1. LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

An Historical Overview of the Self-Study School

The White Rabbit put on his spectacles.
“Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?” he asked.
“Begin at the beginning” the King said, very gravely,
“and go on till you come to the end; then stop.”

(Carroll, 1998, p. 105)

As educational researchers and reformers, in our ongoing search for ways to improve teaching and learning, it is important to look backward to take stock of our beginnings, where we have been, what we have accomplished, and what we have learned. This chapter provides a retrospective look at the field of self-study by tracing its roots, including how and when it started, as well as discussing how it has developed and grown into a large field of research. We discuss the nature of self-study, definitions of self-study and its purposes, as well as the role the community of self-study researchers has played in its development. In addition, we offer suggestions for the future of self-study and the possibilities ahead.

ROOTS OF SELF-STUDY

To gain a deeper understanding of the background and development of self-study, it is helpful to trace its roots from its inception to the formal field of study. In the following section we will give a brief overview of how self-study has evolved over time. We begin with a discussion of the key research paradigms that have directly influenced the outgrowth, process, and focus of self-study of teaching. These areas are teacher inquiry, reflective practice, and action research.

Teacher Inquiry

Prior to the late 1980s, teachers’ practical and everyday theories of how to improve teaching and learning were not considered particularly important, nor were they considered as areas of research (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Classroom teachers viewed educational research as academic-oriented, something generally conducted by university researchers from various disciplines (Dana & Yendal-Silva, 2003). Teachers primarily saw their responsibility as implementing what researchers told them was valid in their classrooms. They did not think about problematizing their experiences or classroom observations to learn more about their students, their
context, and their teaching practices. However, in the late 1980s, teachers began to inquire into and explore their teaching and their students’ learning. Questioning one’s practice became an integral aspect of teacher research (Duckworth, 1987; Richardson, 1989). Prior to the formalization of self-study research, a number of teacher educators began to question their teaching and conducted systematic research of their practice (LaBoskey, 1994; Russell & Munby, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

Reflective Practice

Research in the area of reflection and reflective practice has had a strong influence on self-study. The movement towards developing reflective practitioners led to a body of research that focused on the teacher as researcher of his or her own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Researchers found that teachers could examine and problematize their teaching by reflecting on their practice and by becoming reflective practitioners (Schön, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teachers studying their teaching spurred research that used a number of qualitative research approaches. By the late 1980s, university researchers began to use biographical forms of inquiry as well as personal histories, life history approach, and narrative inquiry to better understand their practice (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These research approaches provided a foundation for teachers and teacher educators to incorporate similar methods to systematically study their practice. As teachers critically reflect on their practice, they strive to make sense of their teaching and participate consciously and creatively in their growth and development (Zeichner, 1999). Many self-study researchers were influenced by the area of reflective practice, particularly Schön’s (1983, 1987) and Dewey’s (1933) work in reflection.

Action Research

Action research has also had a strong influence on self-study research and has been referred to as a “useful tool for self-study” because it provides a method to conduct systematic inquiry into one’s teaching practices (Feldman, Paugh, & Mills, 2004, p. 970). Introduced by Carr and Kemmis (1986), action research involves a systematic approach to problem solving. Teachers and teacher educators engage in action research (McNiff, 1988; Mills, 2000) to examine their teaching and their students’ learning as a basis for making changes.

Although teacher educators had written about, discussed, and promoted the use of reflection and action research in their education courses in the 1980s, it wasn’t until the early 1990s that teacher educators began doing what they encouraged preservice and inservice teachers to do: that is, reflect on, inquire into, and study their practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Loughran, 2004a; Mills, 2000). The shift in the focus of educational research was characterized by research questions that delved into the complexities of teaching and learning. An important result of this shift in research focus was that the role of teachers and teacher educators
changed as they began to investigate and question their practice. Teaching was viewed as highly contextualized, and the research began to focus on the complex and dynamic interactions between the teacher and the students. Research on teaching and schooling became more inclusive, and the knowledge generated about teaching came from the teachers’ questions and wonderings.

DISTINGUISHING SELF-STUDY FROM ACTION RESEARCH

Like many self-study researchers before us, we moved into the area of self-study through our involvement in action research. Although we found self-study to be familiar because of its close relationship to action research, we also found ourselves asking one another “How does self-study differ from action research?” In both methodologies, the researcher inquires into problems situated in practice, engages in cycles of research, and systematically collects and analyzes data to improve practice. Nonetheless, self-study may incorporate other methods, such as personal history, narrative inquiry, reflective portfolios, memory work, or arts-based methods (LaBoskey, 2004a; Samaras & Freese, 2006).

