



# Burrowing Into Female Teachers' Temporal Constraints Experienced in the Midst of the Research Process

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this qualitative study is on three female teachers' experiences as teacher researchers in the midst of conducting first-time research studies about their own teaching/professional practices. Inquiring into participants' accounts of their research experiences revealed complex personal and professional obligations shaping the amount of time that participants felt able to invest in the research process. The findings of this paper have implications for better understanding teacher research as a sustainable professional learning endeavour and for considering the complexities teacher researchers must navigate as part of their professional development.

I wish somebody had talked to me about  
what [research] might look like in terms of time  
to really consider that it is not you being a student  
who has no responsibilities outside this particular project  
as a [full-time] educator  
there is always something going on  
plus I have a teenager and a toddler

(Susan' excerpt from found poem based upon three interviews between July 2013 and July 2014)

**I**n this excerpt, an experienced teacher, Susan, describes the experience of conducting a first-time research study as more time-intensive than she had originally envisioned, due in part to other obligations of which she had to be mindful. Scholars have documented that while teacher research engagement (Borg, 2010) may provide deep professional learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,

1993, 1999, 2004; Zeichner, 2003), they also note that engaging regularly in research may be challenging for teachers due to busy teaching schedules and professional responsibilities (Chandler, 1999; Massey, Baber, Lowe, Ormond, & Weatherly, 2009). Overall, the literature tends to agree that time for research is limited for teachers, a finding that is usually attributed to the contextual busyness of teaching (Borg, 2007, 2009, 2010; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; Thornley, Parker, Read, & Eason, 2004). While Susan's comments in the opening excerpt resonate with earlier findings, her observations also show a multiplicity of personal and professional responsibilities that she had to juggle as she engaged in research relevant to the context of her teaching.

The focus of this qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) is on three female teachers' experiences as they engaged in teacher research for the purposes of a Master of Education degree. In this paper, I maintain a focus upon participants' understanding of research engagement in the midst of the research process. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: 1) to problematize and better understand time constraints as teachers conduct teacher research; 2) to document teacher researchers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges associated with research engagement in the midst of the process. The findings of this paper have implications for better understanding teacher research engagement as a sustainable professional learning endeavour (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2004; O'Connell Rust, 2009) and for considering the complexities that female teachers must navigate as part of their efforts to professionally develop and learn.

## Literature: Benefits and Constraints of Teacher Research Engagement

Stenhouse (1981), often credited with the early conceptualization of "teachers as researchers," wrote, "the basic argument for placing teachers at the heart of the educational research process may be simply stated... Teachers are in charge of classrooms... [and] the teacher is surrounded by rich research opportunities" (pp. 109–110). The proliferation of teacher research by and about teacher researchers suggests that many in education agree (Craig, 2009; Leeman & Wardekker, 2013). Scholars note the influence of Corey (1953), Dewey (1933), Lewin (1948), and Stenhouse (1975) as individuals who fostered the idea that teachers could and should engage in systematic inquiry of their own classroom practices as a way to improve and enhance their knowledge of teaching (Borko, Whitcomb, & Byrnes, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Fichtman Dana, 2013; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

Teacher research may be broadly described as a process of methodical inquiry undertaken to better understand the complexities of one's teaching with the intent of improvement and change the heart of its initiative.

For the purposes of professional development, the sponsors of teacher research are abundant (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009) and have been documented to include: university-school partnerships (Arhar et al., 2013; Hall, 2009), professional learning communities (Lieberman, 2009; Zeichner, 2003), and professional development schools (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Leeman & Wardekker 2013; Vrijnsen-de Corte, den Brok, Kamp, & Bergen, 2013), among others. University teacher education programs, according to many scholars (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Shosh & Rappe Zales, 2007; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009), also play an important role in the fostering of professional learning through teacher research by encouraging teachers to take on inquiry puzzles about their own classroom practices.

