

VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY

Action Research and Consultation to Promote Inclusive Practices

by

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We accept this Graduate Applied Project as conforming  
to the required standard.

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### **Abstract**

A fundamental tenant of inclusive education is that students with exceptionalities have the right to pursue a quality education with supports in a general classroom setting; it promotes diversity, cooperation, and acceptance amongst all students. While Canada has progressed in promoting communities of diverse learners in schools and made advancements in policy, the shift has not been consistent throughout the country. Policies and practices vary from province to province, but beyond this individual schools and communities face a myriad of challenges due to a number of barriers including isolation, personnel, funding, and specialist supports. Schools lacking qualified special education personnel, experienced staff, access to specialists, or facing other constraints must be creative in meeting the needs of their students with disabilities. Small, rural and First Nations schools are some of the most affected by this. Developing capacity within these schools is essential. Models such as action research and directed consultation serve as a means to that end as they enable schools and educators to address issues of interest and concern, with regard to their unique contexts. Through supporting the professional development of educators, the needs of students with exceptionalities may be addressed and their right for inclusion promoted.

Action Research and Consultation to Promote Inclusive Practices Website:

<https://bwszucs.wixsite.com/-arc>

*Keywords:* inclusion, action research, collaborative action research, response to intervention, consultation, directed consultation, professional development

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Inclusive Education**

The policy statement from the government of British Columbia lays the foundation for what inclusive practices in our schools are to look like. It asserts, “All students with special needs should have equitable access to learning opportunities for achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 1). It continues to address definitions of students with exceptionalities, the need to consult with parents regarding their placement, and reporting requirements. Placement is intended to be for students with special needs to be educated in neighbourhood schools with their peers, but does not exclude the use of other settings, such as resource rooms, as is deemed necessary. “The practice of inclusion is not necessarily synonymous with full integration in regular classrooms, and goes beyond placement to include meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others” (p. 2). Planning involves the development of an IEP and ensuring the supports and services for students identified are provided in accordance with it. However, standards are to be high yet appropriate in their expectations for all students, with the aim of meeting some to all of the provincial outcomes. Ministry audits provide accountability, with the aim that schools address the achievement of all students.

Similarly, Villa and Thousand (2003) asserted integration moves beyond simply placing students in a classroom setting to a responsibility for educators to attend to academic, physical, and social access to the general curriculum and opportunities. They highlighted how schools and states should approach this and discussed a systems approach to promote

inclusion. The systems approach proposed by the authors attended to five crucial elements. These included inter-organizational best practices, effective leadership, a redefining of staff roles, collaboration, and supports. Their ideas spark both questions and potential implications for the field. Leadership and the development of a collective responsibility and accountability for teachers to meet the needs of all students were crucial components noted by the authors. The final elements of the systems approach included the need for collaboration and support. While collaboration requires the commitment and insights of a team to plan for the diverse needs of students, supports must be in place, which allow general education teachers to provide for those needs to be met in the classroom context.

### **Current Challenges with Inclusive Education**

The amount of diversity that exists in classrooms today is vast and it is essential that both general and special educators reach out for support to meet the needs of their students. There is a need for teachers to be life-long learners and researchers, for administrators to support teachers in the development and utilization of best practices, and for the development of educators to address issues collectively. Collaboration is essential. Vangrieken, Dochy, Raies, and Kyndt (2015) asserted, "...teachers need to be proficient collaborators in order to successfully perform their job" (p. 18).

Crawford (2009) describes the tumultuous state of inclusive education in Canada. Noted difficulties included the retrieval of statistics due to a lack of appropriate or specific data, as well as inconsistencies in terminology and policies across a country as large and diverse as Canada. Challenges faced by students with disabilities include the current education model and a broken approach to incorporating inclusion. Crawford (2009) asserted that the old deficit model, reliant on assessment, classification, and intervention remained and the incorporation of inclusion has

been a tense one. He pointed to research by Lupart (as cited in Crawford, 2009) that suggested special education as it exists is a barrier to inclusion. Significant problems with the current special education model highlighted confusion over its complexity, a lag between recognition of needs to assessment to provision of services, the lack of sufficient and steady funding – which is particularly detrimental to rural and northern communities, and a disconnect between parents and schools throughout the process. Persistent challenges noted were a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities of classroom and special education teachers, a lack of time and support to develop and provide appropriate services, as well as regular classroom teachers lacking sufficient specialized knowledge about students with disabilities.

Crawford (2009) made recommendations for the advancement of inclusive education, which primarily revolved around supporting general educators. The assertion was that this could be achieved through implementing policies for education with a focus on inclusion, providing focused and continuous funding, and mandating the development of skills for educators to support them with incorporating diversity. He suggested parents and parent associations work in ‘constructive partnerships’ with teachers and universities could develop curricula for diversity and inclusion, as well as research and advocate for inclusion. Finally, leadership at the school level should communicate roles clearly and provide supports and training.

Also on a national scale, in their research Sokal and Katz (2015), discussed a “...disharmony between the provinces with regard to the ways in which the needs of students with exceptionalities are met” (p. 44). They noted how this has potentially suppressed the development of a truly national approach to implementing inclusion and argued that though students may be included in general education classrooms, the supports required for them to be truly included and successful were lacking. Barriers to this included persisting philosophies of

segregation such as ‘pull-out’ models, inadequate teacher education, complex funding processes, and ‘hidden disabilities’ such as mental health.

In their review of the literature, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) discussed findings from several American reports that focused on concerns regarding educators’ attitudes towards inclusion. Noteworthy to this study, were findings that suggested more severe learning and behavioural needs, as well as environment related variables (i.e., lack of funding, resources, and support systems), were associated with increasingly negative views towards inclusion. The authors further asserted that increased training should be a top priority, as benefits could include improved competency and attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion. Their study is also of particular importance when considering schools lacking qualified special education staff. In these cases classroom teachers are often the ones responsible for developing and implementing programming for their students with special needs. Having a positive, knowledgeable, and dedicated teaching staff to carry out such demands is imperative.

**Barriers to Inclusive Education in Rural and First Nations Contexts.** Similar issues to the implementation of inclusion are faced by rural and First Nations schools, although difficulties here may be exacerbated and a unique set of challenges added. Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, and Farmer (2012) raised concerns around the hiring and retention of special educators, insufficient training, diversity of caseloads, and a lack of services, budget and personnel for rural schools. Additional challenges in band-operated schools, as noted by Anderson and Richards (2016), included inadequate funding, high staff turnover, small and often isolated schools, potentially limited professional development, political challenges, and indistinct responsibilities for bands and government. A number of policy reviews have raised questions about the discrepancy of funding between band-operated schools and those in the provincial system, as

noted by Phillips (2010). The author also went on to address concerns surrounding the methods of assessment and over-identification of students with special needs, a distrust of government and institutions by families and communities, the lack of a comprehensive special education system, and inadequate access to professionals and services for students with disabilities.

There are a host of issues surrounding the implementation of inclusive education and this presents educators with a significant challenge. In meeting the standards for inclusive practices and providing students with exceptionalities the supports they require, educators must overcome several obstacles, which cannot be done in isolation.

### **Personal Context and Experiences**

It was part way through my teacher education program when I began to work at a variety of schools in the city of Regina. Many schools had a high percentage of First Nations students, and it was then that I realized how little I knew of First Nations culture and history from my experiences and formal schooling. In preparing to enter the field of education as a classroom teacher, I felt it would be important to deepen this understanding. This led me to complete my practicum in a northern community where I gained invaluable experiences and made contacts that would see me take my first position as a teacher and principal of a band-operated school in a small, isolated community in northern Saskatchewan. Following this, I moved to British Columbia and had the experience and desire to find a position with a local First Nations school. A decision some 15 years ago to deepen my understanding of First Nations culture has led to a rich and rewarding experience on both personal and professional levels, which continues to this day. It has also had its share of challenges, and one of the most pressing areas of concern that I have experienced is within the field of special education.

Similar to the stories of colleagues in the provincial system, the diversity of needs of students I have taught has varied tremendously. Areas requiring support have included autism, emotional disturbances, intellectual disabilities, behavioural challenges, ADHD, and the list continues. All of this is to say, over the course of my career I have worked with a variety of students with a variety of needs that have extended well beyond my knowledge base, schooling, and experience.

The training I received in the area of special education in university did little to prepare me to adequately meet the diverse needs of these students. Until recently, each of the schools I have worked in has lacked qualified special education teachers at the school level, leaving teachers on staff to work in a capacity they were underprepared for. While assistance has been arranged through supporting agencies, it has been somewhat hindered due to substantial demands on their time, personnel, and resources as they serve a large number of communities facing similar difficulties. In the day to day lives of our students and staff, general education teachers have often been left to navigate the wide and complex field of special education. This is not an uncommon experience as many rural and band-operated schools lack designated, qualified, or experienced special education personnel on site.

