Transforming teaching and learning practice by inviting students to become evaluators of my practice

Cathy Griffin

Cathy Griffin

Bluewater District School Board

Abstract

In this article, I will describe how research into my Grade Six students' attitudes towards math turned into a joint action research project with my students using student feedback to inform and improve my practice. I will focus on evidence that this sort of authentic, democratic co-learning environment can transcend the constraints of moral poverty by improving teaching practice and that it is an effective model for students to replicate in order to voice rich moral questions in the form of, "How can I improve my learning?" I will share my learning from the democratic evaluations of my teaching by my grade 6/7 students who are ten and eleven years old. In addition, I will provide evidence of the enhanced culture of inquiry in the community of learners within my classroom. My visual narratives are intended to inform my own practice as well as the practice of my students.

Keywords: transformation; student evaluators; teaching and learning

1. Purpose

My purpose in writing this article is two-fold. First, it is a way for me to hold myself accountable to my value of authenticity in making public what I feel is important in my work as a lifelong learner, as a practitioner trying to improve my own practice. I held myself accountable within the culture of inquiry in my classroom as I explained what I was doing, why I was doing it and enlisted their help to evaluate our progress as individual learners and as a culture of inquiry. I held myself accountable in the culture of inquiry with Jack Whitehead, Jackie Delong and Liz Campbell as we worked collaboratively in creating this paper. Finally, I hold myself accountable to a wider audience of the EJOLTs reviewers and readers as I make my story and conclusions public. At each level, I invite both validation and critique as I tell my story and draw conclusions about my learning, our collective learning process and the learning of my students.

Second, and most important, I wish to communicate how deeply important it is that we as educators extend ourselves in a loving way to our students, that we carefully build trust in our relationships and that we really listen to their voices in an open and honest way without trying to fit their words into our notion of who they are. This concept can be applied to any relationship, but in my experience there is a deep, traditional hierarchy which is reinforced in many overt and covert ways in the education system. This hierarchy can treat students as vessels to be filled and measured rather than equals sharing a learning journey, capable of navigating and mapping their own journey. I want to communicate how I struggle to break down this hierarchy which is ingrained in both policy, in my own practice and in the results of this struggle.

2. Data collection

Our data, as a group, are drawn from the descriptions and explanations of the action research of all four researchers. My data have been drawn from my master's Major Research Project, my journals from the 2012-2013 school year, student feedback collected orally and recorded in classroom anchor charts, video recordings of students working in groups with and without me and with me one-on-one, video recordings of students giving me feedback after watching videos of me working with them, student self-assessment, and mid-year report card comments. A fuller description of how we, as a group, collect and analyze video data is located in the introductory article.

3. Background to my values as an educator

In my Master's thesis (Griffin, 2011), I describe my journey as learning to recognize a living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989) central in both my teaching and personal lives - I wished to build deep and meaningful relationships in my personal and professional lives and yet I sensed that coping mechanisms I had developed as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) were preventing me from building these relationships. I felt my tendency towards being very protective of peoples' and my own privacy was preventing me from really getting to know my students personally. I am deeply concerned for the wellbeing of my students but particularly those at risk and know that a connection to me as their teacher is one way to build their resilience, their ability to cope with any difficulty they encounter in life. Barr and

Parett (2008) confirm that "the most important factor affecting students' learning is the teacher" (p.16).

Barr and Parett (2008) describe "students at risk" as a broad range of students who are underachieving for whatever reason, whether it be financial poverty, disengagement, lack of motivation or upheaval at home (p. 1-2). When I talk about students "at risk" I think of individuals I have met in my classroom - students who suffer from anxiety, fear, self-loathing, lack of control over their emotions, students who have a history of abuse, students who practice ineffective ways of communicating with others and students who seem consistently unhappy or unable to thrive in a school setting. By thriving, I do not mean achieving according to a national or provincial academic standard, although this may be the case. Thriving is a state of authenticity or wholeheartedness in which one is capable of clearly seeing and being seen for who one is, paired with a personal and social acceptance of this identity. Tara Brach (2012), describes this concept: "The two parts of genuine acceptance — seeing clearly and holding our experience with compassion — are as interdependent as the two wings of a great bird. Together, they enable us to fly and be free."

It is a state which, in my experience, is not correlated with academic achievement. However, it is the inability to achieve this state which I refer to as a moral poverty and which can prevent anyone, students included, from thriving personally, socially and/or academically.