Looking across how teacher research is supported, advocates of teacher research contend that it serves the field of education in several ways. For example, in how teacher research can contribute to the knowledge base of educational research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Craig, 2009; Lieberman, 2009; O'Connell Rust, 2009) and enable teachers to contribute to educational policy development (O'Connell Rust, 2009; Rust & Meyers, 2006). Teacher research has also been found to foster critical thinking (Hagevik, Aydeniz, & Rowell, 2012; Kraft, 2002; Mitton-Kukner, 2013), content area knowledge (Babkie & Provost, 2004; Huillet, Adler, & Berger, 2011), improved instructional practices (Grove, Dixon, & Pop, 2009), and inclusive forms of pedagogy (Capobianco, Lincoln, Cannuel-Browne, & Trimarchi, 2006).

In contrast to the benefits of teacher research are the known challenges that research engagement can create for teachers. Scholars note that due to full-time teaching commitments (Borg, 2007, 2009; Massey et al., 2009) within diverse classroom contexts (Li, 2006; Magos, 2012), teachers struggle to sustain research practices. Other factors that constrain the investment and quality of teacher research include a lack of institutional support (Anwaruddin & Pervin, 2013; Borg, 2007; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; Thornley et al., 2004) and limited resources and/or funding for such endeavours (Borg, 2009, 2010; Fowler & Procter, 2008).

As part of this discussion, one of the most common barriers identified for teacher researchers is a lack of time. Scholars agree that a lack of time tends to influence the quality, depth of investment, and desire of teachers to initiate and/or continue with their research efforts (Borg, 2007, 2009, 2010; Fowler & Procter, 2008;

Leeman & Wardekker, 2013; Li, 2006; Kraft, 2002; Magos, 2012; Reis-Jorge, 2007; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; Thornley et al., 2004). A lack of time for research is generally attributed to the contextual constraints of schools, as teachers must manage multiple responsibilities (Ellis & Armstrong, 2014; Leeman & Wardekker, 2013), full teaching loads (Borg, 2007, 2009; Fowler & Procter, 2008, Tavakoli & Howard, 2012; Reis-Jorge, 2007), dense curricula (Thornley et al., 2004), and diverse student needs (Li, 2006; Magos, 2012). Although temporal constraints are depicted as a common trial for teacher researchers, little is known about their complexity beyond the demands of teaching.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study is informed by several concepts: teacher research engagement (Borg, 2010), a narrative view of teacher knowledge (Xu & Connelly, 2009), a performativity-performance approach (Morison & MacLeod, 2013), and teacher time pressure (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Borg's (2010) definition of research engagement encompasses two broad areas associated with the research process: the active conduct of a research study as well as the practise of reading and drawing upon empirical research. While the overall intent of this study is upon teacher researchers' experiences as they actively conduct research about their work in K-12 and higher education classrooms, I was also attentive to participants' use of published research in how it was employed to inform their thinking as they developed research proposals or literature reviews.

Viewing participants' accounts of their research experiences narratively was also an important concept informing this study. Xu and Connelly (2009), drawing upon the work of Connelly and Clandinin (2000), defined a narrative view of teacher knowledge, as "a narrative construct which references the totality of a person's personal practical knowledge gained from formal and informal educational experience" (p. 221). Attending carefully to participants' research experiences, in and outside of educational contexts, provided insights into how they understood research and the importance of significant others shaping their perceptions of learning within the research process. Thinking in this way allowed me to consider what Morison and MacLeod (2013) refer to as a performativity-performance approach, particularly the "relational specificities and the mechanisms through which gender trouble occur" (p. 567). Morison and MacLeod's conceptualization enabled me to mindfully examine participants' accounts of their social interactions within particular contexts, making "gender trouble" (p. 567) explicit when it occurred. Given my purpose to explore female teachers' experiences as novice

researchers, their approach supported my efforts to inquire deeply into participants' stories being attentive to how their highly structured lives shaped their perceptions of how time was to be used in relation to their research efforts.

Refining my thinking about the role of time in teacher researchers' experiences was Skaalvik and Skaalvik's (2011) notion of teacher time pressure in how increasing workloads in schools constrains the amount of time teachers are able to dedicate to different tasks. Attending to the time pressure participants reported in response to numerous personal and professional responsibilities provided insights into participants' time constraints and how these informed their understanding of research engagement.

