FROM INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES paraprofessionals face when pursuing a graduate library science degree to finding out why circulation figures are so low for professional resources, teacher-librarians have a need to find answers to real problems they face in their school library resource centers.

Recognizing this need, faculty in the School Library Media Program at the University of Georgia (UGA) are encouraging their graduate students to understand their work by conducting action research. Action research is a type of inquiry that has re-emerged as a popular way for educators, particularly teacher-librarians, to gather information about challenging workplace issues (Glanz, 1999). So what exactly does action research involve, and what types of management and professional development problems can teacher-librarians solve with it?

What is action research?
As graduate professionals, teacher-librarians often figure things out intuitively, but using this “sixth sense” alone does not allow a thorough examination of an educational situation or a resource center administrative challenge (Glanz, 1999). In its simplest form, action research is “practical inquiry” with practitioner-tested actions (Bernauer, 1999), and in its most sophisticated form, action research involves applying traditional research approaches to management issues, teaching-learning situations or professional development concerns. Action research is an uncomplicated way of documenting problems that emerge from practitioners’ own views of what needs improvement, and consequently empowers teacher-librarians to create solutions and effect continuous improvement of practice (Bernauer, 1999). Involving only four steps, teacher-librarians can apply various action research methodologies to almost any problem.

Four basic steps
The action research cycle includes the following basic steps, plus reflective practice throughout the cycle (Bernauer, 1999; Demarrais, 2000; & Glanz, 1999).

Step 1: Pinpoint a problem, develop guiding questions and design a plan. Ask yourself, “What is the problem?” Then ask, “Why is it important?” Chart what is known and what is unknown about the issue. Determine what aspects of the problem need to be examined closer.

Step 2: Collect/analyze data to clarify what is happening. In this step, gather and organize information to more fully understand the problem. You may collect data in a variety of ways including interviews, participant observation, and artifact collection and examination (e.g., circulation records, comment cards, etc.)

Step 3: Examine the literature. Determine what others have found out about the problem, and how they dealt with it. In addition to journals, explore national standards, organizational positions, conference presentations, etc.

Step 4: Take action. Carefully consider all options, and then implement a strategy. Record your findings (e.g., journal writing). Reflect upon what you learned. Consider presenting your findings in a public forum.

Action research is an appropriate process to explore a wide variety of problems. Now consider the kinds of problems teacher-librarians can solve with this type of inquiry.

Addressing school library issues
Action research for teacher-librarians takes many forms. In this issue of Teacher Librarian, we have included three different types of action research, two of which are more traditional. Joan Jordan wanted to find out why the professional collection for teachers in her middle school resource center was not used more frequently. Jordan felt that the collection contained valuable help and assistance for teachers and wanted to know how to jumpstart teacher
Lindy Pals kept a journal during her internship and recorded her reflections about the roles and responsibilities as she observed and taught. Her journal reflections allowed her to lay the foundation for action on her part in creating a working professional collection for her teacher colleagues. To initiate solutions, Jordan first had to find out what the problems were with the collection and why it was not more attractive for teachers.

Georgia does not require teacher-librarians to have classroom certification as teachers. Thus, some students come to the School Library Media Program from business and industry wanting to be teacher-librarians. Lindy Pals came with a non-education background but with an enthusiasm for the profession that was evident from the beginning. Because of her lack of a teaching background, she took a job as a technology paraprofessional within a middle school library resource center in order to help herself form a vision and goals for herself as a teacher-librarian. Pals kept a journal during her internship and recorded her reflections about the roles and responsibilities as she observed and participated in teacher-librarian activities. Her article contains snippets of her reflections showing her development as a future teacher-librarian, her involvement with learning the profession and art of teaching, her dedication to her future profession, and her powers of observation as a non-education major. It is always fascinating to see the profession from fresh eyes, non-experienced with the struggles and triumphs of school life.

Carol Bowen was a Grade 4-5 classroom teacher for a number of years before she decided to come back to school for her specialist degree and teacher-librarian certification. As part of her degree, she completed an action research study for her applied project. Bowen set up the action research as a qualitative study of a research project with a Grade 5 class using the I-Search as the research model. She had been introduced to the I-Search in one of her graduate courses and was intrigued with its possibilities for giving students in this age group a meaningful research experience. Most of the research projects she had observed and taught left her with a feeling of emptiness as to their value. Her experience with analyzing and evaluating the I-Search experience with the Grade 5 class gave her impetus for continuing to change the direction of research in her elementary school. She is now convinced that not only can Grade 5 students do an I-Search with excellent outcomes, but that the research process in elementary school is a necessary and valuable process to include for teaching students information literacy.

These three people created action projects that changed their perspectives, objectives and jobs. Although Jordan’s project was preliminary to her action, it set the groundwork for what she decided to do to build the professional collection. In Pals’ case, her journal reflections allowed her to create her vision of her role and responsibilities as a teacher-librarian from a working perspective. Bowen used her action research to change her teaching and her emphasis on integrating information literacy through research experiences that kept her students motivated.

Each applied research project or teacher-librarian internship project that our students propose as part of their programs start with questions...
about problems at the building level. What problems do our students observe in their building environments? What actions could they take to change/alter the problem situation and what methods could they use to assess and evaluate what happens during and after the changes? Some problems need investigation to find out how others around the state deal with similar problems. We use these types of questions typically to form the starting point for helping students initiate their investigations. As a result of using these conferencing questions, the efforts of our students to produce quality research projects, meaningful to them and to us, has improved tremendously. In many respects, the results are like I-Search results. The students choose the topics that hold a compelling interest to them. In the process of working through how to change the problem or situation that concerns them, they create a problem-solving process that works for them and will stay with them for future action research projects. The process works.

References


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GHOSTLY ADVENTURE...

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