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# Teachers' Perspectives on Educational Research

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March 2012

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1781\_03/12

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## **Abstract**

Based on two studies that we conducted in the Chicago metropolitan area in 2009 and 2010, we found that teachers do, in fact, use research, although they tend to seek it out under very specific conditions and circumstances. Namely, teachers tend to look for research in response to an immediate, pressing concern, such as how to best teach fractions to English language learners (ELLs). Teachers also turn to research to address a specific content need, such as gathering information for an upcoming lesson. In terms of broader reviews of research, teachers sometimes review research they have used in the past, such as best practices for a particular topic or method. Finally, teachers may consult educational research when they participate in groups that use research findings to more broadly support their instructional practices (e.g., study groups, committees, or courses on using research in the classroom).

## Introduction

*The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head, and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before.*

(Dewey, 1929, p. 76)

How can we improve education? The educational research community is constantly aiming to produce high-quality research that pushes the boundaries of our knowledge and creates a stronger education system. The volume of literature housed in the Education Resources Information Center database now exceeds one million articles. Linking the vast community of educational researchers is “a deep concern with the condition of children and schools” (Gardner 2002, p. 72).

However, in spite of the large volume, educational research has sometimes been criticized as being neither useful nor influential (Burkhardt & Schoenfeld, 2003); some have even said that the reputation of research is awful (Kaestle, 1993). As described by Bransford, Vye, Stipek, Gomez, and Lam (2009), in 2003, the then director of the National Institute of Education Sciences, Grover Whitehurst, drew widespread attention to these concerns about whether the educational research field was producing useful work for the field. In a presentation at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Whitehurst criticized some of the esoteric paper titles that are inaccessible to those outside a particular research niche, citing a made-up example paper titled “Episodes of Theory Building as a Transformative and Decolonizing Process: A Microethnographic Inquiry into a Deeper Awareness of Embodies Knowing.” Whitehurst (2003) further cited a survey of state and district leaders, 77 percent of whom believed educational research was overly theoretical and too academic in its orientation.

Some researchers note that educational researchers may not be adequately prepared to disseminate research to practitioners in useful ways (Schoenfeld, 2009). But it is not readily understood whether there are more fundamental criticisms to the nature of the research being produced. For teachers to make effective use of new knowledge being developed by the field, they must be able to identify and access high-quality research. But what are the circumstances under which this occurs?

Much of the research on the usefulness of educational research for teachers has emerged from abroad, including Canada (Cooper, 2010; Lysenko, Abrami, & Bernard, 2011), Great Britain (Cordingley, 2000, 2009), Turkey (Beycioglu & Ozer, 2008), and the Netherlands (Bronkhorst, Meijer, Koster, & Vermunt, 2011). Hemsley-Brown and Sharp’s (2003) cross-national review of research on this topic in multiple English-speaking countries over the period 1988–2001 revealed that there were indeed barriers to teachers’ use of educational research, including a lack of access to academic journals, the daunting amount of research, jargon and overly theoretical orientations, and distrust of the findings.

One leader in the educational research field in the United States believes there is a dearth of relevant research on whether teachers look for research-based solutions or even view research as a useful source of information (Porter, 2007). A limited amount of research has begun to address this topic (Laitsch, 2010; Nelson, 2011), which confirms that practitioners are generally not

prone to accessing educational research. Hargreaves and Stone-Johnson (2009) argue that because teaching is not only a technical and intellectual practice but also an experiential, emotional, ethical, cultural, political, and situational practice that requires complex decision making in numerous contexts, educational research ought to be used by groups of colleagues engaged in dialogue and collaboration, such as that provided by professional learning communities.

In 2009, we conducted 9 focus groups with 49 public school teachers throughout the Chicago metropolitan area and asked them about the types of research they are most likely to use and the resources they consult when looking for research. Based on the findings, which suggested that teachers are more likely to use research when fellow educators filter it to them, we conducted a follow-up case study in 2010. In the second study, we were interested in whether the information teachers received in a course specifically designed to disseminate research to teachers translated into classroom practice. Once again, we found that if research is tied to a current classroom issue, teachers may use research to address the issue. However, teachers will not spend a lot of time seeking out research. Instead, the information must be presented in a way that is convenient and sensitive to their time availability. In this report, we present each study, including the findings and the implications for researchers and schools.

