

TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS

Teacher research is defined as research which is conducted by classroom teachers on their own practice, hence the title teachers as researchers. Recently, this type of research has expanded into the university setting and there is some debate as to whether this too should be considered teacher research. Generally the field has settled on the term *practitioner research* to define all forms of teacher research and *teacher research* as limited to P-12 teachers. This entry looks at the historical development and current practice of the teacher as researcher.

Historical Development

Teacher research as a research methodology has existed since at least the end of the nineteenth century. Though many would credit the start of teacher research with Stephen Corey at Columbia University, it is difficult to give a precise history or starting point for when teacher research began because many teachers have long incorporated research to inform their own teaching practice, without the intention of publishing their results.

A modern example of this can be seen on a systemic level in the Reggio Emilia preschools where teachers are expected to do action research as part of their normal duties. The fact that this research is not published does not mean it is not happening. As such it is impossible to state exactly when teacher research started as a practice and to quantify how widespread it was in the past or for that matter how prevalent it is today. It is safe to say that during the beginning of the twentieth century teachers started to call

their work research and to share it with others.

The struggle for the research teachers do on their own practice to be considered valid has existed since its beginning. This struggle has fundamentally been about control; initially this argument came from an academy reluctant to relinquish its control on knowledge production. Though this argument continues, and subjects teachers unnecessarily to positivistic criticism that is no longer tolerated within the academy itself, the current struggle of teacher researchers comes from governments, both federally and locally, as politicians collectively exercise greater influence and control over what teachers can and cannot do in their classrooms.

Increasingly teacher research is coming under pressure not because it is banned or discounted but because teachers' work is so legislated and controlled that there is little room for teachers to conduct research on their own practice except as a counter-narrative. Teacher research reached a peak of popularity in the 1990' s but it has been steadily losing ground ever since. Today pockets of teacher researchers can be found in the United States and throughout the world but rarely are they aware of each other' s existence.

Current Practice

How is teacher research best described? Teacher research does not dictate a specific method. It is possible, as a teacher researcher, to do experimental, quantitative research; but the classroom setting and the fact that teachers are typically participating in the research that they are doing lends itself to qualitative approaches.

Often teacher research is simply described as a form of action research but this

perspective ignores and undermines the power of teacher research as a 'new' methodology, and undermines the 'power' of teachers as researchers. Although action research is the one method of conducting research that resonates best with what teachers are trying to do in their classrooms, teacher research is not just a type of action research. Teacher research does not dictate either a qualitative or quantitative methodological perspective or use of specific methods.

This is essentially because teacher research is its own methodology. It is a specific worldview that argues that the teacher can have the authority to conduct research in his or her own classroom. This simple notion turns the world of 'traditional' research on its head. Teacher research as a methodology dictates not only that teachers have the right and power to conduct research in their own classrooms, but that teachers are in a better position than anyone else to conduct that research.

Criticisms

In part this explains why teacher research is often attacked. It challenges the traditional power structures which are inherent in U.S. school systems. Even though exclusively positivistic models reflective of the modernist movement are no longer dominant in current educational research, criticisms of teacher research are often based on the assumptions of this model. Teacher research is seen by these critiques as subjective and unscientific. Others would argue that all research is subjective.

This subjectivity may, in fact, be the potential strength of teacher research. The transformative power of this research has been realized by teachers throughout the world and is now seen as normal practice by many teacher researchers. Despite negative attitudes among some in the academy and others in power, teachers have taken up teacher

research, and many schools and communities are transformed for the better as a result. The transformative power of this research has also been seen by many teacher education institutions and is now often a requirement of many post-degree certifications and graduate degrees.

How It Works

The power of teacher research is that it is not significantly different from the work that good teachers already do. Effective teachers are focused on the learning of each student in their class and are engaging in reflective practice, constantly examining their own teaching to become the best teachers that they can be. These two practices supply a teacher researcher with more data than anyone could ever need. The difference between a teacher researcher and a teacher is the intentionality behind the collection of this data.

Teacher researchers are collecting this data not just to be better teachers but to answer the bigger questions that they have about teaching and education. Teacher researchers are systematic about how they collect and analyze data. The power lies in the fact that when teachers approach their own classrooms as researchers, they have total access. Teacher researchers can see more and learn more than any researcher who comes in once or twice a week for a few months can ever experience. Teacher researchers are unquestionably subjective, but this, as was mentioned, may be a strength not a weakness of this research. Their subjectivity gives them access and power to make change in the only place where it really matters – locally, in their own classroom with their own students. Whether teacher researchers go on to share this work publicly, or not, does not detract from its value as research.

Educational journals are increasingly welcoming work by teacher researchers, and

a number of publications specialize in it. Teacher researchers are also increasingly presenting their work locally, regionally and nationally, at events such as the International Teacher Research Conference which is held annually following the American Educational Research Association's annual conference, in the same city. With increased recognition and opportunities to share their work the teacher as researcher is a role that teachers will continue to assume despite the increasing demands and pressures.

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See also: Action Research, Educational Reform, Praxis, Teacher Empowerment

FURTHER READINGS

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