

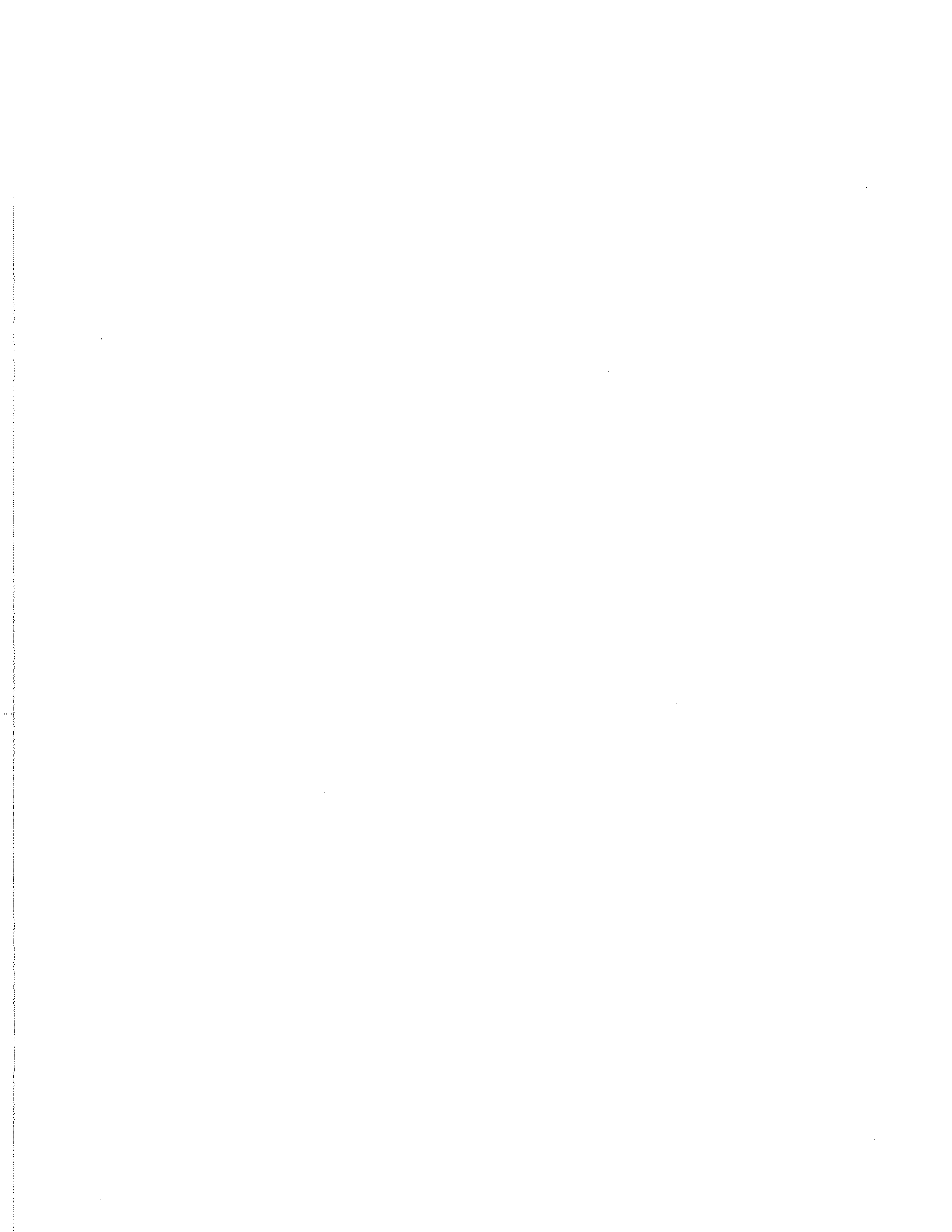
Passion
In
Professional Practice:

Action Research
in
Grand Erie

Edited by Jacqueline D. Delong

Grand Erie District School Board
Brantford, Ontario, Canada

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From the Director of the Grand Erie District School Board of Education:

Passion in Professional Practice: Action Research in Grand Erie

Peter C. Moffatt



*Peter C. Moffatt
Director of Education
Grand Erie District School Board*

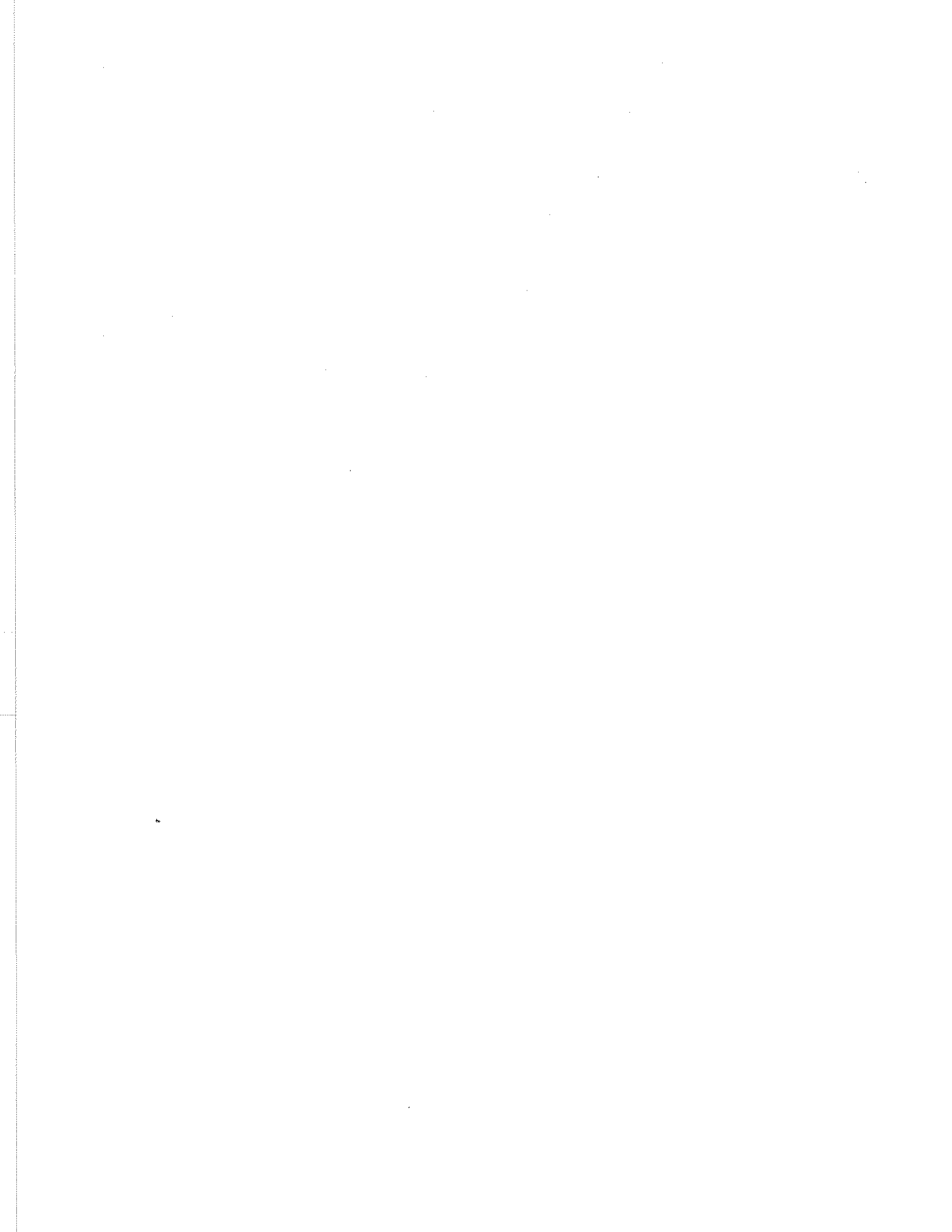
“There can be no greater satisfaction than to be passionately involved in any worthwhile activity.”

The highest form of professionalism is the on-going, self-generated pursuit of improvement and excellence. Teachers and administrators who are involved in action research demonstrate and develop that professional passion. The rewards of this professional activity are improved student learning and personal engagement and growth. Through the posing of important questions, the collection and analysis of classroom and school based data, the articulation and presentation of results, the sharing of those results and the posing of new, important questions, teachers and administrators take control of their own job satisfaction. They can support their classroom practices and they improve classroom learning.

It is with a great deal of pride that I congratulate the professionals from Grand Erie who have contributed to this collection. I congratulate them for their writing, for the influence that they have had on education, and on their achievement of the highest professional status. Their passion makes a difference!

Peter C. Moffatt, GEDSB 2001

PC Concepts 10/01



Part I

What is Action Research in Grand Erie?

Part I sets the stage through discussion of how we do action research and the history of action research in Grand Erie.

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About This Book

by Jackie Delong



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~ Editorial Team ~

It is with great pleasure that I submit this publication of the work of practitioners - teachers and administrators - in the Grand Erie District School Board as a significant contribution to the evidential base of teaching and learning. The research which spans the years 1998-2001 is informal action research, that is, it was completed purely to improve learning in classrooms and not for academic credit. Not included in this publication but on a parallel track, 1999-2001, a cohort of masters students completed their action research projects for their degrees at Brock University in October, 2001. This publication builds on the earlier publications, Act Reflect Revise.. Revitalize! (Halsall & Hossack, 1996), the action research kit, Action Research: School Improvement Through Research-Based Professionalism (Delong & Wideman, 1997) and the ongoing electronic journal, the Ontario Action Researcher (Delong & Wideman, 1997-2001) www.unipissing.ca/oar

Our inspiration for the action research process has been Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath who has worked with us since 1996. We have used his and Jean McNiff's work to guide us in the process. In particular, guidance for action researchers has come from You and Your Action Research Project (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996) and Action Research For Professional Development: Concise Advice for New Action Researchers (McNiff, 1995)

The projects represent a variety of levels of experience in teaching and in research. I am very impressed with the recurring themes and patterns of teacher commitment to improvement. I think you will recognize the clear and confident voices of the teachers.

My thanks to the dedicated teachers and administrators, Jack Whitehead, Ron Wideman, the project facilitators - Diane Morgan, James Ellsworth - and the network leaders - Cheryl Black and Heather Knill-Griesser, Dave and Lynn Abbey, Paula and Peter Rasokas. Thanks also to Peter Moffatt for creating a culture of inquiry and reflection that supports reflective practice and action research in the Grand Erie District School Board. A big thank you to the editorial team - Cheryl Black, Diane Morgan, James Ellsworth, Karen McDonald and Paula Curran. Anyone who has gone through this process will recognize the Herculean effort that is required. Thanks.

The content of this book is as follows:

Part I, "What is Action Research in Grand Erie?", sets the stage through discussion of how we do action research and the history of action research in Grand Erie.

Part II, "Improving EQAO Results" demonstrates action research in practice with a focus on analyzing EQAO provincial test results to inform strategies to improve student achievement.

Part III, "Quality Assessment" includes the projects of teachers using assessment as a means to improve teacher practice and student learning.

Part IV. "Action Research Resources" is an annotated list of resources that we have found useful.