Feldman, Paugh, and Mills (2004) argue that a critical way to differentiate the two research genres is to focus on the relationship between action and research, and self and study. When the accent is on action, there is an assumption that the primary purpose of conducting action research is to modify or transform one’s practice or situation, or those of the community or institution. This means that the collection and analysis of data are used to guide the development of a plan of action or to articulate a critical analysis of the individual and institutional barriers that are shaping their lives (p. 953). However, when the accent is on the word self, then the self becomes the focus of the study and this is a “distinguishing characteristic of self-study as a variety of practitioner research” (p. 953).

Feldman, Paugh, and Mills further explain “action research provides the methods for the self-studies, but what made these self-studies (italics in original) were the methodological features” (p. 974). Self-study researchers use their experiences as a resource for their research and “problematize their selves in their practice situations” with the goal of reframing their beliefs and/or practice (Feldman, 2002, p. 971). Action research is more about what the teacher does, and not so much about who the teacher is.

Another important difference is that self-study focuses on improvement on both the personal and professional levels. Self-study builds on the personal processes of reflection and inquiry, and takes these processes and makes them open to public critique. Self-study is not done in isolation, but rather requires collaboration for building new understandings through dialogue and validation of findings. Self-study research requires openness and vulnerability since the focus is on the self. And finally, self-study is designed to lead to the reframing and reconceptualizing of the role of the teacher.
FORMALIZATION OF SELF-STUDY

Self-study emerged as a recognizable area of research in the early 1990s (Loughran, 2004a). The first step in the development of self-study research occurred in a 1992 American Educational Research Association (AERA) session on self-study that included the collaborative work of some of the self-study leaders, such as the Arizona Group (Guilfoyle, 1992; Hamilton, 1992; Pinnegar, 1992; Placier, 1992). It was also at this session that Russell (1992) presented his work entitled “Holding up the mirror: Teacher educators reflect on their own teaching.” The presenters raised issues and questions about teacher education, such as the personal and professional struggles of teachers, the unspoken rules of tenure in the academy, aligning one’s beliefs with one’s teaching practices, and the nature of learning to teach about teaching (Loughran, 2004b). This 1992 AERA session attracted researchers from related areas such as teacher inquiry, reflective practice, and action research. In 1993, the AERA Special Interest Group (SIG), called the Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP), was created. This was a critical step towards formalizing the area of self-study (Hamilton et al., 1998). The establishment of S-STEP proved to be a significant turning point in creating a community of self-study researchers. Valuable opportunities for professional networking and collaboration among researchers resulted from the SIG’s creation, thus contributing to the further development of self-study (Loughran, 2004a).

Another significant influence on the development of self-study was the First Castle Conference held in East Sussex, England in 1996. The four-day conference, sponsored by Queen’s University in Canada and the S-STEP SIG, drew eighty participants from four continents (Australia, Europe, North America, and South America). The Castle Conference served as a valuable forum for bringing researchers together to dialogue, to ask probing questions, to make their knowledge public and open for critique, and to contribute to the evolving nature of the field. The educational researchers in attendance presented papers, created and displayed alternative representations, and explored the philosophy, methodology, and practice of self-study (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. viii). The Castle Conference was significant in terms of the emerging understandings of self-study that grew out of the discussions and debate, culminating in the publication of Reconceptualizing Teaching Practice: Self-Study in Teacher Education (Hamilton et al., 1998).

EVOLUTION OF SELF-STUDY AS SCHOLARSHIP

Looking back we can see that the First Castle Conference held in 1996 (Richards & Russell, 1996) was fundamental in establishing a forum for exploring and expanding the conversations about self-study. The first conference was followed by six subsequent biannual conferences: Cole & Finley, 1998; Loughran & Russell, 2000; Kosnik, Freese, & Samaras, 2002; Tidwell, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2004; Fitzgerald, Heston, & Tidwell, 2006; and Heston, Tidwell, East, & Fitzgerald, 2008, respectively. The conferences have provided a safe space for creating a learning community of self-study researchers who are willing to ask questions,
clarify terms, take risks experimenting with innovative approaches, and examine and reframe their views about teaching and teacher education practices.