Within British Columbia, band-operated schools receive support from organizations such as the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and First Nations Schools Association (FNSA). Organizations like these have been acknowledged as key pieces in addressing issues surrounding special education in First Nations schools (Phillips, 2010). I have had the pleasure to work with these organizations during the second half of my career and have benefited from the supports and opportunities they have provided. One notable professional development opportunity, with implications for this project, has been my participation in a

professional learning community. Through it, teachers from band-operated schools around B.C. have been connected with colleagues of similar grade levels with the aim of improving educational outcomes for their students. Groups work in face-to-face settings, connect with teleconferencing, and utilize technology to address issues of importance to them. They are supported at administrative, financial, and classroom levels.

While concepts such as collaborative action research and professional learning communities are not new, they hold significant potential when considering the difficulties faced by educators within the area of special education. Connecting classroom teachers with trained and knowledgeable special education personnel on a regular basis could serve to address many of the aforementioned issues, and frameworks such as directed consultation and action research are avenues worth exploring.

### **Addressing the Situation**

In developing a model to support diversity within the classroom several of the aforementioned ideas must be given consideration. Adherence to policies outlined from the Ministry of Education regarding meaningful inclusion, consultation with parents, IEP development, supports and services, reporting, and accountability are not negotiable. Beyond that however arise issues of leadership, support, teacher attitudes, professional development, and best practices; none of these can be seriously addressed without collaboration. The implementation of practices such as collaborative action research and directed consultation are of great importance. They offer not only the means to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, but an avenue for improving practice and assistance for teachers to meet the needs of all students. This does however, require both time and commitment.

Lang and Fox (2004) acknowledged the difficulties faced by schools and educators in meeting the diverse needs of their students and noted they are, "...challenged by a changing definition of their professional role as students are served in more inclusive schools and teachers are required to engage in consultation, collaborative, and co-teaching relationships with other educators" (p. 164). These collaborative efforts may take many forms. For the purpose of this applied project, an introduction to collaboration through professional learning communities and collaborative action research, as well as consultation will be addressed as a means of supporting and promoting inclusive practices.

### **Collaborative Action Research**

Sagor (1992) broke the definition of collaborative action research (1992) down into its components. A group of committed educators (collaborative) conducts a disciplined inquiry (research) into a topic or concern of interest with the aim of improving it (action). It contrasts from traditional research methods in that it is conducted by practitioners, with the aim of improving instruction for the benefit of their students. A defining feature of CAR is that it is poised to address issues at the school level. Practitioners are able to tackle the questions and challenges unique to their contexts. "When we hold these twin beliefs – that schools are about student learning and that learning occurs primarily through the efforts and talents of teachers – then it becomes clear that school reform should focus on nurturing and developing the teaching profession" (Sagor, 1992, p. 1). The potential for applying this type of methodology to address specific needs regarding special education within the unique context of individual schools should be acknowledged.

Advantages of collaborative action research could be of particular benefit to schools lacking designated special education personnel. These include practicality, flexibility, the

potential to improve self-efficacy, and the ability to address problems specific to one's context. Again, this is of importance when issues such as a lack of funding, geographic isolation, inadequate resources, lack of access to professionals, etc. are considered. The cycle of collaborative action research presented by Sagor, (1992) outlines the process. Following the steps of problem formulation, data collection, data analysis, reporting, and action, a school based team could collectively address concerns of interest.

A significant aspect of collaborative action research is 'buy-in'. As teachers will be asked to devote their time, the practical element of addressing their personal questions and concerns is important. As such, it is difficult to determine the topic or area for a group that may be explored. The group must define what issues and concerns are of significance to them as the process unfolds, which will ideally help to garner support and promote a motivating experience that is beneficial to those who participate.

Collaborative action research is educative in nature. Teachers and their practice are ideally transformed, in a process of growth and change. While the knowledge created stems from anti-realist and interpretive philosophies, it is important to consider that any findings will be highly contextualized, thus lacking generalizability. However, its flaws and effectiveness may be observed and improved upon so it may be utilized by other schools facing similar situations.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

"Most educators acknowledge that our deepest insights and understandings come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 1). Professional learning communities (PLCs) offer teachers a means to improve educational practices with a focus on student results. Fundamentally, through them, educators are team members committed to students and their achievement, but they go beyond this. There are

several essential components of a PLC. There is a professional and collaborative element. As members of a team, teachers share and evaluate their practices, raise questions and discuss strategies, and examine their effectiveness, as they are committed to improving. A focus on student learning is also present. The aforementioned teacher learning and commitment to improvement has the end goal of raising student achievement. One more important element of PLC's is that they are action oriented. The work of meeting, questioning, collecting data, sharing strategies, and targeting student growth, leads to action. It is the catalyst for change and growth (DuFour et al., 2006).

### **Directed Consultation**

Collaboration in the form of professional learning communities and collaborative action research are full of potential. They utilize the strengths of school and innate capacity and desire of individual educators to harness them within the framework of a team. They promote problem solving of real life issues, with a lens on the specific and unique contexts of students, educators, and schools. Yet the field of special education is a broad one. Educators and professionals could dedicate entire careers to specializing in just a small segment of it. How then could general educators or newly inducted special educators hope to address issues that extend well beyond their scope of training and experience?

This is compounded with issues surrounding attrition, retention, complex learners, diverse needs and insufficient training. Professional development has commonly been used to address these issues, but it has also been suggested traditional models may be insufficient in addressing these issues effectively (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle & Farmer, 2012; Israel, Carnahan, Snyder, & Williamson, 2012). Here the concept of directed consultation holds promise.

Directed consultation (DC) is a model that provides a means to tackle this issue. DC was developed as, “a professional development framework to train teachers in contextual interventions” (Motoca et al., 2014, p. 119). DC is rooted in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (1977), which posited that the functioning of an individual must be considered in the light of contexts and interactions that the individual exists within. Many professional development opportunities are ‘one size fits all’ events targeted at large groups; DC diverges in that it is ongoing and specifically attends to context, as well as small group and one to one situations. While student progress is the ultimate goal, DC is focused on improving the practice of educators with attention to their concerns, needs, and resources. It promotes the use of evidence-based practices and is intended to be a research-practitioner partnership. Led by an intervention specialist or team, the directed consultation model is comprised of four components to address staff concerns or needs. These are data collection, tailored general training, ongoing training, and implementation consultation. The steps begin with an assessment of school needs and progress to provide increasingly specific supports. In the opinion of this researcher, it is poised to support rural and First Nations schools with their unique sets of challenges.

### **Guiding Question**

The list of concerns on how best to implement inclusion and improve practice has been echoed across a variety of educators and settings, which leads to the questions of focus for this project. What elements of directed consultation and collaborative action research can be coordinated to support teachers of learners with exceptionalities? Also with respect to rural and First Nations schools, how might this framework best be shared with educators to improve their practice?

## **Key Terms/Working Definitions**

There is an abundance of research and literature available on the various iterations of action research, collaboration, collaborative action research, professional learning communities, collegial inquiry, and collaborative inquiry - so much in fact that the terminology, frameworks, cycles, etc. associated with each of these could be difficult to ascertain precisely. In their review of the literature, Vangieken et al., (2015) stated “there appeared to be a lot of conceptual confusion concerning teacher collaboration” (p. 23). However, many commonalities could also be observed. In presenting the following, brief, working definitions taken from the literature reviewed, an attempt is being made to demonstrate the common thread that is woven throughout them. It is of importance to this project in that some of the terms are at times used synonymously and in support of each other. Furthermore, aspects of each were drawn from in creating the foundation for the proposed model presented in the project. The more pertinent concepts of collaborative action research and directed consultation will be more fully explored in Chapter 2.

### **Action Research**

“The term ‘action research’ comprises two words, each with a different focus. • Action refers to what you do. • Research refers to how you find out about what you do. Doing action research therefore involves taking action ‘in here’, in your mental world, to improve the quality of your thinking, and ‘out there’, in the social world, to improve the quality of your interactions with others, who you hope are doing the same as you. It is always done in interaction with other people, so the knowledge you create is knowledge of practices, that is, how you work with others to ensure that what you say and do, and how you interact, will be for the benefit of all” (McNiff, 2016, p. 14).

### **Collaboration**

“A systematic process in which people work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve individual and collective results” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 214).

### **Collaborative Action Research**

“...teams of practitioners who have common interests and work together to investigate issues related to those interests” (Sagor, 1996, p. 10).

### **Collegial Inquiry**

“Collaborative action research, also known as collegial inquiry, can be defined as a learner-centered approach to staff development. It grows from the tradition of action research, which emphasizes the idea that individual and teams of educators can and should study their practice as a means to improve it” (Mills as cited in Cunningham, 2011, p. 3).

### **Consultation**

Consultation is an indirect service delivery model wherein a specialist or consultant provides guidance, knowledge, or service to a consultee for the purpose of intervention support with a service recipient (Luiselli, 2018).

### **Directed Consultation**

“Directed Consultation is a research-practitioner partnership model designed to use local data and stakeholders’ insights to adapt EBPs [evidence based practices] to the unique features and needs of specific schools, teachers, and students’ (Farmer et al., 2018, p. 164).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

“Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (Dufour et al., 2006, p. 217).

### **Response to Intervention**

“The practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to students’ needs, monitoring progress frequently to make changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions” (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2009, p. 210).