McNiff, J., Lomax, P. & Whitehead, J. (1996) You and Your Action Research Project. London:Routledge.

McNiff, J. (1995) Action Research For Professional Development: Concise Advice for New Action Researchers. Toronto: OPSTF.

Jackie Delong, GEDSB, 2001



J. Delong, Superintendent of Education
Grand Erie District School Board

What is Action Research in Grand Erie?

Based on the work of Jack Whitehead, action research is self-reflective practitioner research for teachers, administrators and support staff focused on the question,

"How Can I Improve...?"

Training and support for practitioners through the Educational Change Fund projects or the networking support groups [Brant Action Research Network – BARN; Cayuga Action Research Team – CART; Simcoe Action Research Team – SART; and Secondary Teachers Action Research – STAR] for the purpose of:

- individual and professional growth
- improvement in professional practice which contributes to improving student learning and which is of vital concern to the individual practitioner

Sharing of best practice with other professionals in GEDSB and beyond through:

- published research
- presentations of research findings at workshops, conferences, and school-based P.D. sessions

Guidelines for Practitioner Research Funding

Background

Quality educators have always been involved in reflective practice as a professional activity. Grand Erie District School Board would like to support and extend that effort by offering research opportunities.

Expectations

- 1.0 Research must be conducted by the teacher/administrator on his/her school or classroom for the purpose of improving student learning.
- 2.0 The research must be conducted in a professional and ethical fashion:
 - teachers have the right to investigate their practice; however, publication requires permission or anonymizing of names
- 3.0 Research must be conducted:
 - by an individual or group
 - informally or for credit (Master's Program)
- 4.0 The research should be a one-year project, connect to the areas of emphasis and may connect to other initiatives, such as:
 - Educational Change Funds
 - Leadership Programs such as L2K
 - Action Research Projects
 - Project Management
- 5.0 The participant(s) must be able and willing to conduct research that includes the following:
 - focuses on a clear question that will improve student learning
 - involves careful data collection that may be qualitative and/or quantitative
 - develops findings based on analysis of data
 - shares the results and reports in writing

For example, a research question could address:

 - creating a whole school approach to EQAO testing
 - improving problem solving in Mathematics
 - using articulation as an indicator of reasoning
- 6.0 Participants must submit a written report before the end of May to the superintendent responsible.
- 7.0 The participant(s) must be willing to share their research project. This may include:
 - conferences
 - websites (O.A.R.)
 - network groups (Brant, Cayuga and Simcoe Action Research Networks)
 - school and area professional development
 - First Class "chat" groups

Jackie Delong, GEDSB, May 2001

PC Concepts 10/01

Part I

- 10 -

Sustained Support for Action Research in Grand Erie

Jackie Delong



*Jackie Delong
Superintendent of Education
Grand Erie District School Board*

Jackie Delong is a Superintendent of Education in the Grand Erie District School Board, Brantford, Ontario, Canada and is currently completing her PHD thesis with Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath, UK. She is the proud mother of two adult children.

Her career has included a variety of positions including secondary school teacher, Special Services Department Head, OSSTF District President and OTF Governor, Coordinator of Special Education Services, elementary principal and university teacher. An active volunteer in the community, she is currently vice-chair of the Brantford General Hospital Board.

From her experience as a professional educator for 30 years, she advocates for improved student learning through research-based professionalism. In the article, she is sharing the story of Action Research in our board.

I begin with my initiation into action research and the beginning years in The Brant Country Board of Education. I continue by carrying on the teacher research activities in the tumultuous years of creating the Grand Erie District School Board. As well as expanding the supports that I have built up to provide sustained support for the teachers and principals in the former board into the new district, I am also sharing the

learning of the means to sustain activities and processes into other districts. The supports include networks, organizations, conferences, publications, accreditation and other resources. You will see that I begin with small groups, invest personally in individuals and then support them to be the leaders in the communities or networks. I will start with an overview of the growth of action research in my school system and

then broaden the picture with more detail of the process of arriving at a critical mass.

How did I get connected to action research?

In 1995, I was moving in a new direction and inadvertently and without any real understanding of the potential of action research I was leading my school system in that direction too. The idea that teacher research can improve teacher professionalism is not new but it was new to me. Buckingham saw it as the 'scientific spirit of inquiry':

It is my firm belief that the emancipation and professionalizing of the teacher's calling rests far more on the originality, insight, and expertness which the teacher evinces than upon any considerations having to do with salary, tenure, or legal status. Society cannot be compelled to respect anybody or anything. The surest way to win respect is to be respectable...[Nothing] would so effectively obtain for the teaching body the possession of professional expertness...as the open-eyed, open-minded, scientific spirit of inquiry. (Buckingham, 1926, p .iv).

More recently, Susan Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1994) take it one step further to the "redefining of knowledge":

Research by teachers represents a distinctive way of knowing about teaching and learning...[Teacher research] will fundamentally redefine the notion of knowledge for teaching, altering the locus of the knowledge base and realigning the practitioner's stance in relationship to knowledge generation in the field. (p. 35-36)

They also talk about "inquiry as stance" and "inquiry as agency: the culture of community" in terms of the potential of teacher research:

From an inquiry stand, teacher leadership and group membership look very different from what they look like when teachers are

"trained" in workshops or staff development projects. Taking an inquiry stance on leadership means that teachers challenge the purposes and underlying assumptions of educational change efforts rather than simply helping to specify or carry out the most effective methods for predetermined ends. (1999, p. 294-5)

And in 2000, Richard Pring reviewed the work of Stenhouse (1975), Elliott (1991) and Foster (1999) in the field of 'teacher as researcher' and concluded:

The notion of teacher as researcher is important. It is crucial to the growth of professional knowledge. It is a refinement of the intelligent engagement in an 'educational practice'. It is a refreshing counterbalance to those who, in treating 'educational practice' as an object of science, necessarily fail to understand it. It is reassertion of the crucial place of professional judgment in an understanding of a professional activity. (2000, p. 138)

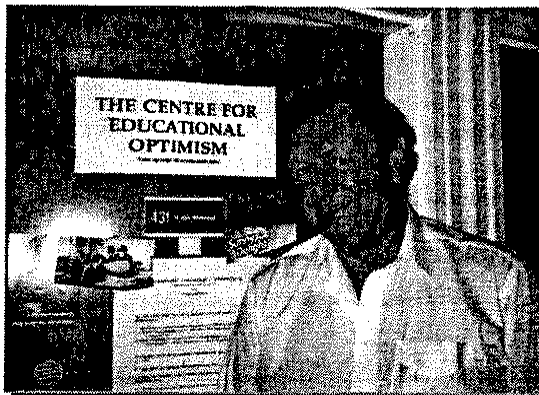
It seemed to me in 1995, given my educational experience and my experience in professional development activities in the board and in teachers' federations that the connection between teacher research-based professionalism, improving student learning and professional development made sense and had great potential for a better educational system.

How did we get started in action research in Brant County?

In the winter of 1994-5, Linda Grant, Executive Assistant for the Ontario Public School Teachers' Federation (OPSTF) and I represented OPSTF on The Common Curriculum Implementation Team.



The criteria the team established for organizations to access the \$1.9 Million Innovation Fund set up to implement the curriculum included innovation, partnerships, improving student learning outcomes, willingness to share results, in-service training, and the use of technologies. Linda had visited with Jack Whitehead at the University of Bath in 1993 and came back with the idea of making a proposal to use action research as a process to



Dr. Jack Whitehead University of Bath has been an integral part to the growth of action research in Grand Erie and in Ontario.

implement the curriculum. Linda drafted the proposal which would include four Ontario boards of education, OPSTF, Television Ontario (TVO), Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) and Queen's University. The proposal was awarded \$200,000 in June of 1995. Then the fun began.

During the winter of 1995-96, I recruited and arranged training for teams of teachers to conduct action research in order to implement the new curriculum. In February 1996 in Toronto, we held a forum – Act Reflect Revise - for the teams from the four boards to meet in facilitated sessions to share their processes and research. One of the events of note during that forum is that some of the teachers left early for a political rally – it seems that conflict between the teachers and the government has been a fact of

life in Ontario for my entire career. At the forum, Tom Russell, Queen's University professor and action researcher, introduced me to Jack Whitehead and over lunch Jack convinced me to start my Ph.D. research at Bath University. Much like the teachers in the project, I had no idea what I was getting into.

The teachers were willing to take a risk, as was I, having faith in the potential of action research to improve student learning, to honour teacher professionalism and to help me improve my practice. Lori Barkans, a member of the pilot study-the Group of Seven, wrote,

"It has become a source of great amusement to each of us that we volunteered so readily for such a mammoth undertaking without even fully understanding the meaning of the words 'Action Research'. We did not feel any pressure when being given one hour to decide if we were interested in this unique project. All we knew was that it would be an opportunity to explore new options and, hopefully, improve the quality of the education that we were able to offer to our students". (Barkans, MacDonald, & Morgan, 1996. p. 23)

In her writing it is easy to recognize the desire of the group to improve their practice for the benefit of students as well as my frequent flaw of moving processes ahead too fast. The comments the teachers made about the impact of the action research processes on their lives made the investment well worth the time and energy. "Action Research has allowed me to grow as a professional...Throughout this whole process, I have felt in complete control of all aspects, along with my two colleagues." (MacDonald, 1996, p.24) and "...there is satisfaction in knowing that in some small way you have tried to make a change, and at the same time, you have been able to grow as a professional." (Morgan, 1996, p.25).

The story of the beginning of action research in the four boards is described in the issues of the Act Reflect Revise Newsletter (Grant, 1995-96) and in Act Reflect Revise Revitalize (Halsall & Hossack, 1996). The stories specific to the Brant County Board of Education are found in the following

articles: "OPSTF Sponsored Common Curriculum Innovation Fund Action Research Project: Action Research and Teacher

Networking" (Grant, 1996); "A Journey Through Action Research" (Barkans, MacDonald, &

Morgan, 1996) and "Banbury Heights Action Research: Home/School Partnerships" (Wilson & Churchward, 1996); "The Role of the Superintendent in Facilitating and Supporting the Action Research Process" (DeLong, 1996); "Action Research: School Improvement that Honours Teacher Professionalism" (DeLong & Wideman, 1996).

We learned a great deal during the 1995-96 school year about teaching and supporting action research processes. We had no manuals for what we were doing and were unaware of stories of people who were experienced in teaching practising teachers and administrators from whom to learn. Jean McNiff's work was very helpful, particularly her booklet Action Research For Professional Development (McNiff, 1995). Tom Russell came from Queens' University to share his experiences with teaching teachers to conduct action research and Lynne Hannay wrote a booklet for OPSTF Learning in Action Thinkbook (Hannay, 1995) that year and as well provided training sessions for the teachers in the boards "to

help them formulate research questions and begin to establish appropriate data gathering techniques." (Hannay, 1996, p.72) During the January workshop on Data Collection and Analysis, I remember the surprise and dismay of the Banbury teachers – Jeff Churchward and Ed Wilson - when they

realized that the data (and they had boxes of it) they were collecting were not answering the question they had formulated. They very good-naturedly accepted that and went back to the drawing board.