## Study 1

Our first study focused on the extent to which the large body of educational research is useful for teachers’ instructional practices and how educational research might be made more appealing to teachers. In other words, is there a demand by teachers for research, and, if so, what, if anything, can the producers of research at universities and elsewhere do to ensure that what they are supplying meets this demand?

To further our understanding of this issue, we conducted 9 focus groups with 49 teachers from urban and suburban schools within the Chicago metropolitan area. These teachers were asked the following questions:

- Do you seek out research? Why or why not?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word *research* in an education context?
- What sources of research do you rely on? How do you judge source credibility?
- What barriers prevent you from using educational research?
- What type of research is useful? What would make using research more appealing?
- What type of preparation for using research have you received?

### Methods

For our focus groups, to capture typical teachers, we chose teachers from schools that were not struggling, where 60 percent or more of the students meet or exceed adequate yearly progress (AYP). More specifically, the percentage of students in the selected school districts meeting or exceeding AYP ranges from 60 percent to 88 percent. Both urban and suburban schools were sampled, representing a wide socioeconomic range. The focus group sessions took place at schools and district offices between October 12, 2008, and January 12, 2009, before or after school and, in one case, at lunchtime. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. District and School Sample**

School or School District	Number of Teachers	Range in Years of Teaching Experience	Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding AYP	Percentage of Students Who Are Low Income	Date of Focus Group
Urban Elementary School #1	5	0–1 year	76.8%	93.3%	11/19/08
Urban Elementary School #2	6	4–6 years	62.2%	97.1%	11/20/08
Urban High School	5	4–7 years	61.6%	43.4%	12/8/08
Suburban Elementary School District #1	7	8–27 years	87.6%	13.2%	10/22/08
Suburban Elementary School District #2	5	0–15 years	82.9%	26.4%	11/13/08
Suburban Elementary School District #3	6	3–5 years	68.0%	70.0%	12/10/08

School or School District	Number of Teachers	Range in Years of Teaching Experience	Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding AYP	Percentage of Students Who Are Low Income	Date of Focus Group
Suburban High School	3	25–30 years	87.6%	2.1%	12/11/08
Suburban Elementary School District #4	4	3–7 years	62.0%	76.1%	1/6/09
Suburban Elementary School District #5	8	3–6 years	59.5%	92.8%	1/12/09

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed inductively, which allowed the findings to emerge from frequent or dominant themes and subthemes in the data. The transcripts were coded with an iterative process that involved identifying and reidentifying emerging themes until agreement between two researchers was reached. The responses then were coded and grouped by theme. All data related to a particular theme or subtheme were read and reread to fully capture the essence of the discussion. The responses were also linked to each participant’s school or school district, experience level, and grade levels taught. This allowed differences between the subgroups to be explored. However, the focus group findings should not be interpreted as representative of all teachers or of all teachers within a given subgroup; rather, the findings should be regarded as a useful starting place for future studies.

## Findings

Based on data gathered from the focus groups, several key findings emerged about the ways teachers use educational research, the types of research that teachers find most useful, and some of the barriers that prevent teachers from accessing and using research.

- **Although teachers are not opposed to accessing and using research, research in general evokes several strong yet conflicting responses.** The tension between using educational research to support instruction and the perceived gap between what researchers provide and what practitioners need emerged as a common theme in all nine focus groups, regardless of teachers’ years of experience, grade level taught, or school location in the greater Chicago area.
  - Teachers who had positive reactions to research viewed it as information about what works in the classroom. For example, some teachers indicated that research findings are a way to validate that educational practices are “tried and true” and have been “proven to be successful.” Research findings, then, can provide an extra level of assurance that teachers are implementing strategies and practices that work.
  - However, not all teachers view educational research in a positive light. Many focus group participants also suggested that the research seems removed from everyday classroom realities. This sentiment was reinforced when teachers believed that the research environment is not an accurate representation of actual classrooms or of classrooms with similar student compositions compared with their classrooms.