### **Project Overview**

The primary intent of this project is to develop a framework that could be utilized to offer educators in rural, isolated, and First Nations schools a means to address issues or topics of concern or interest, while at the same time developing their capacity. With consideration paid to unique issues, such as a lack of experienced or on-site special educators and other factors such as geographic isolation, this model seeks to incorporate elements of collaboration within a response to intervention framework. Supporting research for its components is drawn from the fields of action research and consultation. Though the methodology of collaborative action research, or similar initiatives such as PLC’s, and the framework of directed consultation are separate models, it was a goal of this project to coordinate and locate them within the pyramid of interventions. Thus it is hoped that this model could be implemented to help schools and supporting organizations to meet the diverse and complex needs of students with disabilities through empowering their educators.

Web-based professional development opportunities have the potential to tackle many of the barriers teachers in remote, isolated, or rural settings face. Issues such as personal and professional isolation, time and expense, limited knowledge or experience meeting a diversity of learning needs, as well as effective, timely, and targeted professional development opportunities may potentially be addressed. Collaboration is a crucial component of professional development, and the internet provides a means for various organizations, administrators, educators, and a host

of supporting personnel to both share and access information. With this in mind, a secondary objective of the project became the development of a website to share information regarding collaborative action research and directed consultation, as well as to provide an overview of how they might be coordinated within the tiered model of an RTI framework.

Because a multitude of literature exists regarding the establishment and operation of PLC's, action research, collaborative inquiry, RTI, and consultative processes exists, it is not the aim of this project to reinvent the wheel. As there are also several variations within these models, individual schools and groups will need to select a process that suits their context and needs. The website itself will serve a variety of purposes. First, it serves as a primer for organizations and educators to gain a brief insight into the history, purpose, and issues surrounding inclusive education. Second, the website will introduce visitors to the processes of collaborative action research and directed consultation and their potential to meet the needs of educators and students with special needs. Third, the website will present a proposed model of RTI, which incorporates elements of CAR and DC, and could theoretically be implemented by schools as a means to support inclusive practices and professional development. Fourth, the website includes links and information regarding practical resources to support the implementation of the models and frameworks previously discussed. Details and research regarding the rationale behind the development of the website, as well as future considerations, are more thoroughly presented in Chapter 3.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Considering Context**

In reviewing literature regarding factors identified such as the diversity of students, difficulties with implementing inclusion, the unique issues that rural and First Nations schools face, the individuality of educators and their schools, and the variety of avenues to pursue in addressing needs, two major themes emerged. They are the need to consider the unique contexts of both students and educators and the need for professionals to collaborate to address the challenges faced. The literature review begins with an examination of literature regarding collaboration. It then proceeds to provide an overview of response to intervention, collaborative action research, and directed consultation and their supporting or foundational premises. Studies on effectiveness are examined and implications are discussed.

Collaborative action research and directed consultation were selected because they underscore just how crucial the consideration, exploration, and search for unique solutions are in addressing the issues facing students and educators in unique contexts. Response to intervention provides a potential framework for organizations to explore as they may potentially endeavor to coordinate these two processes in support of their educators in meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities.

#### **Collaboration in Education**

Reeve and Hallahan (1994) noted the educational reforms in the United States, such as those of the 1970's and onward, including what is now referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), served as a major impetus for collaboration in the related areas of consultation, inclusion, general education, and special education. These were not

without their influences on Canadian policies. Noting collaboration was not something that could be implemented without planning, time, and resources, the authors attempted to present some of the benefits and challenges regarding collaboration. Their presentation about some of the forms of collaboration presents an entry point into this discussion. These could be divided into two categories, consultation and cooperative teaching. More recent literature (Vangrieken et al., 2015; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2007) examines professional learning communities.

Consultation, as presented by Reeve and Hallahan (1994), has a history in education dating back to the 1960's. Early models reflected a form along the lines of an 'expert model of consultation'. This was a hierarchal model wherein a supporting professional such as a school psychologist would analyze the situation and prescribe intervention for the teacher to carry out. A collaborative consultation model, in contrast, is one where the consultant and consultee work to identify and assess problem areas, then select, implement, and evaluate strategies. A distinguishing characteristic of this type of consultation method is the concept that it is a shared responsibility through all stages. School based teams, child study teams, and intervention assistance teams were highlighted examples of groups working together within this problem solving model.

In terms of cooperative teaching, some approaches such as supportive co-teaching, parallel co-teaching, complementary co-teaching, and team teaching were reported by Neven, Thousand, and Villa (2009). Similar methods were reported by Reeve and Hallahan (1994), and they largely characterized these as having a defining characteristic of collaboration between general and special educators, with a joint responsibility for instruction. It was asserted the teaching arrangement was likely to evolve out of the needs and best fit for general and special educators.

Dependent on the depth and method utilized, several benefits from teacher collaboration have been reported. These have been noted to impact three levels: the student, teacher, and school. Positive benefits for students included increased services for students with special needs, mainstreaming (inclusion), additional support for students not eligible for special education services, and improved student progress. At the teacher level benefits appeared in areas of job performance, motivation, and decreasing isolation. Improved innovation and cultural shifts at the school level could also be observed at the school level (Reeve & Hallanah, 1994; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Reeve and Hallahan (1994) also cautioned that collaboration requires more than educators with good intentions. The authors noted that barriers to collaboration include a lack of planning time, potential difficulties in developing cooperative relationships, concerns about a change from the service delivery model, and a potentially increased work load. Vangrieken et al. (2015) also highlighted the possibility of a perceived threat towards teachers' autonomy and independence, as well as the potential for a contrived and superficial rather than deep-level of collaboration if a top down approach is implemented.

However, in terms of support for collaborative efforts, many factors were identified in the research. Important to the success of collaboration are characteristics of the participants involved, as well as factors facilitating the process itself. Some of the competencies West and Cannon (as cited in Reeves & Hallahan, 1994) identified included effective communication, active listening, continuous feedback, giving credit, managing conflicts, and a trust and willingness to admit uncertainty and move forward. Vangrieken et al. (2015) suggested factors facilitating the collaborative process that included the provision of time for collaboration, the development of clear roles, and interventions to enhance the working group composition.

Though it may be challenging, the benefits for those involved provide many reasons to work collaboratively.

### **A Pyramid Response to Intervention: Connecting Professional Learning Communities and Response to Intervention**

**Response to Intervention.** Response to Intervention (RTI) can be described as a problem solving model in education to support students with learning and behaviour needs. It is a multi-tiered approach that promotes quality core instruction in the classroom and the implementation of systematic interventions to struggling students. RTI encourages universal screening to identify students requiring extra time and support. Research based interventions and ongoing progress monitoring are important components. They serve to provide relevant interventions and monitor their effectiveness for the students in need. If students are not responsive to the interventions, the intervention may be altered or intensified. Students with ongoing needs are placed in higher tiers for additional support, and may potentially be placed on an individual education plan. Ideally, students are able to move within the tiers based on needs being met, or continued or increased supports being required (Buffam, Mattos & Weber, 2009).

Buffam et al. (2009) described RTI as stemming from a cascade model developed by Stanley Deno, in 1970, which intended for students with special needs to be served through a continuum of contexts. The authors asserted this preceded the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 in the United States, which made it illegal to exclude students with disabilities from being educated in public schools and was a part of the inclusion movement. It was noted that early efforts were 'hamstrung' by a lack of general education teacher preparedness to work with students with disabilities. Other difficulties included a focus on moral and philosophical issues, with shortcomings in the application of evidence based practices and

attention to the rules and policies. RTI attempts to address these through a unified system of observing and diagnosing student difficulties, coordinating systems of support, and providing timely interventions, as provided by both general and special education teachers. Referrals for formal special education evaluations are then made subsequently, if needed. The provision of early and targeted intervention was lauded as an improvement from the traditional ‘wait to fail’ model, or severe discrepancy approach to identifying students with learning disabilities.

In reviewing three studies of RTI in literacy, Marston (2005) identified and summarized commonalities in the model regarding the three tiers as follows:

Tier 1 was described as general classroom instruction. It was noted that RTI promotes the use of research-based instruction with professional development to promote effective teaching. Universal screening is often done at the start of the year, and benchmark assessments throughout the year are also conducted.

Tier 2, often delivered by special and general educators, focused on interventions for struggling students and is often delivered to small groups. It includes supplemental instruction to the core program, for a determined amount of time, often several weeks. More frequent data collection is an important component at this level to monitor student progress and guide decisions regarding intervention effectiveness and movement of the student through the tiers. An important factor in the delivery of Tier 2 interventions included fidelity to implementation of the intervention with appropriate levels of intensity and duration. Collaboration between special and general educators was highlighted, along with professional development to promote the effective delivery of interventions.

Tier 3 instruction was described as being delivered by both general and special educators, but noted an increase in the role of specialists with a greater degree of experience delivering

interventions to students with higher needs. It is more intensive and individualized, and should be delivered to individual or small groups settings. Again, frequent data collection is important at this tier to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments; and instruction here may extend from several weeks to years. It was noted that interventions should be matched to the individual needs of the student. Once again, professional development and collaboration were highlighted as important elements of this tier.