In his book, "Leadership for an age of wisdom," Branson (2009) describes how leaders can only achieve a state of "inner freedom" in which they are free of "self-deceit, impulsiveness, and a lack of self-control" (p. 67). This state of inner freedom, a state of authenticity which I am describing as a necessity for thriving, can only occur when one develops an explicit or epistemological understanding of one's ontology:

> The cornerstone of such authenticity is in being able to always present yourself as having consistency between your words and your deeds – to show a natural and sincere congruence between the values you express in words and those you display in your leadership actions. In other words, authenticity begins in knowing yourself, in knowing your actual values, and in having self-knowledge. This means that an authentic leader must willingly be committed to regular self-reflection and self-inquiry but not of a superficial kind... such deep self-reflection and self-inquiry enables leaders to fully understand how their mind and body are reacting to the immediate experience so that any unhelpful thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and values can be overcome in order to liberate all of the necessary helpful cognitive and consciousness thoughts that will enable them to act in the most authentic and appropriate way. This is about achieving the inner victory. (Branson, 2009, p. 32)

In his thought-provoking critique of this paper, Tim Cain questioned whether the term "moral poverty" should be applied to what Liz Campbell, Jack Whitehead, Jackie Delong and I experience and are trying to address in our various cultures of inquiry. He explains:

> I've had quite a privileged life really, and haven't experienced a lot of poverty but, as I understand it, poverty is hunger. It's a dull ache that doesnt' go away. It's lethargy. It's continual anxiety, every time you wake up. Fear of the bailiff. (Cain, 2013)

What I am trying to make clear is that some of us, including students in our classrooms, have suffered or do suffer from the effects of abuse or a condition which creates a mental hunger, a dull ache that doesn't go away. Some of us do live with a constant, pervasive feeling of shame and a fear that someone will find out just how unworthy we are. Many survivors of CSA "come to believe that they are bad, that they did not deserve to be taken care of, and that they in fact deserved abuse. They feel isolated and alone" (Bass & Davis, 2008). Although they may feel unworthy of love or care, the abuse itself is not confused with love. Bass and Davis (2008) explain that for female survivors of CSA, "Thriving means enjoying a feeling of wholeheartedness, satisfaction in your life and work, genuine love in your relationship, pleasure in your body" (p. xxiv). Bass and Davis, too, look to self-reflection, developing an understanding of oneself as a first step forward. In their words, survivors need to "differentiate between the ways your coping mechanisms are beneficial and the ways they may be hurting you. Then you can celebrate your strengths while you start to change the patterns that no longer serve you" (p. 13). Shame researcher, Brene Brown (2010) echoes the same self-awareness and self-acceptance model of healing I spoke of above, "Shame cannot hold on when we name it. Shame cannot survive empathy." (Brown, 2010)

What I have discovered in doing the sort of work, and will describe in this paper, is that the vast majority of my students question who they are, experience anxiety, and are concerned about how I and others perceive them. In *The Soul of Education,* Kessler (2000) describes these feelings as the, "yearnings, wonder, wisdom, fear and confusion of students" (p. x) and calls for more attention to be paid to these matters in all classrooms, as all students can benefit from a soulful curriculum:

> When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and talents they have feared would provoke jealousy in even their best friends. They risk exposing the pain and shame that peers might judge as weakness. Seeing deeply into the perspectives of others, accepting what has felt unworthy in themselves, students discover compassion and begin to learn about forgiveness. (Kessler, 2000, p. x)

Tara Brach (2005) reflects on the pervasiveness of feelings of unworthiness in the general public:

> Several years ago the Dalai Lama was meeting with a group of western teachers and he expressed astonishment at the degree of self-aversion and feelings of unworthiness that are reported by western students. Shame, or self-aversion, is the most pervasive type of contemporary suffering. And what this means is that for awakening beings of our time, people on the spiritual path, that paying attention to shame, paying attention to self-aversion is a necessary gateway for awakening. It's not something to get rid of, rather the way we pay attention to self-aversion is actually the grounds of the path. (Ch. 1, 3:47-4.39 minutes)

Through my own self-reflection and reflection with my validation group during my Master's work, I discovered that my core values are love, authenticity and trust. In my Master's thesis (Griffin, 2011) I was able to show how these values were part of my ontology, part of who I am because of early experiences in my life. I was only able to identify them by studying my thought patterns, my beliefs, my actions and reactions and by listening to others reflect my ideas back to me. As I gained an explicit understanding of these values I

was able to develop an epistemological understanding of my values and use this knowledge to guide future action. I use these values epistemologically in the sense that they form the standards of judgment I use to evaluate the validity of my contributions to educational knowledge.