## Methodology

Informing qualitative research, Merriam (2009) wrote, is a researcher's desire to understand "*the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13, author's emphasis). Viewing the phenomenon of female teacher researchers' experiences qualitatively, I had a focused interest in participants' accounts of their teacher research experiences, particularly their learning in the midst of the process, what they identified as meaningful, and how they made sense of their research efforts. All three participants designed their studies<sup>2</sup> to answer questions that were relevant to their classroom practices, professional identities, and/or educational contexts. Both Susan and Carly focused upon student learning experiences and Teagan was looking closely at perceptions of a particular curriculum program. All three felt their topics would inform their teaching and professional practices. This work builds upon a previous study conducted in Turkey (2009-2011) in which I explored three female teachers' experiences as novice teacher researchers (Mitton-Kukner, 2013, 2014, under review).

In June 2013, I invited Susan, Carly, and Teagan, three experienced teachers, to take part in a study about their experiences as teacher researchers. I met the participants as they were taking courses as part of their graduate studies. I taught Susan and Teagan in two different courses that happened in 2012 and 2013, respectively, and I met Carly through a former graduate student. Susan and Teagan were invited to participate when they were no longer students of mine and once I learned that all three of the women had made the decision to do a thesis as part of their graduate studies. At the time of the study, two of the participants, Susan and Teagan, were married and had children, and Carly was engaged. Presently, I am in the second year of this study;

the thesis timeline is different for each of the participants due to different start dates in the process, although I anticipate they all may complete requirements by December 2015. For the purposes of this paper, I am focused on their experiences over a 12-month period (July 2013-July 2014); this period encompasses different stages of their research engagement.<sup>3</sup> To date, I have conducted nine individual interviews of approximately 35-60 minutes apiece. The interviews have been timed to coincide with different stages of the formal thesis process (Phase one: Research proposal development and ethics approval application; Phase two: Data collection; Phase three: Data analysis; Phase four: Write-up of findings). During this 12-month period, I interviewed Carly four times (June 18, 2013; June 28, 2013; September 11, 2013; March 20, 2014), Susan three times (July 16, 2013; November 28, 2013; July 16, 2014), and Teagan twice (November 20, 2013; April 1, 2014). Other data sources include: field notes, participant-generated artifacts, and blog entries from a blog to which we all contributed.

Inductive analysis enabled me to pinpoint frequent patterns across participants' narrative accounts. For example, participants' references to time methodologically allowed me to consider their positioning in different personal and professional contexts with important others. Once I had established commonalities, I was able to identify relationships amongst time, personal and professional obligations, and research engagement. Inductive analysis of the data led me to the decision to represent participants' research experiences as found poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2002, 2010). What emerged in the data required representation that could show participants' research experiences vividly in a form that facilitated understanding (Butler-Kisber, 2002).

Creating the found poems was a recursive process (Butler-Kisber, 2002). It required multiple readings of transcripts as well as listening to recorded conversations to see if my representation of participants' experiences conveyed "the stamp" (Addonizio & Laux, 1997, p. 115) of their voices. From the transcripts I chose nuggets of words and phrases (Butler-Kisber, 2010) that depicted participants' understanding of their research engagement. Drafts of the poems were shared with participants to create an additional opportunity for their response and input. The following poems may be understood as "untreated" (Butler-Kisber, 2010) in that I made minimal changes to participants' words with only minor modifications to grammar and arrangement.

## Situating the Benefits and Challenges of Teacher Research Engagement Within Experienced Temporal Constraints

Emerging from the data were participants' mixed views about the benefits and challenges associated with teacher research. In the midst of conducting research, participants generally described the challenges of research engagement as outnumbering its benefits and seemed to feel that more benefits would become evident once they had completed their research. In what follows, I discuss three main themes using found poems (Butler-Kisber, 2002, 2010) to show the relationship between the complexities of participants' busy schedules in relation to their understanding of the research process. The found poems are reflective of commonalities found across participants' accounts and provide insights into the temporal constraints informing their research. I begin with the theme "multiple obligations in the midst of teacher research engagement," as it was the most distinct pattern in participants' accounts and provides a lens through which to view their understanding of the benefits and challenges they associated with research engagement.

