Teacher Research: Empowering Teachers To Empower Students
by Sonia Rocca

Blending reflective practice with systematic inquiry, teacher researchers put their students in the spotlight and treat their work as a meaningful data-informed way to understand student learning beyond standardized tests' results. Teacher research is student centered and fosters empathic student-teacher relationships, because teachers feel more connected to their students and students feel more valued by their teachers.

According to an Australian study (Edwards & Burns, 2016), English language teachers who completed an action research course as part of their professional development reported its considerable impact on their teaching, their relationship with students, their motivation for research, and their recognition from their professional communities. Undertaking their own classroom research was a transformative experience for these teachers, as they felt more confident about their teaching and more connected to their students. They also felt more valued by their schools and their sector. Whether or not they continued to be engaged with action research, they developed a research ethos that has guided them in their professional growth.

Yet, despite all these benefits and more, teacher research faces challenges. It may be perceived as an additional burden, and, furthermore, teachers might think that research is for academics. For teacher research to have a sustainable impact, it needs to be encouraged, mentored, and incentivized. In this article, I discuss how teacher research contributes to the development of teacher identity, agency, and voice. I also make a case for mentoring teachers to cultivate a research mindset, emphasizing the importance of supporting teacher research institutionally and beyond.

Teacher Identity, Agency, and Voice Are Interrelated

Teacher Identity
Teacher identity is a multifaceted construct that changes over time and across contexts. Its definition is complex, lying at the crossroads of several disciplines—education, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Barkhuizen (2017) defines language teacher identities as "both inside the teacher and outside in the social, material and technological world" (p. 4).

Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is pivotal to the development of teacher identity. The roles one fulfills as a teacher align with what one does and how one acts as a teacher.

Teacher Voice

Teacher voice relates to teacher identity and agency in terms of the "who I am" as a teacher, the "what I do" as a teacher, and the degree to which a teacher's perspectives and experiences are shared and valued. As they take on the role of researchers, the agency they show helps shape their professional identity. (See Figure 1.)
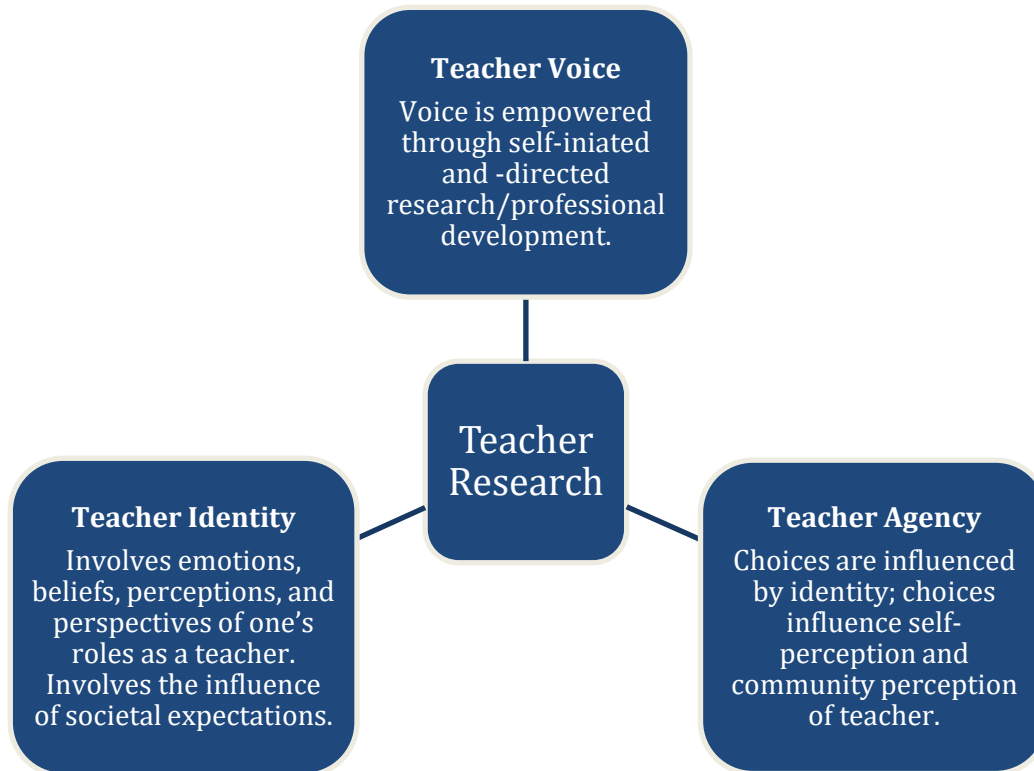
Figure 1. Interconnection of teacher identity, voice, and agency as a result of teacher research.

