

## Chapter 3: Identify A Research Question

Finding the research question often presents a seemingly insurmountable problem for teacher researchers who, still thinking as they did as students, view conducting research in the scientific model.

In action research, the question emerges out of the process of collecting and analyzing data and keeping a journal of one's observations and reflections. During this process, the question frequently changes and, in fact, becomes less important than the learning that occurs in the research process. It is important to remember that the purpose of action research is to improve student learning.

### Five Steps in Identifying a Research Question

#### 1. Identify a burning concern

The initial step in identifying a research question involves asking, "What is it that is bothering me about the performance of the students in my classroom?"

Identifying an area of concern in this way provides a general direction for the study. This area of concern can emerge from a *critical incident* in the classroom<sup>12</sup> or *moments which surprise or perplex*.<sup>13</sup> The teacher records such incidents in a personal journal, whether in hardcopy or in electronic form.

The actual refinement of the research question emerges from the data collection and analysis process.

The concern must be something about which the teacher researcher cares passionately. It must be focused on improving instruction in the teacher's classroom so that student learning improves.

That passion provides momentum that carries the research through what may be difficult learning by the teacher.

#### 2. Describe the burning concern

To get started, it is suggested that teachers tell a story about an incident in their classroom. The story describes the situation that shows the concern:

- what are students doing or not doing?
- what is the teacher doing or not doing?
- what does it look like?

Incidents can be captured in journal entries or on videotapes of classroom activities. Capturing these initial stories allows the teacher researcher to describe a starting point or baseline for future analysis.

Once the story is written, it can be shared with a critical friend who may be asked to write down the values that are observed in the story.

The researcher may think about questions like, "What are my values?" "Is my behavior consistent with my values?" Sometimes when teachers are not living their lives according to their values, they come to see themselves as *living contradictions*.<sup>14</sup> The experience of seeing themselves as a living contradiction can trigger a desire to change the way they are in their classrooms. Teachers then see themselves as the problem that needs to change.