Lori Barkans, Anna Morgan, Bev MacDonald, elementary classroom teachers, risk-takers extraordinaire. I have known them for six years. They were part of the original Group of Seven.

It is important to remember that as these teachers were learning action research, they were learning a new

curriculum and the role of the technology at the same time. My friend and colleague, Ron Wideman had moved from the Ministry of Education to TVOntario by this time and was part of a telephone conference to allow the teams to discuss curriculum issues. The photo of that conference call is interesting in that the participants are looking at the telephone! Now that we have videoconferencing working, it seems rudimentary communication.

One of the products of the year was a publication of the projects - Act Reflect Revise Revitalize (1996) edited by Nancy Halsall and Leslie Hossack. In addition, both the Branlyn and the Banbury teams received much public attention for their work in presentations to the board and provincial curriculum associations, local and provincial conference workshops especially during the 1996-97 school year. The Banbury team was featured in a Globe and Mail feature on homework and on national radio. As a result of her work, Lori Barkans was appointed to the Ontario College of

Teachers' committee on creating Standards of Practice for the province.

From outside the board, Lynne Hannay, Head and Associate Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Midwestern Centre (OISE/UT) with Research Officer Kathleen Schmalz completed a research project on the pilot projects in the four boards. Lynne conducted two workshops with the Brant teams and was involved in three of the forums. Kathleen interviewed Brant staff individually and in groups and made a report: "Report for the Brant County Board of Education: Observations arising from the 1996/97 study entitled: Action Research: Facilitating Teachers' Professional Learning." (Hannay, 1998). The report was highly complimentary and, although it doesn't name me specifically, I was "the superintendent" (Hannay, 1998; Schmalz, 1998) referred to in the references to Brant County:

The Superintendent was cited as an important catalyst to the project's success. S/he provided knowledge of action research, support, a trust relationship and placed no pressure on participants. S/he initiated project involvement, gave strategic support, did the writing, provided extra professional development, gave personal support and was said to facilitate a "feeling of accomplishment" in teacher-participants. (Schmalz, 1998)

The Group of Seven – Lori Barkans, Anna Morgan, Bev MacDonald, teachers, and Jesse MacDonald, principal, and Ed Wilson, Jeff Churchward, teachers, and Fran MacLean, vice-principal - became the workshop leaders for other staff to learn action research; Jean McNiff came one year to teach and support them and Jack came to teach, encourage and support the networks of action researchers on an annual basis. As

the Group of Seven learned the process of action research, I learned as well. It was collaborative learning at its best. After February, 1996 when I began my Ph.D. journey, I became a much better support for them as I researched my own practice.



Fran MacLean, vice-principal, Ed Wilson and Jeff Churchward, classroom teachers, presenting their research at the OERC Conference, December 5, 2000. I have known them for six years. They were part of the Group of Seven.

During the years that I was supporting the pilot projects and then subsequent years – 1996-2001 – I have led many workshops in Ontario teaching various aspects of action research, most in Brant and Grand Erie but others in the Peel and Toronto Boards, in Huron County with Jean McNiff and in Ottawa with Ron Wideman. Every year I brought in Jack to talk to groups both locally and provincially. It was a signal to us of the progress we had made that during 1998-99, Jack and I felt that he had done enough 'awareness sessions' in Grand Erie and that from then on we would only conduct sessions with people who were actually conducting action research and needing support.

I started the monthly meetings of Brant Action Research Network (BARN) and organized the Act Reflect Revise conferences where staff could learn and get support. For the first four years, I held the weight on my shoulders. During the 1997-98

school year, I met once a month with a group of ten to twelve action researchers, providing support and teaching them the process as they needed it. Cheryl Black conducted a project in her classroom as her performance review process and grew steadily in her knowledge and skill. In June, when she presented her project, she was eloquent and the group in the room were impressed with her knowledge of her practice in her classroom. Over the next year, the supports grew steadily in the Brant board with Diane Morgan and Cheryl Black taking more of the weight and then gradually extending the influence into the Grand Erie Board. With the new board, I was able to pass the leadership of the support networks onto Cheryl and Heather Knill-Griesser, Dave and Lynn Abbey and Peter and Paula Rasokas.

In 2000-2001, from a group of seven, the numbers have risen to well over 100 staff conducting action research projects in Grand Erie. Action research is integral to leadership programs; the Ontario Action Researcher is in its fourth volume; Fifteen Masters students are becoming the new cadre of leaders; in my family, principals are researching their practice for their performance appraisal process; An Action Research Approach to Improving Student Learning Using Provincial Test Results (Wideman et al., 2000) study has been published; two groups of Japanese professors have visited to see action research in a school system; the Ontario Educational Research Council (OERC) conference focused on action research in 2000 and I was awarded the Leadership in Action Research Award; the next OERC conference will be held in Brantford, December 6-7, 2001 with Jack as again as keynote presenter; Trudy Gath and Janie Senko presented with me at the Quebec Conference April 19-20, 2001 and the list goes on.