- **There was a wide degree of skepticism about researchers and research findings per se, but this skepticism can be reduced when research comes from a source that teachers trust and if the findings work their classrooms.** In general, the focus group participants were more likely to trust research findings that came from a source they deemed credible, such as a colleague, an administrator, a professor of theirs, or a researcher with classroom teaching experience. However, if the research is associated with promoting an educational product, the findings may be disregarded. In the end, teachers must do what seems to work in their classrooms, regardless of official best practices or other research guidance. Teachers also are more likely to trust their own experiences and feedback they receive from their students than suggestions made by a researcher. For some, a strategy that works with their students provides more evidence of success than what research might argue is effective. In addition, teachers may be more likely to accept research that confirms their current instructional pedagogy. Conversely, if applying research findings does not work in their classrooms, teachers will abandon the effort.
- **Teachers turn to research when there is a pressing concern, but often only after they have consulted other, more efficient resources.** Before teachers look at research to address clearly defined issues, they are more likely to turn to colleagues, trade journals such as *The Reading Teacher*, or the Internet, starting with a Google search. Through these avenues, research and research-based information may be shared. The teachers also reported that they would use educational research as part of a study group, a committee, a school initiative, or another workgroup that uses research findings to support learning more broadly.
- **teachers nearly unanimously indicated that, given competing demands on their time, seeking and reading research are low priorities.** Teachers of all experience levels in urban and suburban elementary and high schools serving higher- and lower-income students shared this explanation of research use. In light of their limited time availability, teachers are less likely to read research when it is presented with overwhelming information and in a manner that is dry and difficult to decipher.

  - Even though the teachers stated that they often do not have or make time for educational research, some mentioned that they would be more likely to read research if administrators advocated for and provided sanctioned time to discuss research with their colleagues. For example, one elementary school received a grant that supported a teacher study group focusing on professional development about instructional strategies. In addition, the teachers also suggested that they would be more likely to read research if the massive volumes of research available were screened and filtered by school leaders or administrators.
  - The desire to receive research findings as a bulleted list, in the form of a brief synopsis, or as audiovisual media was also cited by an overwhelming majority of the focus group participants as a way to access research findings without taking large amounts of time away from students' more pressing needs.
- **The teachers are less likely to use research if they do not see a connection between the population studied and its applicability to students in their classrooms.** Some teachers suggested that the research setting is so controlled that they would be unable to

replicate the program or practices in their own classrooms, while others believed that certain aspects of their own classrooms, such as a high concentration of ELLs, make many research-based teaching strategies inappropriate. If teachers believe their classrooms do not reflect a study's students, resources, or context, they will be less likely to try to read or apply the findings.

## **Summary of Findings**

In all, the focus group participants were not opposed to using educational research; rather, they indicated that as long as certain conditions and criteria are met, research is or can be informative to their instructional practices. However, for research to be most useful to teachers, it needs to take into account the limited time teachers have by presenting findings in a clear, user-friendly manner; appear relevant to teachers' own classroom contexts and experiences; and be provided by a person or an organization that they trust.

## Study 2

A key finding from Study 1 was that the teachers are open to using research if it comes from a trustworthy source, is relevant to their classroom contexts, and is presented in way that respects and values their time. The challenge is ensuring that these trusted sources are also good consumers of research and capable of sifting through documents of varying quality to accurately communicate research findings to teachers. Looking at these criteria, we asked ourselves if there were any initiatives that provided teachers with research in useful ways. One vehicle stood out as especially promising: a professional development program conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

As one of the two major teachers' unions in the country, AFT includes the following in its mission goals:

- Strengthen the institutions in which teachers work.
- Improve the quality of the services that teachers provide.
- Bring together all members to assist and support one another.

AFT has partially addressed its mission by creating several professional development courses to help teachers improve their instructional practices. AFT's line of professional development, known as Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D), provides professional development in ways that meet the needs of teachers by providing information on research-based and field-tested practices, with content delivery by their peers.

