if they wished. Participating teachers who felt comfortable in disseminating their research to colleagues, did roundtable or poster sessions on their action research projects at the third whole-group meeting. Additionally, they worked in cross-provincial groups with a university team member as a facilitator to create artefacts, which took the form of info-graphs, collages, tips and advice columns for parents/teachers, dances, and PowerPoint presentations, that were uploaded to the project’s public website for a wide audience (www.now-play.org). These artefacts represent or symbolize participants’ and university researchers’ learning. On the agenda of the fourth cross-provincial meeting were work sessions for teams of classroom and university action researchers in order to create research posters to present at international conferences. Additionally, in cross-provincial groups, teachers and university team members analyzed together selected data from all three provinces.

**What Does Collaboration Look Like in Participating Provinces?**

Although there are many commonalities across the collaborative action research conducted in each province, we would not be honouring principles of relationship, respect, relevance, responsibility, and reciprocity (Kirkness and Bernhardt, 1991), if all participants were carrying out exactly the same practices in every province. Accordingly, we outline the unique features of the action research in each province.

**Alberta.** Alberta teachers, together with researchers, identified the need for and co-created a play- and curriculum-based term for the playful learning that characterizes participating teachers’ action research. This term, creative, collaborative curriculum activity (CCCA), addresses concerns of parents and administrators regarding the significance of play in kindergarten and grade one classrooms (Portier and Peterson, 2017a). Together with the teaching
initiatives that individual teachers designed for their own classrooms, we collaboratively designed an observation tool for assessing young children’s language in play contexts. In meetings of all participating Alberta teachers, we designed and then refined the tool, after teachers tried out each version, until teachers deemed it useful and useable (Portier and Peterson, 2017b).

In Alberta classrooms, teachers’ action research projects involve play contexts that reflect children’s rural environments and the primary industry-based professions and trades of their parents. Teachers’ research questions focus on how children’s rural cultural learning and their vocabulary and writing are influenced through the introduction of various dramatic play contexts. Teachers were also interested in children’s use of language to see which contexts seemed to foster a wider range of purposes for using language. Polly, for example, placed farm machinery, trucks and machines used in road and oil rig construction in a box by the sand centre. In one video clip, she entered into the children’s play at the sand centre, taking a role as a farmer while playing with a tractor. While in role, she introduced a way that print is part of the life of a farmer by saying that she needed a No Trespassing sign because people were driving their trucks over her crops. Polly then prepared manila tag signs glued to popsicle sticks to post around the part of the sandbox that she had deemed her crop. Her students picked up on the notion of creating signs for various purposes and made signs as part of their sand centre play.

In another kindergarten classroom, Lila put up a tent and had toilet paper rolls and red and orange crepe paper available for children in the dramatic play centre. Children enacted camping narratives in the tent, including building fires with the toilet paper rolls and crepe paper. She invited her students to talk about their family camping experiences (camping is a typical vacation activities of families in the community) and to draw or write about their experiences.
The action research projects of both Polly and Lila were intended to create real-life contexts for children to talk, draw and write about topics relevant to their lives in northern rural communities, and to provide opportunities to use specific vocabulary about these topics in their dramatic play.

**Ontario.** All participating teachers from Ontario teach in Indigenous communities. The Indigenous communities can only be accessed by air or by winter road when the lakes freeze over. Because of the hundreds of kilometers between each participating Indigenous community, it is not possible for all Ontario teachers to meet as a group. Instead, the whole-group meeting is with participating teachers within each school. University researchers spend a day in each school, video recording children’s play and sometimes joining in the play activities that are part of teachers’ action research, with the goal of enriching children’s language and conceptual learning.

The action research projects of Trisha, Sadie and Shania, three Indigenous teachers teaching in Indigenous communities, were designed to provide experiences for children to imitate and practice what they had learned in Indigenous Cultural classes from community Elders, deepening their sense of pride in their Indigenous identities. In Shania’s junior kindergarten class (children are four years old at entry), Shania demonstrated the swaddling of a doll in a taakobisin (swaddling wrap) and created a house centre where her students could enact traditional Indigenous ways of caring for babies.

