

preface

From “Out There” to “In Here”

Mention the word *research* to practicing teachers, working diligently in classrooms with students, and the subsequent responses traditionally could be summed up into the single statement - “What have *they* learned now about what *we* should be doing?”

This response alludes to the conventional view of educational research, a mysterious exercise reserved for revered scholars in ivory towers to collect, decipher, and disseminate researched *best practices* to the masses. Involving the scrupulous, lengthy study of some far-off, unknown subject group, research was typically viewed as something *they* did *out there*, far from the realities of the classroom. Research was the work of the academically elite and, although research and the related literature it generated informed and guided the work of teachers and schools, it was still learning that needed to be applied to the unique contexts and circumstances of each educational community.

Enter site-based, teacher-conducted research (what we will circle in this book into the concept of *action research*). With growing prevalence, educators are ripping down the curtains to expose the Great Oz, cutting through the mystification of research and finding the value in study related directly to the every day work they do with students and their colleagues. Educators, groups of educators, and educational systems are recognizing the power that can come from conducting research, focusing with intentionality on specific questions and issues they face, and determining links between effective practice and student learning. Research and the resulting *teacher professional learning* has shifted to be found *in here*, conducted with *real* students, staff, families, and community members. Rather than making sense of what is traditionally delivered by scholars and experts, professional teachers involved in site-based action research are engaging in meaningful study that has an observable and experienced impact on those closest to them. This practice has

been formalized in the case of Alberta’s Initiative for School Improvement (AISI).

But I’m not a researcher...am I?

Consider the following profiles of everyday educators and groups of educators. As you read them, allow yourself to understand the backgrounds and desires within these descriptions of burgeoning site-based researchers. Can you see yourself anywhere in these descriptions?

Focusing on Home Reading

Pamela has taught in a number of primary classrooms over the past twelve years and her classroom is affectionately referred to by her colleagues as “the other library.” Over her career, she has amassed a sizeable reading collection in her classroom that she uses with her students. She is a staunch believer that students should develop strong reading skills early in their school career; and, as a result, she implements instructional strategies and structures aimed to this goal. Over the years, she has begun to sense a decline in the amount of reading that students are doing outside of school. Didn’t it seem like just ten years ago students were reading more at home than they are today? She is curious to see if her insight is more than just her singular perspective; and, she hopes to help children read more and better. Are her colleagues also noticing the same trend? Has there actually been a drop in reading or is it just a decline in the traditional practices that she associates with reading (such as curling up with a book alone or with an adult)?

Flipping the Classroom

Martin is the head of the mathematics department at a large urban high school, working closely with six colleagues who

share his passion for algorithms and problem-solving. Over the past three years, the group has informally debated issues related to their individual instruction and the math program at large for the school, often leading to sharing best practices and resources between their courses. The latest topic dominating their professional dialogue is the emergence of the *flipped classroom* concept – moving instructional components of their teaching to online forums for student to access outside of class, using class time for homework and practice with support from the teacher and peers. Basically, the thinking is to “flip” when teaching and homework happen. The concept, being used successfully in a growing number of schools, is interesting for this relatively progressive department. Martin is interested in exploring this concept with another member of the mathematics department, effectively developing a two-person team pilot to investigate its merits. Could this model work effectively in their mathematics department? Could it be applied to other subject areas at their high school? What have other schools done that has improved student learning through this flipped classroom concept? Finally, what should they do to get parents on-board so their children might participate in this innovative pilot?

A Collaborative Coaching Model

Janice is an instructional coach, working with teachers in a relatively small rural school district. Her role involves modeling lessons, supporting teachers in incorporating differentiated instructional strategies, designing assessments, and anything else aimed at improving teacher effectiveness across the schools she works with. Over the past four years in this role, Janice has found that she is most effective when working with teams of teachers, rather than individuals. Although this individual support accounted for the bulk of her work in her first two years, she has discovered that working with teams more and more has led to greater collaboration within schools, peer support with increasingly less reliant upon her involvement, and expanded coaching expertise at each site. She has also found that her time is more efficient and effectively used. She knows that most surrounding districts and her colleagues in similar roles still heavily focus on one-to-one support. She has begun to write about her experiences working with teams, rather than just individuals, on her professional blog and has been approached to lead professional development in this area with other districts.

