

Stakeholders as Researchers: Cooperative Inquiry and the Leadership Role of School Librarians

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Abstract: Cooperative inquiry (CI), a form of qualitative research used in community building, has not been used with school librarians and in very few schools. Through the lens of Formative Leadership Theory, the researchers studied the abilities of three new school librarians trained in CI and leadership to engage in collaborative problem solving for technology-related school challenges. Due to internal and external factors, participants experienced various levels of success in the CI process and gained positive recognition from their colleagues for exhibiting traits of formative leaders.

Keywords: school librarians, cooperative inquiry, technology integration, formative leadership

1. Introduction

Technology integration is an increasingly crucial element of teaching and learning that requires school-based leadership in order to be consistent and relevant. Library education has traditionally been at the forefront of embracing new technologies, but only in the last decade or so have library and information science (LIS) programs also focused on leadership, particularly in a school library context. The U.S. Institute of Museum and Library and Services (IMLS) has served as a catalyst for leadership education by funding such programs as Project LEAD which was developed and implemented over three phases by the Florida State University School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS).

Project LEAD is a leadership curriculum for school librarians with emphases on technology integration, instructional leadership, reading expertise, and organizational leadership. Thirty outstanding teachers from Florida were selected for a cohort that completed the curriculum and engaged in leadership activities as part of a master's degree in LIS. Given all the opportunities of the Project LEAD program, the question remained: Would graduates enact a leadership role when they took positions as school librarians? One study of the

Project LEAD cohort (Smith, 2011) revealed that school librarians felt most confident to lead was technology integration, so it was determined to focus on this leadership area in this research.

Cooperative inquiry (CI), a leadership-in-action research methodology that includes leadership development as part of its process, is uniquely suited to answer this question. CI research aims to engage and empower practitioners as they partner with researchers in documenting, interpreting and disseminating insights from their own experience (Heron, 2009). It has not been applied in any known library setting. Project LEAD provided an excellent context in which to test this powerful research methodology with new school librarians. This paper presents the cases of three who were selected to participate in a year-long study of their leadership practices using CI.

1.1 Research Questions

Participant experiences form the driving research question of this study: *How can the CI methodology be used to evaluate the outcomes of school librarian leadership in technology integration?* During the course of the study, the researchers investigated the following questions:

1. To what extent are new school librarians able to exercise formative leadership to organize and convene cooperative inquiry groups in their schools?
2. What are the factors common to successful cooperative inquiry processes led by school librarians?
3. How do new school librarians feel that the cooperative inquiry process integrated with their own leadership styles and abilities?

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Formative Leadership Theory (Ash & Persall 2004) is based on the belief that school leadership is not reserved only for administrators and that all educators should enhance student learning and the abilities of educators within the school (Avolio & Gibbons, 1988). As educational organizations shift to a greater recognition that a school is a community with unique cultural aspects and many equally important roles (Maxfield & Flumerfelt, 2009), the idea that leadership can develop in response to opportunity and experience is especially appropriate.

According to Ash and Persall (2000), nascent leaders may not be fully aware of how their leadership capabilities are developing until they act and reflect on actual leadership events. By using storytelling and modeling to communicate these formative experiences in later contexts (Janson, 2008), leaders are well-suited to use collaborative inquiry and learning to address organizational problems. Formative Leadership Theory accommodates the school librarian's leadership roles in instruction, collaboration, resource provision, and administration.

In light of the possibilities and challenges inherent in technology integration and leadership development, this study explored ways in which school librarians asserted, enacted, and documented their leadership development. Using the lens of formative leadership to view the CI process in school librarian-led technology integration, this study lends insight into the education, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful in this role.

2. Literature Review

Teachers, even in schools and districts committed to integration, struggle to effectively integrate technology (Hixon, 2009). Many studies of school library characteristics (Scholastic, 2008) found that school librarians with technology leadership were more likely to co-plan and co-teach with teachers and provide training for teachers. Other studies (Achterman, 2008; Mardis, 2007) reported school librarians who acted as technology leaders impacted academic success.