### **Theme One: Multiple Obligations in the Midst of Teacher Research Engagement**

Pervading participants' descriptions of conducting research were multiple responsibilities reportedly influencing their actions and their perceptions of the amount of time they felt they could invest in the research process. Their understanding of who they were in relation to others was a constant tension underlying their experiences as teacher researchers.

#### **Susan: There Is Always Something Going On**

I wish somebody had talked to me about  
what [research] might look like in terms of time  
to really consider that it is not you being a student  
who has no responsibilities outside this particular project  
as a [full-time] educator  
there is always something going on  
plus I have a teenager and a toddler.

Many late nights in my office  
it is a space I can work without being interrupted  
my partner can watch the children  
at home I feel obligated to do something  
like housework or laundry, dishes, food preparation.

Balancing those desires  
the kids  
spending time with my husband  
walking my dog  
kind of taxing  
during the process of doing a thesis  
they get lost.

My plan was to start doing data analysis and writing,  
did not happen  
we had two [tragic events] in the family  
I had to evaluate where I was spending time in my life  
not just the kids  
but extended family  
[and] nuclear family  
the one I created and the one I come from  
both needed my attention  
I wanted a balance between family and work  
the thesis went on the back burner.

For me, I'm trying to rush through it now  
I didn't want to do the course based [program]  
I would have cheated myself by doing the course based  
I want it done  
but I also don't want to compromise.

**Carly: My Mind Wonders Away**

The thesis does ask you to work hard  
to be dedicated  
to delve quite deeply  
to explore something  
to discover things you might not have known.

I do find it very hard to work at home, at my parent's house  
if my mom is awake  
she is talking, wanting to interact which is good  
but it just has to be focused on her  
I cannot separate myself from that.

We're almost done  
the church, the reception hall, DJ  
we got our invitations  
[the engagement] was very exciting  
just a couple weeks after that my mom got sick  
[the doctors] ended up saying that the best thing to do...  
[was to] let her go naturally.



I haven't had time  
to just focus  
my mind wonders away  
[on] teaching  
thinking about my mom  
everything except Merleau-Ponty.

**Teagan: My Responsibilities Are Split**

This semester has been busy  
Some of my many hats  
it's just the regular mum stuff  
taking the kids where they need go  
Taekwondo classes, Mondays and Wednesdays  
massive chaos after work  
get supper ready  
then we have to dedicate family time on the weekends.

When the kids go to bed I put my headphones on  
sit at the table  
and start writing until about 10.30  
that's my time  
I get to talk to [my husband] at the end of the week  
we don't get to do a lot of stuff together  
my responsibilities are split.

Being able to work independently  
that's something that I struggle with  
[My husband] can stay at home  
and work all that day  
There is no way in God's creation I can do it  
There is too much stuff going on  
the laundry  
get[ting] supper ready  
I have to do this  
I have to do that  
just too much other stuff.

**Unpacking theme one.** Over the course of the time period in which participants were engaged in research, a recurring topic in participants' accounts were descriptions of ongoing responsibilities as complicating their research efforts. Participants described their research efforts as intersecting with other personal and professional obligations in the form of important others (e.g., family members and students) and professional responsibilities (e.g., lesson planning and marking assignments). Having to juggle multiple relational responsibilities (e.g., children, partners, and ill family members)

alongside teaching commitments, created for participants a sense that their research was part of an ongoing cycle with no end in sight. Implied in their accounts, particularly for Susan and Teagan, were expectations of how they felt they needed to spend their time regarding childcare and housework. In order to create time and space for research in their schedules, participants, particularly Susan and Teagan, described their research efforts as happening around the schedules of their children, most often late at night after the children had gone to bed. Both described the tension of working at home with the distraction of housework providing an ongoing tension in the list of things that they felt had to be done. Despite their reported efforts to immerse themselves in the research process, all of the participants described the challenge of maintaining ongoing connections to their research. Participants attributed this to not only the regular demands of family and teaching, but also to pivotal life events, as emphasized by Carly in her efforts to return to her thesis following her marriage engagement and the death of her mother.