I want to stress that I am not suggesting that teachers take on the role of a therapist to deal with the sort of moral poverty I have described. I have learned that my tendency to protect my own personal life and that of others is important, valid and non-negotiable. However, I have found a way to connect personally with my students, to allow them the opportunity to see me and accept me for who I am and who I am trying to be as a teacher. By opening up my practice to democratic evaluation, I find students respond by letting me know who they are as a learner and they begin to trust that I accept this version of themselves. I will describe this process in the remainder of this paper.

4. Background to this research project

I teach Grade 6/7 at a small rural school in South Western Ontario. I have eight Grade Seven students and 18 Grade Sixes. About a third of the population at our school is either Pennsylvania Dutch or Mexican Mennonite with English as a second dialect. The majority of the remaining students are Caucasian Canadian of various ethnic descents. This is my third year teaching Grade 6 and my second year with a split Grade 6/7 class. I have been teaching for about fifteen years. I completed my Masters of Education with Brock University in 2011. Since meeting Jackie through this programme, I have gradually attempted to implement what I learned from her about action research and forming cultures-of-inquiry with my students.

This paper chronicles my success during the 2012-2013 school year arriving at the goal of having students articulate questions that address who they are as learners through the context of mathematics. I began teaching this year with the firm belief in the value of cultures of inquiry and problem solving in math. I have tried to live according to my values of authenticity, trust and love and use them as personal standards of judgment to guide me in developing a classroom culture with my students. I want my students to feel safe, to trust me, to trust themselves as learners and to feel that I am being authentic in my words and actions. In addition, my goal in building a safe, trusting environment, is that they will have the courage to reveal their authentic selves. Although, I do not always explicitly tell my students that I love them, as do Jackie and Liz, I attempt to show them this in both words and deeds. I use the same definition for love as Liz, "Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (Peck, 1978, p. 81).

A group of teachers and I worked on improving our instruction of mathematics within an action research project with Ontario Ministry of Education funding in the 2012/13 school year under the programme title: Teacher Leadership Learning Project (TLLP). We identified that a culture-of-inquiry looks like students asking their own questions and discovering principles for themselves rather than being instructed. It includes dialogue and students sharing their ideas with each other. In problem solving, there is an entry point for each student in the class at different ability levels. Common discussion happens between students at different levels because the problems share common themes or big ideas. If you walked into my classroom I would want you to see students engaged in their work, taking risks,

trying different strategies, talking to each other about what they are doing, challenging each other's ideas and, above all, enjoying the process.

However, as I approached the end of November, 2012 and we had been working on this project, I still had some students in my class saying, "Awwww, math!" when they saw it on the day's schedule. I identified this as my living contradiction (Whitehead, 1989). I wanted my students to value our problem solving sessions as I did. I wanted them to feel safe and trust and enjoy the process of problem solving but this appeared not to be the case. So I set about on an action research project.

Action that I took to improve student attitudes in math:

1. Research student attitudes towards math

2. Intentionally model inviting criticism of my own practice

3. Act on results of attitude survey with students as co-researchers

4. Reflect on results using video data

5. Repeat 3 & 4 as needed

6. Meet with critical friends (TLLP group, Jack, Jackie and Liz)

7. Honour student voice on report cards

I am claiming that by intentionally asking my students to give me feedback and using this feedback for action research, I am able to change my teaching practices to create an authentic, democratic co-learning environment. Indicators of my success include teacher and students as co-learners (learning from and with each other), feedback flowing from student to teacher and vice versa and changes made to my teaching practice which honour my students' embodied knowledge.

I also claim that modelling the action-research process through inviting criticism of my own teaching practice and acting on feedback received is an effective way to lead into student-directed action research projects addressing issues of moral poverty. Indicators of my success are their actual questions which are asked in the form, "How can I improve my learning?" and my acknowledgement of the importance of their questions and their voices which I include in their words in report cards.