School librarians have a professional imperative to teach students new literacies that go beyond knowing how to use technology tools to create and communicate new learning (ALA, 2007). Students need these new literacies to be ethical, legal, and safe participants in digital culture. Now, “school librarians are in a prime position to make significant and meaningful contributions toward the integration of 21st century literacy skills” (Hanson-Baldauf & Hughes-Hassell, 2009, p. 4).

School librarians’ knowledge of pedagogy, curriculum, information, and cooperative work makes them valuable leadership assets (Asselin, 2005; Vansickle, 2000). The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) first described the technology leadership role in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (2009). These guidelines delineated multiple opportunities for school librarians to act as leaders and collaborators by modeling and promoting the use of technology for learning.

However, the leadership role of the school librarian in technology integration has been undefined for administrators, teachers, and, often, for the school librarians themselves (Asselin, 2005; Everhart & Dresang, 2007). Research by Smith (2011) suggested that effective school library leaders benefit from leadership training, mentoring, professional development, and administrative support. Training must foster risk-taking, an essential aspect of embracing technology and a self-descriptor rarely used by preservice school librarians. To date, school leadership literature has been dominated by theories and research designs that focus on the power of an individual to lead (Muijs & Harris, 2003). However, studies of effective school leadership often conclude that it is distributed, collective, and empowering (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

3. Methodology

CI, the method upon which this project is based, is an appropriate leadership approach because it is designed for institutions responsible with social transformation (Ospina, et al, 2004) like schools.

CI is an emergent process that contributes to the acquisition and creation of knowledge, deepens the leadership potential of all participants, and strengthens trusting and collaborative partnerships and relationships among group members (Oates, 2002). CI is designed to bridge the perspectives and approaches of diverse stakeholders in a situation (Ospina, El Hadidy, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008); for the purposes of this study, the CI process was used to merge the viewpoints and experiences of school librarians, teachers, technology personnel, administrators, and other key school stakeholders in solving a mutually agreed-upon problem: *What is an issue facing our school community that can be*

addressed with technology? CI participants inquired through cycles of action and reflection in an effort to "heal" their divergent points of view into a common solution (Heron, 1995).

Alcántara (2009) makes a distinction between two types of cooperative inquiry groups. Spontaneous cooperative inquiry groups are those that are initiated, designed, and self-directed by the co-inquirers themselves whereas systematic cooperative inquiry groups are organized and managed by others who maintain vested interests in the research outcomes. Lawson (2008) revealed that the five critical factors that have a direct impact on the production of knowledge in a both types of inquiry groups are environment, relationships, trust, respect, and facilitation.

3.1. Study Design

This study reports the experiences of three school librarians who led cooperative inquiry projects in their schools. The participants were recent LIS graduates and in their first year as school librarians.

3.1.1 Phase I: Preparing Participants for CI

The initial phase of the project, training in the CI process, was coordinated over a two-day period by a team of two expert facilitators from the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA), New York University and the researchers from Florida State University. The RCLA facilitators introduced fundamental principles of CI, ways to start a CI group, how to choose an inquiry question, the cycle of action and reflection, and the importance of holding the validation principles through the inquiry. This first phase of the project functioned as the start of systematic inquiry in which the researchers posited the primary research question of this study: *What is the school librarian's role in technology integration?*

Training activities and group discussion prepare participants to guide spontaneous school-based inquiries. The researchers and RCLA facilitators worked with the school librarian participants to brainstorm examples of how each one could tailor the research question to their own site and methods for moving the inquiry ahead. This evolved into the localized, secondary question: *What is an issue in our school which can be addressed with technology?*

With the help of facilitators, they identified possible challenges they might face in their schools: lack of time, managing authority and power and lack of clarity from school members on what they could learn and/or obtain from participating in the process.

3.1.2. Phase 2: Creation of School-Based Teams and Enactment of CI

At their schools, participants were responsible for selecting and cultivating their own school-based teams. Each school librarian began by identifying key participants from the school community and invited potential team members in writing. The invitations included information regarding the nature of the cooperative inquiry (i.e., to identify a school-based technology integration problem) and an explanation of the CI process. By accepting the invitation, team members committed to attending the entirety of each meeting; giving the meeting activity their full attention; respecting rules of constructive dialogue; and participating in the action/reflection cycle.