The ER&D program was created in 1981. In the past 5 years, at least 7,500 teachers nationwide have taken an ER&D course. The program deliberately trains classroom teachers to create and deliver each course. Instructor training involves two distinct, weeklong training sessions, with requirements between sessions to practice and reflect on the topics that were taught. The instructor training also involves a mock delivery of the course. Local course instructors are chosen for their content mastery and are often classroom teachers, teacher leaders, or coaches, not administrators. The program offers courses on topics such as the following: managing antisocial behavior; reading instruction; reading comprehension; thinking mathematics; and school, family, and community. In 2010, AERA gave the ER&D program its highest honors for bridging the gap between research and practice.

To get a better sense of whether the information provided in an ER&D course translates into classroom practice, and whether it increased teachers' use of research, we conducted a case study of the ER&D course *Managing Antisocial Behavior* in a Chicago suburb in fall 2010. This course encourages classroom teachers to improve their instructional practices and students' performance by

- Becoming users of research.
- Exposing them to timely research-based principles, practices, and strategies.
- Teaching other teachers to share strong practices.

The participants are also expected to leave with a strong knowledge base that equips them with specific research about the nature and the origins of antisocial behavior and change their practices accordingly. The course specifically focuses on the following questions:

- Who are these students and what is antisocial behavior?
- What are effective classroom management techniques?
- What is behavior analysis?
- How can social competence be built in the classroom?
- What is behavior enhancement and reduction?
- What is the acting-out cycle?
- What schoolwide behavior support practices work?

In keeping with teachers' interest in meeting with peers to discuss research and practices, the course participants meet for three hours, once a week, for seven weeks. Each session involved a lecture peppered with numerous opportunities for participants to ask questions and participate in small-group and whole-group discussions. Thus learning came from not only research but also trusted peers.

Each course participant is provided with a binder—assembled by course designers at the AFT headquarters—that consolidates high-quality, timely, and meaningful research. The binder includes articles with charts and images to help readers connect to the content. National AFT experts update the course binder every three years. These experts seek feedback from other course instructors to ensure that the research is useful to teachers. The course is then field tested for usability. In response to early feedback that the binder for the *Managing Antisocial Behavior* course felt more like a research journal than a user-friendly resource, adjustments have included removing research articles that were not relevant, too dense, wordy, or jargon filled. In line with the principles of adult learning, activities were added to help teachers identify with and internalize the content. Each revision effort aligned with our previous findings that teachers are more likely to use research if it is provided in a clear, straightforward way and filtered through a trusted source.

## **Methods**

Using a case study approach, we followed two sessions of the *Managing Antisocial Behavior* course. Through surveys before and after the course, interviews, focus groups with teachers and ER&D instructors, and five course observations, we explored why the participants chose to take the course, the degree to which they use research to inform their instructional practices, and the extent to which course participation influenced their research use. A school administrator facilitated the course.

## Findings

Our findings suggest that when teachers are presented with research-based information, they use it, particularly when it is related to a specific classroom need. The following themes emerged from our case study on the *Managing Antisocial Behavior* course:

- **Participation in this targeted professional development course increased teacher reflection on and knowledge about student behaviors.** The participants reacted positively to the course and walked away from the course with more strategies for classroom management. One participant specifically spoke about how the instructor stated, “What you permit, you promote,” a phrase that stayed with her well beyond the course. This course participant also found herself reflecting on how “letting little things go” in the classroom can have larger ramifications for student behavior later. Another teacher wrote in the postevent survey, “I have been reflecting on the way I address students.”
- **The course participants left with increased knowledge about the medical, psychological, and cultural underpinnings of typical student behavior issues.** The teachers told us that they left the course equipped with “techniques to deal with antisocial behavior” and a better understanding of “why students with antisocial behaviors act in certain ways.”
- **The course did not influence teachers’ broader use of research.** Although the participants enjoyed the course and felt as if they gained new knowledge and strategies for working with challenging students, most of the teachers did not indicate that the course influenced how often they turn to research or their intentions to seek out research on their own after the course ended.

## Summary of Findings

The feedback from the participants suggests that a targeted approach to using research can increase teacher knowledge about the topic at hand and can have a direct effect on teachers’ use of research-based practices. At the same time, for a course focused exclusively on research dissemination, we were surprised that neither the participants nor the instructors emphasized using research regularly to inform practices. For example, little emphasis was placed on seeking out and assessing the quality of research. Neither the participants nor the instructors received training on seeking out research beyond that which was given to them by the national course designers.