## **Theme Two: Minimal Benefits of Teacher Research Engagement in Light of Other Responsibilities**

For teachers, the decision to conduct teacher research often arises from acknowledging that something about one's practice could be improved (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Castle, 2006; Robinson & Lai, 2006). Of the research studies in which Susan, Carly, and Teagan were engaged, all three had questions about phenomenon related to their teaching practices and educational contexts. Attending to what they felt was worthy for further inquiry, seemed to inform their understanding of research although they tended to see the benefits of research engagement as something that would become more obvious upon completion of their degrees.

### **Susan: The Positive May Come**

I really went in knowing that I was going to do a thesis  
[the course-based route is] a path of least resistance  
not necessarily a good path for me.  
[in the past] decisions were made for me about my teaching  
left me feeling the teaching lacked a piece of how I felt  
what I thought was happening  
how that should be applied  
just wanted to own something.

[Preparing the proposal was] much more a conversation  
between [the instructor] and me.

Right now it's frustrating [writing the thesis]  
the positive may come.

It forced me to do more reading in the area  
didn't know [the literature] with this researcher lens.

Just frustrating for me...  
I still see it as I knew it  
we'll see in the end  
the positive may come.

**Carly: I Have High Expectations**

I came into the program really open minded  
the group that I started with was  
a very research oriented group.

Doing a fair amount of reading in [my subject] area  
benefits definitely.

Working with grade 8 students [was] an interesting process  
they were all quite active  
being able to reflect on that  
how I made it work  
how the students responded  
is a good thing.

I learnt how to make changes as I was going along  
being able to get multiple perspectives  
being able to bring everything together  
the ability to read in an area that [is of] use to me  
benefits definitely.

I have high expectations  
for the feeling of accomplishment when it's done  
I hope that with [my] new knowledge I could share.

**Teagan: This Will Be Beneficial**

Always had in my head I was going to be a teacher  
I was going to teach and then I was going to retire.

[An instructor] mentioned [the thesis] and  
the [possibility] of doing a PhD  
sort of put that seed in my head  
working [here] it makes complete sense  
that was kind of my rationale for it.

It couldn't be timed better  
even just some of the stuff in the literature  
just kind of reinforcement  
we know what we are doing  
we know that we are on the right track  
it's really kind of neat.

I could be done in December if I [had gone] the course route  
part of me is like "oh God that would be nice"  
at the same time this will be beneficial for me  
it is a big time commitment  
I'm doing it  
but it's hard.

**Unpacking theme two.** Each of the participants had very different reasons for deciding to follow the thesis-based route as part of their Master of Education studies, citing personal and professional influences as informing their decisions. In the midst of research engagement, all three were in strong agreement about their efforts to develop a literature review as having the biggest impact upon their learning. Carly reportedly understood the research literature as useful for her teaching practices and Teagan felt undertaking a literature review was timely in that it supported her efforts during a time of program renewal within her particular institution. Although Susan had seemingly mixed feelings about what she was learning from her study, she did describe a "researcher lens" as enabling her to see the literature in new ways. Participants also described delving into the literature as empowering in how it allowed them to further develop knowledge about a specific area of professional practice. Of the three participants, Carly was the most affirmative about the benefits of research engagement in the midst of the research process. In addition to gaining knowledge and feeling empowered in response to reviewing the literature, Carly also identified the importance of working with participants and learning to adapt as positive gains from her research engagement.

At the same time, it is important to note that all of the participants, particularly Susan and Teagan, seemed to think that more benefits would emerge upon completion of the research, a finding which suggests that in the midst of the process participants found it challenging to sustain their research efforts in light of other responsibilities. Because of participants' emphasis on the benefits yet to materialize as part of their research engagement, I was also mindful in my questioning and analysis of their experiences, their perceptions of recurring challenges informing their research engagement.

