

Using Research in the Classroom to Identify and Support Vulnerable Children

by

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Abstract

For the past two years I have been a part of the Trauma Research, Education, & Consultation at Kansas State University (TRECK) research team and the Restore Coalition. TRECK is a division of the Kansas State University College of Human Ecology, and the Restore Coalition exists to serve victims of human trafficking by identifying issues with current services for victims and adjusting those programs. I have conducted qualitative and quantitative research on the needs of victims of human trafficking, as well as how current services could be improved. This research is ongoing and a conclusion has yet to be obtained. Nevertheless, I have learned a vast amount in my time conducting this research that will benefit me in my future career as an elementary teacher. Teachers can apply the process of research to questions of learning, curriculum, or assessment in order to identify instruction and strategies that most benefit their students (Logan, 2014). I have gained knowledge of the research process and the ability to implement it in my classroom, as well as a greater understanding of the vulnerability of children when it comes to risk factors for human trafficking. In my profession, I plan to use these skills in order to use research-based evidence to identify at-risk youth and prevent them from becoming victims of human trafficking.

Introduction

Picture this: twenty third grade students all working on the same science project – labeling the joints on a skeleton. Everyone is moving around the room and the noise level is high. Groups of students are arguing over whether a particular joint is a hinge joint or gliding joint. Each student in the room has a unique learning style and individual learning needs. One student has Attention Deficit Disorder so he is straining just to focus on the task. Another student has dyslexia so she is struggling to keep the labels straight. Yet another student is learning English as his second language, so he is trying to figure out exactly what the words “hinge” and “gliding” mean. In addition to these learning concerns, students are also dealing with a wealth of other issues such as poverty, loss, and abuse. These confounding factors have an equal, if not greater, effect on students’ ability to learn in the classroom. How does a teacher (1) identify the specific needs of an individual child, and (2) decide how to fulfill those needs? One answer: research.

For the past two years I have been a part of the Trauma Research, Education, & Consultation at Kansas State University (TRECK) research team and the Restore Coalition. TRECK is a division of the Kansas State University College of Human Ecology, and the Restore Coalition exists to serve victims of human trafficking by identifying issues with current services for victims and adjusting those programs. I have conducted qualitative and quantitative research on the needs of victims of human trafficking, as well as how current services could be improved. This research is ongoing and a conclusion has yet to be obtained. Nevertheless, I have learned a vast amount in my time conducting this research that will benefit me in my future career as an elementary teacher. I have gained knowledge of the research process and the ability to implement it in my classroom, as well as a greater understanding of the vulnerability of children when it comes to risk factors for human trafficking. In my profession, I plan to use these skills in order to use research-based evidence to identify at-risk youth and prevent them from becoming victims of human trafficking.

Research in the Classroom

For the past four months, I have been a student intern in a third-grade classroom in East-Central Kansas. The school is located on a military base, and each of my 20 students was military-connected. During my time there, I observed my cooperating teacher as she frequently integrated research in the classroom for the students and on her own teaching practices. According to the Conceptual Framework for the Preparation of Professional Educators, teachers must “engage in ongoing professional learning and use evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice,” as well as “value learning and professional development” (Kansas State University, College of Education, 2015). In order to be an effective teacher, it is essential that I continue to

learn and apply new knowledge to my practice. I can only fulfill this ideal by staying up-to-date with research-based practices and committing to continuous classroom improvement.

Not only do teachers need to rely on current research, it is also necessary that they conduct their own action research in their classrooms. Joyce P. Logan (2014) says it best in her book, *School Leadership through Action Research*: “Action research is an inquiry tool that follows a systematic process for planning improvements based on the best available knowledge and evidence-supported data applied to school-based problems of learning” (107). In other words, teachers should use methodical processes and data records to analyze and address student-learning challenges.

For example, during my classroom internship, one of my students continuously reversed certain letters and numbers more often than not in his writing. My cooperating teacher and I documented and kept detailed records of the frequency of his mistakes. Then, we used that data to inform our grade level team and seek possible solutions. We are not qualified to medically diagnose the student; but we are legally and ethically responsible for making accommodations for this student in the classroom and giving him tools to help him succeed.

Teachers can apply the process of research to questions of learning, curriculum, or assessment in order to identify instruction and strategies that most benefit their students (Logan, 2014). It is imperative that teachers refer to research-validated solutions in order to assure that students have the best resources available to them.

