

Collaborative Interactive Group Action Research (CIGAR):
Practical Research to Keep Middle School Programs Successful

Dr. Dan R. Saurino
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

(An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Collaborative Interactive Group Action Research (CIGAR):
Practical Research to Keep Middle School Programs Successful)

At this time of strong public concern throughout the nation over quality education, it is significant to note the continued and widespread positive interest in middle level education. Efforts to provide an appropriate education of quality for young adolescents continue unabated with new middle schools springing up and efforts being made to implement the middle school concept (National Middle School Association, 2010) in existing middle schools. I believe that as middle schools continue to grow and develop educationally, collaborative action research can be used to help answer questions that inevitably arise in such an expanding field. This chapter utilizes a case study of how one group of middle school teachers engaged in Collaborative Interactive Group Action Research (CIGAR) answered questions related to their school programs in an effort to keep them successful.

One attempt to better understand and improve school and teacher programs in recent years has been the use of collaboration and collaborative action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Elliott, 1990; Pate, 1997; Noffke & Zeichner, 1987; Saurino, 1998; Saurino, Saurino, & Clemente, 2009; Saurino, Saurino, & Crawford, 2005), and I will use one CIGAR project to explain the model of research that was specifically designed for busy pre-service or in-service

teachers in collaboration with administrators and university researchers to help keep school programs successful. Our group was interested in how we might answer our research question concerning the development of a successful school wide classroom management program in a middle school.

Since the early work of Lewin (1947) action research has and will continue to be used to look at roles and programs that initiate changes not only in education, but in areas such as industry, community development, and the military (Noffke, 1995). Action research is basically the development of an action plan to answer a question of interest or solve a problem, and often the implementation of the plan follows. The addition of the word collaborative to action research implies that two or more researchers are working together, exchanging ideas and expertise, and interacting as they conduct action research in an effort to be more productive than if they worked alone. Therefore, interactive collaborators meet together regularly to plan, conduct, reflect, and write about the action research project they are conducting. Finally, the use of the word group emphasizes an important area of development in middle schools involving the use of teacher groups or teams, what is referred to as teaming (Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Gallagher-Polite, 1997). In our study, we expanded the concept of teaming to include administrators in an attempt to answer questions and solve problems on a school wide basis, not just for individual teaching teams. We were interested in developing and integrating a classroom management plan that could be utilized as a standard for the entire middle school and help create a norm of expected classroom behavior. Our group included four teachers, two school administrators, and a university researcher conducting classroom-based action research. In summary, we define collaborative interactive group action research as a group of teachers and administrators actively working together with university researchers, asking questions of interest to the group, and attempting to find answers that might help improve school programs to keep them successful (Saurino, Saurino, & Crawford, 2005; Saurino & Saurino, 1996).

Our Study

The research group in our study consisted of four content area teachers representing various teaching teams at all grade levels (grades 6-8), two school administrators, and a

university collaborator. Meetings of the group were scheduled regularly throughout the study for periods of about an hour, and an informal atmosphere was maintained throughout all meetings. In the group meetings, designs and plans were created, questions were asked and answered, problems were discussed, and reflections were freely expressed. The interactions among the group members proved to be most valuable. The group setting was conducive to the generation of new ideas, strategies, and techniques used to initiate actions, direct the research, solve problems, and ultimately answer the research question. Through the process of self-conscious scrutiny we, as participants, could theorize our actions, revise our theories in light of reflective implementation, and transform our successes into reflectively informed changes in our program (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Gatewood, 1998). An important goal of the reflection was to develop in the participants a rational understanding of our practices and how that understanding applied to the success of the classroom management program. This increase in understanding was achieved through systematic reflection on both the unconscious and deliberate acts which constituted the process (Beane, 1993; McEwin, 1997; Oberg, 1986). Another goal of the process was for the participants to understand this form of group inquiry; that is, how the reflective process increased awareness of our actions and even our capacity to direct programs more fruitfully.