This has been a "passionate enquiry" (Dadds, 1995). It is truly delightful to feel that the personal drive, commitment and passion that I poured into the first three years of action research in the Brant board and despite the slowdown caused by the trauma of restructuring of education, I can now play the supporting role. I encourage, provide opportunities and resources in a supporting role so that now I can focus on and enjoy watching the growth and development of the teacher researchers. While the work is never done, it is interesting that new people are discovering its impact. At the Teacher Training Agency conference "Using Research and Evidence To Improve Teaching and Learning" on March 7, 2001, Jean Rudduck pointed out to the group that while many people have just discovered teacher research, Jack Whitehead has been encouraging and supporting it for over 20 years. That support and inspiration for me and the action researchers in Brant and Grand Erie is, and has been, Jack Whitehead. In addition, I want to make very clear that I was able to do all of these activities because Peter Moffatt, Director of Education, was working with me to create that culture of inquiry and encouraging me in the processes. In the Action Research Kit video he said:

What will be necessary to make action research a vital element is the opportunity to dialogue and share. And I think that is where some of the system supports can come into place. And so, as Director of Education, I think we can support action research by facilitating the dialogue, by seeing that people engaged in any form of research are given the opportunity to share their findings on a stage that they are comfortable with. And certainly research projects involve the need for additional resources, or financial or technical I think the system can facilitate it. I guess the best thing you can do to support action research at the system level is to

create a culture that values research and that recognizes the research that has been carried out and the fact that the teacher is the person best situated to conduct research on learning and improve education. (Delong & Wideman, 1998c, p. 7)

That is the overview. Now I will share the variety of supports that has been created to support and sustain action research and to get the voices of the teachers and administrators heard and published. First the networks that I initiated and developed and now are sustained through the leadership of Cheryl Black, Heather Knill-Griesser, Paula Rasokas, Dave and Lynn Abbey and Karen McDonald.

The Networks: Brant Action Research Network (BARN), Cayuga Action Research (CAR) and Simcoe Action Research Team (SART)

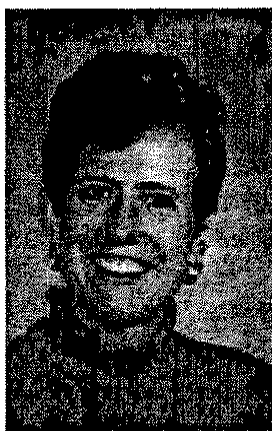
It was at a session that Jack was giving to my 'Leaders of the Future' program that he asked me (in front of the group, of course), "What kinds of sustained support are you providing the leaders so that they can continue their research and learning?" The issue of sustained support is one that has stayed with me and comes to my attention any time I think some effort or program is done. It was with this prompt that in September, 1997, I sent an invitation to the system inviting staff to BARN, modelled after the Bath Action Research Group but with monthly meetings as opposed to weekly. Each session included a presentation and some dialogue and varied in size from ten to twenty participants. In terms of what made the difference in attendance at these meetings, it seemed that careful timing to avoid busy times of the year like report card writing, interesting presentations like 'Using the Internet for Research' and having food available were contributors to higher attendance.

While the earliest presenters were from the Group of Seven, the Brantlyn and Banbury pilot project teams, as the years went on, more new action researchers presented projects. I consistently try to give other people the profile and experience with groups like this and I found that Shayne Mann, one of the secondary teachers was willing to chair the sessions.

During the 1997-98 school year, I led the groups and as Elaine MacAskill, teacher consultant, gained confidence, she took more and more ownership. In the workshops, Elaine worked with Fran MacLean, who was vice-principal at Banbury Heights, one of the pilot schools, to teach the process and coach staff afterwards. This was a frustrating year because of the political unrest and the teacher strike that lasted two weeks but impacted on activities for months before and after. When we did get things going in the January, the group varied from ten to twelve. One of the changes I made in the second year was I added an additional meeting just for follow up from a workshop session on an aspect of the action research process and for informal sharing and dialogue. I had always used Jean McNiff's (1988; 1992) and Jean's and Jack Whitehead's (1996) publications for teaching the research process. A new tool I used that year that Linda Grant had given me was Field-Based Research: A Working Guide (B.C. Ministry of Education, 1992). Also this year I was targeting teachers who were conducting action research projects as part of their teacher performance review (TPR) process. I had managed to get the action research process as part of the TPR system and had the begrudging support if not encouragement of members of Executive Council. One of these teachers was Cheryl Black. When she presented her project on June 11, 1998, the response was electric. Her project, Developing Self-Esteem: An Action Research Project (1998), inspired

many others to take up the challenge to research their own practice in addition to the benefit derived by Cheryl and her students.

In 1998-2000 I was consumed with the work of the amalgamation of the school boards. Cheryl provided the leadership for BARN bringing together the group. She also was



Cheryl Black, vice-principal, action research leader with music in her soul.

the system leader of CAR and SART although there were local leaders in Elaine Cooper, Paula Rasokas and Peter Rasokas. While I attended only a few of those sessions, I always felt that my presence sent a message about the importance of their work and the value of their commitment. We described our research of this

process in our paper for ICTR 1999: How can we, as teacher and superintendent, improve our practice by assessing our influence on each other in our roles as educational leaders and critical friends? (Black & Delong, 1999). The culminating event, a dinner meeting on June 22, 1999 for all three groups, was two presentations, one by Heather Knill-Griesser (2000) from BARN and Lori Weins (2000) from SART. Both of the presentations were reviewed and published in the spring 2000 issue of the Ontario Action Researcher electronic journal (OAR), guest-edited by Cheryl Black and Peter Rasokas (2000).

In 2000-2001, Cheryl Black and Heather Knill-Griesser were co-leaders of BARN with Heather, now teacher consultant, beginning to pick up more of the load of BARN. I was pleased to see the succession

in such capable hands. Both SART and CAR also had capable new leaders – Paula Rasokas and Karen McDonald.

