

# Professional Learning Methods (Descriptions)

## *Action Research*

Action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practices, systematically and carefully, using research techniques (Watts, 1985). Usually informal, action research can use the process of teachers analyzing behavior and various classroom situations to better understand their classroom environment. Participants identify topics important to their teaching e.g.: classroom performance, student needs, examines their own work; uses research techniques, or explore how to become more effective instructional leaders. The following processes of thinking, questioning, and researching leads to desired improved outcomes. Action research is an evolving form of inquiry that affects the researchers and the contexts in which they work. This professional experience is different from other forms of research as it is directed by individuals taking action as a result of the findings within the study.

## *Collegial Circle*

A Collegial Circle is a group of teachers (usually 4 to 8) who meet regularly to solve common problems; to share opinions, research, and strategize; and to discuss common needs, questions, and interests. A Collegial Circle provides educators with structured time for collegial support and study as well as an opportunity for reflection on practices. It provides opportunities for sharing expertise, for problem solving through group processes ultimately deepening the knowledge of teaching and learning. Collegial Circles are designed to encourage effective teacher planning and reflection about the process of student learning. The ultimate value of the collegial circle is to gain insight based upon structured group experiences and shared commitment to the group.

## *Critical Friends Group*

A Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a professional learning community consisting of a small group (6-8 educators) who come together voluntarily to meet regularly to have structured professional conversations about their work. The purpose of a CFG is to provide professional development that translates into improved student learning. This adult learning is accomplished through formal, ongoing interactions of small groups of staff that participate voluntarily. One person, a member of the faculty, facilitates the CFG. A CFG can generate effective practices for teachers to share materials, develop support systems, and promote and define holistic approaches to meet the teaching and learning needs of schools around the nation (Cromwell, 1999). During the meetings the participants practice techniques for examining student work and observing their colleagues during their lessons. As colleagues, CFG members help each other make choices on how to introduce concepts, uncover evidence that students are demonstrating growth, or have mastered a concept, rule, or strategy (Silva, 2003). A CFG promotes collegiality and provides a way for staff members to be reflective in their practice.

## *Immersing Teachers in Practice*

Immersing in teacher practice allows teachers to over time, intensely participate in the content in which they teach. For teachers to develop a rapport of strategies that work when teaching their content they must first engage in how to learn that content. This design is based on the premise that teacher knowledge, both depth and breadth, is key to success in the classroom. Additionally, this model focuses on building capacity within teachers. Gaining firsthand knowledge of a content area results in improved practices for teaching and student learning. To be able to think and act as a reader, writer, mathematician, historian or scientist is really a key component to be able to teach the content. This approach to professional learning allows teachers to recognize the complexity of their content. While tasks may seem simple, engaging in the practice reveals the challenges and layered cognitive processes of learning (Easton, 2008). Critical elements of immersing in teacher practice include a focus on building capacity and a commitment to teacher leadership. Building the capacity of a school or a teacher to support student achievement takes a commitment of time and possibly a leap of faith. Immersing in teacher practice allows teachers to not only see what does work with students but also what students might struggle with. Additionally, immersing teachers in a content area allows teachers to take a role as a leader within their own buildings.

## *Lesson Study*

A Lesson Study is a structured process, a form of classroom inquiry, involving small groups of teachers that collaboratively plan, teach, observe, analyze, revise and refine actual classroom lessons. It is a form of extended professional learning as it involves a series of planned concrete steps that engages teachers for a year or more. Lesson Study grew out of the collective efforts of classroom teachers most notably in Japan. During a Lesson Study teachers prepare a lesson to demonstrate a specific teaching and learning goal. Other teachers observe and document what they see. After the lesson, the teachers meet and discuss the strengths of the lesson and make suggestions for improvement. Sometimes the lesson is revised and presented again. Lesson study focuses on the core of the teaching process; what happens between teachers and students in the classroom.

## *Workshop*

A workshop provides a pathway for educators and administrators to build and enhance their own professional development. It is guided by distinctive goals and objectives to provide information around a number of topics i.e.: curriculum, best practice, strategies, and assessments. It is usually a hands-on interactive session that provides an opportunity to learn new information and skills or hone existing ones. Depending on the area of focus, a workshop can be full day, half day or several hours in length.