For convenience in the discussion, we divided the overall research process into four chronological phases, based on the recursive collaborative group action research cycle in the study, and a planning phase for future cycles:

Phase 1) August	Planning phase of Cycle 1 and Literature Review
Phase 2) Early September	Baseline data collection for Cycle 1
Phase 3) Sept - November	Implementation / Modification of Action Strategies
Phase 4) December	Repeat baseline data / Reflection for Cycle 1
Phase 5) January	Return to Planning phase for future Cycles

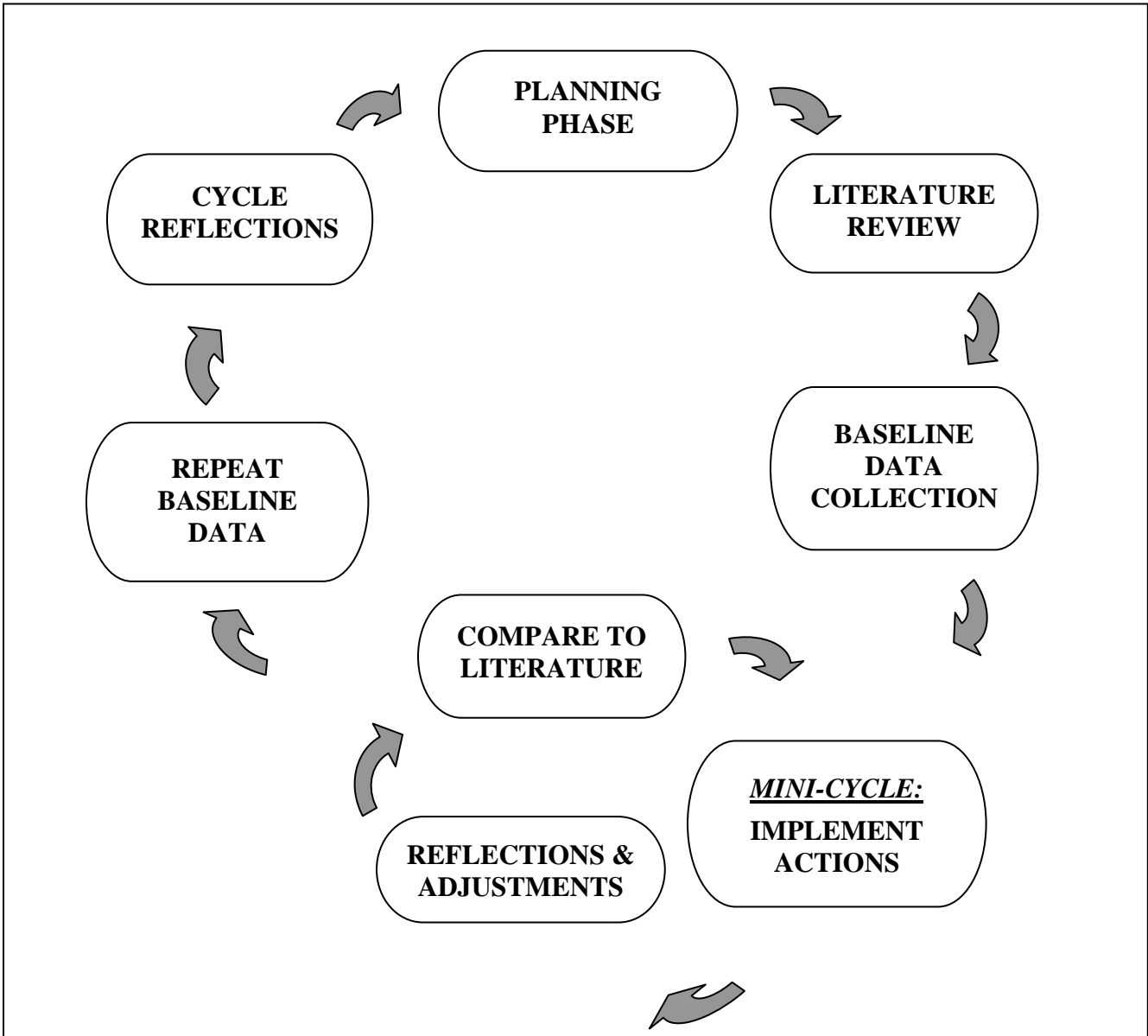


Figure 1. Cycle of Collaborative Interactive Group Action Research

exploration of whether to continue the research, to modify or replace the research question, and to continue or change the group or the process for future cycles. A single cycle consists of the phases outlined in Figure 1, as was conducted during our study.

