

# Exploring the Contribution of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practice to the Conversation on Research on Teacher Education

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According to Putnam (2004), careful attention to the particular shows the most promise for making progress with research that uncovers knowledge in the human sciences such as psychology, sociology and education. Inquiries that are oriented to the particular allow for identification of orientations, strategies, and new responses to the intractable human problems faced in today's world. If this is true, then Self-Study of Teacher Education Practice (S-STEP) has great potential to contribute new knowledge about teaching and teacher education. This methodology has enabled teacher educators to research their embodied, practical knowledge of teaching in the context of their own particular settings, and to make that knowledge publicly available for others to apply, to adapt, to respond to, and to question. Yet S-STEP work is often criticized because the links between S-STEP research and the conversation in research on teaching and teacher education have not always been made clear or obvious (see Zeichner, 2007).

Polanyi (1966) argued that to understand practical knowledge, we must explore issues that are entangled, holistic, and multi-faceted. As we learn from practice, we develop new understandings that are then re-entangled in our practical knowing, creating new possibilities for further questioning and knowing practice. While S-STEP has a history since 1995, it continues to be labeled an innovative research methodology (Loughran, 2004). New scholars to this methodology arrive startled that such research has over a 20-year history and is not something they invented. In 1999, Zeichner identified S-STEP as the most promising methodology for contributing to new understandings in teacher education and the particular practices that individual teacher educators could more profitably enact. Then in 2007, he argued that while this methodology was still the most promising and profitable, it was not meeting its potential because published studies failed to cite and build on the work of other S-STEP research. Further, he noted that it also did not contribute to the conversations on research on teaching and teacher education because it did not build on or provide new insights into this work. Within the S-STEP community, we labeled this the Zeichner paradox—according to Zeichner, we are and we are not the most promising and profitable scholarly venue.

## **Aims/Objectives**

In this systematic review, we explore the contribution of S-STEP research to the larger conversations in teacher education research. We seek to synthesize the assertions for action and understanding that have emerged in response to the Zeichner paradox (Berry & Loughran, 2004), identifying how S-STEP methodology integrates with other research on teacher education, and the unique contributions

it is poised to make. This project reviews and synthesizes evidence that S-STEP research can and does contribute to the empirically-based knowledge of teacher education. In this review of studies reported in *Studying Teacher Education*, we explore the knowledge contributions of S-STEP to the field of teacher education and integrate the results of S-STEP studies with other research on teacher education.

## Methods

S-STEP has always been an international community of scholars (Hamilton, 1998). This feature of S-STEP is critical in a globalized society where both underdeveloped and developed countries seek to secure future success for themselves and their citizenry through improving the quality of teaching and learning through teacher education. The search for this review is limited to empirical (data-based research) pieces written in English and published in *Studying Teacher Education*. We set 2005 as the lower boundary as this was the inaugural publishing year of *Studying Teacher Education: A Journal of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices*. We set our upper boundary as the first issue of 2019 since the other issues were not yet posted. For this study, we reviewed all publications in this journal from 2005 through the first issue of 2019. Of these, we identified those that clearly used S-STEP methodology and specifically focused on studies of teacher educators or teacher education. All authors of this paper reviewed the selected articles to make certain all fit our two criteria: S-STEP methodology and focus on teacher educators or teacher education.

We then came together and examined the studies that we were unsure of, eliminating any that did not meet both criteria. To make the distinction concerning methodology, we relied on LaBoskey's (2004) criteria: research that is self-initiated and focused, improvement aimed, interactive, multiple, primarily qualitative, methods, and exemplar-based validation. To make the distinction concerning the focus, we skimmed the articles and determined that the focus was definitely teacher educators or teacher education. As we reviewed studies to determine whether they met our selection criteria, we also began to identify potential emerging themes. This resulted in the identification of 196 articles. It was at this point that we also decided to include in our analysis, and to potentially use to support our findings on teacher education focused S-STEP research, five literature review articles published in *Studying Teacher Education* during this time period. This resulted in the identification of 196 articles and five literature reviews, making a total of 201.

Next, we looked closely at abstracts to decide whether our initial list captured all articles that should be included in the review. At this point, we collapsed themes, added new themes, and made initial definitions. Next, we divided the set of articles into four segments. Working independently, we each carefully reviewed the individual studies in our segment. We focused on the methodology findings, and discussion sections of the studies. In this more careful analysis, we identified two articles conducted by teacher educators on teacher education but they focused exclusively on self-study methodology and not teacher education. We removed these two articles from the review, leaving 194 articles.