The Castle Conferences, the extensive contributions to the literature over the last 15 years, and The International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004) have shaped the field and document how self-study has evolved and grown since the early 1990s. The Handbook is the most definitive and comprehensive collection of self-study research written to date. In 2005, Studying Teacher Education, a peer-reviewed, international journal of self-study of teacher education practices, was launched and contributed to the formalization of the self-study of teaching research. The publication of this journal and the Handbook has brought much attention and interest to the increasingly popular movement of the self-study of teaching, and marked turning points in the coming of age of what we call the Self-Study School (Samaras & Freese, 2006). The self-study movement came out of a desire to “combine the best of both worlds: the world of scientific research on education and the world of practice” (Korthagen, 1995, p. 100). Although self-study is a relatively new field of research, it has been growing quickly and, at the same time, evolving. As the self-study field has matured, it has made great strides in gaining legitimacy in academia and among educational researchers due to the extensive amount and quality of research conducted by self-study researchers. Only seven years after the AERA session where self-study began, Zeichner asserted that “the birth of the self-study in teacher education movement around 1990 has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research” (Zeichner, 1999, p. 8).

THE NATURE OF SELF-STUDY

Like any new field of research, self-study has gone through growing pains and stages of development marked by a need for a shared understanding and shared language around the field of self-study. Self-study scholars have thought deeply about the nature of self-study, what it involves, and what distinguishes it from other types of research. In this section we chronologically present the development of the language and terms used in the literature to describe the nature or characteristics as noted by self-study scholars.

Open, Collaborative, and Reframed Practice

Beginning in the mid 1990s, and particularly at the First Castle Conference, questions were raised about the nature of self-study. Participants asked, “What is self-study and what constitutes self-study research?” An important step towards clarifying these questions took place after the First Castle Conference. Barnes (1998) conducted a content analysis of the conference papers and the results of the analysis were helpful in moving the field towards a shared understanding of how self-study scholars were characterizing self-study. He identified three characteristics based on his analysis. These characteristics include: 1) openness; 2)
collaboration; and 3) reframing. Barnes explained how self-study researchers must have a disposition that is open to ideas from others, and how collaboration plays a critical role in self-study. Through dialogue and collaboration with other teacher educators and students, the researcher can frame and reframe a problem or situation from different perspectives. Reframing is important in self-study because it provides an opportunity for the researcher to think about things differently, change how he/she looks at what’s going on in classrooms, and ultimately change one’s practice (Hamilton et al., 1998, p. xii). As we continued to review the self-study literature, we identified additional characteristics that distinguish self-study from other forms of research, i.e., its nature is paradoxical, postmodern, and multiple and multifaceted.

Paradoxical

An intriguing characteristic that we discovered in our research was that self-study seems paradoxical. For example, the term self-study suggests that the study is about the individual, and yet self-study researchers assert that it must involve collaboration and “critical friends” or trusted colleagues who provide alternative perspectives for reframing, support, and validation (LaBoskey, 2004a; Loughran, 2007). McNiff and Whitehead (2006) have worked to emphasize the need for critical friends and validation groups. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) and Whitehead (2004) argue that self-study scholars must have a deep commitment to checking data and interpretations with colleagues to broaden possibilities and challenge perspectives to increase the credibility and self-study validity. Whereas validity in conventional research involves empirical evidence, generalizability, and professional critique, self-study is validated through collaboration including testing, sharing, and challenging exemplars of teaching practices (LaBoskey, 2006, p. 252). Multiple perspectives provide ways of validating the findings (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). We found that although self-study involves an intrapersonal quest to understand one’s practice, it is the interpersonal mediation that allows individuals to work within “learning zones” or “communities of expertise where learners co-mediate, negotiate, and socially construct an understanding of a shared task” (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 51). This revealed yet another paradox: although self-study involves a private and personal exploration, it is also public.

Postmodern

Self-study is often noted as having a postmodern nature because of its non-linear and unpredictable outcomes (Wilcox, Watson, & Paterson, 2004). According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2004), self-study scholars have demonstrated that “self-study works from the postmodernist assumption that it is never possible to divorce the ‘self’ from either the research process or from education practice” (p. 607). Self-study doesn’t claim to know a truth but rather seeks to understand what is. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2007) explore using an ontological, rather than an
epistemological lens for analysis and state that by comparing opposing views, one’s analysis is open to alternative views. Postmodern researchers understand that knowledge production has a cultural component and, therefore, they contend that researchers should take a reflective and analytical stance and seek to identify the cultural, interpretive, and ideological basis built into their conceptions of knowledge. Accordingly, Pinnegar (1998) explained that “self-study is methodologically unique” (p. 31) and that in self-study, researchers operate from and embrace the premise of subjectivity and “present evidence of meaning and relationships among phenomenon from the authority of their own experience” (p. 32). Self-study serves a common purpose of “finding power in practice” (Allender & Allender, 2008, p. 145) because its inclusive nature encourages practitioners to be researchers and constructors of knowledge.