5. Building trust and respect in the classroom

The following 2:34 minute video shows me interacting with students in ways I believe demonstrate me living according to my values throughout this study. I do not present the clips to create the illusion that this is how I teach all of the time but rather to demonstrate that I am mindful of the moments in which I know what I am doing is right and true to my values. The use of video allows me to capture these moments, heighten my awareness of what I am doing in the moment and allows me to reflect more accurately afterward. It also allows me to seek validation for what I believe to be true about my teaching. I honour the diverse values and beliefs of my students and their families about the use of technology by angling the video camera in such a way as to capture only those students with permission to share their images publicly.

The video begins with three examples of how I believe I live my value of authenticity by assuring the group of students that I am learning with them, reflecting on what I do and trying to improve. I admit that I make mistakes and ask for their feedback in how what I do affects them. The second section shows two clips in which I believe I am demonstrating my love for my students. In the first example, I demonstrate joy and excitement in celebrating a student's original thinking. In the second example, I am assuring a student who has expressed concern about the Grade 6 standardized testing that, "I don't care about EQAO I care about you!" EQAO is the Ontario standardized testing authority.

Video 1.   Evidence of how I teach to my values of authenticity and love
(http://youtu.be/4Wah1YLgSQY)

6. Unveiling embodied knowledge to develop a democratic, reciprocal learning relationship with students

In late November, 2012 I decided to do an in-class, informal survey to find the source of their negative attitudes towards math. I was inspired by the title of a chapter in a book by Judy Willis (2010) entitled Learning to Love Math. The chapter title is, "Reversing math negativity with an attitude makeover." I explained that I was looking for examples of when they found math enjoyable and learned. I also asked for examples of barriers that made it difficult for them to enjoy math and learn.

In the next video clip (the link is three paragraphs down), I give evidence of how I am trusting my students' embodied knowledge. I am demonstrating that I value the information they can give me about how they learn and the barriers to their learning. First, I describe to Jackie and Liz how the students began with many positive examples of what helps them enjoy math and learn. As soon as I welcomed an example of barriers to their learning by saying that the information would help my teaching, the list on that side of the chart began

to fill rapidly with comments on themes including group work, level of challenge, communication, and feedback. When relating what happened to Jackie and Liz, my excitement at getting such rich feedback is evident in my tone and body language. Jackie and Liz respond with empathetic resonance in the form of broad smiles, nods and positive comments.

Made explicit to both the students and myself during the process, were areas in which I could improve my practice as a teacher and they could improve their practice as learners. The fact that one student felt, "being lectured one-on-one by teachers" made math less enjoyable for him stunned me as I had never considered I might be speaking to this very able student in a manner that he found offensive.

What followed this activity were successive action reflection cycles in which the class helped me decide on action to take based on their feedback. The action included working with different partners, experimenting with different ways of working collaboratively, changes to my teaching practice (e.g. ways of giving feedback) and being intentional and mindful of the effect of strategies already in place. Included in the second part of the video under the following paragraph are debrief sessions with students after the first action reflection cycle. They viewed recordings of classroom sessions in which they experimented with different ways of working in groups and ways of receiving feedback. Charles and Meghan share different opinions of how my questioning practices affect them.

Video 2. Inviting students to become evaluators of my practice
(http://youtu.be/nbuQHRhqEOE)

Finally, the video above ends with a clip from a conversation between Jackie and Jack. Jackie explains how she sees me asking for feedback on my teaching which is helping to build an authentic, democratic co-learning community rather than an impoverished one.

Jack articulates that in showing how I am responding to the feedback of my students I am addressing a poverty within the research base in terms of demonstrating the influence of these sorts of reciprocal relationships over time.

7. The living curriculum

I feel the conflict between teaching the "given curriculum" and a "living curriculum." For me this presents as a conflict between covering the curriculum to prepare students for standardized testing and allowing student questions to guide my instruction. I teach my students math, language, science, social studies, health, physical education, art, drama and dance. I have pages and pages of expectations for two grades to cover in a year. Despite giving students time to follow their personal inquiries, the majority of my time with them is more directed by me with their input. Students help me plan units and have choice and I endeavor to follow their questions and approach units of study as a co-learner. Until February, 2013, I felt I had not arrived at the point of having my students articulate questions of inquiry which truly reflected their personal values.