Simcoe Support Action Research Network (SSARN) and Covey Action Research Team (CART)

After a number of workshops on the process of conducting action research given by Jack and me in my new family of schools, I set up support groups that I committed to work with myself even though I was finding direct involvement very difficult since amalgamation and fewer superintendents. I wanted to get action research into the culture of the areas of the board other than Brant. Starting in September, 1999, I met once a month with two groups who accepted an invitation to dialogue about their action research projects: five program support staff from the Simcoe School Support Office and six people who had taken Covey training in July, 1998: five principals, two from the former Brant Area, one from the former Haldimand area and three from the former Norfolk area, and Brad Kuhn, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) Executive Assistant. Because I wanted to clearly demonstrate support for research-based professionalism in my area office and connected to the Covey training, I committed the time to these two groups. They were willing learners and came with commitment to the process and thoughts and writings to share. It was informal and frequently I provided lunch. For a first year group, I was pleased that two written projects from SSARN were submitted for review. Several of them came to the year end session on June 22 and others committed to finishing written projects. One of my regrets was that I was not better prepared for the sessions but perhaps because I have a penchant for organizing everything, their informality was their strength!

Voices of Principals

Linda Grant, OPSTF Executive Assistant, invited me to conduct a research study with principals using action research. OPSTF would fund the production of a paper on the role of the principal for use in responding to the declared intention of the provincial government to remove principals and vice-principals from the union. I began in January of 1997 working with a group of seven elementary principals, five from my family of schools and two others, all volunteers, all of whom had responded to an invitation to research their practice. Elaine MacAskill, Curriculum Assistant – Career Education and Community Relations, joined the group in April. The once a month sessions were a combination of dialogue around the process of researching your practice and the roles and responsibilities of the principal. Sometimes I listened; sometimes I talked about the process; sometimes I facilitated dialogue on themes and metaphors. The sessions were taped and transcribed and I



Rick Denton, Greg Buckles, Dave Pyper, Jesse McDonald, June Ayrhart, elementary principals, members of the Voices of Principals action research group. I have known them for 10-15 years.

frequently asked for written feedback on how I was doing at facilitating the process. All that year, 1997, we made progress on getting their stories written and published. One principal dropped out after a few sessions citing discomfort with producing an adequate story and asked to leave the group. I readily gave her permission to leave but kept the door open for her to return. I didn't

think there were any hard feelings because near the end of the work, she came to hear how we had done.

Six principals produced six wonderful stories, some more ready to publish than others. I had planned to pull the publication together with Elaine in August of 1998. Like the Waterloo Act Reflect Revise conference, obstacles got in the way: Elaine moved to be a vice-principal in another board; Linda moved on to OCT; the principals had their own issues to resolve; I was surviving amalgamation and new responsibilities. This was, however, my responsibility and I had failed to fulfill it. Not like me. It haunts me to this day. It's easy to say that in the pressures of change, things get lost but it doesn't salve my conscience and it doesn't fade away. A failure: doesn't feel good. This is clearly one of those "stories of ruin". (Lather, 1994 in MacLure, 1996)

I did, however, learn a great deal about supporting action research. This was my first group since the action research pilot group. Several sessions at the beginning were committed simply to building a supportive atmosphere where it was safe to talk about your values, beliefs, concerns and failures. The attendance at the sessions indicated their enjoyment of the sessions and commitment to the project. I worked hard at letting them find their own way to express their values and explanation of their professional lives. As I said, "I want to avoid being prescriptive so that your stories will be individual and true to your lives. There is no model for telling your story." (transcript of session, April, 1997). They were willing gatherers of data around their practice. The most difficult part was getting them to write their stories. I met with some of them individually to see if I could help get them writing. Greg Buckles who was one of the group responded with trepidation to the writing process. Gradually during the

summer and fall of 1997, some stories started coming in and Elaine and I reviewed them, gave them feedback and in the fall there were four completed stories and then by early in 1998, all six. I was beginning to realize that I needed to find a way to get the action researchers writing earlier in the process. This was confirmed for me in working with Cheryl and BARN.

Now I want to talk about the conferences that I have planned and/or supported so that teachers' and administrators' voices would be heard and their research and learning would be shared on comfortable platforms (Moffatt in DeLong & Wideman, 1998c) and in supportive communities.

CONFERENCES

I Act Reflect Revise, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001
The Ministry of Education Innovation Fund money was allocated for the 1995-96 school year but Linda Grant and I knew that we could manage to stretch it out until Christmas of 1996. On the plane to New York AERA in April of 1996, we talked about next steps and decided to run another Act Reflect Revise (ARR) forum, this time in Brantford and to make it self-sufficient. The conference involved many of the same players-Jack, Tom, Lynne, and Ron. The exception was that by the time of the conference, Marg Couture, Executive Assistant at OPSTF replaced Linda who had taken a new job at the Ontario College of Teachers. Also Jean McNiff was going to attend. I was a member of the conference planning team, introducing speakers and leading several sessions.

I have never been able to just do one thing at a time. Ron and I used the conference as an invitation to participants to contribute to a second publication of action research projects as part of a kit that would include a video and Jean McNiff's booklet which she

graciously donated. During the forum, board program staff organized interviews with fifteen participants taped by a local videographer to log over six hours of tape. As if organizing that wasn't enough, I also scheduled a meeting of my validation team-Jean, Jack, Tom, Linda, Andre Dolbec for University of Quebec in Hull and Peter Moffatt (transcript and video 23/02/97). In addition I chaired a meeting of an action research symposium group with the same group with the addition of Marg and Jack MacFadden, president of Ontario Education Research Council. (transcript, 23/02/97) Jennifer James (1996) says that "Entrepreneurs and those with what I call 'menagerie minds' create resilience by always being immersed in a variety of projects and interests. They never depend on only one way to energize themselves, solve a problem or earn a living." (p. 43) I'm not sure those around me think I create resilience but I do get energy from a variety of projects and interests.