Multiple and Multifaceted

Another characteristic of self-study research that we discovered is that it is multiple and multifaceted (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Self-study scholars come from various theoretical orientations and conceptually frame their studies accordingly. Also, self-study scholars conduct their research with multiple and diverse qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004b). Some choose to employ autobiographical and personal history self-study, narratives, memory work, and multiple artistic modes such as visual representations, theater, drama, and poetry (LaBoskey, 2004a; Lighthall, 2004). Loughran (2007) explains “there is no one way, or correct way, of doing self-study. Rather, how a self-study might be done depends on what is sought to be better understood” (p. 15). LaBoskey emphasizes the multiple characteristics of self-study as follows: “it is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement-aimed; it is interactive; it includes multiple, mainly qualitative, methods; and it defines validity as a validation process based in trustworthiness” (LaBoskey, 2004a, p. 817). A variety of methods that self-study scholars have incorporated into their work are included in our Invitations to Practice (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Self-study scholars continue to discuss the nature of self-study while also working to clarify its definition.

DEFINING SELF-STUDY

Looking back, we recall that we first met in 1998 where we found ourselves both intrigued and yet somewhat confused by the notion of self-study as we listened to conference presentations. At that time, we were both sharing our work (Freese, 1999; Samaras, 1998) and openly discussed some of our questions and concerns about a lack of a clear definition. We later discovered that many self-study members raised their own questions about how to define self-study according to their role, practice, and/or purpose.
Self-Study Defined by Role

Self-study involves a strong personal reference in that it involves study of the self and study by the self although there are variations of that theme. Baird (2004) brought attention to the possible interpretations of self in self-study when he analyzed types of studies and distinguished the foci of self-study research, i.e., a focus on “the self in teaching”; “the self as teacher”; “the self as researcher of my teaching”; “the self as researcher of teacher education”; and “the self as researcher of self-study” (p. 1445). Hamilton and colleagues (1998) define self-study as “the study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the ‘not self’… Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered” (p. 236). Hamilton and colleagues conclude “a critical examination of the self’s involvement both in aspects of the study and in the phenomenon under study” is central to self-study (p. 240).

Self-Study Defined by Situated Practice

We also found that self-study scholars have presented definitions that were situated within their personal and professional experiences. For example, Pinnegar (1998) defined self-study as “a methodology for studying professional practice settings” (p. 33). Clarke and Erickson (2004) claim that “For teaching to occur, there must be a somehow (bold and italics in original), a way for an educator to know, recognize, explore, and act upon his or her practice” (p. 59). After studying her integration of Vygotskian (1981) theory in her teaching, Samaras (2002) designed a self-study model for teacher educators and wrote “I use the words self-study to mean critical examination of one’s actions and the context of those actions in order to achieve a more conscious mode of professional activity, in contrast to action based on habit, tradition, or impulse” (p. xiii). Similarly, describing self-study from their teacher education program contexts, Beck, Freese, and Kosnik (2004), described self-study as “a personal-constructivist-collaborative approach” to emphasize important components of self-study. Self-study is constructivist because it includes elements of ongoing inquiry, respects personal experience, and emphasizes the role of knowledge construction. The collaborative component of self-study acknowledges the important role of the social construction of knowledge.

Self-Study Defined by Purpose

Cole and Knowles (1998) argue that there are multiple reasons why people practice self-study and those purposes are typically integrated and not mutually exclusive. Although the purposes may be layered and multifaceted, researchers often focus on one aspect of professional practice. At the same time, the purpose may extend beyond the self towards educational reform. Kosnik, Beck, Freese, and Samaras (2006) identified three purposes for practicing self-study: 1) personal renewal, 2) professional renewal, and 3) program renewal.

Furthermore, there are a number of different methods of self-study that can serve to focus one’s lens on a particular issue. An example of this is personal history
self-study where teachers explore and begin to identify who they are as teachers for self-knowing, forming, and reforming a professional identity (Samaras, Hicks, & Garvey Berger, 2004). Another example is self-study action research whereby classroom teachers conduct a manageable professional inquiry that enables them to study their classroom strategies and actions for change, and also who they are as teacher professionals (Samaras, Beck, Freese, & Kosnik, 2005). Regardless of purpose or method, the self-study scholar questions practice with the support of colleagues, and frames, assesses, and reframes his/her practice within the context of broader educational aims.