Although Janice feels that she knows the benefits of this shift in relation to her position, she is really interested to hear the thoughts of teachers she has worked with. Are they experiencing benefits receiving coaching support in teams? Did those who

received individual and team support have a preference or feel that one method had a greater impact on their growth? What key elements of coaching her colleagues would be most beneficial to share with other instructional coaches?

A Cross-District Approach

At a recent meeting of district superintendents, Paul conversed with four other superintendents and associate superintendents, focused on the growing population of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Each district has engaged in multiple strategies and initiatives designed to support this student population, but with varying degrees of success. Overall, the group’s sense is that no one is successfully meeting the needs of their ESL learners. Rather than continuing to address this dilemma in their geographically determined silos, Paul suggests that the districts pool their resources to investigate the issue together, determining what practices really make a difference in schools across their districts and researching best practices from other jurisdictions. The informal group of leaders agree to schedule a meeting to explore their “napkin idea” further, inviting the key personnel in each of their organizations to attend.

The professionals and situations we have described above are not extraordinary. In fact, such inquisitive evaluations are happening in classrooms, schools, and school districts everyday, involving practitioners such as yourself. Our experience suggests that the systematic investigation of best practices, exploration of alternatives, and sharing what we find out “works best” for students and teachers is increasingly more what we consider a regular part of “what we do”!

However, a common response is “But, what I’m doing is not research!” This narrow focus on what research really entails is a product of research traditionally including some secret scholarly handshake, only shared with those in tweed jackets, carrying tape recorders and leather attaché cases. Side-by-side with this narrow view is a belief that what happens in the case studies we have mentioned lacks the academic rigor of true research. Our intent with this text is to deconstruct the myth and mystique of educational research so that research fits more comfortably in the hands of teachers. We believe the research you will do can have substantial impact on the greater educational community. So investigate, analyze and share!

The Rewards and Challenges of Research

Research, many tell us, rings like the Spectre of Christmas

Yet To Come. If this myth is believed, research truly is facing the unknown. Even if you know what you want to do, there are lingering questions about how to do it. Then there is the writing-it-up part. For those of you who have not lived in an academic world of words, the task can seem like a test of your abilities. *Preparing for Teacher Research* is the collection of ideas and processes that have worked with practitioners like you. It contains step-by-step procedures that outline, from start to finish, your own research project. We hope this book helps you.

First, we offer advice. Take solace in the fact that many teachers, similar in background and abilities, have completed the task currently before you. In fact, you might be wise to go on a little field trip to look at the fruit of their labor. Read some site-based research conducted by colleagues who worked in an area similar to yours. Second, we give you this promise: if you do your part, like those who have gone before you, you will be able to complete your research and share your findings. You will then know the secret handshake – but, of course, we can't tell you that right now.

How to Use This Book

Whether your role is a classroom teacher, school administrator, divisional coach or district-level leader, you will be designing, conducting, and reporting a site-based investigation. You will be doing research. Many of you believe that such research is new, and that can be daunting. But in a way you have been

preparing for this research for a long time. Research is less rocket science than carefully planned, rigorously attended activity. That means that if you have a good project (one worth doing) and you do it well (with care and consideration), you will be able to complete work that “contributes to the literature” (the defining feature of valuable research) and that you will be proud of. No one talks much about the pride of a job well done, but don't underestimate the motivational aspect of prideful work.

Our standard advice to new researchers is not to *get goofy*. Don't panic, or gratuitously waste energy. You need your energy and calmness of thought. It is one thing to enjoy a hike through the woods; it is quite another to be lost and wandering around in the dark forest. Think of this book as your guided hiking trail, and think of completing your project as a hike along this trail. It will sometimes be tiring, and you should know that up front. Perhaps at some point you will even feel like turning around. But if you know that you are not lost and that eventually you will arrive at the end of the trail, you will be able to look around and truly enjoy the vistas.

Preparing for Teacher Research is written to offer a brief, clear, and detailed look at how to complete your own self-directed, site-based action research. It provides a framework that will help you complete your own personal written report. The result will be dual: you will have contributed to the literature, and you will have engaged in professional growth. We wish you the best of luck moving from *out there* to *in here*.