As we did this deeper review of the articles, we created charts and study by study, we listed the findings that contributed knowledge on teacher education. As part of this process, we honed our themes by adding details to the definitions and identifying the strongest exemplars within our segment. Once we completed this process, we met and reviewed each study considering how it had been categorized determining whether it fit the theme by which we had categorized it.

In our findings section, we will define each theme and list the relevant contributing findings to

research on teaching and teacher education. In reporting this study, we will then provide exemplar articles that represent the categories and potential contributions. The collaborative negotiations of the article selection and the review of our analysis represent our attention to the trustworthiness of this review. In the next section, we will report on the nine themes that emerged.

## **Findings**

Through analyzing the 194 articles in *Studying Teacher Education* that were self-studies of practice published between 2005 through the first issue of 2019, we found that S-STEP research did meet the challenge Zeichner made to the S-STEP community. The articles we reviewed made contributions in nine thematic areas: returning to teaching as a teacher educator, becoming a teacher educator, supervising pre-service teachers, pedagogy and practices in teacher education, issues of social justice, collaborating and collaboratives as teacher educator researchers, relationships in teacher education, programmatic studies of teacher education, and teacher educator knowledge. In reporting this review we present the definitions of each theme, illustrative examples, and key contributions made to the research on teacher educators based in the examples.

### **1. *Returning to Teaching as a Teacher Educator***

The concept of returning to teaching, not as an observer or supervisor but as the teacher of record, was a theme that arose in this review. Both in statements of their purpose for the work and in their report of their findings, teacher educators uncovered new insights about what it means to be a teacher educator, what dilemmas their future and current teacher/students faced or would face. This return to the classroom afforded them opportunities to reflect on their own practice as they revisited what it was like to be in the daily practice of teaching in schools (McDonough, 2017; Scherff & Kaplan, 2006; Spiteri, 2010). The tensions that teacher educators experienced produced new understandings concerning the challenges teachers faced. They considered these new insights as they decided how they could apply what they learned and determine ways to better prepare new teachers for the varied roles they will play (McDonough, 2017). They articulated challenges teachers and teacher educators face when they attempt to implement new initiatives (Spiteri, 2010). In addition, the experience of returning to the school often reminded teachers of the knowledge about teaching they held based on their prior experience as a classroom teacher. These memories and experiences positioned them differently in relationship to the teachers they taught. Finally, the insight they gained reinvigorated them for their work as teacher educators (Scherff & Kaplan, 2006).

### **2. *Becoming a Teacher Educator***

Just as teacher educators returned to teaching to better understand their practice as a teacher educator, many S-STEP scholars study their transition from teacher to teacher educator. Many teacher educators reflected on the journey from classroom teacher to graduate student to teacher educator in an effort to understand the influences that are affecting their preservice teachers and their shifting identity (see Williams et al., 2012). Issues such as vulnerability (Grierson, 2010), the complexity of the university role (Wood & Borg, 2010), change in practice (East, 2009), background experience and culture (Skerrett, 2008), merging of identities and knowledge for decision-making (Dinkelman et al., 2006ab), and the roots of these identities from early influential experiences (Young & Erickson, 2011). It also included the identity formation of the non-traditional teacher educator (Newberry, 2014; Richards & Ressler, 2017) as they had the additional struggle for acceptance from students and colleagues for not having traditional teaching experience. Each of the accounts of identity deepens our understanding of what it means to be a teacher educator and how our

understanding and practice shift as we become teacher educators. In these studies, scholars uncover the background influence and prevailing personal experiences that color their understanding of what it means to be a “teacher” for themselves now as teacher educators as well as for their preservice teachers. Support for practices that enable a smoother transition from teacher to teacher educator were also noted (Hamilton, 2018), in particular a teacher portfolio that allows for deep reflection on pedagogy as well as documentation that bridges practice to research and theory.