LaBoskey’s work (2004a) emphasizes the important moral, ethical, and political purposes of self-study when she defines self-study work as moral and value-laden. In addition, teacher educators have employed self-study to question the status quo of education programs and their role within teacher education pedagogy (Samaras, 2002; Loughran, 2006). They have questioned the assertions of their practice (Loughran & Northfield, 1996), the tensions in their practice (Berry, 2007), and the taken for granted assumptions of their practice (Brandenburg, 2008). Whitehead (1988) also calls upon teachers to consider the possible alignment or disparities between what they say, and what they believe, and what they actually do in practice. He referred to this gap between one’s teaching philosophy and actual practice as a “living contradiction,” although LaBoskey (2004b) notes that our inquiries do not have to derive from problematic situations.

As we strive to clarify and provide a shared understanding of what self-study includes, it is wise to keep in mind the following caveat.

Despite the development, refinement and clarification that has occurred…it is clear that the ‘one true way,’ the template for a self-study method, has not emerged. Rather self-study tends to be methodologically framed through the question/issue/concern under consideration so that it invokes the use of a method(s) that is most appropriate for uncovering the evidence in accord with the purpose/intent of the study (Loughran, 2004a, p. 17).

Perhaps it isn’t possible to come up with a fixed definition, and perhaps it isn’t desirable. Bullough and Pinnegar (2004) assert that the inclusive nature of self-study and its multiple definitions provoke a continuous and communal conversation about its characteristics.

THE SELF-STUDY COMMUNITY

Self-study scholars include a dynamic group of teachers, teacher educators, and administrators committed to studying their practice through self-study in an effort to make their teaching and programs more effective for students’ learning. Many hold membership in the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Allender and Allender (2008) recall, “A small notice in the Educational Researcher, … with the help of some word of mouth brought together a group of over 200 members at the 1993 [AERA] annual meeting—to explore the value of
studying their own practices as teacher educators” (p. 129). The S-STEP SIG, now with nearly 300 members, has fostered a sense of intellectual safety in a collaborative and highly supportive culture, much like what we encourage teachers to do in their classrooms.

The S-STEP membership is diverse and unified by its use of the self-study methodology rather than by a discipline, theory, or educational issue. Although self-study grew out of the work of teacher educators, it has expanded to include practitioners such as administrators, librarians, occupational therapists, psychotherapists, counselors, and community educators working for social justice and educational reform (e.g., Allender, 2004; Manke, 2004; Wilcox, Watson, & Paterson, 2004). We refer to this extension from self-study of teaching practices to other fields as self-studyship (Samaras & Freese, 2006).

The Castle Conferences have proven to be an important forum in the development of the self-study community, attracting self-study teacher practitioners from a wide range of countries from both research-intensive and teaching-focused universities. People from many different disciplines gather to gain feedback and insights from colleagues as they share their applications of doing self-study in their contexts.

THE DOING OF SELF-STUDY

As we looked back, we recognized that it was in the doing of self-study that we were better able to understand it. Applying the methodology of self-study research, actually immersing ourselves in doing self-study, helped us understand its nature and purposes. We initially had a fear of sharing our work and making ourselves vulnerable—but as we moved to a feeling of openness and learning together, we found ourselves framing and reframing our understandings of self-study through our teaching and our application of self-study to our practice. We recall that when we engaged in action research, the focus was on our students and what they learned. However, through our dialoguing we realized that by focusing on the students we left out a very important aspect of the study—the self, the role we played in the research, and what we learned and how we subsequently changed. Self-study and our work with students reinforced our belief that teaching needs to be purposeful. And we found that by studying and systematically examining our teaching, we became more focused on our purposes and whether we were aligning our beliefs with our practice.