Phase 1 (Planning Phase and Literature Review in Figure 1)

As is typical, the planning phase began in August with an initial meeting of the four teachers, the principal and assistant principal of the middle school, and the university researcher. The teachers volunteered to do the research after being contacted by the assistant principal, but they did not know any particulars about the process of conducting the research. The general plan of creating research questions, taking actions, collecting data, and writing reflections was discussed, and a basic timeline for the cycle of research was established. The teachers had a variety of questions and concerns that were expressed and discussed. Their concerns were heightened regarding the amount of time required to complete the project. We emphasized the fact that we were flexible in our planning and could adjust our timeline. During the project, we digitally recorded all the meetings with the participants, including individual and group meetings. In addition, we made field notes of all observations, kept personal journals, and gathered data concerning the research question from administrators, parents, and other teachers. These data collections and analyses were the source for this written report.

We met during preplanning in August and finalized the research question for the cycle. As a group, we decided to develop one group question and decisions about research procedures concerning the group question. In fact, we decided that all group members had to be in agreement in order for an idea to be accepted. We were concerned at first whether unanimity might be a problem when trying to move forward in the research process, but were pleasantly surprised that it helped keep all members of the group involved, allowed all opinions to be aired and discussed, and generally united the group by insuring that everyone had input and was in agreement before a decision was made. After a lengthy discussion, the group decided on the following research question:

What kind of classroom management plan will positively change behavior and maintain school wide consistency?

To complete the planning phase, we reviewed the literature pertaining to our research question. Busy teachers and administrators were not expected to complete a review of the literature, nor did they have much experience with literature reviews. Therefore, as university researcher, I conducted an adequate, and certainly not exhaustive, review of the literature concerning classroom management plans and discipline programs. I collected research articles and book chapters and each participant agreed to read one or two before reporting back to the group. I summarized the remainder of the review articles for the group. The result of the review was a basic understanding by everyone in the group concerning plans and programs that had been successful in other schools and classrooms, and a general understanding of the problems and possible solutions that had already been researched.

Phase 2 (Baseline Data Collection in Figure 1)

Phase Two began at the start of the new school year in September and consisted of the been established, the next step was to begin to collect data that could be summarized to establish what the current situation was in relation to our research question. The data established a Baseline against which we could measure change later in the cycle. The baseline data we collected confirmed the two concerns established by our research question. First, the baseline data indicated that most of the classroom management plans in use by the various teams in the middle school were not changing behavior in a positive manner. The current plans were no more than a series of increasingly severe steps designed to punish students for behavior deemed inappropriate by teachers or administrators. The definition of inappropriate behavior varied dramatically and there was no system in place to try to solve problems that might be leading to the inappropriate behavior. Second, there was very little school wide consistency among classroom management plans. A variety of classroom management plans were in place, again with great variation in styles and punitive steps, as well as subjective interpretations regarding what was unacceptable behavior. For example, the final step in a typical teacher classroom management plan was to send the student needing discipline to the

assistant principal in the office. Some teachers were sending students to the office on a regular basis, and other teachers teaching the same students were sending those students to the office almost never.

As is true with all the steps in the action research cycle, at the end of each group meeting we summarized what we had accomplished and wrote a summary statement. Then at the end of each Phase we summarized the results of that Phase of the cycle. Again, busy teachers and administrators were not expected to write summaries, they brought their own notes from what they had accomplished since the last meeting and I, as university researcher, summarized the data. The process sounds complicated, but the group found that summarizing with consensus was easier than expected. For example, our summary of the Baseline Data Phase is the paragraph prior to this one. In addition, for anyone who volunteered to write a summary, we took turns in completing that task. Everyone volunteered at least once. We did not pressure anyone to help in the writing because their primary responsibility was to answer their program question, not to write this report for publication.