Action research initiatives were also designed to encourage children’s use of language for a range of purposes and provide background experiences for children’s writing and drawing. In one video clip from Trisha’s class, students recreated the making of tea porridge; a traditional practice that they had observed Elders doing during one of their Indigenous Cultural classes (held outdoors in a teepee). The children used brick blocks from the block centre to create a fire
pit, and then layered toilet paper rolls inside the fire pit with crepe paper as the flames. They set up chairs to sit around the fire in the same manner that tree stumps and benches were arranged around the fire in Cultural classes. The children poured imaginary oatmeal from an empty cereal box into a container placed over the pretend fire. They added crepe paper bits as tea leaves and sugar. Later, Trisha asked the children to draw and/or write about making tea porridge.

_Saskatchewan._ During each visit, an initial catch up/planning meeting typically takes place with all of the participating teachers first thing in the morning before school starts for the day, and one-on-one teacher consultations and interacting and engaging with their students during play-based/classroom activities occurs in each classroom environment. In conjunction with school division speech-language pathologists, teachers and researchers work together to plan classroom-based strategies to address goals set by teachers.

Like the Alberta teachers’ action research initiatives, the Saskatchewan teachers’ action research involved creating contexts about rural activities that were common to many families in their communities. Pre-kindergarten teacher Rose, for example, created a classroom garden of root vegetables and beans with her students in the spring. The garden was brought outside in May. Rose and her students’ families occasionally tended the garden over the summer. When the children returned to school as kindergarteners in September, Rose collaborated with the kindergarten teacher to help the children harvest the vegetables. The pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes prepared and ate vegetable soup with the harvested vegetables. Throughout this action research initiative, children documented the growth of the seedlings and created recipes for vegetable soup. The collaboration between teachers and the contributions of the community to the project added to the children’s learning of ways of being and kinds of relationships that are developed in northern rural communities.
Allison, a kindergarten teacher, set up a post office in the dramatic play centre in her classroom. The classroom post office had many mailboxes for children to take the role of rural community members who use a key to pick up their mail at the post office. There were also opportunities for children to carry out rural delivery by car to families living on farms. Allison’s action research goal was to see how creating a real-life context for children to write letters and postcards, and address parcels could provide relevant experiences on which children could draw for their writing and drawing.

**Focus Group Methods Addressing Questions about Teachers’ Experiences and Perspectives**

Following two years’ participation in the project, the 20 educator participants responded to seven questions in semi-structured focus group discussions conducted at the May 2016 meeting of all participants. The focus group protocol, developed by the authors with the two research questions as a framework, is as follows:

1. Tell us about the high points of participating in our action research project and the impact the project has had on you and your teaching.
2. Tell us about the low points of participating in our action research project.
3. Describe your view of collaborative action research when we began this project. How has your view changed or evolved? How would you describe the project to prospective teachers, early childhood educators and parents?
4. What do you know now about oral language and play that you didn’t know before?
5. What was helpful and supportive to you in implementing creative collaborative curriculum activities and carrying out other activities as part of the action research project?
6. What were some challenges you encountered?

7. What kept you working with us on the action research? Was there any point during the year when you considered leaving the project? What can we do to enhance your experience?

In order to avoid conflict of interest, doctoral students who had not visited the schools facilitated the focus groups. The four focus groups, with four to seven participants, were approximately 75 minutes in duration. Each focus group was comprised of participants from the same province. We decided to use provincial groups because the approaches taken by teachers was slightly different in each province and we wanted teachers to build on each others’ comparable experiences in each province in focus group conversations. Because of the large numbers of teachers from Ontario, there were two Ontario focus groups. Interview responses were transcribed and analyzed inductively (Patton, 2015) to generate codes and themes relating to the main research questions of teachers’ professional learning and what factors they felt contributed or hindered their learning. Codes were created representing the recurring topics of focus from the teachers’ discussions, and possible meanings were considered in order to align with the topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Because of our desire for honest critique to guide improvement of the practices within the overall project, we have attempted to ensure anonymity of participants and thus have not involved teachers in the analysis of the focus group data.