The evaluations of the conference were so good (ARR II Evaluations, 1998) that another ARR forum ran in Grand Bend in April of 1998. Again Jack, Tom, Ron and I were involved, the Brantlyn and Banbury teams presented as well as the new group of action researchers from Brant including the compensatory education project by Ruth Mills (2000), the Voices of Principals with Greg Buckles and Dave Pyper, Elaine MacAskill, Curriculum Assistant for Career Education and Community Relations, on beginning action research and Ron Wideman and I presented the Action Research Kit (1998) which had just been released.

Just when you think you can assume something is a 'fixture', it falls apart. A third forum planned for April, 1999 in Waterloo County failed. I was very disappointed and made last minute efforts to keep it alive but

to no avail. It failed for lack of registration but mostly because of staff change and overload – all of us – Marg Couture, Ron Wideman, Waterloo staff, me – were in the throes of upheaval and amalgamation. These conferences are very much dependent on the local team and in this case the Waterloo superintendent who contracted to support the conference retired and no one picked up the responsibility. However, we learned some things about what we needed to do for the next one. So I talked to Marg Couture in June, 1999 and offered to hold the Act Reflect Revise Forum on February 17-18, 2000 in Brantford with a plan in place. Cheryl Black volunteered to chair the committee; several members of Grand Erie support groups and James Ellsworth, Program Co-ordinator, would be committee members along with ETFO representatives; Jack would be keynote speaker; Peter Moffatt was supportive and would give the luncheon address; Marg Couture and ETFO would manage the contracts, marketing and registration; Ron Wideman would be a facilitator; I would access my local resources and provincial networks for support and we would continue to use the forum model with facilitated sessions.

These pieces came together very quickly because of my conference-planning knowledge, my past experience with the ARR, because of my academic and professional networks and because of the critical mass of action researchers in the board: a combination of knowledge, experience, relationships and connections. The personal relationships and experience make projects like this enjoyable. Then a transition took place with the combination of ARR and OERC Conferences.

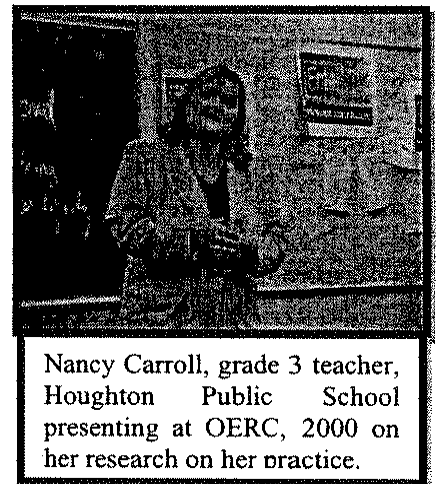
II. Ontario Educational Research Council Conference, (OERC), 1997-2001

Since 1996, wherever I've been involved in educator groups, I have taken the action research process with me. With one of these

groups, the Ontario Educational Research Council (OERC) which holds an annual conference in the first week of December in Toronto I have supported and encouraged the inclusion of Jack as a keynote speaker, and local action researchers (Branlyn and Banbury teams, James Ellsworth, Cheryl Black) as well as myself and Ron Wideman to present at the conference since 1997.

My involvement on the Ontario Educational Research Council (OERC) Board as President-elect and my work on the annual conference is another vehicle for supporting action research. I have encouraged and supported teacher researchers to present their research at this conference for the years of 1999 and 2000 and brought Jack Whitehead to speak to the gathering. At the 2000 conference, fifteen Masters students (teachers, consultants and school administrators), four consultants and three teachers presented their action research projects and three other teachers attended with my support. The GEDSB group represented a significant number of the group in attendance.

The value of getting teacher researchers to present and be publically accountable for their learning is captured in "Cohort Story: Re-Searching Together" by Robert Ogilvie (2000), one of the Master's students. I had worked hard to get them all in attendance at the OERC conference in 2000 in terms of finding the money and organizing the sessions with Jack, but the benefit was clear:



Nancy Carroll, grade 3 teacher, Houghton Public School presenting at OERC, 2000 on her research on her practice.

We are lined up side by side in a manner that reminds me of Monday Night Football where players introduce themselves in little video clips....

Phillip Sallesky, Intermediate core French, Grand Erie District, .negotiating curriculum.

Janie Senko, Grade 5, Grand Erie District,..... integrating curriculum

Marilyn Davis, Secondary English, Grand Erie District.... improving student writing.

And so it goes, through all thirteen of us.....not linebackers, quarterbacks and kickers, and hardly the Miami Dolphins, but a real team nonetheless. We are the Brock/Grand Erie Masters Cohort, and seated in a row on either side of Jack Whitehead, we recite the litany of our names, jobs, and thesis/project topics to the assembled audience at the 2000 Ontario Educational Research Council conference. I am the first to speak and as we move down the line I am at first attentive to the audience, but then quickly drawn back to a focus on us, for I am forcefully struck by how articulate, clear and confident we have all become. This is not at all the nervous,

halting and uncertain group which began together fifteen months ago, and I wonder yet again about the process that has enabled this to be so." (p.1)

I know from my own experience of presenting my work and holding myself accountable in a public forum that the preparation is as important as the actual presentation. A great deal of learning goes on as I try to synthesize what I've learned from my research and the dialogue with the academic and practitioner groups is invaluable in moving my thinking onto the next stage. In December 2001, Ontario Educational Research Council Conference, 2001, Brantford, Ontario: Co-Sponsored by Grand Erie DSB and York Region DSB: "Improving Student Learning: How do I-You Know?" will again showcase the work of teacher researchers in GEDSB and other boards.



The OERC Conference team: Peter Rasokas, Heather Knill-Griesser, Cheryl Black, me, Karen McDonald, Lynn Abbey, Geoff Suderman-Gladwell, Dave Abbey.

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