Phase 3(Mini-Cycle: Implement, Reflect, & Compare in Figure 1)

Phase three included mini-cycles of each action we took to answer our research question, reflections about our actions, adjustments of our actions as necessary, and a comparison of our results to the research literature. After summarizing the Baseline Data that described the current situation, we brainstormed and discussed what actions we might take to answer our research question, and came to a consensus as to what a school wide classroom management plan might include. Our actions included creating the plan, discussing and getting feedback from all teachers through their grade-level research group members, revising the plan, planning training for teachers related to the plan, and maintenance or updating the plan. During each segment we compared our actions to those in the research literature, often getting new ideas from the literature. The following are excerpts from our Phase 3 meetings (the names, other than the author, have been changed):

September 11:

Dan (university researcher): Let's define what we believe to be the current situation.

Any quotes you have gathered will be helpful.

Bob (assistant principal): Too many students are coming to the office for things like chewing gum and talking back to the teacher. These types of infractions should not require administrative input. We have a real problem with sixth grade. Parents are complaining about the unfairness of the teachers, and most of the office referrals come from the sixth grade team. Some teachers seem to be able to go all year with only one or two office referrals while others have ten or more referrals a year. I just don't understand it.

Krista, sixth grade content area teaching teams' representative, did not look happy during this part of the discussion. Her eyes became tearful as she said the following:

Krista: The group of students that we have this year are difficult in fifth grade and in fourth grade; they have a reputation for being a difficult class. Why is it suddenly our fault? We have tried contacting parents about the problems with their children, but it doesn't work. We not only have more problems with students, but we aren't getting parent support. The parents defend their children. I've never seen anything like it.

Group members began to brainstorm ideas that might help the sixth grade team with their discipline problems.

Ansley (seventh grade teaching teams' representative): If sixth grade teachers are dealing with an especially difficult class, this is reality for us too. Instruction often seems incidental to the time spent on discipline when we are trying to deal with as many problems on grade level as we can to avoid sending them to the office. We're frustrated and at a loss as to how to deal with certain students since the various interventions are not working.

Penny (gifted/special education representative): Currently, from my perspective, not being on a team, sitting back and looking out, I see that some teachers are doing things that are working well and they have their methods. Other teachers are trying really hard to find those right answers. I don't think there is any one method being used and everyone is just doing the best they can.

Marley (eighth grade teaching teams' representative): Among the eighth grade, there seems to be a consistency with the posted expectations. There is a certain comradely among eighth grade teachers that I haven't experienced at other schools.

The discussion progressed to the development of a plan that could be implemented

school wide and Krista took notes during this meeting and summarized our initial plan as follows:

Krista: Do you want to know what we have so far in common for a plan?

All: Sure.

Krista: After they are familiar with our expectations, consequences are: First, give them a warning and try to eliminate the cause of the problem. Second, give them an alternative written assignment summarizing their expectations/actions/consequences. Third, involve their parents with a telephone call, and try to get them to help. Fourth, they go to the office and are referred to a mentor, counselor, etc.

Dan: That's four steps.

Marley: Why must everything be rules and consequences? I see many students punished for reasons that are escalated by the teacher, not the student. The teacher gets into a power struggle over a little thing that escalates into something big, because the teacher doesn't know how to deal with students. Are we going to include classroom management training in-service for all the teachers about the new program?

Barry: That shouldn't be a problem, everyone knows the basics anyhow, and we would just be getting everyone thinking the same way. I think we should leave room for individuality as well; perhaps to supplement the basic system.

Penny: Have you tried having the parents in for a social or workshop in the evening? That has worked well for me in the past. It gives the parents a chance to get to know the teachers and helps to pull in parent support. Make sure that you have some type of refreshment. That always draws them in.

The discussions continued and concluded with the different members of the group assigned to developing the various areas of the plan of action before the next meeting of the group. At each successive meeting, the plan developed and came together as a three-part plan. The collaborative group finally came to a consensus with the following (Late October).

Part 1: Expectations and consequences. The group agreed upon a set of expectations and consequences to use as an initial format with expectations for revisions based on feedback

from teachers after the school wide plan was implemented. The chart below was prepared by all teachers and posted in every classroom.

EXPECTATIONS

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1) Be Prompt | 5) Be Polite |
| 2) Be Positive | 6) Be respectful to self and others |
| 3) Be Productive | 7) Be done on time |
| 4) Be Prepared | 8) Be self-directed |

CONSEQUENCES

- 1) Warning - Let's discuss what is causing the problem!
- 2) Writing - You write about the problem, expectations, & consequences.
- 3) Welcome - Your parents called to get their help solving the problem.
- 4) Westward - You go 'West' to the office for a referral.