**Findings: Participants’ Learning and Influential Factors Contributing to their Learning**

Focus group data show that teachers’ participation in the project led to a deepening understanding of the role of play in creating authentic opportunities for oral language growth and for assessing children’s language through observation. These themes are elaborated in the following sections.
Teacher Professional Learning: Observing Children’s Interactions During Play Provides an Authentic Forum for Assessment

Through video-recording students’ interactions, participating teachers gained a heightened awareness of the many social purposes for which students used language to communicate with their peers and to solve problems that arise in their play. One teacher described this new awareness: “And now when I hear children, I’m thinking that the child is very directive. And I listen to another child and I think they make a lot of attempt to get along; they’re using that type of language. And I wouldn’t have naturally categorized that before. And now it comes a lot more natural.” In the process, many teachers learned ways to adapt their teaching to meet individual student needs. As one teacher explained, through participating in the project she has been “learning ways to interact with the kids more and kind of draw language out.”

Participating teachers came to see play as a forum for authentic observation to gain deeper understanding of the children’s’ overall growth and development. They became more purposeful in their observation and teaching, and gained an enhanced awareness of how children develop in different stages: “What I like about this project is watching the kids’ language development … I just loved the focus on the oral language because really, that’s such a nebulous area out there.” Teachers also began to see that many of the students use non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, to communicate during play. One teacher explained:

So even just recognizing the gestures and the body language and how the other kids kind of pick up on those cues and understand each other. That was really interesting for me—seeing how that all kind of connects to the oral language part. Because they still understand each other.

Participating teachers also became more confident in communicating to others what they were learning about oral language learning. They said that they had begun to share specific examples
of children’s language development in parent-teacher conferences and promoted the importance of oral language, both with colleagues in their schools and beyond the school environment.

**Teachers’ Professional Learning: Influential Factors**

Features of the collaborative action research that teachers said were influential to their professional learning included: collaboration at multiple levels (e.g., with colleagues in the school division and across provinces, as well as with university researchers); and the need to create trusting relationships in order to carry out action research activities. These two themes are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

**Collaboration at Multiple Levels Supports Professional Learning**

Participating teachers talked about the positive contributions of each of the levels of collaboration to their professional learning. The cross-provincial conversations, particularly those centering on the creation of artifacts, were highlighted by many teachers. As one teacher explained, “You learn lots as you work in groups and talk and share things from other people and what their experiences are and what they’re doing.” Another teacher enthusiastically assessed the cross provincial conversations that took place while creating an artifact for the project website in this way:

This morning was amazing. Our group was fantastic in the discussions that we had...Because we were getting so much from each other about a variety of different things. And it was definitely something that I gained a lot of information from that I will use when I go back to school next week, as well as to set up for next year. And we came to the same conclusion that it wasn’t so much that we were building an artifact, right? It was that collaboration, talking, we spent so much time talking about it.
The artifact creation provided a focus for the conversations and knowing that the artifacts would be posted on the project website provided an authentic purpose for the artifact creation.

Collaborating at the school division level to create the observation tool was also viewed by participating teachers as making a valuable contribution to their professional learning. One teacher described her experience of the inductive process of using classroom data and the professional conversations that informed the development of the oral language assessment tool in this way:

I was surprised this year how the oral language assessment tool came together. I guess I’ve never been part of developing something like this before. I mean, we’ve all done assessments before, but that was very interesting. The tool started out with just some descriptions of the children’s language. And then we tried it out and the next time they brought something that was slightly different. It just got refined and refined and refined through the discussions until now I’m looking at it as something actually we might be able to use.

The tool development took place over the course of the first two years of the project. The individual meetings where participating teachers and university researchers talked about videos from each teacher’s classroom were important for building the trust needed for teachers to persist in working with researchers to refine the tool over this lengthy time period.