## Recommendations

For educational research to enlighten and improve teachers' practice, certain changes must be made by educational researchers and other stakeholder groups. Based on the findings from our two studies, several recommendations are presented for researchers, teacher preparation programs, and school and district leaders and policymakers.

### Recommendations for Researchers

Teachers genuinely want their students to benefit from the findings of good research. However, there is somewhat of a mismatch between the educational research that currently is supplied and what teachers need or demand. This mismatch is not necessarily due to carelessness or a lack of concern on the part of researchers. On the contrary, it may be largely due to the extreme care with which researchers present their findings as precisely as possible—a process that may lend itself to obscure language and lengthy discussions. To bring supply and demand into equilibrium, researchers should do the following:

- **Get to the point.** Teachers are busy and want to see bulleted lists and brief synopses of the research findings. This not only helps ensure that teachers will benefit from findings but also demonstrates to teachers that researchers understand and appreciate that the time availability of teachers is at a premium.
- **Provide examples of the applicability of the research to real classroom situations.** This may include illustrations and hands-on examples of how to put the research findings into practice. Also, many teachers consider themselves visual learners and have expressed a desire to access research through audiovisual technology that allows them to see the recommended instructional practices in action.
- **Write in an accessible manner.** This does not mean that research findings should be watered down; rather, it means that unnecessary jargon should be avoided in favor of straightforward language and sentence structure. In addition, complex statistical analyses should be described in terms a layperson can understand.
- **Emphasize how research findings can help teachers solve specific, immediate classroom problems or address students' particular learning needs.** The demands of teaching tend to prevent teachers from exploring future-oriented or higher-order issues than those immediately at hand; however, there was near consensus that research is consulted in response to pressing needs.
- **Highlight the attributes positively associated with research.** Teachers already appreciate that good research represents a trustworthy and a solid basis for coming to conclusions about what works in the classroom. Research that reminds teachers of these qualities and how the goal of finding out what works inspired the study is likely to be better received by teachers.
- **Be clear about the context of the study and its applicability to other settings.** Teachers are quite skeptical about the relevance of studies conducted in different contexts, especially when there are clear differences in grade level, ability level, socioeconomic level, class size, behavior, and culture. It is important to make clear which

population was studied and, if it is believed that the findings are generalizable, to emphasize that point and explain why.

- **Be proactive about engaging with teachers and those who directly disseminate research to teachers by spending time in schools.** Although the demands of doing research may make it difficult, spending time in schools and with teachers, being available to present findings and answer questions about the research, and working collaboratively with teachers and teacher educators at each stage of the research process will make research more relevant and useful.

## Recommendations for Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs play an important role in building the foundations for a research-oriented teaching career. As the gateway to the profession, teacher preparation programs shape teachers' views and approaches to using research to inform their instructional practices. In some cases, they are also the closest source of access to research and researchers that teachers will have during their careers. Researchers should do the following:

- **Be proactive about connecting teachers and researchers.** Bridging the gap between teachers and researchers requires that the two groups build trust. This can be accomplished through interaction from the early stage of their careers—their preparation. Such interaction might, for example, take the form of joint seminars, coffee hours, or project work.
- **Prepare teachers to find the research they likely will need.** Several teachers mentioned difficulty in effectively using search engines, deciding which research is credible, and making decisions about which sources to trust when studies contradict each another. Those preparing teachers should ensure that they learn how to effectively search for research, evaluate the quality of research, and interpret the findings.
- **Encourage and support teachers in accessing research once on the job.** Teacher preparation programs cannot feasibly address all the potential classroom experiences that teachers might encounter. It is important to make it clear that gaps between the knowledge gained during preparation and that which is needed to address particular needs faced in their specific classroom contexts can be filled in part through access to research on the job. Some teachers attributed their current use of research to their continued contact with and guidance from former graduate school professors.

