Chapter 7
Moving Forward with an Eye on the Past: A Historical Perspective of Teacher Research

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ABSTRACT
Teacher research has become a well-known term in professional development circles, yet it is still often misunderstood. This chapter seeks to facilitate those who are interested in teacher research by providing a historical perspective. Understanding the development of teacher research over that past century will allow interested parties to move forward with greater insight of the potential benefits and drawbacks inherent in teacher research. Such an analysis may lead to increased success for teacher research projects as the twenty-first century unfolds. Although teacher research can be a challenging form of professional development, it has incredible transformative potential. It has the potential to enhance the entire profession of teaching as well as the knowledge, skills and abilities of individual teachers. A call is made for teachers and academics to move forward by forming an alliance to explore new models and methods of teacher research.

INTRODUCTION
A wealth of research exists on the potential benefits of teacher research (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Burns, 1999; Borg, 2013). This has caused many institutions to want to initiate teacher research programs. However, prior to embarking on a teacher research project, it may be beneficial to get a little perspective on teacher research. Some confusion still exists on exactly what the term “teacher research” means. This is in spite of the fact that the concept has been around for over a century. The purpose of this article is to provide a clearer perspective on teacher research by looking into its history and current practices. From that vantage point some predictions will be made regarding future directions of teacher research.

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DEFINITIONS

From the name, one may assume that teacher research is research done by teachers. Whereas this is true, not all research done by teachers qualifies as teacher research. For example, a teacher may find out the names and ages of the siblings of their students out of personal interest. This may be a form of systematic inquiry, but could hardly be said to be teacher research. Even educational research done by a teacher may not be recognized as teacher research, depending on the topic and methodology. For example, investigating the impact of socio-economic status on math scores across an entire school district would not be considered teacher research by most, even if it was conducted by a teacher.

The question of exactly what constitutes teacher research has been widely discussed. In fact, turning to the literature on teacher research one can find a variety of definitions. These definitions share many common features, such as being systematic and done in the professional context of the teacher researcher (Borg, 2013). A succinct definition was presented by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993). Teacher research is, “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work.” (p. 23). While this definition is beautiful in its simplicity, other researchers have felt the need for a more specific definition. Some researchers felt it was important to add the purpose of the research. In their study, Carter and Halsall (1998) used the aim of “…beneficial change, ultimately, in student learning” (pg. 73). Other researchers used a different goal in their definition, “…undertaken with a view to enhancing their vocation as professional educators” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004, p.9). A variety of other definitions have been proposed specifying different methods, contexts, requirements, or objectives. After reviewing the various definitions, Borg (2010) came up with the following definition, which is more comprehensive although somewhat cumbersome:

On the basis of the above analysis, I thus define teacher research as systematic inquiry, qualitative and/or quantitative, conducted by teachers in their own professional contexts, individually or collaboratively (with other teachers and/or external collaborators), which aims to enhance teachers’ understandings of some aspect of their work, is made public, has the potential to contribute to better quality teaching and learning in individual classrooms, and which may also inform institutional improvement and educational policy more broadly. (p. 395)

Borg’s definition has its merits. However, the aspect of publication has been contested. Bartels (2003) contends that research that enhances personal knowledge is valuable and that publication is a practice of the academic community, not the teaching community. Central to this argument is the idea that teachers and researchers are members of different discourse communities. According to Bartels, the concerns of teachers are more personal and pragmatic. Their concerns revolve around what to do in the classroom, which does not require publication. Academics, on the other hand, are interested in fitting their research into other research, which requires publication. Borg (2013) contends that personal inquiry may be valuable, but it should not be called research.

Indeed, what counts and what doesn’t count as research in practitioner inquiry has also been debated vigorously by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Apparently there are tensions between groups who claim that research must adhere to a rigorous set of standards to be called ‘research’ while others feel that any systematic inquiry may be called ‘research’. The issue was resolved by including both teacher research and educational research in the research agenda for AERA. The following quote from Cochran-Smith is illustrative, “we argued that given the complexity of