Many researchers however, have raised concerns with the RTI model. Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009) addressed several issues in their discussion of RTI as a potential ‘watch them fail’ model. While the authors agreed with the model as a means of prevention, implementation problems addressed included a vague model of practice, questions surrounding bright but struggling readers, the unique nature and context of identified students, shortcomings of RTI as a determination process for eligibility, and a lack of student-data used for informing decisions regarding interventions. These concerns are relayed in their statement, “RTI as a diagnostic model, lacks not only in diagnostic coverage and validity, it also provides few clues guiding what to do as far as instruction is concerned after a child fails to respond” (Reynolds and Shaywitz, 2009, p. 139). They further posited the information gleaned from formal evaluations serves to provide insight into a child’s unique learning profile and could be used to support effective instructional and intervention practices. Dougherty Stahl (2016) also presented information from a study review that highlighted potential pitfalls of RTI. These included schools implementing RTI independently and drifting from essential components of the framework, schools conducting RTI without proper resources, and ‘disheartening’ student performance.

While Dougherty Stahl (2016) presented potential barriers, the author also cautioned not to disregard the framework, but rather advocated to refine the process. Recommendations included using all available human and financial resources. The list included school psychologists, general and special educators, as well as specialists. As RTI also requires additional data collection and analyzation, as well as tiers of specialized intervention, appropriately allocating adequate time and finances to its implementation as a service model is crucial. In a similar vein, it was noted that schools administering RTI need to distinguish between interventions and differentiation. While all students may benefit from small group instruction, additional resources must be targeted at students demonstrating the greatest need. Finally, it was suggested that teachers as members of data teams should be immersed in the data. Identifying the correct tier, need, and intervention for individuals should be one of the strengths of RTI. Other significant recommendations regarding the improvement of an RTI framework were presented by Reynolds and Shaywitz (2009). Notably, they emphasized the use of RTI as an early identification or screening tool, but cautioned against its use in diagnosing disabilities or determining placement. This, they argued, should be done via comprehensive assessments. Validated interventions should then be implemented, and the authors further suggested that independent professionals monitor and assess implementation of them for fidelity.

**Professional Learning Communities.** Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) described a shift over the past two decades in the professional development of teachers, which has largely been driven by increased accountability and the need for enhanced knowledge and skill development. Professional learning communities, a premise adapted from the business world, was one of the models developed to address these issues. The authors posited premises of PLC's include that it is the teachers who hold the knowledge that is best understood and reflected on with other

teachers, and that teachers actively engaged in collaborative practices will grow professionally and improve outcomes for students. The essential characteristics of a PLC, presented by the authors, are shared values and norms, a focus on student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatizing practices, and utilizing collaboration.

**Findings in the Literature.** In their literature review of PLC's, Vescio et al. (2008), attempted to study the impacts of professional learning communities on teachers and students. The intent was to learn how teaching practices change through participation in a PLC, and if literature supported the assumption that student learning increases as a result.

Studies utilized in the review were located from US research and publication links, as well as searches on ERIC and EBSCO databases. The literature selected focused on 10 empirical studies on the work of teachers involved in professional learning communities, as well as one British multi-site research report.

Findings from all 11 studies suggested a change in school culture had occurred, including areas of collaboration, focus on student learning, teacher authority, and continuous teacher learning. Teachers across studies reported increased collaboration, while one study highlighted positive results on teacher practice and morale. In the studies, teachers who participated in PLC's with a focus on improving practice reported changes in instruction, while those who did not focus on teaching practice did not report changes to instructional practice. Autonomy was presented as being vital for the successful implementation of a PLC, as teachers were the decision makers in their own learning. This, it was suggested in the literature, should promote student learning. Finally, continuous learning was observed in several of the studies, as teachers sought out information and outside ideas to improve practice. It was suggested that only modest evidence was found in support of improving teacher practice.

With regards to improving student outcomes however, each of the studies reviewed that attempted to link PLC's to student achievement reported student learning had improved. Specifically, several of the studies noted that the level of student achievement varied with the level of involvement of the staff in professional learning communities. Schools that had greater staff involvement, maintained sustained and structured instructional discussions, and had a focus on student learning, were reported to have seen the largest improvements.

As the authors acknowledged, the literature selected was 'an act of interpretation'. Though only vetted and empirical research was selected, they noted a variety of literature on this topic exists, and in proceeding in this manner the scope was limited.

The authors unabashedly concluded that PLC's have the potential to improve student learning if the right elements are in place. In holding true to that, it is recommended that PLC's maintain a focus on student learning, intentionally and systematically investigate issues of importance, and explore issues from their own context while also drawing on new and professional wisdom from the outside.

Hardman (2012) presented challenges and benefits to using professional learning communities as a professional development approach in special education, and how web-based PLC's may be utilized to address issues. The networking element of PLC's, the author contended, "...provides an authentic process for posing problems, deliberating solutions, and constructing new knowledge" (p. 18). This is done through the reflection of practice and use of evidence. It was also asserted that PLC's incorporating general educators, administrators, special educators, and teacher educators were the most effective. Problems with a lack of 'experienced special educators' or personnel distributed across school sites were noted barriers. But, because of a PLC's unique potential to provide professional development matched to students and its

flexibility to meet individual needs, it is an approach well suited for the practice of special education. The use of Web 2.0, with its capacity for active two-way participation was examined for its potential to support collaborative practices in special education. However, the results of Hardman (2012) suggested its potential is not fully being realized. Most users were noted to be observers only and active learning did not seem to be a characteristic of WEB based PLC's. In developing effective PLC's, the author suggested leadership for their organization and implementation is a critical component. It was noted this might come from within or outside of the school.

**Pyramid Response to Intervention.** The framework for response to intervention, as presented by Buffum et al. (2009), seemed to address many of the concerns raised and already incorporate some of the recommendations put forth, in theory. The authors presented a vision for the future, wherein schools operating as professional learning communities, while utilizing a response to intervention through tiered supports, could unite regular and special education. In pyramid response to intervention (PRtI) there is a premium placed on collaboration as a central tenant is, "...that all staff members demonstrate a collective responsibility to help all students learn" (Buffum et al., 2009, p. 5). The authors also stated, that implicit to its implementation are universal screening, progress monitoring, and required research-based interventions.

PRtI, the authors asserted, is the unification of the complementary processes of RTI and PLC's. PLC's establish the school culture and climate for the effective implementation of RTI. The three big ideas of a PLC are a focus on student learning, a collaborative culture, and a focus on results. The school's mission is to ensure that all students learn. "Because no teacher can possibly possess all the knowledge, skills, time, and resources needed to ensure high levels of learning for all students, educators at a PLC school work in collaborative teams" (Buffum et al.,

2009, p. 51). It was noted that this does not happen by chance; rather it is a concerted effort with the support of time and resources provided for teachers to engage in ‘disciplined inquiry’.

Utilizing common formative assessments, student learning is assessed. Reflection of needs, instruction, interventions, and effectiveness may then be contemplated.

Several connections between the characteristics of action research and PLC’s were observed. These included collaboration, a focus on results, action experimentation, and collective inquiry. As educators develop questions or tackle issues of concern, they turn to data and make observations. Utilizing this data and research about best practices, a plan is formed regarding instructional changes or interventions and action is implemented. Progress monitoring and data tracking ensue. Finally, results are analyzed and future directions are discussed.

### **Action Research and Collaborative Action Research**

**Overview.** A brief history and major theories associated with action research are presented to provide some context as to its theory, theorists, and its development. It should again be noted that varying iterations of both action research as well as collaborative action research exist. It is not within the scope of this paper to differentiate between the two, nor variations of each. Rather, commonalities will be presented and elements of each will be brought forward in support of developing a proposed model to support rural and First Nations schools. Literature including both CAR and inclusion was explored to provide a description of the field. In reviewing this, a deliberate effort was made to search for studies that addressed both topics simultaneously. Therefore much of the discussion revolves around identifying aspects of its value, methodology, issues, and limitations.

**A Brief Historical Perspective and Major Theorists.** McNiff and Whitehead (2002) provided a brief overview of the beginnings of action research and its development into

current practice. They discussed the first observable workings coming from John Collier and Kurt Lewin in the 1930s and 1940s. Both recognized the importance of democratic principles and participation in the decision making process. Lewin further developed a theory of action research, and though it was not originally within the context of education, it included the spiral of steps that are now “understood as an action–reflection cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 41). In the 1950’s in the United States, Lewin’s work was adopted and applied within the field of education by Stephen Corey; however the initial push for this approach eventually dissipated as the prevailing thought at the time favored the separation of research and practice.

Bryant (1995) noted a resurgence of action research that occurred in England and Australia in the 1970’s and 1980’s as a part of educational reform. McNiff and Whitehead (2002) further highlighted the work of Lawrence Stenhouse in Britain in the 1970’s, which saw the teacher as a researcher. Stenhouse’s work was further extended by a host of researchers, notably Stephen Kemmis and John Elliot. In the following years, as Bryant (1995) noted, action research reemerged in the United States in the 1980’s due to inadequate theories and uncertainty in the area of education and educational research. McNiff and Whitehead (2002) bring us to more recent times, noting how action research may be conducted utilizing interpretive, critical theoretical, or living theory approaches.