### Theme Three: Complex Temporal Constraints Informing the Challenges of Teacher Research Engagement

Outnumbering the benefits of engaging in research were participants' views of the challenges associated with the process. A regular thread throughout participants' descriptions of their research efforts was the time-intensive nature of research conflicting with the little time they felt they had.

#### Susan: Why Did I Think This Was a Good Idea?

No idea just how much time it was going to take

To interview

the further [participants] are from that experience  
the less they remember specifics.

To transcribe

ten minutes of conversation  
takes at least an hour.

To analyze

it's time consuming  
requires a lot of thought  
the [more] time between an interview and the transcript  
harder for me to remember the details.

There's also the writing

working on one task  
there are five more to do  
frustrating—wrapping my head around  
something I know.

I asked [my thesis advisor]

"could you pose some deadlines?"  
[Advisor said] "No, no. I will never come after you for anything."  
Suppose that's a good thing  
what would have I done [after tragic events] in the family  
the flipside of that coin is  
how much longer can I keep pushing this ahead  
when I don't have a schedule?

I am in the cycle right now, asking,

"Why did I think this was a good idea?"  
partially because I don't think I have learned anything  
ground breaking  
wish I had deadlines set for myself.

**Carly: A Tough Balance**

It's been a tough balance [research and teaching]  
getting back into teaching  
the new job  
finding lessons  
I really do feel like I am getting back into everything  
this [degree] is two more years  
and I am not young  
neither are my parents  
the health of my parents  
that just makes it more challenging

Time is definitely a challenge

I've been reading a lot of philosophy  
took me up awhile to figure out how to read it  
I had to go back and redo some things.

I have been trying to write

I'm not a flowery writer  
challenging to be able to bring out that creative aspect  
definitely challenging when it is not your main focus  
making it into a story  
maintaining the integrity of the student.

The other thing

The student interviews were a lot shorter  
than the teacher interview  
they were lot less forthcoming with the information  
it was harder to pull out the information.

[Plus] getting the feedback from three different people  
different people with different ideas, different opinions  
questioning, urging me to look through other things  
combining it and having it all kind of make sense to me.

Making the time to do it [the thesis]

choosing to make the time to do it  
daily time, the length of time  
so that's definitely been a very big challenge.

**Teagan: It's the Stopping and Starting**

Putting aside the time that I need

I definitely see that as a challenge for me  
I am a very strong writer  
as long as I have the focus and [the] feedback

I am not intimidated by the writing of the research  
it's the time that [is] the biggest challenge for me.

Because it is new

I don't quite know how much information to put in  
on the other hand...I have a bit of a time constraint  
feel like I can [only] go into so much detail  
within the time that I have  
because I don't want it to hang over my head  
my own sort of self-inflicted goal of getting it done.

What took me longer

than I anticipated  
were the revisions of chapter one  
[then] I was looking at the lit review  
don't know if I'm on the right timeline  
to graduate next May.

Each time [I pass in a draft] it is hard to get the wheels turning again

It's the stopping and starting piece that that I find tricky  
if you tell me that I have a particular class  
at a particular time I can rearrange my schedule.  
But when I am the one that I have to be accountable to?  
it's hard—very hard.  
I want to get as much as out of it as I can  
but I want to be done.

