

# Letting teachers choose what they want to learn supports teacher morale—and yields better teaching

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Ensuring teachers have input into professional learning contributes to empowering them. Credit: Allison Shelley/EDUimages, [CC BY-NC](#)

Student achievement is highly correlated with having qualified teachers

who feel empowered and motivated to provide quality education for their students. Such teachers should be in every classroom.

Yet, with [the shortage](#) of teachers in [schools in Canada](#), [the United States](#), [Europe and Australia](#), some schools are hiring staff [without formal education training](#).

Initiatives to increase the number of qualified teachers entering the profession, including [fast-tracking teaching degrees](#), have been proposed. These initiatives are valuable to help recruit future teachers. Yet teachers are needed in classrooms now—and attention has turned to retaining them.

Schools seeking to retain teachers—and to sustain their often-passionate investment in their chosen profession—might consider a proven professional development model my colleagues and I have researched known as "collaborative action research."

This model [allows teachers to take control of their own learning and the changes they want to make in their classrooms](#).

## **Retaining teachers: factors to consider**

Much of the research on retaining teachers has identified why they leave the profession. [A survey of teachers across Canada](#) shows that [stressful working conditions and feelings of powerlessness](#) due to restricted autonomy in decision-making are more influential than salary dissatisfaction. Recommendations to address these sources of dissatisfaction include:

- [developing a culture of collaboration](#) that supports teachers in building positive collegial relationships.
- empowering teachers by ensuring they have input into

professional learning initiatives and changes that impact their teaching.

## **Remote rural and Indigenous communities**

My own research has attempted to find ways to support teachers' professional learning in remote rural and Indigenous communities, where researchers have documented that [the teacher shortage is especially acute](#)

With colleagues, I have been involved in the Northern Oral language and Writing through Play (NOW Play) project. This project, [with teachers in public schools and in First Nation schools in the Northwest Territories and northern Alberta and Ontario](#), uses collaborative action research to support young children's Indigenous language and cultural learning and their writing.

In conversation with colleagues and supported by a researcher, teachers create an open-ended research question, and then determine what kinds of data they will gather to answer their research question. Often the data will be student writing, artwork or digital creations, together with [teacher](#) observations of what students say and do as they carry out the learning activities.

## **Teachers reflect on data**

For example, with the NOW Play project, one teacher from an Anishinaabe community formed this question: "When the school's Ojibwe language and culture teacher and I take my Grade 1 students fishing and we smoke the fish, and then I ask students to write and draw about what their experience, what does their writing show about their cultural knowledge of the community and about their writing

development?"

Teachers reflect on what the data show about how their teaching is meeting students' needs and how their findings answer their research question.

After teachers gather information, they meet with me (usually about every six to eight weeks). We all look at each teacher's data together and discuss what we observe about students' learning and how our findings answer the teachers' research questions.

## **Supports student learning**

Teachers' reflection on what they have learned through this close examination of the data, and the conversations with colleagues and myself, may lead to satisfaction that a teaching approach is supporting students' learning in the desired way.

It may also bring to light student learning that goes beyond teachers' expectations or does not match the expectations at all. Regardless of the type of findings, [teachers' reflections on the data are used to improve teaching so that student learning is enhanced](#). In this way, action research aligns with reflective teaching practice and is not an additional research workload for teachers.

I contribute my experience and skills in conducting research when needed, but the teachers take the lead in identifying what they need to achieve their goals. Over the years of working with teachers, I am taking more and more of a back seat as they develop the skills to carry out research without me.

As a NOW Play participant explained, collaborative action research provides "a structure that helps us move forward in the work we want to

do."

## **Professional learning brings excitement**

In focus groups, participating teachers have talked about the excitement generated through participation in collaborative action research. In an [earlier collaborative action research project](#) with northern teachers, one teacher said, "If I had known that teaching could be this fun, I would never have submitted my retirement papers ...."

Although this early action research project ended and the teacher did retire, teachers who are participating in the NOW Play project are committed to continuing with the project and remaining in their northern teaching positions. Indeed, enthusiasm has captured the interest of other teachers in the schools. We will welcome many new teachers to the project in the upcoming year.

Teachers' excitement and desire to continue comes from the collegiality and the opportunity to take control of their professional learning. One teacher explained what she gained from participation: "I appreciate the power of data. Having observations and always using that to guide your practice and being reflective on what you did. And there's the deeper understanding I'm getting from working with colleagues. It allows me to develop as a person as well."

One teacher said that she has changed as a teacher; has become more observant of the learning her students demonstrate in their everyday activity. Another teacher explained, "I think that carrying out action research has led me to kind of just pause and take the time to notice what kids are doing at present."

These teachers and their colleagues participating in the project agree that this collaborative action research has contributed to their professional

growth and increased student engagement and learning.

## Not 'another thing on the plate'

The value of supporting teacher involvement in collaborative research and reflection for generating renewed interest in teaching and becoming better teachers is expressed by a NOW Play participant: "I've gone from thinking that action research is an add-on; it's another thing on the plate. I now realize that it's one of the most important things we can do."

Schools that are seeking initiatives for generating teachers' excitement about teaching and staying the profession might consider collaborative action research as a proven professional development model—and one that does not require substantial financial resources, beyond providing time in the school day for teachers to get together with an experienced researcher who can support teacher-led collaborative research.

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