

# Teacher Research Could Change Your Practice

## *Add It to Your Professional Development*

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Teacher research can be a powerful form of professional development that can change a teacher's practice. But what is it exactly and what does it involve?

Teacher research is practical, action-based research. It enables educators to follow their interests and their needs as they investigate what they and their students do. Teachers who practice teacher research find that it expands and enriches their teaching skills and puts them in collaborative contact with peers that have a like interest in classroom research. Some researchers call this type of research "action research." By definition (Mills, 2002):

*Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher-researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved.*

### **What Do Teacher-Researchers Do?**

Teacher-researchers simultaneously act as participants and observers as they conduct research in their own classrooms. With these dual roles, they complete the following tasks:

- Develop research questions based on their own curiosity about teaching and learning in their classrooms.
- Systematically collect data and research various methods of conducting research.
- Analyze and interpret the data and the research methodology.
- Write about their own research.
- Share findings with students, colleagues, and members of the educational community.
- Discuss with colleagues relationships among practice, theory, and their own research.
- Examine their underlying assumptions about teaching and learning.
- Assume responsibility for their own professional growth.

### **What Are the Effects of Teacher Research?**

Teacher research can change a teacher's practice, but it can also have a profound effect on the development of priorities for schoolwide planning and assessment efforts as well as contribute to the profession's body of knowledge about teaching and learning.

Teacher-research projects often yield findings and implications that result in:

- Increased sharing and collaboration across departments, disciplines, and grade levels.
- Increased dialogue about instructional issues and student learning.
- Enhanced communication between teachers and students.
- Improved performance of students.
- Revision of practice based on new knowledge about teaching and learning.
- Teacher-designed and teacher-initiated staff development.
- Development of priorities for schoolwide planning and assessment efforts.
- Contributions to the profession's body of knowledge about teaching and learning.

### **Who Provides Support for Teacher Research?**

For teachers to become involved in teacher research, they need additional time and resources to conduct, evaluate, and share their findings in meaningful ways. Fortunately in my school district, Fairfax County Public Schools, we have a number of resources available for teachers wishing to become involved in teacher research.

The Office of Staff Development and Planning (a division of Instructional Services) supports a network of teacher-researchers within our school system. The Office provides staff development funds to teams of teacher-researchers to meet periodically during the school year as they support one another in their research. Each spring, the Office holds an annual conference where teacher-researchers share their projects with members of the broad educational community in round table presentations and panel discussions. Workshops are also available on topics such as grant writing to support research and tips for publishing projects. Marion S. MacLean and Marian M. Mohr provide actual teacher research project reports by Fairfax County teachers in their book, *Teacher-Researchers at Work* (1999).

### **References**

MacLean, Marion S. & Mohr, Marian M. (1999). *Teacher-researchers at work*. Berkeley, Calif.: National Writing Project.

Mills, Geoffrey (2002). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill Prentice Hall.