## Recommendations for School and District Leaders and Policymakers

Leaders and policymakers in schools and government have an important role to play in facilitating teachers' use of research and by taking action to overcoming barriers to teachers' access to research. This primarily involves the provision of time, encouragement, and resources. Specifically, they can do the following:

- **Create a system to filter high-quality research to teachers.** Having school administrators or teacher leaders filter research is attractive because it makes the task of locating relevant research less overwhelming, comes to teachers from a trustworthy source, and provides a channel for support and communication between teachers and

school or district leaders. Teachers who prefer to search for useful research themselves will still have that option.

- **Ensure that teachers have enough structured time specifically intended for accessing, collaborating on, and reflecting on research.** The primary barrier to teachers' use of educational research was simply not having enough time available. By providing adequate planning periods and support staff to guide teachers toward high-quality research, this type of professional growth and learning can take place. Teachers should be provided with regular time to work with others in their subjects and grade levels to discuss research findings and how to coherently apply them to teaching the school's curriculum. Teachers should receive support from administrators and sufficient classroom autonomy in their implementation of research-based findings.
- **Encourage and provide the time for teachers to access research through district initiatives or in collaboration with unions.** Teachers appreciate the time to discuss strategies and best practices that are backed by research and from trusted sources. Providing regular opportunities for teachers to participate in committees, lead departmental meetings, or participate in professional development that includes discussions regarding research is likely to enhance teachers' use of research.
- **Provide professional development opportunities that include opportunities to learn about and reflect on research.** Some teachers cited high-quality, ongoing, job-embedded professional development workshops as among the most useful sources of research that encouraged them to put research to practice in the classroom.
- **Encourage more professional development based on best practices, similar to the programs provided under the ER&D model.** Based on our findings, the teachers enjoyed participating in the ER&D course and felt equipped with new research-based strategies to apply in their classrooms.
- **Maintain high-functioning technology for accessing research.** The Internet was the most cited source for accessing educational research. Yet in some cases, broken or slow computers, as well as blocked websites, presented a barrier to teachers who wished to access research.
- **Create a library of educational research.** Currently, teachers tend not to rely on libraries as a source of research-based information. Devoting a section of the school library or creating a library in the faculty lounge that houses articles, books, and digital media that exhibit the characteristics of research that are useful to teachers is one way to provide busy teachers with easy access to research.
- **Support the dissemination of research to teachers.** The cost of journal subscriptions, books, and workshops is a real barrier to teachers using research. Local and state-level policymakers should consider ways to reduce or eliminate this financial burden to encourage teachers' access to knowledge that is likely to help improve student learning.



## **Future Research**

Our findings provide thought-provoking insights into teachers' use of research, insights that are well worth exploring with additional studies. Future work might further explore these ideas in a variety of ways, including obtaining the perspective of educational researchers, exploring the role of social networks in disseminating research-based practices, and investigating the use of research by particularly successful teachers.

### **The Perspective of Educational Researchers**

Although our studies examined teachers' perspectives on educational research, if the desire truly exists to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners, one possible next step is to hear directly from educational researchers: Do researchers view their work as a means of improving instructional practices? More specifically, do educational researchers have aspirations to disseminate findings in ways that are useful to teachers, and, if so, are barriers preventing this from happening?

As the other half of the researcher-practitioner divide, educational researchers provide a much-needed perspective on research, its purpose, and the way findings are disseminated. Once the view of researchers is clarified, the two points of view can be compared for similarities as well as areas of disagreement. By identifying teachers' and researchers' perspectives, the two communities can be brought together to discuss ways to make research findings more relevant and useful for both parties.

### **Social Networking**

Our study participants indicated that they would be more likely to turn to colleagues for information about how to improve instruction before consulting research findings. Exploring how teachers use social networks to gather information may lead to a better understanding of how to more effectively disseminate research findings. A future study, then, could explore possible connections between group norms, social influence, and the use of research. For example, how do group norms or school culture influence the way teachers use research? Do teachers in schools with stronger collegial networks influence whether their colleagues use or access research? Do teachers who are part of an organized cohesive group, such as a professional learning community, access research more frequently?

### **Effective Teachers and the Use of Research**

Another potential avenue for exploration includes looking at whether teachers who have been identified as particularly effective by district or school performance metrics use research to inform their practices. Are effective teachers more likely to access research than teachers who are less effective in the classroom? Do they make more time to access research? Are they part of programs or communities that support using research?

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