My journaling, while I was writing the learning skills section of my report cards at the beginning of February, 2013, chronicles my transformation through action reflection cycles to address a living contradiction. At the moment of writing, I was mindful of important shifts in my thinking that would have a huge impact on what I did from that point forward. By mindful I am referring to the ability to stay with negative emotions, really feel them and ponder where they came from, embrace them and consciously making room for them rather than suppressing them or running away from them. Williams (as cited in Heaversedge, 2010) explains that "mindfulness training encourages the brain into [a] welcoming pattern even for things we might have found aversive." In my case I was being intentional in welcoming a cognitive examination of my living contradiction.

In short, I wanted to report on my student's learning skills but it became apparent that I felt my traditional reporting method of me commenting on their progress did not match the rich reflection and action research in which the students had been involved. Before this transformation, I created prepared comments that could be stored in a comment bank within the reporting database and modified for individual students. An example:

> [Name] demonstrates good learning skills on a consistent basis. [He/She] is able to work cooperatively in small and large groups and usually resolve conflicts independently when they arise. [Name] demonstrates a positive attitude towards learning and completes most work in a timely manner. [He/She] uses initiative in problem solving. Next Step: Begin to set your own goals and work towards them. (C. Griffin, January, 2011)

Once I had identified the living contradiction, I experimented with writing comments about my students and gradually got closer to what I was looking for:

> I have just realized that I am trying to intentionally comment on where they are in the process of reflecting on their own practice and learning. I am working towards my comments being thought provoking questions rather than "thou shalts" or "you shoulds". I want them to think about what they are doing and what they might experiment with changing. I am not there yet. Even doing this right now I have made little tweaks to some of the comments to

make them less value laden, less judgmental on my part and put more of the responsibility on the student for the thinking. (C. Griffin, personal communication, February 3, 2013)

Subsequent to this thinking, I changed my comments to more accurately reflect the students' experiences:

Joe's efficiency and focus in completing work is commendable. The next step for him continues to be in taking the initiative and reflecting on the question, "How might I engage and *do my best rather than rushing to get tasks done?*"

Having recognized the living contradiction in the writing of report cards, I found myself making the same mistake with their action research questions. I was writing questions *for them* that *I* felt they should investigate as their next steps in developing their learning skills. While I was writing my journal this hypocrisy hit me: "New Thinking: I can't write the students questions for them! I have finally arrived at a point where I have to get students to voice their own action research questions." (C. Griffin, personal communication, February 3, 2013)

The next school day I had the students look at the learning skills outcomes that Ontario teachers use to assess students. We brainstormed what each might look like in the classroom. Each student then made their own list of strengths and next steps, the next steps representing current barriers to their learning which they would like to address. I met with each student individually to make sure I understood what they were trying to say.

The final transformation for me was in learning to truly honour each student's voice by using their words and their questions. In my journal I record the effort it took to resist the temptation of "teacherizing" the students' words or to again fall into the trap of trying to persuade them to ask the question I felt they should ask:

And don't I find myself again and again turning their words into teacher speak. I just changed "not getting distracted while working" into "focusing" – ARRGGHH!... How much more powerful will it be to see their own words there? When they can explain it to their parents? What will their parents think when they read, "How can I improve my learning by reducing my stress and learning to receive criticism?" "How can I improve my learning by learning to deal with conflict and not being so down on myself?" These questions move me to tears. Why? Partly because it took me until I was 40 to start asking these questions of myself and here they are at 11 beginning their journey. They have the same concerns, the same deep personal questions that any adult has. (C. Griffin, personal communication, February 3, 2013)

The importance of making this struggle explicit is, first, to highlight the fact that in my experience, it is not always a smooth transition from cognitive understanding of theory to implementation with deep understanding. I had a positive experience in Jackie's classroom in going through a process of developing a sense of my own values and formulating an action research question that reflected those values. Initially, I wanted to simply replicate this process with my own students. However, I came to see that I am a different teacher and they are a different set of students in a very different context than the one I experienced. This kind of research is very individual, takes time and involves struggle.

Second, without an explanation of the process we went through together and the struggle I had to honour my students' voices, the reader might not believe that students in Grade 6 and 7 would be able to articulate questions of such deep and profound moral quality. I certainly doubted that we would arrive at these questions.

In the following video, four of my students read their personal research questions. Since creating their questions, I have sorted students into research groups based on the themes of their inquiries. The themes include focus, group work, independence in learning, interacting with others and conflict management and fear of talking in front of the class. Rather than getting ideas from books, we worked individually and in groups to develop action plans based on what the students already knew. You will hear each student explain the barriers they experienced and action they are taking.

