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What I learned as a Teacher Researcher

Jill Darrow

My experience as a teacher researcher did not begin with a strong desire and aspiration to conduct research. Rather, it began as a requirement for a graduate level course at Michigan State University. Still, the experience left me with a lasting impression that will forever stay with me. Looking back to this experience has brought memories of working very hard, but with a tremendous payoff that benefited my students and myself as a teacher and as a learner.

Who Does Research?

I was very naïve I suppose. I had taught only two years and was starting my third when I took the class that would ask so much of me. Just how much it would push me to think critically about my teaching, I was about to find out. The beginning of the year started, and I was in a new room with lots of space. I was anticipating having a great class, and I got just that. When I learned about the teacher-research project I would be doing as a course requirement, I remember thinking that at least I had a really nice group of students to work with, and hopefully it would make things easier. But I also couldn't help being surprised that the professors actually wanted us to conduct research. I always had a notion of researchers as being professors. I thought they went out occasionally to nearby classrooms and took notes and studied the students and the teachers and then went back to the university to figure out what they had been watching. Much to my surprise, I not only found out that teachers do, in fact, do a lot of research, but they are the very ones who should do the research.

Teachers make excellent researchers because they are in the classrooms and in touch with what is happening there. They know what it is that is working or not working. Teachers as researchers also get the benefit of first-hand knowledge. Conducting research can help them identify not only why but how they can make needed changes, adjustments. More importantly, teachers conducting research can learn that what they are doing has validity. This was the case for me.

Identifying a Question

When you begin the task of teacher research, you must first identify a question. I thought this would be the easiest part because I knew what I wanted to find out, but I was about to learn that I didn't know my question very specifically. Because a question for research must be focused, I needed to think deeply about what I wanted to know. In order to be focused, I had to play around with my ideas. First, I proposed my question to my professor who said it had to be more direct and to the point. So, I talked with some of my classmates and colleagues who gave me some suggestions, but I found their suggestions only gave me more things to consider.

I was in search of a better way to teach language arts, as I felt my students really weren't being challenged, nor were they developing a real interest or desire, especially with reading. I knew that students who enjoyed reading read more. And because they read more, their reading abilities were better, along with their vocabulary, and their level of interest in reading. These students also performed well in other subjects and even had better grades. Literature circles, or book clubs, offered the changes I felt were necessary for my program, and I hoped their attitudes would be permanently changed as a result. Therefore, I was searching for a question that would ask if literature circles worked. My hunch was that they did.

Indeed, I did want to know if literature circles worked and if they would offer the changes in reading habits and attitudes I was really looking for, but what did that really mean? Was I just interested in whether or not I could implement them? Did I want to know if they were manageable? Perhaps I was really asking if they were able to work at a fifth-grade level? Although all of these were valid questions, they were not what I was truly in search of. Since I was eliminating our basal system from our curriculum, I wanted to know, and needed to know, if this new method would create more interest in reading. I wanted to know if students would become more interested in reading because they had some choice in

what they were reading, and if the choice would create a desire to read more, reflecting in their reading abilities and assessment?

I now had to work all of these ideas into a one-sentence question that was not only concise, but also manageable—a question that at first seemed almost impossible. But I finally did it by sitting down alone and writing, and rewriting until I was able to come up with a research question that was very succinct and to the point. The “question,” which I thought would be the easiest part of research, turned into a very thought-provoking task. Just in identifying a question, I found myself taking a very close look at an area of my teaching and coming up with a critical issue to examine more carefully. The process and the product turned into an intensive look at the field of teaching. My focus question ended up being “Do students enjoy reading when offered individual preference, discussion, and a variety of novels?”

What is a Focus Group?

Once again I was enlightened in my research experience by learning that I needed to find a focus group for my question of inquiry. I had been thinking I would just study the whole class, until once again my professor helped me see the way. She asked me if I wanted to try to gather data on 27 students versus four or five. Of course four or five sounded much more appealing and manageable, so I quickly set about selecting a focus group.