**Linking Theory with Practice.** Action research works at the individual level, but exists in the domain of wider circles, including environments and social interactions. It is a relational practice and as, “...a practical way of generating one’s own theory of living, is a potentially powerful methodology for theories of relationship” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, p.36). The authors continued to assert that action research is participatory, as it intends to

improve something deemed personally important for the benefit of others. As knowledge claims are made, evidence must be provided to support the changes in light of our influence. “The boundaries are dissolved; knowledge, interests and practice are integrated within a life” (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002, p. 36). The authors asserted that traditional propositional models of research will not suffice, as they are not grounded in reality and do not lead to personal or social change. Action research is distinct in this manner, in that it action is inherent to the process of research.

**Collaborative Action Research and Inclusive Education.** Literature reviewed was selected based on its potential for evaluating collaborative action research as it relates to inclusive education. Several articles were valuable in exploring CAR as a vehicle to improve inclusive practices and provided insights into its theory, potential, and limitations.

Two reports examined and recounted the findings of large scale action research projects as they related to inclusion. Though they are admittedly dated, the reports drew on large pools of participants, from a number of schools in England and the United States, and were situated closely to the aim of this project in seeking to elucidate how issues within special education might be approached through collaborative action research and networks (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2004; Salisbury, Wilson, Swartz, Palombaro, & Wassel, 1997). The other two sources were research studies which focused on the development of collaborative networks between post-secondary institutions and schools, with the aim being to advance a culture of inclusion and to meet the needs of marginalized students. This research examined the impact of the process on students and teachers who were directly involved in the studies (Argyropoulos & Nikolarazi, 2009; Causton, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier & Dempf-Aldrich, 2011). When viewed collectively, the literature offers insights into the experiences, benefits,

and challenges of collaborative action research as it pertains to inclusion. The collection of articles also serves to examine CAR from both insider and outsider perspectives.

While the larger Ainscow et al. (2004) and Salisbury et al. (1997) reports more vaguely identified participants including members of the education staff and researchers serving students ‘at risk’ or those with moderate to severe disabilities, Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) and Causton et al. (2011) more precisely noted these along with the specialists, students, and project leads and administrators who were involved. In respect to the larger reports there may be a more viable claim for generalizability, whereas the smaller research studies tended to provide much more qualitatively rich information.

Action research, collaborative action research, and collaborative inquiry were the research methods described and supported within the studies. It is important to note that there are differences in the methodology of action research depending on the source, as there are with collaborative action research; overarching similarities exist however. At times the terminology was used somewhat interchangeably. This can be problematic for discussions, but is a worthwhile consideration for the reader as models, applications, and outcomes could vary.

McTaggart (as cited in Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi, 2009) identified four phases in action research, which include planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Moreover, these phases formed a spiral of cycles in an ongoing fulfilment of the goal of AR - that being change. Salisbury et al. (1997) explained the rationale for action research in their study as five-fold: it respects teacher knowledge, promotes self-reflection, provides a mechanism for improvement, reduces isolation, and promotes an intellectual environment. The methodology was further justified through recognizing practitioners as being the most knowledgeable about their specific contexts and challenges. Ainscow et al. (2004) further claimed this method of

research helps to address the practitioner researcher gap, as practitioners bring forward inquiries and the research is used to plan, guide, and monitor the CAR project. While the Causton et al. (2011) research study did not utilize or describe action research per se, they utilized mixed methodologies and presented the findings of a school reform project that closely resembled it. Each of these mentioned some form of initial training and discussions to familiarize the participants with collaborative action research (or similar methodology), working with data, and providing support. These common threads help to justify the use of collaborative action research, determine a suitable working framework for this project, and offer insights into areas to be addressed.

The most thorough discussion of data collection was provided in the Salisbury et al. (1997) report, which discussed the use of ethnographic field notes (on the school ecology, services, supports, activities, etc.), semi-structured interviews with AR groups at the beginning and end of the school year, transcripts of AR spring institutes, rating scales on child performance and classroom context, and specific examples provided from groups through narrative summaries and first person accounts. While Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) research had a strictly qualitative methodology, obtaining data from discussions and observations, it focused more closely on the experiences of the two students, and the impact of CAR on them, their teachers, and student teachers. The mixed methodologies research conducted by Causton et al. (2011) provided a strong blend between these two styles. While it examined and narrated the accounts of one school's reform, it provided qualitative and quantitative data to support its claims.

The ability to examine reports of studies, as well as primary research was extremely valuable. A note of interest, as well as point of caution, that arises in the methodology of

collaborative action research is the entanglement of researcher and participant. The reports provided by Salisbury et al. (1997) and Ainscow (2004) seemed more objective in their analysis of action research. Their purpose in analyzing the work conducted by large collaborative action research projects saw them removed from the actual research, and plausibly, more capable of objectively analyzing and presenting findings from the primary research. To the end that they were reporting on emerging findings from the field, their work seemed to meet its aims. On the other hand there is the potential for smaller action research studies, such as Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) and Causton et al. (2011), to blur the line of researcher and practitioner as the project and research become intertwined. Ambitions to identify barriers and successful practices seemed acceptable, but validity, reliability, and generalizability could justifiably be questioned. It is a noteworthy point for this project that distinguishing the study of collaborative action research from the sub-study of a selected topic may be a fine line to walk at times.

Four key findings proposed by Ainscow et al. (2004) included a necessity to support practices that reduce exclusion and increase inclusion, to develop the ability of teachers to act as researchers, to explore new ways for researchers and practitioners to collaborate, and to improve our understanding of effective practices regarding inclusion. While their report examined action research, or collaborative inquiry, the description of participants, methodology, and data collection was somewhat vague and impractical. However, contributions of a different nature emerged from the article. Noteworthy were discussions of difficulties presented regarding CAR, which included an outsider versus insider mentality, researchers supporting educators while avoiding taking over the process, constraints of time, and potential struggles with power and influence. Positive takeaways included teachers and

schools utilizing data, a variety of experiences and perspectives met through CAR, and the improvement and development of networks within the system.

By contrast Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009), Causton et al. (2011), and Salisbury et al. (1997) brought results down to the school and individual level. Specific examples drawn from the projects were identified and described. Key features, challenges, highlights, and insights from participants were used to relate information and support claims, and the articles corroborated some key findings. Similar conclusions reached were: AR is a viable strategy for improving the self-reflection and the practice of educators; it is a means of promoting inclusion; and the educators 'own' the process. Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) also believed that the projects had a positive impact on students' academics and behaviour. Furthermore, important to the success of AR and CAR, is administrative support and a willingness to participate in an ongoing search for answers through inquiry (Salisbury, 1997).

Each of the studies (Argypolous and Nikolarazi, 2009; Ainscow, 2004; Causton et al., 2011; & Salisbury et al., 1997) involved university researchers in their projects, which served to offset some of the concerns about AR and CAR being conducted by general educators. Generalizability, a common concern about this style of research, remains however.

The studies selected had several commonalities and differences. Much of the information presented corroborated the findings of the other reports, yet offered some important claims and unique perspectives regarding the use of CAR as a tool to promote inclusion where the others left off. The two larger studies of federal based projects drew from large pools of participants, but differed in the approach of their reporting. While Ainscow et al. (2004) more broadly attempted to attach the underpinnings of broader theories to the issues examined, details in the methodology, description of participants, and specific examples were fewer. By contrast, the

description of data collection, descriptions of methodology, and examples provided in Salisubry et al. (1997) and Causton et al. (2011) were more thorough. And while the research by Argyropoulos and Nikolarazi (2009) was much smaller by comparison, the qualitative analysis of the report offered yet another more intimate perspective of those involved in the study. When viewed collectively, the reports offer a well-rounded view of the potential for CAR to improve inclusive education practices and possible challenges, which is of particular value to conducting this type of research.

The review of the literature does a great deal in providing insights into supporting inclusive practices with collaborative action research. Studies such as the one conducted by Causton et al. (2011), highlighted potential barriers to inclusion, such as negative teacher attitudes, a lack of time, and a lack of understanding of inclusive practices. As CAR has the potential to address self-efficacy and promote collaboration to promote the effectiveness of practitioners, it may go a long way in meeting the needs of a school lacking special education supports. Garnering the approval and support of administrators is another consideration to make implementation feasible.

Collaborative action research (CAR) has also been described as a process being composed of constantly overlapping and evolving cycles. The very nature of this method impacts the participants, their practice, and the process itself. While a question, or set of questions, may serve as an initial starting point it is important to keep in mind it is a flexible and changing process. Furthermore, the nature of CAR is such that it is run by practitioners as a means of addressing issues and concerns that are unique to their context (Bryant, 1995). In aligning with the methodology of collaborative action research, the topic of interest or concern for the individuals participating in the study will be determined by the group as the process unfolds.

### **Directed Consultation**

Directed consultation is grounded in ecological theory, as posited by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) framework, which considers how the 'nested' hierarchical systems interact and influence one another (Motoca et al., 2014). With DC, the needs of both students and educators are being addressed and a host of influences must be contemplated. As directed consultation is a targeted professional development and support framework, characteristics such as classroom instruction and management, family and community values, school culture, policies, and available resources, as well as individual beliefs are all considerations. Furthermore, the myriad of interactions between these is important. In targeting the needs of students, addressing the needs of and influences on their educators is a crucial component.