I have been a teacher-researcher for as long as I can remember. I have always been interested in investigating what goes on in my classrooms. This is the cornerstone of my professional identity. In 2012, my sixth-grade class was involved in a 1:1 iPad pilot program. I designed a study to test the effectiveness of such a program (agency). Not only did I share my findings with colleagues, parents, and administrators, I also presented at international conferences and published them in a refereed journal (voice). This whole experience impacted not only my pedagogical practices, but also, importantly, the way I see myself and present myself as a teacher (identity).

Mentoring Teacher Researchers

I am one of those teachers who merge teaching with research, embedding inquiry into daily classroom practices and treating student work as a constant source of data. In my constructivist

approach to education, I espouse Dewey's (1933) view that inquiry is central to education. Inquiry is propelled by reflective thinking, and "reflection includes observation" (p. 102), making it part of a scientific approach, where data represents observed facts (p. 104).

An Important Distinction: Teacher Research vs. Action Research

My experience as a teacher researcher has made me appreciate what an endeavor it is to undertake classroom research. Where and how to begin is always an issue. The idea of conducting action research can be particularly anxiety-inducing because it focuses on implementing change. But not all teacher research is action research. In fact, teacher research that is exploratory research could be a good starting point.

Getting Started

Smith (2020) recommends teachers start by reflecting on a success, a problem, or a puzzle by sharing their recent experiences with other colleagues or writing them down in a journal. Teacher journals come in many different shapes and forms. The internet is a cornucopia of such resources: teacher journal templates, ideas prompts, examples, notebooks. A personal favorite is the Notes app: I use it to jot down my thoughts, take photos or videos of my students' work, and record my observations. Writing journal entries is the stock-in-trade of the typical reflective practitioner. It helps with monitoring practices, sampling student work, scrutinizing patterns, and developing a research focus. However, unless a teacher has a solid background in research methodology, moving from reflective practice to systematic inquiry could be a daunting endeavor.

Teacher Research Mentors

This is where a research mentor comes in handy. A mentor does not judge or tell you what to do, but rather encourages you to find your own way. Mentors build on confidence and confidentiality to provide support throughout the process, as mentees evolve from reflective practitioners to teacher researchers. Mentoring helps structure reflective practice, which is a common part of many educators' teaching and is often included in teacher evaluations, steering it toward systematic inquiry.

Mentors provide guidance in designing a research methodology, from formulating research questions to collecting data and analyzing them, using strategies like the following:

- dialog journals
- classroom observations
- Socratic questioning
- scaffolding activities
- interactive workshops

Mentors also assist with sharing findings through presentations and publications. Smith (2020) is an excellent resource for mentors, with practical guidelines based on the extensive experience of the author as a research mentor and a coordinator of research mentoring programs.

Incentivizing Teacher Researchers

Teacher research requires a considerable investment of time and effort. It hinges on teacher agency and, hence, on the choice of the individual teacher to engage in this type of professional growth. As such, teacher research should be promoted but not mandated; it is important, too, for teachers to see tangible signs of institutional support. Here are a few ways institutions can incentivize teacher research within their staff:

- Recruit "resident mentors" as part of your professional development offerings. This could be a powerful motivator as mentors advocate and pave the way for teacher research.
- Provide opportunities for promotion for teacher researchers.
- Allot time for teacher research in professional development credit hours or in a workload schedule.
- School districts could organize action research courses.

Promoting teacher research needn't be limited to institutions; professional organizations could offer grants to encourage teachers to attend action research courses, as well as to present at conferences and write for publication. The British Council has successfully implemented "Action Research Mentoring Schemes" in Latin America and South Asia.

In the End: *Cui Bono?*

All stakeholders benefit from teacher research—teachers, students, parents, and administrators— and benefits stem from both the process and the outcome. During classroom research, teachers build evidence-based knowledge that informs their practices and refines their expertise, and they become more attuned to student perspectives. Students feel their output is important because it becomes input for a teacher researcher's investigation. All of this (the new knowledge, refined expertise, and improved student self-perception) impacts the classroom environment and student learning, and it can also impact policy making and curricular decisions. In Suskind's (2016) words, "teacher researchers are innovators, curriculum drivers, agents of school change, and directors of their own professional development."

References

Barkhuizen, G. (2017). Language teacher identity research: An introduction. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 1–11). Routledge.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think, a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Heath.

Edwards, E. & Burns, A. (2016). Language teacher action research: Achieving sustainability. *ELT Journal, 70*(1), 6–15. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv060

Smith, R. (2020). *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical guide*. British Council.

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Mentoring_Teachers_Research_classrooms_handbook.pdf

Suskind, D. (2016, January 26). *Teacher as researcher: The ultimate professional development*. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/reacher-researcher-ultimate-professional-development-dorothy-suskind

_____

Sonia Rocca *is a Fulbright Global Scholar and an English language specialist with the U.S. Department of State. She holds a PhD in applied linguistics from University of Edinburgh and has been a language educator for 30 years, teaching three different languages (English, French, Italian) in three different countries (Italy, Britain, United States). Currently, she teaches Italian at the Lycée Français de New York. Last year, she launched a teacher research mentorship program at her school.*