Video 3. The Living Curriculum: Student Action Research Projects
(http://youtu.be/rz2sSUeZlno)

8. Influencing self, others and social formations within cultures-of-inquiry: Classroom and research group

Working within the culture of inquiry with Liz, Jack and Jackie has had a huge influence on my confidence, the process of building a culture of inquiry and doing action research within my classroom. All three of my critical friends were able to offer me just in time feedback that built my trust in my embodied knowledge. In the following video you will see three examples prefaced by the doubt I was feeling. First, Jack reassured me that I am worthy of co-authoring a paper with two professors. Second, at 1:54 Jackie allayed my doubts as to whether I had significant evidence to add to the paper. Finally, at 2:44 Jackie and Liz help me to see that I was making progress when I doubted this compared to where

Liz took her students. They confirm I am "... actually are doing more than you think with those kids. You are making them self-evaluate and evaluate you. Whoah!"

Video 4.   Vulnerability (http://youtu.be/drpUzQ78pls)

What is very striking to me within the classroom and outside of the classroom, is the effect exposing our vulnerability can have on building trust. For example, I showed a clip of the four teachers in my TLLP group discussing our culture-of-inquiry, to my students. One teacher stated, "I felt much more comfortable when I knew it was just Cathy [me] coming in to watch me teach. With people I don't know as well, I felt they might be judgmental." I asked my students which part of the conversation surprised or had an impact on them. Many commented that they had had not realized that adults could feel vulnerable too.

Shortly after that session, the students in my class shared their questions with Liz's class. Some students asked me to read them though as they felt shy or awkward - they felt vulnerable. Several reported that after hearing older students admit they had the same questions, they realized that everyone had questions like theirs. Some of them even felt they might have the courage to read their own questions the next time.

9.   Influencing social formations outside of the classroom

Making public my inquiries and my personal vulnerabilities has also had the effect of building trust and allowing for rich communication within various groups outside the classroom. Jackie and Liz both commented that in communicating the source of living contradiction in my Masters inquiry, I influenced others to do the same. In one staff meeting, my TLLP group presented our work to date. In the presentation I explained that the math we are expected to teach now is not the math we learned in school. We have to invest

time and effort in learning new strategies and approaches and this is not easy. In video clips of our group working, the staff could see us struggling and debating over how to do the math. After the presentation, one educational assistant (EA) articulated her great relief to know that we, as teachers, also struggle with teaching math.

Successful cultures of inquiry in my experience have participants who are willing to be humble or fallible in their knowing and act as catalysts for the rest of the group to do the same. I have been able to be either that catalyst or facilitate the making of this process explicit. As a catalyst I am willing to be seen as fallible and imperfect in my own practice in order to be part of the solution. My TLLP group (on February 13, 2013, as recorded in transcripts of our video recorded conversation) articulated that the introduction of individuals into a group who perceived to be judgmental has the effect of shutting down conversation. They felt strongly that "people have to be willing to swallow their pride," "to come at it like they don't know it" and "to be able to be exposed and open." These are strong values that can build cultures of inquiry, not only in classrooms but in groups of adults working to improving their practice.

10. EJOLTS update

Since the writing of this article for the AERA conference in 2013, much has happened. Although I write in this paper about my internal journey, the three colleagues in my TLLP group experienced similar transformative experiences. Our TLLP group made passionate presentations to the rest of our teaching staff and then to our Area of Schools principals and superintendent to invite them to consider using self-directed action research in small, self-selected cultures of inquiry as a model for our professional development sessions. All four of us agreed that it was more important for us to share our passion, what we value about the process we used rather than try to share the understanding we gained about mathematics. We felt others could learn about the math from the countless professional resources we had used ourselves. What was remarkable about our work was the internal journey each of us made because of how we structured our culture of inquiry based on the work of Jack and Jackie and the experiences of Liz and myself.