**Ecological Systems Approach.** Bronfenbrenner's (1977) model is comprised of four systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, which are bound within the later added chronosystem.

The microsystem consists of the relationships between a person and their immediate environment. On a regular basis an individual interacts with those found in his home, school and neighbourhood. From research for his case study, Walter (2007) noted that the variety of interactions influencing an individual's development must be considered. These may be beneficial or detrimental, but viewing them collectively is important. Positive and protective factors within these relationships exist, as well as detrimental risk factors.

The mesosystem, as Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes it, is the set of 'interrelationships' between the settings that make up the microsystem. The importance of not examining the developing person in light of one setting, but across settings is essential. Some of the

‘interrelationships’ of note in an educational setting might include the interactions between home, school, community, and peers.

The exosystem is not a context exactly, but consists of factors that directly influence and are influenced by the setting in which a person exists (Motoca et al., 2014). Factors such as workplace related issues and community resources may impact an individual indirectly.

The influence of the macrosystem is of notable importance. In part, Bronfenbrenner (1977) describes the macrosystem as the ideologies of a culture or subculture. It is the overarching set of patterns and structures that produce meaning and incentive, and influence the agencies that operate within them. The values, beliefs, and policies surrounding education are subject to larger currents. The later added chronosystem, considers the element of time on development (Empson, 2015).

Directed consultation is a highly contextualized approach, and so consideration of the systems and their components posited by Bronfenbrenner (1977) are extremely important. Students, staff, schools, and communities all require individualized consideration as to the nature of their issues and potential solutions. These may include geographic barriers, time, resources, and personnel available, as well as unique factors such as community cultures and values.

**Consultee Centered-Consultation.** Lambert, Hylander, and Sandoval (2004) offer a history and overview of consultee-centered consultation. The authors reported its origins may be traced back to research from the 1950’s and early 1960’s when mental health professionals were developing strategies to support individuals with mental health, learning, and behavioural problems. Caplan, a prominent researcher and developer of the mental health consultation model was also involved in advancing American legislative initiatives that outlined interventions ranging from hospitalization to consultation. His model continued to evolve and eventually

incorporate child development, motivation, learning, and behaviour concerns with consideration given to the context of schools, family, and community. This research was then applied to educational settings and methods of identifying children in need of support and facilitating the role of school psychologists to include consultation with teachers.

Over the years Lambert, Hylander, and Sandoval (2004) continued to research, develop, and define the Consultee-Centered Consultation (CCC) method. It is described as: "...a non-hierarchical, nonprescriptive helping role relationship between a resource (consultant) and a person or group (consultee) who seeks professional help with a work problem involving a third party (client)" (p. 11 ).

This work problem is a topic of concern for the consultee who has a direct responsibility for the learning, productivity, or development of the client. The primary task of both the consultant and the consultee is to choose and reframe knowledge about well-being, development, intrapersonal, interpersonal and organizational effectiveness appropriate to the consultee's work setting.

The goal of the consultation process is the joint development of a new way of conceptualizing the work problem so that the repertoire of the consultee is expanded and the professional relationship between the consultee and the client is restored or improved (Lambert, Hylander & Sandoval, 2004, p. 12-13).

Both the consultant and consultee have expert knowledge of their field and context respectively, and CCC as a result is intended to be egalitarian in nature. Caplan stated that it is a 'joint problem-solving process' wherein current problems are addressed and consultees are motivated to actively engage in the learning and problem solving process (as cited in Lambert et al., 2004). Duncan continued, "These solutions are based on the consultee's improved

understanding of their particular classroom ecology and available resources” (as cited in Lambert et al., 2004, p. 84).

**Components of Directed Consultation.** DC is a model that considers the context teachers operate in as a means of addressing their concerns and providing appropriate professional development opportunities and supports - it has been noted that a complex issue exists regarding the shortage of special education teachers, as well as qualified mentors - particularly in rural contexts (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle & Farmer, 2011). While research suggests the establishment of effective mentorship supports for newly inducted special educators is important, the shortage of personnel makes it a difficult topic to address.

Noting difficulties facing rural schools such as isolation, limited resources and professional supports, and a host of students with varied learning needs Farmer et al. (2018) describe DC as, “a research-practitioner partnership model...designed specifically to address intervention support needs of rural schools and teachers” (p. 164).

Motoca et al. (2014) acknowledged there are a multitude of influences such as, “contributions from other teachers, the school administration, parents, school board policies, neighborhood values and expectations, state-level standards, and broader societal values” (p. 120) that educators face. In order to influence teachers and their practices, consideration of these factors is essential. “A primary concern of rural special educators centers on professional development that does not reflect their actual experiences, the contexts they work in, the constraints they experience, and the resources they have available to them” (Farmer et al., 2018, p. 165). Directed consultation seeks to address these issues.

In an overview of DC, Farmer et al. (2018) provide a description of the process as involving four components including: data collection, tailored general training, ongoing training,

and implementation consultation. It is a cyclical approach, which promotes continuous improvement.

**Data Collection.** The authors describe data collection as a pre-intervention phase wherein information regarding practices, needs, strengths, resources and leverage points is collected; the purpose here is being able to link optimal intervention strategies with available resources and current practices to promote success for the student and teacher. ‘Scouting reports’ developed through observation and interviews are used to identify strengths and weaknesses within practice, as well as resources and personnel available to implement strategies.

**Tailored General Training.** Tailored general training targets the needs identified in the previous phase. A key component of these workshops is that the participants are involved in guiding the training process. The authors suggested activities, content, examples, interests, and the needs of the teachers be taken into account and the workshop take on a responsive nature based upon this. “The goal is to ensure that content reflects issues that teachers experience in the classroom and that teachers learn strategies they need and can immediately apply.” (Farmer et al., 2018, p. 167). As with CAR, the expectation is that it is egalitarian in nature, such that the intervention specialist is viewed as a team member and the teachers are equally valued for their knowledge, especially in light of the particulars of the context. In this manner it is possible to note what the authors describe as a ‘climate of partnership’ and ‘strength-based solution-oriented mind-set’.

**Ongoing Training.** The authors describe ongoing training as the next step, with modules designed to elaborate on content focused on in the initial training. This phase also presents an opportunity to address issues noted in data collection. Content may be delivered online to groups or individuals on topics of shared interest or individual concern. Training may also include a

reflective component for the intervention specialist to monitor teachers' fidelity to implementation and for self-evaluation, or the use of video to view and refine practice. The potential for establishing a network or community for support and innovation might also be approached.

***Implementation Consultation.*** Farmer et al. (2018) noted the last phase as being implementation consultation, where groups or individuals meet via videoconferencing or face-to-face to address specific circumstances and potential adaptations of interventions. Goals and next steps are planned as the educators move to utilize the knowledge gained in real world applications. As the authors noted, this is a crucial component for students not responding to universal approaches. Data collection is also key as it consultants utilize it to determine the effectiveness of interventions and to make modifications where they are not.

***Directed Consultation in the Literature.*** Motoca et al. (2014) presented a study on directed consultation as a framework for professional development. It was used to train educators in the use of an intervention program named SEALS (Supporting Early Adolescent Learning and Social Support), which is comprised of academic engagement enhancement (AEE), competence enhancement behaviour management (CEBM), and social dynamics management (SDM) components. The authors presented a brief discussion about the foundations of directed consultation, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological theory, and highlighted the importance of the methodology of DC in promoting the use of evidence-based practices by practitioners.

Motoca et al. (2014) intended to examine DC effectiveness as a professional development framework. Hence, the focus of the study was on teacher, not student, outcomes. 14 schools from a southern state were selected and placed into intervention and control group pairings, based on

data from the National Center for Educational Statistics. 144 sixth grade teachers consented to participate. Across teachers and schools, characteristics between control and intervention groups were comparable when considering traits such as experience, education, standardized test scores, minority status, etc.

To determine if the practices of teachers met standards in the areas academics, behaviour, and social areas, a criterion approach was used. This involved a ‘cluster-randomized multi-cohort design’. Schools were paired, with one school in each pairing being randomly assigned to the DC intervention group receiving training in SEALS, and the other control group continuing with standard practices. Classroom observations focused on teacher feedback were conducted in the fall, coinciding with DC training, as well as in the spring when it was completed.

The TOMBA (Teacher Observation of the Management of Behaviours and Academics) was used in fall and spring observations. Results indicated that intervention teachers who received training using directed consultation were generally less negative in classroom management styles, and tended to use more effective classroom management strategies such as structure, feedback, and communication in regards to problem behaviours. The authors asserted that DC appears to hold potential as a professional development training model to support teachers’ integration of intervention strategies in their daily practice.