**Unpacking theme three.** Participants had vivid observations about the amount of time research engagement entailed and described particular tasks such as preparing literature reviews, transcribing interviews, analyzing data, and writing drafts of findings as needing large amounts of time. Time for research was described by participants as two-fold in that there was the time needed for practically completing a task (e.g., interviewing participants or transcribing interviews) and there was the time needed for conceptualizing and producing products of the research process (e.g., preparing a literature review or analyzing qualitative data for recurring themes). For all of the participants, the practicalities of completing research tasks competed with the cognitive undertaking of conceptualizing their research. Complicating their efforts was the challenge each of them experienced to maintain consistent connections with their research and found that breaks in their research engagement in the form of teaching and professional obligations, as well as family responsibilities, impacted their ability to pick up where they left off and negatively influenced their motivation to carry on. Susan referred to the research process as comprising multiple tasks that required

careful thought. She also described the importance of having deadlines, although she acknowledged that in light of a negative family event imposed deadlines may not have been realistic. Due to the length of time in which Susan was engaged in the process, Susan did have concerns about how she would be able to maintain the current pace of her research efforts, something that seemed to undermine her appreciation of what she had learned in her study in that she had not learned anything “ground breaking.” Like Susan, Carly described reading research and writing drafts of findings as time intensive. Carly also provided insights into the complexity of interviewing participants, particularly when interviewing adolescents as well as the challenge of responding to feedback from a three-person thesis committee. Unlike Susan and Carly, Teagan was at the beginning of the research process and during this stage of the study was in the midst of finalizing her proposal for her thesis. Teagan did emphasize the amount of time that writing revisions took and was concerned about how this might impact her goal of graduating at a particular date. All three participants had concerns about being able to schedule the time that was needed for the thesis in relation to balancing research engagement with childcare and professional obligations, as noted by Susan and Teagan, as well as in juggling a new teaching position and spending time with her aging parents, as emphasized by Carly.

## Supporting Teacher Research Engagement in an Era of Increasing Workload at Home and in School

This study describes some of the ways three teacher researchers in the midst of the thesis process understood their learning in response to research engagement. Unlike many studies populating this field, which focus on teachers looking back upon completed research (Fecho, Graham, & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Castle, 2006; Babkie & Provost, 2004; Capobianco & Joyal, 2008), my intent in this study was to bring forward participants’ experiences in the midst of the research process. Looking closely at participants’ experiences in this way revealed findings that contrast with the known benefits of teacher research engagement, particularly in how engaging in research enables teachers to develop deeper understandings about their own professional knowledge (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Ellis & Castle, 2010; Power & Hubbard, 1999) while also fostering capacity and confidence to conduct research (Castle, 2006). Although all of the participants did attribute meaningful learning in response to conducting a literature review, it is important to note that the benefits identified by participants were outnumbered by the challenges they reportedly experienced. Susan, for example, reportedly felt an ongoing sense of disappointment in that her



study had not revealed findings she did not already “know.” Rather than seeing this as positive affirmation of her teacher knowledge through research (Craig, 2009), Susan tended to describe the study as disappointing and “frustrating” and seemed to think that perhaps “the positive” of the study might come once it was completed. Similar to Susan, Teagan also suggested that despite the positive possibilities of her study being situated within a timely event at her institution, she noted the time commitment that research in combination with the procedural requirements of the thesis entailed. Of the three participants, Carly was most upbeat about the benefits of her research engagement, although she did note she had “high expectations” for her research and was hopeful about the “feeling of accomplishment” that would come upon its completion. As a single woman without children, Carly did not have the same family responsibilities as Susan and Teagan, and arguably experienced less time pressure associated with gender-related multitasking (Offer & Schneider, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Overall, participants seemed to think that more benefits would emerge upon conclusion of their theses. This is a highly probable possibility; but in light of the challenges they experienced during the process, it is also important to consider the viability of Susan, Carly, and Teagan’s future research practices, that is, if they will continue to engage in research as part of professional learning about their teaching/professional practices once they have completed their studies.

Time as a constraint is a well-established finding in the teacher research literature (Borg, 2010); this body of work; however, tends to attribute teacher researchers’ lack of time to teaching and the contextual needs of classrooms (Ellis & Armstrong, 2014; Leeman & Wardekker, 2013; Magos, 2012; Massey et al., 2009). While it is important to recognize the increasing workloads of teachers (Bruno, Ashby, & Manzo, 2012; Hargreaves, 2003; Galton, MacBeath, Steward, Page, & Edwards, 2004; Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2006; Philipp & Kunter, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, 2011) as offering probable reasons for the time pressure that Susan, Teagan, and Carly experienced, it is also important to acknowledge the complexities of their lives outside of teaching responsibilities, and how these constrained their research efforts.