After the team was established, the school librarian held a series of CI meetings about a need in their school that could be met with technology. The meetings included: list possible focuses of the inquiry; agree upon a focus for the inquiry through dialogue; analyze the underlying problem of the inquiry; devise and prioritize possible solutions to the problem; determine implementation processes and outcome measures for the solutions; enact the solution; reflect on the effectiveness of the solution; and repeat the process if necessary. Each school was given \$6000 to finance their technology projects. In keeping with the procedures of CI, each school librarian organized the meeting spaces and agendas, took notes, and shared the notes with the team members.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The participants met with the researchers throughout the project. They shared their CI experiences via videoconference, online discussions, email, and journals. Journal entries were prompted by questions that were both descriptive and reflective, asking participants to not only record their activities, but also to reflect on their leadership styles and development as new professionals. Because the group members had also known the researchers and each other as students in Project LEAD, they had informal communication and felt comfortable contacting the researchers for advice and feedback.

The researchers analyzed the participants' artifacts for themes that reflected aspects of CI and Formative Leadership Theory.

4. Results

Three participants' experiences, representative cases, are presented in this paper. Penny, Christine, and Jennifer conducted their spontaneous cooperative inquiries during their first year as a school librarian. They achieved high, intermediate, and low levels of success in leading their CI teams. This section presents summaries of their cases.

4.1. Penny: High Level of Success

Penny's CI took place in an elementary school. Her team consisted of two teachers, the assistant principal, and a parent with technology expertise and community connections. Their inquiry was centered on the question, "How can teachers quickly and easily integrate technology into their instruction?" The team's solution was to have the school librarian meet with classes every two weeks and teach students alongside their teachers how to integrate new hardware or software by modeling.

Penny reported a high level of satisfaction with her CI. She held the meetings in the school library and used a SmartBoard to guide the discussion. Penny felt that the team worked well together because they had already been using other cooperative and collaborative approaches for professional development in the school district. The CI team's trust was strong; group members were eager to work together and follow through on tasks for one another. Penny reported that she strategically invited team members based on their abilities to represent a variety of perspectives. This balance engendered respect among the group. Penny felt that her facilitation was important to the

success of the group and she worked very hard to ensure that every meeting was well organized and focused.

4.2. Christine: Intermediate Level of Success

Christine's CI took place in a middle school. Her team consisted of the principal, the network manager, the instructional TV teacher, a social studies teacher, a math teacher, a music teacher, and language arts teacher. Their inquiry was based on the question, "How can we use technology to increase student motivation?" The team decided to buy iPads in an attempt to motivate students in after-school tutoring to approach learning in a different way.

Christine reported an intermediate level of success with her CI. She conducted the meetings in the library after school and provided snacks. She constructed a wiki for communication and ensured equal talk time for everyone in meetings. Group members were each accountable for something between meetings; no one had to carry all the weight. Through the process, Christine came to realize that facilitating consensus was leadership.

The group experienced some distrust because a few members disagreed with the device choice. The network manager, who was originally supportive, blocked the download of apps once the iPads were purchased. Despite these initial difficulties balancing leader and facilitator roles, Christine reported that she would use the CI process again. She felt that the \$6000 funding and University sponsorship heightened her colleagues' regard for the school librarian's leadership role.

4.3. Jennifer: Low Level of Success

Jennifer's CI took place in an elementary school. Her CI team consisted of volunteers - two teachers, a parent liaison, a volunteer coordinator, and a technology coordinator. The CI team explored, "How can parents be taught the importance of technology to their child's education?" In response, the team designed workshops for parents to learn basic computer skills such as email, web searching, and filling out job applications.

Although Jennifer felt good about the after-school library-based meetings and their professional tone, she felt that more time for the team to establish personal relationships would have been beneficial. Perhaps as a result, the team suffered interpersonal conflict, lack of shared purpose, and erratic attendance. The school librarian was left to execute many of the team's plans. Yet, Jennifer is willing to use CI again and considers many of her experiences "lessons learned."