The collective results of the study were favourable and suggested many positive outcomes connected to the SEALS and DC training. The design and implementation of the models are intended to be responsive to classroom and school contexts and needs and the size of the study lends to its generalizability. Some concerns regarding Motoca et al.’s (2014) study were highlighted by the authors, and two were quite notable with regards to this paper. Firstly, similar to some of the CAR studies examined, there was some degree of entanglement between

the content and the methodology employed to deliver it. It could not clearly be ascertained if the content of the SEALS intervention or the framework of the DC professional development training model was what impacted teachers' practice. Secondly, the results did not relay information regarding student outcomes. Though it was not within the scope of the paper to determine, improved student outcomes are one of the primary objectives of improving practice. As this was a preliminary study, future intentions of the authors included addressing this with the completion of all phases of the research. They also acknowledged further fine-tuning of the SEALS and DC approaches will require more attention to specific 'leverage points' and a targeted feedback system to truly be responsive to students and teachers at the individual level. The cost of operating such a model will also surely be a factor in determining the feasibility of this approach.

Farmer et al. (2018) reported findings obtained from a Project REAL (Rural Early Adolescent Learning) study, which was intended to evaluate the directed consultation model through a randomized controlled trial. It involved 36 'low-resource rural schools' across nine states. Participants included 188 teachers and 2,453 students, over one third of which were of ethnic minorities. Findings from the intervention schools noted teachers were more attuned to 'classroom social networks', more adepts at managing classroom ecology and social dynamics, and in two schools had an improved sense of efficacy. Importantly, findings also suggested students in the intervention schools saw improvements. These included higher grades, improved outlooks regarding school and peers, and a greater sense of belonging. Specifically noted was a study in the Northern Plains, wherein Native American students in two intervention schools saw improved standardized test scores, as well as increased peer support and classroom participation

with less emotional risk. These findings are of significance when considering the aforementioned set of circumstances facing rural and First Nations schools.

While the use of evidence-based practices and directed consultation may seem to be at odds with each other, Farmer et al. (2018) suggested they may work hand-in-hand. Evidence-based practices often rely on rigor and fidelity to achieve results. The authors asserted that when students are unresponsive to a specific practice, adaptations and modifications regarding its use must be considered. Here the intervention specialist and classroom teacher form a partnership of ‘supported professionalism’. The classroom teacher brings knowledge of the student, context, resources and data to the table. The intervention specialist brings their experience and specific knowledge base. Working together they move forward through the directed consultation cycle and in this manner meet the unique needs of the individual teacher and student.

### **Justification for the Project**

There is ample literature on action research, collaboration, and consultation, and much of the literature reviewed pointed to favourable outcomes for students, educators, and schools. However, utilizing just one of these models would require a significant commitment of time and effort, of research and practice. Another challenge lies in the coordinated implementation of these components. Therefore, as these methods have been examined individually, a sample framework wherein CAR and DC might be located as hierarchical means of support within the PRtI model was provided. In providing a space to learn about the components of DC and CAR, and how to utilize them, as well as a place to locate practical resources, it is hoped that educators will be equipped with a starting point to expand their knowledge. While there is an abundance of literature on action research and collaboration, much less information was available regarding directed consultation specifically. Thus a gap exists between the research and educators.

Returning to issues of the hiring and retention of experienced special educators, the breadth and diversity of students with special needs, matters of geographic isolation, and a lack of resources or personnel, one can easily see how no single individual may hold all of the answers. It is vital that a collaborative approach is employed to support our students, teachers and schools. The medium of a website in promoting collaborative practices serves as a means for educators to freely explore action research and directed consultation at time and place, and to a depth that are suitable for them. Action research and directed consultation are the vehicles they may use to examine issues of interest or concern.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Applied Project**

#### **Considerations for Implementation**

The rationale for researching and utilizing CAR was a desire to find a method of professional development where teachers are supported and encouraged to become involved in the research process. Improving and sustaining quality teaching practices is at the heart of this. Elliot and Langlois (as cited in Chou, 2010) addressed the issue that many forms of professional development do not lead to lasting change without continuing support. Addressing this concern, Lassonde and Israel (2009) shared research that in-service with additional coaching is one of the most effective forms of professional development. This falls closely in line with aspects of directed consultation, which aims to address specific teacher concerns and provide ongoing support throughout the process. For the purpose of this project, it was important to develop a new framework that incorporated elements of CAR as well as DC. When considering the depth and breadth of the field of inclusive education, combined with the potential absence of specialized staff in many schools, a multitude of challenges to be met by general education teachers becomes apparent. The potential advantages of CAR such as improved self-efficacy, enhancing a sense of professionalism wherein teachers are researchers, addressing concerns of interest and need, and ongoing professional development could serve well to address many of those challenges. Where the knowledge and experience of general and special educators falls short, gaining access to outside agencies and professionals for ongoing support and continuing professional development is key. Herein lays the potential of locating both action research and directed consultation within the pyramid response to intervention framework. While they may be utilized as a hierarchal means of addressing concerns and

developing interventions and supports, they may also be used independently of each other to address concerns of varying significance. For example, teachers may begin the process by studying how to improve class wide reading results through action research, but may find it more appropriate to seek directed consultation for students previously identified as having learning exceptionalities and requiring more support.

### **Overview of the Project**

The aim of this applied project is to introduce educators and administrators to the benefits, pitfalls, process, and feasibility of both collaborative action research and directed consultation models to address concerns in the area of inclusive education through the website. A sample framework locates them within a response to interventions pyramid, and draws on research from the fields of consultation and action research. The intentions of this model are to provide rural, isolated, and First Nations schools that may be lacking special education personnel, or experienced special educators, a framework for addressing concerns and receiving support. Because the nature of concerns to be addressed is unique to the communities, schools, and practitioners involved, the development of a website for people to freely and independently explore seems fitting. This chapter draws on research to support the rationale and effectiveness of developing a website as a means to promote awareness of CAR and DC as viable professional development opportunities. The website was developed with WIX, an online website building platform, and is broken down into five main categories: an introductory home page, collaborative action research section, directed consultation section, a page on the coordination of CAR and DC in a response to intervention framework, and a final area for resources.

**Rationale for Developing a Website.** Beach (2017) described web-based learning environments as ‘primary sources of information’, which provide teachers with access to an

array of knowledge and resources. Some benefits to utilizing an open-ended and informal professional development method such as a website, she noted, include teachers identifying areas of need and subsequently self-directing their learning by exploring resources and approaches that are suited to it. Carfella (as cited in Beach, 2017) proposed self-initiated learning, personal autonomy, and greater learner control as key principles to of self-directed learning, wherein learners are motivated and assume personal responsibility and collaborative control in the learning process. Further benefits, as noted by Kanuka and Nocente (2003), included the ability of web-based professional development opportunities to address concerns related to challenges of, “time, place, and situational barriers” (p. 228). As well, there are an expanded and improved ease of access to education and training, potentially improved quality of learning, and reduced expenses. With regards to this applied project, two salient points arise from the aforementioned benefits.

First, there is the idea that individuals are in charge of their own learning. This fosters ‘buy-in’ and increased motivation, and is a prominent feature of how both CAR and DC operate. Through CAR and DC, teachers are able to examine topics or concerns of importance to them. Conducting action research and choosing to seek out consultation and coaching opportunities however, are large commitments. Educators who choose to embark down these roads are required to invest time and energy, open themselves to the pressures and demands of working in a group or partnership, and develop new skills as practitioners and researchers. It is crucial that teachers find value and practicality in what they are learning. Similarly, while the website is designed to provide educators with an introduction to inclusive education, CAR, DC, and PRtI, it also contains videos and resources for a deeper exploration of these topics. Ideally, educators who see a value, need, or desire to conduct CAR, DC, or PRtI will find enough information here

to gain insights into their rationale, methodology, and find resources to help implement them. Another value of a website is that individuals or teams of educators may access material together or independently. Access to the videos and resources permits for the exploration of both action research and directed consultation as frameworks, but may also be used as a guide for their use in addressing topics of concern or interest.

Secondly, as Beach (2017) noted, online learning is flexible, provides ease of access, and considers an individual's needs, time, and place. This is important when considering the context and needs of rural schools. As many rural and First Nations schools are geographically isolated, and access to supports, professionals, and experienced special education personnel may be lacking, the internet provides a method to circumvent some of the issues that may arise because of that. Bates, Phalen, and Moran (2016) noted how the proliferation of online professional development opportunities has expanded in the last decade, and suggested it has the potential to be as effective as live professional development. Through the internet, educators potentially have access to learn about frameworks such as CAR and DC, as well as a wealth of information, resources, and professional contacts to address their needs, interests, and concerns.

### **The Action Research and Consultation (ARC) Website**

As was previously mentioned, the website contains five sections. Research conducted by Beach (2017) about teachers' online learning experiences and Bates, Phalen, and Moran (2016; 2017) regarding teacher use and professional learning through websites was used to guide the development of the applied project and reflect on future considerations for its improvement.

**Home Page.** Upon opening, the Home page of the sight begins with a 'light box' welcoming educators and disclosing the purpose of the site. The Home page itself provides a statement of inclusion as defined by the B.C. Ministry of Education.

As perceptions and teacher attitudes regarding inclusion are important components regarding its implementation a collection of videos that follows is intended to provide insight into the history, purpose, struggles, and benefits of inclusive education. A brief description of the videos and their lengths are provided so visitors may choose to view based on interest and time available. In research on how teachers access and utilize online information, Bates, Phalen, and Moran (2017) found that teachers appeared to prefer accessing resources with brief and clear information regarding the content.