As I looked over my class list, I realized that for my research just picking some students based on my own opinion would not be enough. I had to come up with a way to have my students let me know what they were thinking. So, I used a survey to look at the kids’ attitudes and thoughts so I could combine them with my own. Again, I had to stop and carefully consider what I wanted to find out from my research and how the questions I would ask in the survey could help me determine my focus group.

For the purpose of my research, I was looking for a group of students with a variety of histories, abilities, and attitudes about themselves as readers. I knew I could assess their abilities, but I wasn’t sure I could assess their attitudes, and I knew I couldn’t assess their histories. Using a survey allowed me to carefully select the best students for this research. I asked questions like: Do your parents read a lot at home? Did /do your parents read to you at home? Do you consider yourself a good reader and why? Do you or do you not understand what you read, and how do you know? Should there be more free reading in school and why? Do you prefer reading from the reading book at school, or reading novels? Would you ask for a book for a gift? Do you want to become a better reader? What do you enjoy about literature circles?

After the students had completed the survey, I sat down and reviewed them to see whom I would select, again keeping in mind a range of abilities and attitudes. I quickly found the student who felt he was

a good reader, and in fact was, but had remarked that he didn’t enjoy reading in school because he disliked all the worksheets that went with reading a story. The second student I was able to identify for the focus group was an average-to-high reader with a strong dislike for reading. He also had no desire to try to improve his ability. The third young man was in the low-to-average ability range. But what caught my interest was that although he felt very frustrated about his reading ability, he wanted to try to improve. He recognized the importance of reading and school/life success. His comment, “I don’t read good but I want to do better so I can do good in class and be somebody.” And finally, the fourth student was a very low reader, but had somehow maintained a positive attitude about reading and was committed to trying to improve. I also looked at students’ parents and their history. The chart below demonstrates how these categories along with attitudes toward reading and individual desires to improve became the criteria for my focus group. Since I had only one female student who fit into these categories, I decided it would be more accurate data if I kept all the subjects male.

Student	History	Parents	Ability	Attitude	Desire
Student 1	Read to in the past	Read a lot	High	Somewhat negative	Would like to improve
Student 2	Read to in the past	Somewhat read	Average/high	Negative	Does not want to improve
Student 3	Cannot remember	Read only mail	Low/average	Hopeful, yet frustrated	Would like to improve
Student 4	Was never read to	None, also have difficulty	Very low	Very positive	Really wants to improve

I also learned that although I had made a selection of just a few students, I did not want my class to know who had been chosen for the research. I presented it to the class as if I were conducting research on each of them, when in fact it was only four. By collecting my data in ways in which the students were always in different groups and doing different things, I could concentrate on just my focus group while they thought I was watching the entire class.

Who Needs Planning?

I am certainly not a disorganized person or teacher, but I hadn’t yet experienced the level of organization that would be required for conducting research. Like a lot of the learning I had already encountered along this path of inquiry, I thought I would just use a variety of research methods, such as videotaping, audio taping, field notes, anecdotal records, etc., that would provide me with the necessary information. But instead, I realized that in order to be accurate, I had to ensure that I was using triangulation for all four of the students. Triangulation is using multiple resources to support findings in research. I did use all of these techniques to collect data, but some proved to be more valuable than others, as well as more time consuming.

Videotaping turned out to be the most intrusive to my students, and the conversations never were as natural or as productive when I used this form to collect data. Students often became so focused on the camera that they would forget what they were saying. Their body language was tense, and their eyes would dart around the group and camera quickly as if they were afraid of something. When natural pauses occurred, they became so nervous about the silence that they would start telling each other to talk. Videotaping also took a great deal of time to transcribe.

Anecdotal records and field notes were good sources and relatively easy to do, but I had to allow myself some time afterward to fill in information. This follow-up time was often difficult to find. Also, even though I would place myself outside of the group, students were still somewhat nervous about my presence. Occasionally I would hear someone saying, "Mrs. Darrow is watching."