Part 2: Training and teacher preparation. The assistant principal took on the task of planning and conducting the teacher training. He scheduled an in-service day for classroom management training and then found help from teachers and other administrators to develop a training day that included a variety of topics including:

- how the school would define acceptable and unacceptable behavior
- how the classroom management system would be structured
- how to better avoid problems
- how the referral system would work.

The different sections were led by teachers, special education specialists, counselors, and administrators after several weeks of planning. The resulting classroom management plan was designed specifically for the students and staff at this particular middle school.

Part 3: Ongoing classroom management plan development. In order to receive feedback, reflect, and continue to fine-tune the classroom management plan, the collaborative group decided to create a permanent classroom management committee that would meet several times per year for the purpose of monitoring and improving the school wide classroom

management plan. Specific issues might include:

- continued teacher training, especially those teachers who continued to have discipline problems
- continued avenues of intervention with the students to help positively change behavior and prevent future unacceptable behavior
- new techniques and strategies to improve consistency school wide while allowing for individual differences between teachers and teaching teams (ie. each team had their own reward system)
- support events such as social events and workshops to involve the parents before intervention is required and to inform them of the school wide classroom management plan and how they might help make it more successful.

After the teacher training was conducted in early November, the school wide classroom management plan was implemented. The collaborative group met and discussed the responses they were getting from teachers and administrators, but the group found no modifications that were deemed necessary before the Christmas Holiday break.

Phase 4 (Repeat Baseline Data in Figure 1)

Phase four began the first week of December and basically consisted of a repetition of the data collection process conducted at the beginning of the cycle. Again, the object of the data collection was to answer the question, “What is the current situation in regard to our research question?” The advantage of the second baseline data was our ability to directly compare the current situation with the situation at the beginning of the study. Often change is slow and the level of change is difficult to determine without specific data on which to reflect. In this case, the change was fairly rapid and noticeable. Examples from the Phase 4 meetings follow.

December 8:

Bob: We have noticed a marked drop in referrals to the office since we

implemented the plan. In my rounds in the classrooms, I am seeing teachers conferring with each other about specific students and teams working together more to solve their own discipline problems at the team level. We have placed two referrals, one with a coach who will be his mentor since he wants to be on the ball team, and one to the counselor who has called the parents in for a conference, and has made progress in solving the problem.

Penny: I've noted students talking about how much they like the consistency of the plan. They say they like knowing that the rules are the same in every class and that they know what to expect when they don't follow them. They REALLY don't want to have their parents called!

Krista: One teacher on our team has had problems all year, but is now asking for help from the team and getting it. When so-and-so acts out in her class, the whole team gets on him the rest of the day and talks to her about what is working with him in our class. I think it's helped her become a stronger team member and she uses the input.

Dan: Has she changed any of her classroom management techniques?

Krista: Yes, some, but more importantly, she now has a classroom management plan that she is using, not just yelling at them all the time, or giving them consequences, or sending them to the office when she gets mad at them.

Marley: There's been some resistance too, as there always is when we try to change things. Some of the teachers I talked to wanted to keep what had always worked for them, or they didn't agree with the new definitions (of acceptable, unacceptable, intentional, unintentional behavior, etc.), or they didn't like the consequences structure. It was good to have the training; it helped them to try the new plan anyway, and the team was able to keep them using it even if they are not crazy about it. Time will tell.

Phase 5 (Cycle Reflections in Figure 1)

The last part of the first cycle occurred in a single meeting just before the Christmas break. We began by comparing the initial and final baseline data summaries and the collaborative group reflected on the entire cycle, including what we experienced, what we learned, and what we accomplished. The members of the group were impressed with the differences in the two summaries of baseline data as they had not realized how much the

situation had changed. They reflected about how easy the research was within the structural framework of collaborative interactive group action research and how interesting the process was to move to a solution to their school wide classroom management problem. They also noted that CIGAR or a less formal version of the research model could be used to look at a variety of school improvement needs or even questions individual teachers had related to their classroom practice. They then organized groups within their grade levels to continue to utilize the model within their teams.