From her research on self-directed online learning, Beach (2017) proposed several conditions that seemed to impact teachers' website navigation. Beach suggested participants were more willing to trust information from a website when it contained background information about the developer, affiliations, and members, as well as when their mission and goals aligned with the educator's. Another recommendation was the inclusion of a section describing navigational routes for websites that users could follow to meet their needs and goals. Following these suggestions, the Home page concludes with a section containing information about the site developer, its purpose, tips on how to navigate the website, and contact information.

**Collaborative Action Research and Directed Consultation Pages.** Differing methodologies for conducting action research were present in the literature reviewed (Nugent, Malik, & Hollingsworth, 2012; McNiff, 2016; McNiff & Whitehead 2005; Sagor 1992). And while some commonalities existed, aspects such as the order, cycles of research, and disseminating information varied. A brief description of action research and its purpose is provided, along with a list of reasons educators may want to participate in it. The cycle is also presented through a graphic, and brief descriptions of each of the phases of the action research

process accompany it. A full resource on conducting AR is available for download and is linked to in the Resources section.

Chametzky (as cited in Beach, 2017) suggested, "...teachers' willingness to engage in professional development increases when the material is relevant and personally meaningful to them" (p. 67). To this end an introductory video about conducting action research, presented by Margaret Riel, is linked to at the bottom of the page. If teachers are interested, a host of videos is available from this presenter and are linked to in the Resources section of the website. Bates, Phalen, and Moran (2016) further acknowledged that video-based learning holds the potential of positively influencing teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practice as well as student outcomes. The authors also related that online video based learning has the additional potential for educators to explore videos of interest at a time that is convenient for them and allows them the freedom to select videos to address personal interests and needs.

Farmer et al. (2018) described the directed consultation process as both a professional development and intervention framework. The DC page focuses on introducing visitors to an overview of the process, while briefly detailing the four phases. Because literature on this model is limited, articles regarding the methods and benefits of consultation are linked to. Again, brief descriptions are provided for visitors to quickly assess and select articles of personal relevance. Articles selected were done so with the intent of providing an insight into 'authentic contexts' and 'realistic examples' as Beach (2017) noted these types of resources appear to garner trust.

**CAR and DC in the PRTI Page.** This applied project began with the intention of developing a framework that would support rural and First Nations schools lacking experienced special education staff, or special education personnel whatsoever, with a means of addressing issues involved with inclusive education. To that end a page locating CAR and DC within a

pyramid response to interventions framework has been included. It is the opinion of this researcher that CAR is a viable first step for educators to address issues or concerns at a local level, particularly where experienced or specialized personnel may be absent. However, as has previously been stated, the ability of educators to address a host of complex issues regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities may not be enough. Kozleski, Mainzer, and Deshler (as cited in Hardman, 2012) stated, “To meet this challenge, special educators must develop a broad understanding of students need to know and how they learn. This level of pedagogical expertise can only be acquired through experience and active engagement in two learning communities—one with their general education colleagues, and another with their discipline-based special education colleagues” (p. 18). Hence, further literature searches were conducted and the model of directed consultation was uncovered. It seems a plausible next step after cycles of action research. The incorporation of intervention specialists could potentially address CAR’s limitations, but would also incur additional expenses, time, and the need of outside supports. The merging of these frameworks is still being developed, but requires additional research, time, and input from stakeholders before it can be considered completed and proposed as a viable model. Nonetheless, it is presented in the hopes that stakeholders visiting the site may offer input.

**Resources Page.** The fields of action research, consultation, and response to intervention are vast and there is a wealth of literature regarding their implementation, benefits, and shortcomings. A host of media including books, websites, and videos for profit as well as free of charge is available for schools and individuals to access and utilize. Several of the practical resources uncovered during the research for this project have been included or linked to in this area. Visitors to the site may find ready to use materials, texts to order, or instructional videos, which could be explored to varying degrees determined by the individual. Bates et al. (2017)

related that educators using “...open websites can make more choices about their learning goals and how they address them” (p. 386). And as Hardman (2012) noted, “Therefore, it is teachers, not researchers, who ultimately determine which practices meet their needs, how and with whom those practices will be integrated into instruction...” (p. 19).

**Future Considerations.** Findings from Beach (2017) research suggested educators’ visits and use of websites were influenced by a variety of factors. Due to copyright and privacy issues, some important elements were not able to be addressed through the development of the Action Research and Consultation website. Most notable was the inability to present samples of real classrooms and students, with real teachers demonstrating what they do. The author suggested this was a strong influence on the credibility, trustworthiness, and appeal of a site. Participants in this study were reported to share positive changes in instruction after viewing teachers modeling and implementing strategies. While the aim of this site was to introduce visitors to the frameworks of CAR and DC, and how they could be utilized within a PRTI framework, a future direction of the site could be to develop a database videos, success stories, and strategies that educators have developed.

The website may be found at <https://bwszucs.wixsite.com/-arc>

## **Chapter 4**

### **Reflection**

In reflecting on this project, there are so many things that require consideration. It was the merging of several spheres of influence. With the needs of our schools, the requirements of the program, the input of colleagues, and my own desires, it became a balancing act at times. As my research continued, my knowledge expanded. As my knowledge expanded, my questions were refined. And as my initial questions were refined, my project evolved. Yet, at its heart, I feel like the project never strayed from its purpose – providing teachers lacking resources or special education personnel a method to support themselves, their schools, and their students.

Throughout the course of my studies and examination of action research and directed consultation, the phrase, “You don’t know what you don’t know” never strayed far from my mind. Various iterations of the phrase exist, but in sifting through its context I came across a statement by Donald Rumsfeld in a U.S. Department of Defense address. It seemed an obscure response to a question about intelligence surrounding weapons of mass destruction, and a precursor to the war in Iraq. Rumsfeld stated “...there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know...” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2002). Admittedly, on its face, it seems awkward to reconcile a statement surrounding war and a cover up with a paper about improving teacher practice and student outcomes. While the quote has gone on to some degree of fame, or infamy, there are layers of truth to it. These elements have been applied in fields ranging from psychology to risk assessment. In contemplating its significance as an educator, this quote underscores various levels of knowledge.

Even at a foundational level, defining ‘things we know’ can be a slippery slope. Setting aside philosophical debates of knowledge and its construction, there are practices we engage in and observe that they get results, or they don’t. A pyramid response to intervention recognizes the need to see that, “...teachers are delivering research-based core programs as intended and using classwide formative assessment data to identify emerging classwide areas of need” (Buffum et al., 2009, p. 74). Though there is an art to teaching, the science of it would suggest practitioners should be using evidence-based practices, or at least monitoring them in rigorous ways for us to know that our students are learning.

‘Known unknowns’ assumes correctly, that there is a body of knowledge out there that we do not possess. I have questions and there are answers out there. This was what first drew me to the concept of collaborative action research. The potential for colleagues to bring their unique insights, strengths, and experiences to bear on an issue of common interest seems a powerful thing. For schools lacking that knowledge base of a special educator, or perhaps a special educator lacking experience with specific areas of need, a team conducting a systematic exploration of an issue or question through action research is an avenue worth exploring. McNiff and Whitehead (2005) stated, “There is nothing mysterious about doing research. It is a systematic, disciplined process of finding out something that was not known before, showing that the new knowledge is valid, and subjecting it to the critical evaluation of other people” (p. 4). The education of our students is a serious matter, and so our practice and growth needs to be taken seriously. While I have come to view action research as a potential means to that end, or at least a beginning, it is an intensive endeavour. Support from administrators, through the provision of time and resources, leadership, and the development of a school culture valuing and supporting professional growth, is a key component.

The final level, ‘unknown unknowns’, is at once both easier and more difficult to address. Considering what brought me to the field of special education in the first place, were concerns, interests, and questions that I did not have answers to. While I can attest that I have grown both personally and professionally over the course of the past two years, I can also unabashedly admit that I have not found answers to all of these questions – or even identified all of the questions I could or perhaps should have. In studying and searching for information on collaborative action research, I stumbled upon the framework of directed consultation. It was something I did not know existed, but seemed an even better fit for the needs of the teachers, schools, and students I was intending to support. Noting how special educators in rural settings worked in isolation, often with limited supports and resources, Farmer et al., (2018) stated there was a need for a framework to assist them; the authors surmised, “...directed consultation was designed specifically to address intervention support needs of rural schools and teachers” (p. 164).

As my reading broadened my learning was taken to new places, and as a result the questions, paper, and project continued to evolve; the more I learned the less relevant holding on to that initial question also seemed to be. Comments from colleagues, mentors, and supervisors, also pushed me to see what was in front of me in new ways and directed me down avenues I had never explored. All of this was crucial for a deeper understanding of the content and my project. It became a part of the project to develop a framework that could coordinate the processes of action research and directed consultation, but the enormity of this became a realization. While I was not fully able to see this through to fruition, it has become a future direction. It will involve more time, experience, and the input of a number of stakeholders. Still, I look forward to sharing what I have learned, where I am at, and where I want to go. The importance of being a ‘lifelong’ learner has become abundantly more clear through the course of this process.

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