Teachers also found the individual meetings with university researchers to be affirming and supportive of their professional learning. One teacher said,

I really appreciated just having the meetings where the university researchers would come to the school. And they’re watching your videos; they’ve seen what’s going on.
And then they would discuss what they’re seeing, what I’m doing, what’s my next direction there. And I really liked getting that feedback, there, right? Because typically, you know, you’re in your classroom and there’s not someone always observing you, right? So when someone can come in and just say “Oh I like what you’re doing here. What’s your next direction there?” and then you’re bouncing ideas off them. So I really appreciated it.

These meetings, which focused on individual teachers’ teaching and on the student learning arising from their action research initiatives, were viewed as particularly valuable features of the collaboration because they were tailored to individual teachers’ teaching contexts. Teachers were especially appreciative of the positive feedback they received from university researchers; something that we ensured was part of every meeting.

**Trusting Relationships Support Professional Learning in Action Research**

The majority of the participants had not been involved in action research before, and throughout the project their understanding of what collaborative action research as a professional learning opportunity evolved. One of the major barriers expressed was what they felt to be unclear expectations of action research (Jaipal and Figg, 2011). Entering into the project participants felt they did not have a clear understanding of the nature of action research; they either felt apprehensive, or they did not have any concept of what to expect when they first began. As one participant shared, “in the beginning I’m not sure I fully understood what action research necessarily was.” A second participant explained her uncertainly in the following manner:

…[we] were talking on the plane and being in the third year into the project. I think initially when we signed up, I envisioned that we would be going to the university and
that they would be the masters and they would give me these magical resources and tell me all the new theories that are happening in the academic world. And then I’m going to try to put those into my classroom which it really isn’t. I said it’s a lot like backwards design model where it’s coming from within. So, you provided us with the opportunity to explore ourselves and our students and our classroom environments.

Many said that they initially viewed action research as lacking clear directions and focus. Participation in this project was different from what many had experienced before and participants said that they felt a need for more specific instructions on how to implement action research. One participant expressed, “…the challenge, I think, has been in terms of understanding what action research is. I think that’s been a piece of it… giving us some background knowledge.” After having participated in the project for some time, and collaborating with the university researchers and each other, teachers developed closer working relationships and became more comfortable with the fluid nature of action research. They came to see the holistic nature of such research and to value the ownership they had in creating and implementing it. For example, a teacher who was involved in the creation of the observation tool shared:

It was a long way from being a usable thing when we first kind of started those discussions. And that’s been a big surprise for me, how that has developed… going back, looking at your class, trying it with a few kids in your class, and then coming back in that conversation that happens around the table. Yeah, that was interesting how that came together.

Although many still felt they could not clearly articulate what action research is, however, they became more comfortable with the process itself and its evolving and ever-
changing nature along the way. When seeing the research in action, some teachers felt it gave them reflexivity; a chance to study what they were focussing on and how it was working in their classrooms. As one teacher explained, “…the research; you see it in action and it gives you that reflexivity, it gives you that chance to really study it and see how it’s working and how it’s such a good thing. And it’s mindful, right? It makes you more aware.”

**Discussion and Implications**

Participating teachers’ focus group conversations about their participation in collaborative action research provide insights and starting points for developing professional learning initiatives appropriate for geographically remote communities.

**Collaborative Action Research and Teacher Learning**

Teachers involved in this action research project shared that as the project progressed, and they actively worked with other teachers and the university researchers, they began to feel more comfortable in the collaborative relationships they were forming. Teachers and university researchers had developed trust with one another. As Cowie, Otrel-Cass, Moreland, Jones, Cooper, and Taylor (2015) noted, “the extent to which teachers are prepared to take risks, share their ideas, feelings and opinions depends on the nature of the relationship that develops between teachers and researchers. Mutual trust, respect and rapport are essential” (269). This feeling of trust and comfort in working with fellow teachers and with university researchers carried teachers through the uncertainties they experienced, whether it was as a result of not fully understanding the action research process or their roles as teacher action researchers, or when teachers were questioning whether their collaborative work at the early stages of developing an oral language assessment tool would ever evolve into something useful and worthwhile. Trusting
relationships were very important in order for teachers to take a leap of faith and remain actively involved in this collaborative research relationship.

