Chapter 10

Perspectives on Teacher Research: Teachers Report Challenges in Examining Classroom Practice

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ABSTRACT

Given the diversity encountered in today’s classrooms, teacher research presents an opportunity for teachers to discuss how to conduct research and benefit from self-study in their own classrooms. Although teachers derive their decision-making through different paths, in this chapter the authors explore the practices teachers apply when engaging in research and teachers’ perceptions about the benefits and challenges of classroom inquiry. Data from teachers’ self-reports are examined to determine the extent to which teachers’ classroom research impacted their practices. Teachers reported that classroom inquiry was a beneficial form of professional growth because it helped them to closely examine the relationship between teaching and learning through close examination of data and student practices. However, teachers consistently reported that limited time hindered ongoing inquiry and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher research is a form of professional development that can significantly impact classroom practice by transforming teachers’ learning and efficacy. Teacher research provides a mechanism through
which teachers can explore how they enact practice. Inquiry can also help teachers examine the nature of student outcomes in relation to instructional decisions. Research conducted by teachers is valuable because pragmatic, grounded inquiry provides more credibility for what works and what doesn’t in the classroom (Demetrion, 2012). In fact, Demetrion (2012) stated that more needs to be done to move teacher research from the fringes to the forefront of educational research. The current educational context, which is framed by Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), teacher evaluation, and classrooms with students who have a wide array of literacy skills, presents the opportunity to explore teacher research as a critical component of professional development.

Through research, teachers are empowered to make change in their classroom, rather than wait or be dictated to by top-down mandates. This level of control is particularly important in a context where educators are being asked to think about research, data, and empirical evidence in narrow terms, specifically through student test scores.

In this chapter we explored teachers’ perception of classroom research and how they navigate authentic contexts to explore their own practice and explain their understandings of the relationship between teaching and learning. We begin by framing this work with a brief overview of the literature on teacher research, which highlights the nuances of this practice. Then, using excerpts from teachers’ reports, we illustrate ways in which teachers problematized their practice, posed questions, and problem-solved solutions to address literacy-based issues in their respective contexts.

BACKGROUND

Complexities of Teacher Research

One challenge in the field of teacher research is the varying ways in which the practice is characterized—action research, practitioner-researcher, teacher-research; these terms are often used interchangeably (Cox, 2012; Demetrion, 2012) to refer to a “practitioner inquiry-based format” (Demetrion, 2012, p. 161) used to examine practice on-site in authentic contexts. In this chapter, teacher research refers to a broad term that encapsulates a range of teacher-led inquiries, namely self-study, practitioner research, or action research. This form of classroom research has emerged as a global practice with a “sweeping movement of literacy practitioner action research in North America, Europe, Australia, Africa, Asia, and Latin America [that] is creating new levels of empowerment that have enormous potential for the future of literacy” (Quigley, 2000, p. 7). With this change, researchers have begun to value local knowledge that provides more evidence of what works and what doesn’t in real classrooms. Regardless of the specific identifier used to characterize this mode of inquiry, one common feature of all teacher research is that “teaching and researching are actively intertwined and conducted at the same time” (Klehr, 2012, p. 123). Other commonalities include problem-posing, problem-solving, documentation, and reflection. The initial phase of teacher research is problem-posing, which refers to the specific issue in the educational context that the educator wants to address. By drawing on various sources such as observations, assessments, and other data, researchers identify and describe the problem. This may be a lengthy process of self-assessment, analysis, and reflection to pinpoint the specific issue because some contextual factors may be impacting the problem and posing a challenge when researchers attempt to isolate the issue.