### **3. *Supervising Preservice Teachers***

Supervision as a theme included studies of how teacher educators designed field-based experiences for preservice teachers. It utilized tools such as memory work and engagement with critical friends. These studies sometimes were somewhat hybrid as teacher educators collected data on student learning and then utilized that data to uncover their knowing and action as supervisors. They also engage in analysis of roles that teacher educators take on particularly as they move back and forth between public schools and the university setting. Researchers have reflected on their teaching of practicum students based on self-assumed reactions to situations (Cuenca, 2010). Teacher educators engaged in this work uncovered and acted upon their knowledge by improving practicum experiences. The authors reported how their study of supervision led directly to improved practicum experiences. This occurred as they not only reflected on the practice of the supervisors (Parker & Volante, 2009; Russell, 2017), but also brought to light clearer understanding of the relationships that preservice teachers form with their mentor teachers and the context of the classroom (Bullock, 2017). Thomas (2017) and Martin (2017) had deep concern about whether or not their practices in supervision supported teacher candidates in bridging the theory practice divide. Thomas (2017) argued that her study led her to a startling finding that her role directing field experience acted not as a bridge but as a hindrance to overcoming the theory practice divide. Much information on how to better support preservice teachers while in the field has been identified by recognizing the socialization process (Thomas, 2017) and helping preservice teachers find balance between theory and practice (Dillon, 2017; Klein & Taylor, 2017). Teacher educators learned that by improving their own listening skills, this led them to improve the experience of the preservice teacher in practicum arrangements (Martin, 2017).

### **4. *Pedagogy and Practices in Teacher Education***

Teacher educators employed self-study as ongoing investigations of teaching and learning both as general pedagogies and in specific practices. Bullock and Sator (2018) used self-study to investigate their teaching and practice within a framework of Maker Pedagogy. Studying their own teaching, Forgasz and McDonough (2017) investigated embodied pedagogies, pushing beyond a cognitive-only focus to learning. Brubaker (2010) studied his own democratic teaching and the particular practice of individualized grading contracts. Kastberg et al. (2019) reported what they learned about practices of questioning in a mathematics context. Hohensee and Lewis (2018) engaged in a two-year self-study on cross-disciplinary peer coaching, effectively examining two areas of importance to teacher educators, citing benefits to both. Additionally, online teacher education is a recurring context. Dunn and Rice (2019) considered issues of providing quality special education teacher education as they develop an online course. Cutri and Whiting’s (2018) self-study revealed a clear account of how teacher educators can incorporate technology into a blended learning course as an ongoing process of reconciling deeply held learning theory and content knowledge beliefs.

## **5. Social Justice Practices and Concerns within Teacher Education**

The coding theme of social justice issues was applied to articles that employed self-study of teacher education methodology to collect empirical evidence exploring issues such as social perspective taking, challenging socially constructed assumptions about race, culture, poverty, and ethnicity, and striving to change personal practice and interrogate instructional roles and policies in teacher education (Lee, 2011; Cutri et al., 2011). This theme illustrated the benefit of S-STEP methodology's ontological foundation in critically questioning one's own practice in order to improve it (Craig, 2010). Additionally, this theme highlights the benefits of S-STEP methodology's requirement that insights and critiques forged at the individual level must also be turned toward larger public implications.

## **6. Collaborating and Collaboratives as Teacher Educator Researchers**

The coding theme of collaboration in teacher education was applied to articles that employed collaborative self-study methods within the framework of S-STEP methodology to inquire into persistent problems in teacher education. For example, issues relating to new pedagogical practices; evaluating effectiveness of existing pedagogical practices; grading/assessment issues; student teacher supervision; and program evaluation. This theme illustrates the benefits of S-STEP methodology's epistemological orientation toward meaning making as being fundamentally social and the crucial importance of systematic and rigorous analysis of meaning making (Samaras et al., 2006). Additionally, articles coded with this theme demonstrate the ways in which collaborative self-study methods inform teacher educators' identities and foster productive professional learning communities in concrete ways (Tuval et al., 2011). Specifically, articles documented improved written and oral reflective abilities, the establishment of shared deliberate language, and the creation of patterns of cyclical and rigorous feedback. These findings contributed to the formation of dialogic spaces.

## **7. Relationships in Teacher Education**

Murphy and Pinnegar (2019) argue that the quality of our teacher education programs and research are dependent on the relationships we develop with others in our practice. S-STEP research reported in *Studying Teacher Education* examines and reports assertions for understanding relationships in our various roles and contexts as teacher educators. Studies take up different aspects of relationships in teacher education including relationships with pre-service and in-service teachers, with public school personnel and faculty across the university, and with each other as teacher educators. Coia and Taylor (2013) uncover their relationships established through a shared methodology. Murphy and Pinnegar (2018) examine the challenge of establishing teacher-student relationships in online courses. In his work, Kitchen (2005b) identified the fundamental necessity for teacher education to be conducted in a space of relationship and develops the concept of relational teacher education. He identifies and defines characteristics that are fundamental to such teacher education. Using a narrative research approach, he articulates experiences that reveal the definitions and processes of engaging in relational teacher education. Studies of relationships using S-STEP methodology and reported in *Studying Teacher Education* demonstrate contributions to our understanding of relationships in teacher education and offer a unique perspective and position from which to examine them.