Given their geographic isolation and the realities of high costs and lengthy periods of time to travel to meet with colleagues, participating teachers were especially appreciative of opportunities to collaborate with university researchers who visited them in their schools on an ongoing basis, and with colleagues in after-school meetings. As in other collaborative action research projects (e.g., Burbank and Kauchuck, 2003; Jaipal and Figg, 2011) teachers had opportunities to construct new understandings with their colleagues; listening, reflecting and giving feedback to each other at these meetings. Teachers were able to observe students’ interactions through the lenses of their colleagues and university researchers in the collaborative meetings; a process that invited reflection on and re-imagining of their practices (Goodnough, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). At the individual meetings with university researchers, together, teachers and university researchers puzzled through questions about what the videos from each teacher’s class were showing them about their students’ language and learning. Each contributed insights and experiences to enrich the interpretation. In the process, teachers received specific positive feedback from university researchers about their teaching practices and gained a sense that their practices were supported by others who respected them and whom they respected. We university professors greatly honour and respect participating teachers for the risks they have been and continue to be willing to take in opening up their classrooms to university researchers from distant urban universities and making their practice the focus of research discussions.

The new understandings that teachers identified as outcomes of their participation in the collaborative action research project are common themes in the literature. For example, teachers underscored the importance of play to young children’s literacy, language and learning (Bodrova
and Leong, 2004; Moyles, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978) and became more systematic in observing and assessing children’s language (Weitzman and Greenberg, 2010). Yet, what participating teachers learned was more than a theme in a research article. Teachers shaped what they were learning into meaningful understandings that they applied in their own classroom contexts. In the process, they became “theorists who articulate [their] intentions, test assumptions, and find connections with practice” (Goswami and Rutherford, 2009, 3). These theories were communicated to various audiences, as teachers became increasingly confident in both carrying out play-based teaching and assessing children’s oral language in play contexts, and in articulating their knowledge to others (Pine, 2009). Teachers said that they were better able to translate what they were learning about children’s purposes for using language into descriptions of children’s learning and growth when talking with parents in parent-teacher conferences, for example. They also engaged in professional conversations about their new understandings and assumptions, both with colleagues involved in the collaborative action research project and those in their schools who were not involved.

The experience of shaping research knowledge through action research was especially empowering for teachers when they worked together to create something tangible that would be shared with an audience beyond the action research group. This included the artifact creation in the third cross-provincial meeting and the Alberta team’s development of an oral language observation tool; both of which are available worldwide on the project’s public website and in open-source journals. In both situations, teachers’ knowledge and experiences were valued not only in terms of being influential to their classroom practice but as a contribution to broader professional knowledge (Peterson, 2012; Thohahoken, 2011). In the case of the Alberta team, teachers participated in the inductive analysis of video data that they, themselves, had gathered.
Teachers came to see that reliable and valid data could come from assessments that the teachers designed—they did not have to rely on published formal assessments. Teachers tried out the evolving tool on an ongoing basis in their classrooms and discussed with colleagues and university researchers their observations of the usefulness of the tool. While it is true that these teachers could have learned about children’s use of language for social purposes by reading previous research (e.g., Broadhead, 2004), the process of collaborating to develop an observation tool based on their own students’ classroom interactions introduced a valuable element of personal ownership of the learning (Zehetmeier et al, 2015). In the process, participating teachers came to see themselves as researchers who make valuable contributions to professional knowledge beyond their northern communities.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

