

Classroom to Classroom: Teacher Research in Associate Degree Teacher Education

KAREN OLSON

WITH CHERYL BULAT, DEBRA MURPHY, AND CARRIE NEPSTAD

The following is a short summary of presentations focused on using teacher research in associate degree programs. It was presented at the June 2012 Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators (ACCESS) forum held in conjunction with NAEYC's 2012 National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development in Indianapolis. Four community college teacher educators discussed methods for introducing teacher research in multiple courses, and practical ways to ensure student success. The focus centered on the following question: "In the short time they are with us, is it appropriate for two-year college students to conduct teacher research?"

Engaging two-year teacher education faculty to incorporate teacher research in course assignments is a current discussion within the ACCESS membership. At the June 2012 conference, two-year college educators shared their vision and practices for conducting teacher research with college students. Our goal was to convince our colleagues that teacher research is relevant for our students. We know we can teach our students to use this process as a valuable tool for gaining an understanding of their work with young children, families, and other professionals in the field.

In our supportive college classrooms we can provide multiple opportunities to practice teacher research. We believe students will deepen their understanding, confidence, and desire to use teacher research because they will see it as a powerful tool that can solve problems, illuminate understanding, create change, invigorate teaching, inform others, and make visible both what they are teaching and what children are learning.

KAREN OLSON, M.A., is professor and program coordinator of Early Care and Education at St. Louis Community College-Meramec campus. Karen also serves as MO-ACCESS President and is currently conducting teacher research with community preschool teachers.

Relevancy

Teacher research is a systematic process for understanding questions that arise every day about children, families, curriculum, or setting. It's a set of practical tools that can be used to explore problems and generate new insights and understanding. A two-year setting is an ideal venue to engage in teacher research. Many students at two-year colleges are already working as teachers in a variety of early education settings, and all students will engage with children in supervised practicums.

Think about these powerful ideas: What questions arise for the student in early education settings? How will our graduates stay abreast of new knowledge in our field? When students learn how to ask questions based on their experiences or observations, they are mentally grappling with the first steps of teacher research. But where do their questions go? Teacher research can offer students the opportunity to deeply examine their own questions and ideas about children, families, and early education. Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates that effective teaching practice is supported by evidence.

Teacher research is relevant in a two-year program because we can provide the support for students to follow their initial ideas and test them. Further, we believe that teacher research is the most relevant assignment we can create, because it offers tools and a pathway to research throughout a teacher's career. In the classroom the process of research is demystified, becomes accessible, and produces ideas that can be shared and discussed, which ultimately professionalizes the early childhood setting and workplace. Imagine if early childhood workplaces had staff meetings where teachers could share their research!

While students are at a two-year college the timing is optimal to explore problems they face in the classroom today. Our role is to provide students with the tools to respond to their questions, while building an awareness of and ability to use the literature of our profession.

Implementation

Associate degree instructors must tackle the following questions regarding teacher research: "How can I teach it? Which courses are best suited? What does it look like?" With careful implementation, teacher research can become an integral part of the two-year program.

Teacher research can be built into any course as an ongoing semester-long assignment. We have embedded it in courses such as practicum studies, math, science, literature, guidance/management, and child development. Students actively apply individual course concepts in a researchable format. The basics of teacher research include creating researchable questions; understanding how to locate, read, and use professional literature; deciding how to collect data in a variety of ways; analyzing data; discussing the process and findings; and shar-

ing results. Within this basic research paradigm, there are multiple avenues for faculty to include any course-specific outcomes. The following are several useful implementation examples.

In a literature course, several students were interested in infusing literacy opportunities throughout the environment. After an initial literature review, students created a plan that included adding literacy to block play, socio-dramatic play, expanding the writing center, and creating an inviting reading corner. Students documented changes in children's behavior with photographs, children's writings, observations and written reflections. At the end of the semester, all students shared their questions, research process, and findings with the class through presentation panels. As one student remarked, "It is vital that a teacher keep knowledge and practices current and well informed. This project and the process have challenged me to take a closer look at all of the practices implemented in my center."

In a child development course, many students were interested in finding out how to approach typically occurring behaviors such as biting and temper tantrums. Students were assisted by the course instructor in constructing their questions, engaging in a literature review, and setting up data collection on the strategies they were willing to try in their practicum site. At the same time, they were studying principles of child development. Students shared their findings in small groups. As one student commented, "Through my research I found out that most children contain some sort of self-control abilities, some more than others, but all need help developing those abilities."

In a guidance course, the instructor posed key questions to students and then led them through the process of teacher research. An example of a key question was "When and where does the child exhibit positive and appropriate behavior(s)?" Students learned how to collect and document data through analysis of observation notes, teacher interviews, photos and video recordings, work samples, and time samples. Key guidance principles were interwoven throughout the semester. Students had multiple opportunities to engage, challenge, and discuss their findings.

Conclusion

Teacher research is a powerful way to actively engage two-year college students in questions and topics that are self-selected and interesting to them. We embed teacher research in our courses with the hope that our graduates will continue to use teacher research as a tool for creating effective change in their professional early education settings. We believe that our students will use teacher research as a means to stay current in early education literature, to challenge past practices, and engage others as professional teachers.

Copyright © 2013 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.