5. Discussion and Conclusion

For school librarians, cooperative inquiry can be a powerful means to develop the competencies and awareness necessary to lead effectively in a variety of educational and political contexts (Kasl & Yorks, 2010). The CI process allows school librarians to merge the perspectives of diverse stakeholders through collaborative problem solving. This study, a pioneering effort in the use of CI in a school library setting, provides definitive research findings that are a starting point for future researchers and education.

RQ1. To what extent are new school librarians able to exercise formative leadership to organize and convene cooperative inquiry groups in their schools?

The participants exhibited most of the formative leadership traits, mainly through strategic selection of their CI teams, skillful discussion facilitation, and consistent administration of the CI process. Jennifer's difficulties may be traced to allowing the group to self-select, rather than to deliberately invite influential members of the school community. Her team, even with persistent reminders that Jennifer was a facilitator and not the sole leader, continued to look to her to set the meeting agendas and order of events. She also described group dynamics as very poor. Given that the CI participants were first year school librarians in these schools, it is understandable that team selection was challenging. Those who were successful built teams that were a cross-section of the faculty and also included the technology coordinators and principal.

RQ2. What are the factors common to successful cooperative inquiry processes led by school librarians?

Participants who led a successful CI process noted careful team selection, sensitive and diplomatic discussion facilitation, and professional follow-through as determining factors. The participants emphasized the success of group ownership of problem and process. A well-conducted CI process helped the inquiry teams focus to address problems in their schools with technology and quickly and collaboratively propose possible solutions. Training in the CI process was essential. The skills on how to be an effective listener, facilitation, focusing the group, diversifying their CI group, discussing scenarios and modeling of the process were all reported as being helpful in achieving their goals for their project.

RQ3. How do new school librarians feel that the cooperative inquiry process integrated with their own leadership styles and abilities?

For new school librarians, leadership involves both forming their insights into school culture as well as influencing colleagues' ideas of what school librarians can and should do. The Project LEAD education gave them the confidence to tackle their new positions as school librarians from the perspective of a leader, particularly in the area of technology integration. The CI process gave them a technique to enact and reflect on this leadership with others.

Schools are hierarchical, driven by policy, and framed by concrete objectives and learning standards. Many teachers, hindered by scarce time and resources, are unsure how to participate in decision-making and inquiry. Penny, the most successful participant remarked, "I found that I had to re-think and revise many of the activities to relate to the school setting. It felt very 'corporate' to me." Based on comments like these, the researchers are currently investigating an adaptation to the CI process model that might make it more compatible with school librarian leadership.

Successful teams were those in which the school librarian invited diverse and influential team members. Although the school librarians were new and did

not know other staff members, they relied on their leadership education to determine critical members for their teams. In the case of low success, Jennifer asked for volunteers. Heron (2009) noted the importance for CI facilitators to formally invite potential members to set the stage for mutual trust, respect and understanding throughout the course of the entire process.

Initially, the school librarians reported that their teams looked to them to be a formal leader. It may be that environment played a role in this perception (Alcántara 2009). The participants held all of their meetings in the school library, a space they controlled. Although the participants described their libraries as excellent environments, holding meetings at other places in the school could reinforce the team concept of the CI. Those who maximized their effectiveness as leaders did so by trusting the CI cycle and process. Leaders confronted fear and uncertainty (Ash & Persall, 2004) from other team members by facilitating communication at and between meetings and continuing to ask questions.

Existing literature does not address the importance of data collection in the CI method as was emphasized by these participants. Given the emphasis on data for decision-making in schools today, this is not surprising. Those who collected pre and post data felt it reinforced confidence in their leadership abilities. It was also suggested to collect anecdotal student data in addition to more formal data throughout the project.

Cooperative inquiry proved to be a viable methodology to evaluate the outcomes of library education for school librarianship leadership in technology integration. The process of action and reflection, coupled with the concept of participant researchers, allows for data to be collected in an unobtrusive manner. The cycle of action and reflection can be spread out or condensed, depending on the needs of the participants. It is helpful to provide prompts at various points for focused reflection as this leads to a richer discussion, allows the participants to model and tell stories, and for researchers to compare data among cases.

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