Collaborative action research provides an avenue for addressing what Burton, Brown and Johnson (2013) have identified in their examination of the last four decades of research on rural teachers in the United States and what Corbett has noted in Canada; that the field of rural education research “remains a relatively marginal focus within the corpus of education scholarship” (Burton, Brown, and Johnson, 2013, 2). It is important that the results of collaborative action research conducted in rural schools, particularly northern rural and Indigenous schools, be widely disseminated; not only to ensure that knowledge constructed with substantive teacher input is being valued (Thohahoken, 2013), but also to provide alternative perspectives to curriculum, research and practice that tend to be urban-oriented (Corbett, 2014). These alternative perspectives, as described by teachers participating in focus groups, align with the 4R’s of research conducted in Indigenous contexts (Kirkness and Bernhardt, 1991). We use this framework to discuss implications of our research for research and practice.
**Reciprocity and Respect.** A central focus of collaborative action research in isolated rural communities should be the provision of opportunities for meaningful participation of teachers and university researchers (Burbank and Kauchak, 2003). There should be a sense of reciprocity, as all who are involved willingly contribute their knowledge, experiences, time, and energy, and consider the goals and needs of each other and of the collaborative team as a whole. Respect involves having confidence in “people’s ability to shape and change their own destiny” (Kovach 2005, 30), and ensuring that everyone feels ownership in creating knowledge, and perhaps creating tangible pedagogical and assessment products. Mutual respect is key to developing the needed trust for teachers to persist through the uncertainties of the action research process and the technical challenges of video-recording and uploading data without reliable internet access. Mutual respect (and sufficient funding) are also important to ensure that university researchers continue to devote the many days of travel to visit teachers.

**Relevance and Responsibility.** Consistent with a key assumption of Indigenous epistemology—that experience is a legitimate way of knowing (Kovach, 2005)—teachers’ knowledge and experiences should guide collaborative research activities. In northern rural and Indigenous contexts “many teachers feel like they are dancing a dance choreographed in an office in the city” (Corbett, 2014, 8) and that the content of curriculum and pedagogical research is “fundamentally a story about somewhere else” (Corbett, 2010, 117). Relevance of research knowledge is especially important, given the absence of research and materials geared toward northern rural and Indigenous teachers’ contexts (Burton, Brown and Johnson, 2013). It is important for teachers from these nonmainstream contexts to be constructing knowledge that is drawn from their experiences.
Research relevance for Indigenous teachers should include ways to “bridge Indigenous family and community cultural and linguistic experiences with school-based literacy expectations and practices [in order to improve] their educational outcomes and future success and well-being” (Hare, 2012, 391). Particularly in Indigenous communities, collaborative action researchers’ responsibilities should include taking the lead of Indigenous teachers and community leaders in order to disrupt “discourses of disadvantage and exclusion derived from the structural violence of systemic racism” (Darlaston-Jones, et. al., 2014, 89). These disruptions require collaborative, inclusive spaces for all who are involved to work toward constructing understandings that honour Indigenous and rural knowledge, experiences and ways of interacting.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge that this research has been carried out on Indigenous land in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Territory, and on Treaty Four and Treaty Six Territory. We recognize and pay our respects to the treaty relationships we have with Métis, First Nations, Inuit, and all Indigenous cultures in Canada and throughout the world, and are grateful to participating Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and students for their contributions to our project. We also thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the project.

References


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http://doi.org/doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2014.997261
Table 1: Participants’ Years of Experience and Teaching Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Educational Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Femal</td>
<td>Male 0 to 5</td>
<td>6 to 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario (n=9)*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>(n=4)**</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta (n=7)**</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Indigenous communities; **northern public school division
Table 2: Examples of Participating Teachers’ Action Research Foci

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Action Research Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Kindergarten</td>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>Growing a classroom herb and vegetable garden to make soup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>Cultural Dramatic Play based on Elders teachings about making bannock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>Children create signs for their play at the sand centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>Learning about arctic animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade One</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>Collaborative writing on stories based on objects and structures built at the blocks centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade One</td>
<td>Alberta</td>
<td>Multimodal texts created for the creation of a classroom Lemonade stand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade One</td>
<td>Saskatchewan</td>
<td>Play-based story telling using puppets (e.g., story about a pair of mittens)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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