My favorite research method turned out to be the tape recorder. Students spoke freely and easily because they were no longer distracted by the camera or my presence. Audiotaped conversations not only lasted longer, but were more thoughtful and productive. Students would disagree about the characters or events more often. They were more likely to challenge the book contents or the author. Even the shyest students would speak during taping. After noticing this, I began watching from afar without the students realizing it; even their posture showed their comfort with this setting. They would lean forward with interest, furrow their brows, and even smile at each other.

Since my whole class thought they were a part of this research and the focus students were scattered among groups, I had to again think through my research methods and devise a plan that would allow me to observe all the students in various activities, times, locations, and groups. Discovering this also made me realize that if I thought out a schedule of some sort, I could keep myself on track much better and focused on my question. However, this is not to say that there were not spontaneous moments of data collection when I least expected it. In fact, like teaching itself, a plan is necessary and good, but you must also allow for the unexpected and be able to go with it when it happens. An invaluable but unexpected source of information came in the form of the March Reading Month time slips. I was keeping track of students who brought in signed slips from parents documenting the amount of time they were reading at home. This was used as a school-wide competition among the grades as to who could read more. In the recordings of the daily reading, I suddenly noticed that one of the students for my focus group with a poor attitude toward reading was bringing in a slip each day. Also, he was out one full week due to illness and insisted his mother bring in his slips on that Friday. I realized then I could look at the focus group slips and times to provide another perspective on their

reading attitudes and the amount of practice they were doing on their own.

Who Benefits?

In the beginning, as I thought about my research and talked with others, the question came up of who was to benefit from this research. I hadn't really thought about it until this point, but it made me stop and consider a few things. I was, of course, being very up front with my students and their parents. In fact, I had received permission from every one of them before I started and had explained, in person, the purpose of my research. But suddenly I realized that this research would, in fact, be an intrusion upon them as learners as well as individuals. The first videotape I watched confirmed this, carefully considering the research question to see if it were worthy of my invasion. Fortunately, this question was beneficial.

In conducting this research, I learned that students' attitudes and abilities can be changed, and that the approach and delivery of teaching has direct and either positive or negative impact on students. As a teacher, I had a hunch that there was a better way, and by studying literature circles, I discovered that my hunch was right. More importantly, the students and I came to realize that no matter what the challenge, there is always another approach that can be tried. My students came to realize also that even as adults, you never stop learning and that even teachers look for new alternatives that will best serve their students. But best of all was the student who didn't enjoy reading because he saw it as skill sheets. He wrote in his journal, "I think you can learn a lot more in literature logs than you can in the reading books because you have to write down what you read. I like the logs more simply because you get to learn about other books than just yours. When I had the skill pads I always hated reading, but now I like it because we get to read our choice of book."

What I Learned and Final Thoughts

My final thoughts about teacher research are numerous. It is critically important for a teacher to continually set goals and try to achieve them. This is what helps to keep good teachers fresh and avoid becoming burned out. If we believe we finally have all the answers, we are in trouble. There will always be a better way, and we must challenge ourselves to find it.

A teacher must also be a learner so that she never loses sight of how it feels to be on the other side of the desk. By conducting research, I learned that if what or how I am teaching isn't of interest to me, it is sure not to interest the students. We live in a world of children being inundated with information and technology. If we can't keep them interested in books and help them see the value in reading by using an exciting, interactive method that allows them to think on their own, they will turn away. They will never know the benefits of reading well or the wonder and excitement that comes from reading a good book.

Conducting research made me think hard about what I do and why I do it. Through my research I could see that I had support for what I was doing, and this was crucial. Teaching can be a lonely and sometimes isolating job, and we need to know that what we are doing is the best for our students. By conducting teacher research, I was given a reason and an opportunity to share with colleagues about my work.

Finally, I felt proud of the hard work I had done. I thought deeply about my questions and my motives. I planned, prepared, but also enjoyed the unexpected

moments. Feeling good about what you do, no matter what your job, is essential to happiness in doing it. Conducting teacher research allowed me to feel a sense of accomplishment through the hard work, planning, and the understanding that came from pushing myself to question my techniques all in the quest of becoming an even better teacher.

About the Author

Jill Darrow, a Red Cedar Writing Project participant, teaches fifth grade in Eaton Rapids.