My review of the literature on teacher researchers suggests that research has centrally focused upon the benefits and challenges (Borg, 2010) that emerge from the process of teachers engaging in research and, somewhat, upon the kinds of time-related obstacles that potentially impede the impact of research upon teacher learning. While I admire the persistence of the participants to engage in research, and I am hopeful about their continuance with research as part of future professional learning associated with their classrooms and professional roles, I do have lingering questions. For instance, will Susan,

Teagan, and Carly engage in research outside the supports and structures of a graduate degree? Secondly, how does a teacher educator, in the role of thesis advisor, build bridges that might foster for individuals like Susan, Teagan, and Carly an autonomous professional learning mindset (Castle, 2006; Cornelissen & van den Berg, 2014; Schwarz, 2001; Shosh & Rappe Zales, 2007)? As I consider the ongoing multitasking (Mitton-Kukner, 2014, under review) in which participants engaged as multiple obligations intersected, and sometimes conflicted with their efforts, I am aware that in engaging in research was, at times, for Susan, Teagan, and Carly, tension-filled. Although tensions associated with learning may be educative (Dewey, 1938), and I am aware that frequent and consistent interactions between a thesis advisor and graduate student as well as ongoing descriptive feedback can positively support the learning of graduate students as they engage in teacher research, I am left with questions about how I might alleviate tensions, which are beyond the scope of my reach as a thesis advisor. It also brings sharply into focus the role of the thesis advisor as supportive mentor (Daniel, 2009; Maton et al., 2011; Paglis, Green, & Bauer, 2006) for teachers, particularly in the midst of the research process for, arguably, it is in the messiness of the process that a teacher researcher's mindset is cultivated.

In light of increasing workloads in and out of school, it is important to ask what kind of teacher research might be relevant and sustainable for teachers, as the open-endedness of the research process seemed to chafe against the structure of participants' lives.<sup>5</sup> In part, some of the competing demands placed upon participants may be attributed to the rigorous nature of the thesis process and the university structures and procedures associated with it (Reis-Jorge, 2007). Advocates for teacher research as a powerful form of professional learning suggest that sustainable teacher research happens through professional development, collaborative and community-based initiatives (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Zeichner, 2003) and through graduate teacher education programs (Shosh & Zales, 2007). Both suggestions place an emphasis upon teachers inquiring into classroom-based problems and interests (Fichtman Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009; Fichtman Dana, 2013). While I am in agreement with this group of scholars, I am also mindful of how the participants in this study had to navigate different systems (personal, professional, academic); each with their own inherent sense of time and expectations. Viewing teacher researchers' experiences through a lens of time pressure demonstrates how and why the identity of teacher researcher is not easily taken up.

## Conclusion

Globally, the teaching profession is depicted as gender imbalanced with female teachers comprising most schools in most nations (Drudy, 2008; OECD, 2014). Better understanding the conditions that support female teachers' professional learning is of utmost significance. Identifying the temporal constraints of teacher researchers' experiences offers new ways to consider the factors shaping and, perhaps, restricting, teachers' efforts to professionally develop and learn, and brings sharply into focus the importance of supportive networks in schools and higher education settings working closely with provincial departments of education and school boards.

## Notes

1. All participants' names are pseudonyms.
2. Participants' research topics are not explicitly identified due to ethical considerations of anonymity and privacy.
3. At the end of July 2014, Susan and Carly had entered latter stages of the thesis process (analyzing data and writing drafts of their findings) whereas Teagan was at the beginning of her journey, working on completing a thesis proposal.
4. It is challenging for me to claim that familial obligations were placed more heavily on the women in this study than on their partners or if they were in highly gendered relationships. I did not spend time in participants' homes, and I relied on participants' accounts of their experiences, particularly what they felt they had to spend time upon. I acknowledge that it is probable that male teacher researchers also feel time pressure.
5. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who made this observation.

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