Engaging in conducting self-studies, serving as co-editors of the Castle Proceedings (Kosnik, Freese, & Samaras, 2002), developing the primer (Samaras & Freese, 2006), and working with our doctoral students (Freese & Strong, 2008; Mittapalli & Samaras, 2008; Samaras et al., 2007), helped us come to a rich understanding of its multiplicity. Our understandings of self-study deepened through our ongoing discussions and collaboration with our self-study colleagues and students. Just as we tried to pin down self-study definitions and the research methodology, we have seen how our graduate students wrestle with the multiple definitions and methods of conducting self-study. We realized that our students
learned about self-study best through doing it. By initiating a research question they were passionate about, they were able to move to a better understanding of the process of self-study research. Like us, they gained an enhanced understanding and appreciation for the impact self-study had on their practice and to the field at large. We have found there is a self-discovery aspect of self-study that necessitates inquiring and engaging with others. The result is that we socially construct our understandings and gain new insights through others’ perspectives.

Looking back, we realize that we were drawn to self-study because it was a way for us to ask the deep questions about our practice that we dared not ask alone. Together we were able to negotiate our beliefs, understandings, and misunderstandings through reading texts and articles, e-mails, conversations, and through joint writing. We value the supportive self-study community and the way the Castle Conferences have enhanced inquiry and scholarship. Although we had different questions and we worked in different contexts, we became part of a community in which teacher educators could and were asking the taken-for-granted questions about their practice and the impact of their work. We still have many questions, but we are constantly intrigued at the possibilities that only self-study research provides.

LOOKING FORWARD

As important as it is to look backward, we also see the value in looking forward. Like Alice, looking back can be useful in providing direction to guide us to where we want to go. In this final section, we offer suggestions informed by our work and that of our colleagues. They are not meant to be inclusive or definitive because the road ahead is uncertain, and at the same time full of new possibilities.

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat. (Carroll, 1998, p. 56)

The Need for Brighter Guideposts

As we gained more experience engaging in self-study, we have come to understand that there is not one road, not one direct path to conducting self-study. The purpose of this book is to explore some of the many paths with which self-study scholars have been experimenting. However, at the same time, we argue that for our fellow self-study travelers there needs to be better research guideposts. We see the value of having a shared understanding about how studying our practice can lead us “to where we want to get to” and can help in guiding our decision making. We see the need for some agreed upon methodological components. We encourage continued efforts to provide some standardization for applying the self-study methods with exemplars of practitioners conducting their self-studies such as those shared in this book. We offered some beginning work in providing a structure for informal and formal self-study research as a starting point (Samaras & Freese, 2006). But the self-study community needs to go further.
Clearer Connections with Validation of the Impact of Our Work

LaBoskey (2006) argues that self-studies need to be validated over time with continued work that helps us understand and contribute to a body of knowledge and a specific domain. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) offer guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. Self-study scholars are continuing to address issues of validity and quality in self-study (Feldman, 2003; LaBoskey, 2006; Loughran, 2007). Although much progress has been made in this area, AERA program chairs, editors of the Castle Proceedings, and those teaching about self-study research need to continue to provide clearer requirements for quality papers that include descriptions of the research process, how colleagues contributed to the validity of the research, and what knowledge has been generated from the study.

Accumulating Knowledge across Self-Study

Zeichner (2007) suggests that self-study could be strengthened by “situating individual studies within coherent research programs on particular substantive issues” (p. 36). He says this is “a logical next step for this movement, one that would begin to infuse the insights of practicing teacher educators into the broader knowledge-base of the field and to affect the policy-making process” (p. 40). As the field continues to grow and develop, a number of recent publications have emerged in a variety of topic areas, such as self-study and diversity (Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2006), teacher education reform (Loughran & Russell, 2002), and self-study and the arts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). Samaras and Freese (2006) offered a collection of self-study publications organized by topic (pp. 132–53). Zeichner (2007) now recommends that a discussion is needed on “how a study builds on the work of others” (p. 39). Zeichner, who has conducted his own self-study research with a focus on social change (Zeichner, 1995), suggests a next step for self-study scholars is a focus on analyzing connections across issues such as fostering social justice, science education reform, leadership, preservice teacher preparation, and technology.

Loughran (2004b) emphasizes that we need to state our assertions more clearly and boldly. LaBoskey (2006) adds, “Only in that way can the ideas be employed, applied, and re-tested by the teacher education community in ways that will help us embrace, discard, or transform those assertions; that is the essence of the validation process for the field” (p. 258). It is ultimately the self-study community that has shaped, and will continue to shape, the future of self-study research (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2008). These recommendations warrant our attention as we maintain our uniqueness as a methodology, while also bringing our work into the mainstream of teacher education. In that manner, our voices can be heard by our teacher education colleagues outside the field of self-study. They too are fellow travelers, all working for the common purpose of improving teaching and learning and contributing to the knowledge base of education and research.
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