Bradley Clarke shared how the trust in each other was what he valued most. He felt we were all capable of exposing vulnerabilities in our teaching because we were a small, self-selected group who respected each other and were committed to improving our practice together. Ryan Dawson commented on the importance of humility, of coming to the table as equals learning together rather than as experts. Because we lived according to this value of humility, we were able to remain open to learning and to each other rather than allowing our defenses to go up. I spoke of the authenticity gained in being explicit about our learning to others. We all found we talked openly to staff and students about the action we were taking to improve our practice. We invited feedback and in return others spoke openly to us about their learning. Finally, Melissa Juniper spoke about the confidence she gained through the process. By focusing our attention, taking purposeful action and reflecting openly about our successes and failures she felt a lessening in anxiety about the overwhelming job of improving one's practice as a teacher. She has begun to believe that she is, as she says, "enough" (second presentation available at: http://youtu.be/VF4vI5-0Mig, http://youtu.be/1idqwlZSq0o, http://youtu.be/WfiyPvMAGrc).

Our impassioned speeches had an impact. First, we gained the support of our principal and teaching staff and are moving forward this year with self-directed action research in small, self-selected cultures of inquiry. This move is not without its difficulties. There is tension involved in trying a new process - both for the administration in terms of ensuring accountability and for individuals as they deal with the uncertainty involved in directing their own way forward. However, again and again I have been struck by how committed the staff are to protecting the process that we have begun.

Second, we gained the support of our superintendent and the administrative council of our board in going forward with a proposal to start a board-wide action research network. This was an idea Liz and I first considered at the inaugural Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA) conference (May 2013, https://sites.google.com/site/arnaconnect/arna---2013-conf) as we felt the need to gain more local support for the work we are doing. We were also aware of Jackie and Jack's success forming a variety of research groups and networks and the impact these groups have had on individual professional practice (including ourselves). Liz and I have submitted a proposal to the Ontario Ministry of Education through the Teacher Learning and Leadership Project (TLLP: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/tllp.html) and Provincial Knowledge Exchange (http://mentoringmoments.ning.com) for members of our TLLP group and members of our Bluewater Master's cohort (for which Jackie was a professor and supervisor) to become mentors for others showing an interest in researching their own practice. To act as a mentor to us as facilitators of the group, we have requested Jackie's involvement in the project. Funding approval arrived in December 2013.

Finally, creating our presentations allowed us to consolidate our own values, beliefs and future direction. The year after the completion of our TLLP project, we, meaning the staff, continue to seek opportunities to co-plan, co-teach and reflect together. Topics we discussed as a small group last year are being discussed with a wider audience this year. For example, again and again I have heard each of us discussing the values we try to live in the classroom, why we hold them and the struggles we have in ensuring we live them. We continue to make our practice a topic of discussion with our students and recognize how much more engaged our students become as a result. As evidence of our commitment to improve our own practice through action research, we have submitted a second TLLP proposal for the 2014-15 school year and have invited two new members from our school to join us. We honour the action research process in the new proposal but are tackling a new topic - health and wellbeing.

What Liz, Jackie, Jack, our TLLP group and I are involved in is not neat and tidy and seamless. Although we have success, struggle is inherent in the process both as we try to continue to live according to our own values and as we try to expand our influence. The more we learn, the more there is to learn. As Dewey (1916, p. 408) said, "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." The important thing is to be aware of one's values and to choose to take action which leads in the direction of these values.

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About the Author

Cathy Griffin: I have been teaching for fifteen years in elementary schools in New Zealand, western Canada and now in Ontario. My passion is learning. It is my belief that if my students feel loved and respected, have choice in what they do and are engaged at a challenging level they will be happy and learn more than I could ever hope to teach. Some main foci in my own professional learning over the years have included digital technology and video editing, thinking skills, literacy, mathematics, outdoor education, science and art. I have held various leadership positions within schools and have gradually become more involved in facilitating professional development for other teachers. I completed my Masters of Education with Brock University in October of 2011. The completion of that degree was transformative for me. I was inspired and supported in my self-study action research project examining the barriers that prevented me from forming deep and trusting relationships with my students. I am very concerned for the wellbeing of all my students but particularly those at risk and know that a connection to me as their teacher is one way to build their resilience, their ability to cope with any difficulties they encounter in life. Barr and Parrett (2008) confirm that "the most important factor affecting students' learning is the teacher" (p. 77). It is an honour to work with Jackie, Liz and now Jack in continuing my quest to address issues of moral poverty; it is also an imperative. The greatest thing I have learned in the past three years is that I cannot do this kind of work alone. In the sense of Ubuntu described by Nelson Mandela, "I am because we are."