

CHAPTER 3

Developing a Definition of Teacher Research

Teacher researchers have faith in their students; they know too much to give up on them.

—Marion MacLean

A definition of teacher research began to develop during our journey together and our construction of theories. The definition grew up around six descriptive words intended to acknowledge the conditions, practices, and policies that make teacher research possible, help it flourish, and make its contribution felt in classrooms, schools, and school districts.

We define *teacher research* as inquiry that is *intentional*, *systematic*, *public*, *voluntary*, *ethical*, and *contextual*.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS INTENTIONAL

Teacher researchers begin conducting research by identifying a topic or framing a question they wish to explore and investigate. Teacher research starts with a commitment to examine an aspect of teaching and learning and is carried out through the intentional and systematic collection and analysis of classroom data.

Teacher researchers choose research questions that matter to them. Because they determine their own questions and the course of their research journey based on their own learning needs, their research is responsive to those needs. They may set out in one direction in their research, but their growing understanding of their teaching and their students' learning may lead them to change directions. As their research leads to improved understanding they may revise their plans for the data they collect, the methods they use, and the types of data analysis they conduct. While they cannot predict their research discoveries, they approach each step of the research process with the intention of finding out more about their teaching and their students' learning.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS SYSTEMATIC

Teacher researchers use methods and strategies to document the research process, identify assumptions, collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data, and articulate theories, findings, and implications.

Teacher researchers collect a variety of kinds of data to triangulate findings, engage in constant comparison of data they have collected, and check their interpretations with colleagues, students, or parents involved in the study. They respond to challenges to their thinking that other teacher researchers present to them during discussions or in response to drafts of research reports. They formulate theories in relation to their analysis. In these ways, teacher researchers systematically seek to establish an accurate and full picture of a teaching and learning context that will lead to deeper understanding of that context.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS PUBLIC

Although teachers' decisions to conduct research are individually determined, teacher research is a public endeavor. When teachers conduct research, they examine their assumptions, withhold judgments, and look at issues from alternative perspectives in an effort to make apparent to themselves that which has been unseen or silent. They intentionally shift from a private perspective to a more open, public perspective in order to encourage challenges to their understanding. Often, teacher researchers enlist both students and colleagues as co-researchers. They discuss with them their assumptions, their hunches, their data, their methods of data collection, and their data analysis and interpretations throughout the course of the research.

Teachers join in the professional discourse by reporting on their research. Efforts to make their research public involve sharing research processes, findings, and implications with colleagues in their schools and with those in communities beyond their schools through informal exchanges, the publication of research stories and research reports (both in print and on-line), and the presentation of their research at local, national, and international conferences. Teachers conduct research in order to understand better the workings of the classroom or teaching context, and they make their research public in order to add to the body of knowledge about teaching and learning.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY

Teacher research is an act that has the potential of risk and vulnerability, requiring that teachers publicly examine their beliefs, assumptions, and

understandings related to their teaching practice. Therefore, the decision of whether or not to conduct teacher research remains the teacher's.

While teacher research is voluntary, it is also inclusive. It is conducted by preservice and beginning as well as experienced teachers, and it is of use to all teachers who wish to examine their practice, regardless of their level of expertise about teaching or research. Because teacher research is both voluntary and inclusive, teachers are not evaluated on the basis of whether or not they conduct teacher research nor on the merits of research projects they undertake.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS ETHICAL

Teacher researchers' primary responsibility is to their students, and their students are the primary beneficiaries of their work. They strive to collect data that is representative, often checking with students to confirm the significance and value of the data. They seek student affirmation of their interpretations and acknowledge discrepancies between their interpretations and those of their students.

They invite challenges to their tentative findings by discussing their research with students and colleagues, and they search for additional classroom data that presents confirming or disconfirming perspectives. They obtain permission to quote students or use their work samples, and they are careful to protect information that would compromise the privacy of their students, community members, or colleagues. They report both their successes and their failures, in an attempt to better understand their teaching and the learning of their students.

TEACHER RESEARCH IS CONTEXTUAL

Teacher research requires description of the context for teaching and learning. Rather than attempt to control for variables, teacher researchers strive to define, articulate, and elucidate the context as a whole, to reveal the assumptions at work within the context, and to uncover the connections as well as tensions among elements of that context.

Teacher research both shapes and is shaped by its context. Their research questions reflect teachers' current understanding of their topics, their students, and their teaching context. As teacher researchers gain insight through data collection and analysis, what they learn determines their future research steps. At the same time, they develop new ways of interpreting the events in their classrooms and responding to their students. In turn, those new interpretations and responses can evoke new responses

on the part of their students. Teacher research is contextual because it is context-dependent, context-relevant, and context-responsive.

Our description of teacher research developed during our research process as an emerging and shifting understanding. Many teachers contributed. The six key words of the definition, written large on heavy paper, were often hung in a room where teacher research meetings were in progress and referred to as touchstones throughout the discussion.