Summary and Conclusions

After the last meeting, the entire group considered the three possible outcomes of the reflection meeting yet to occur. First, we could decide to continue the project using the same research question. This first option would be appropriate if we had not answered the research question to our satisfaction and wanted to use the information we had gathered to seek better answers to our question. If we were to choose this option, we would schedule a new planning meeting, and begin a new cycle of collaborative interactive group action research in January. Second, we could choose to continue the project using a revised version of the original research question. This option would be appropriate if we wanted to use the information we had gained and pursue a topic related to our research question. If we decided on this second option, we would schedule a new planning meeting to modify our research question and then begin a new cycle of action research. Our third option was to terminate the current project and create a new, unrelated research question. This option would be appropriate if we answered our research question to our satisfaction and wanted to pursue new interests or problems. Since we had established a school wide classroom management plan that was deemed effective, and we created a committee to handle the ongoing monitoring and improvement of the plan, we chose the third option and terminated the current research project. We scheduled a new planning meeting and began an unrelated collaborative group action research cycle to help improve the middle school in a new area.

In summary, the group found CIGAR to be an effective way to solve problems or answer questions that could keep middle schools successful. We successfully answered our research

question and effectively solved the school wide classroom management problem. We recommend continued research using the CIGAR model or other similar models to continue to improve middle schools and to keep middle school education successful.

References

- Beane, J. (1993). What is an integrated curriculum? *Journal of the New England League of Middle Schools*, 6(3), 2-4.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1983). *Becoming critical: Knowing through Action Research*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Dickinson, T. J., & Erb, T. O. (Eds.). (1997). *Teaming in the Middle Schools*. Columbus, OH:

National Middle School Association.

- Elliott, J. (1990). Teachers as researchers: Implications for supervision and for teacher education. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 6(1), 1-26.
- Gallagher-Polite, M. (1997). The art of creative composition: An administrative perspective on interdisciplinary teams. In T. S. Dickinson, & T. O. Erb (Eds.), *Teaming in middle schools* (pp. 229-270). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Gatewood, T. (1998). How valid is integrated curriculum in today's middle schools? *Middle School Journal*, 29(4), 38-41.
- Lewin, K. (1947). Frontiers in group dynamics. *Human Relations*, 1(1), 5-41; 143-153.
- McEwin, C. K. (1997). Trends in the utilization of interdisciplinary team organization in the middle schools. In T. S. Dickinson, & T. O. Erb (Eds.), *Teaming in middle schools* (pp. 313-324). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- National Middle School Association (2010). *This we believe*. Columbus: OH. National Middle School Association.
- Noffke, S. E. (1995). Action research and democratic schooling: Problematics and potentials. In S. E. Noffke, & R. B. Stevenson (Eds.), *Educational action research: Becoming practically critical* (pp. 1-10). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noffke, S. E., & Zeichner, K. W. (1987, April). *Action research and teacher thinking*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, DC.
- Oberg, A. (1986). Using construct theory as a basis for research into professional development. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 19(1), 55-65.
- Pate, P. E. (1997). Teaming and decision making. In T. S. Dickinson, & T. O. Erb (Eds.), *Teaming in middle schools* (pp. 425-442). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Saurino, D. R. (1998). *A qualitative study of middle school collaborative team action research* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1998). Dissertation Abstracts International.
- Saurino, D. R., & Saurino, P. L. (1996). Collaborative teacher research: An investigation of alternative assessment. *Current Issues in Middle Level Education*, 5(2), 50-72.

Saurino, D. R., Saurino, P. L., & Clemente, R. (2009). Strategies and techniques using graphing calculators to enhance the learning of mathematics applications in the gifted classroom: A collaborative group action research approach. *Journal of Human Resource and Adult Learning, 4*(2), 50-55.

Saurino, D. R., Saurino, P. L., & Crawford, L. (2005). Collaborative team action research in the middle grades: A tool for professional development. In M. M. Caskey (Ed.), *Making a difference: Action research in middle level education* (pp. 47-73), Volume 5 in V. A. Anfara, Jr. (Ed.), *The handbook of research in middle level education*, Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.