Outside of my classroom, I observed the administration, STEM and reading coaches, as well as other faculty conduct informal research about items such as the work climate and teaching practices. The research questions may have been different but the motivation behind the research was the same: to identify needs established by data and to fulfill those needs using research-based evidence. Research in schools is necessary for continued growth and improvement, and can have numerous benefits for both students and teachers. Logan lists professional learning, tools for students, and grant applications as additional advantages for educators using research in their field (Logan, 2014).

Childhood Vulnerability as a Risk Factor for Human Trafficking

In addition to learning about the process and value of research in a general sense, my work with TRECK helped me to gain specific knowledge about the problem of human trafficking and its impact on children. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as inducing a person to perform labor or a commercial sex act through force, fraud, or coercion. Moreover, if the victim is under 18 years old, any commercial sex act is considered trafficking, whether force, fraud, or coercion was present or not (106th Congress of the U.S.A, 2000). Implicit in this definition is the understanding that people do not simply

choose to become prostitutes. It is a decision they are forced to make based on a host of other issues such as poverty, abuse, and mental health issues, usually beginning in childhood. Inconsistencies in reporting have made it difficult to accurately calculate the number victims of human trafficking, but conservative measures indicate that between 300,000 and 400,000 children are trafficked each year in the U.S. (Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). As a teacher, I will be working with and investing in children that are at risk for becoming victims of human trafficking. It is my responsibility to identify vulnerable children and intervene however necessary to protect them.

Human trafficking is a complex crime that anyone can fall into. However, there are certain risk factors that make an individual more likely to become the target of a trafficker. Fong and Berger Cardoso state that, “In the United States, runaway, homeless, kidnapped children, or children living in or leaving foster care are at elevated risk of forced prostitution and trafficking” (311-316). In fact, 86% of child sex trafficking victims were in the care of social services when they initially ran away (Polaris Project, 2018). Many children under the care of child protective services come from families where abuse is the norm. Children who were victims of child abuse experience behavioral and cognitive problems, as well as mental health issues such as PTSD and personality disorders (Fong & Berger Cardoso, 2010). These obstacles, compounded by abuses that often occur in the foster home, become push factors for children to run away and eventually fall into the hands of a trafficker.

So what do human trafficking and foster care have to do with education? Everything. Children spend the majority of the day in school with teachers and other adults that are legally responsible for their wellbeing. It is our obligation to identify students that are at-risk for becoming victims of human trafficking and to take preventative action. It is also necessary that we teach students about the signs of human trafficking and the protective measures they can take. Lastly, and most importantly, we have to be the caring adults in a child’s life that keep him or her from running away or engaging in other reckless behavior. We must show our students that they are safe, valued, and loved. If students know they can come to their teachers with problems and concerns, then we can help guide and encourage them before they ever come in contact with a trafficker.

Conclusion

Human trafficking is manifests itself in different ways and it is both difficult to identify and to prevent. The children that are most likely to fall victim to trafficking are also the children that can be the most challenging to engage with in the classroom. It can be hard to identify what a student’s problems are, especially if the student is under the care of child protective services. That is where action research becomes vitally important. As an educator, I can utilize action

research approaches to identify a child's needs and challenges and identify or design interventions to help him or her.

I may not always have access to a child's backstory or knowledge of his or her situation. Parents and families can choose what they do and do not wish to share with educators. Children in foster care are even harder to learn about because of the transient nature of their lives. However, teachers can document absences, injuries, performance on assessments, and behaviors in order to identify patterns in a student's life. Teachers can then use this information to demonstrate whether the child is at-risk for human trafficking. There will never be a perfect solution to such a nuanced and deceptive crime as human trafficking, but the more we know about our students the better able we will be to help them.

Using action research in the classroom would allow me to identify the student with ADD, struggling to focus on the task of labeling joints. I would also be able to use research-based solutions to create an environment more conducive to his learning needs. I would be able to assist the little girl with dyslexia, by providing materials to help her or reading the labels aloud to her. I would use translations or other research-evidenced solutions to help the boy learning English to be successful in the labeling activity. Furthermore, I would use action research to identify the children living in abusive situations and provide them with appropriate aide to prevent them from falling into the hands of traffickers. Research in the classroom has varied and broad applications, yet it benefits real individuals who could otherwise fall through the cracks. My job is to protect my students and give them the highest quality education possible. Utilizing research in the classroom to the benefit of my students will help me meet this goal and assure that I am doing the best for each of them.

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