## **8. Programmatic Studies of Teacher Education**

Kitchen's (2005a) study of relational teacher education provides a clear articulation of the process for developing such a program. Kosnik and Beck (2008) examine the principles of literacy practice that undergird their program, the impact on their graduates, and how what they teach shows up in the learning of their now practicing in-service teachers through their perspectives and understanding as teacher educators. Samaras et al. (2006) used self-study to explore their understanding of the dynamics of team teaching across a non-traditional teacher education program. LaBoskey and Richert (2015) explored the influence of their program on the thinking of their students during and beyond their program. Their study used their practice of S-STEP in conjunction with self-study of practice research conducted by their students. These studies contribute to designing programs, exploring the influence of such programs beyond graduation and techniques and practice used across a program. These are important contributions to understanding not a single practice, a single course, but the orchestration, implementation and influence of a program as a whole. Loughran (personal conversation 2010) argues that program self-studies of practice are difficult to conduct because of its highly relational and collaborative nature; however, such self-studies of practice (Tuval et al., 2011) offer opportunities to explore more carefully whether programs honor the promises made in mission statements, how teacher educators work together across theoretical and philosophic differences, and how programs are orchestrated to provide a pedagogy and learning context that promotes the desired learning.

## **9. Teacher Educator Knowledge**

Studies of teacher educator knowledge include explorations of teacher educator beliefs, personal practical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. These studies are often grounded in assertions for understanding rather than assertions for action. The S-STEP characteristic of improvement aimed (LaBoskey, 2004) is based in the idea that by more fully understanding our beliefs or assumptions will lead us to sharpen and improve our work as teacher educators.

Schulte (2005) and McDonough and Brandenburg (2012) explore their teacher educator knowledge by identifying and examining their assumptions. Craig (2010) has produced work that provides the strongest example of studies of the personal practical knowledge of a teacher educator. Work by Cite et al. (2017) examines their pedagogical content knowledge for teaching teachers science content not just science pedagogy. These studies contribute to research on teacher knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, personal practical knowledge as well as learning to teach.

## **Outcomes**

Our review documents that S-STEP does and can contribute to the conversation of research on teacher education in opposition to Zeichner's claim that S-STEP does not make such a contribution. First, S-STEP work contributes knowledge about returning to teaching as a teacher educator. Second, the work provides the opportunity to investigate the experiences, roles, and identities related to becoming a teacher educator. Third, S-STEP work has contributed knowledge to research on supervising preservice teachers. Fourth, S-STEP research deepens our understandings about the pedagogies and practices of teacher educators. Fifth, it uncovers much about the ways teacher educators interrogate issues of social justice to challenge both their own practice and institutional policies. Sixth, S-STEP work contributes to the understanding of collaboration and collaboratives in teacher education. Seventh, this work is significant because it contributes to our understandings of developing relationships in teacher education. Eighth, S-STEP work provides the opportunity to

better understand programmatic concerns in teacher education. Finally, S-STEP work contributes to teacher educator knowledge, including pedagogical content knowledge, personal practical knowledge as well as learning to teach.

Maxine Greene (1995) argued that quantitative studies enable us to view the horizon of the things we understand about particular concepts in teaching and teacher education. She called this seeing small. Further, she suggested that when we engage in qualitative projects that are oriented to examining and uncovering the particular it allows us to contribute to research through the details of particular cases, setting, ideas. She labeled this seeing large. When these two kinds of research knowledge are coupled, it releases the imagination and allows scholars to consider things in new ways. S-STEP, because of its particular and personal experiential basis, opens the imagination further as we examine how we might take up the things we learn from these studies in our individual practice and context. S-STEP allows teacher educators to see large against the horizon of studies that see small. Across our review, we came to understand that S-STEP researchers need to be more explicit in the details of their findings and more often link what they find to teaching and teacher education research generally and specifically.

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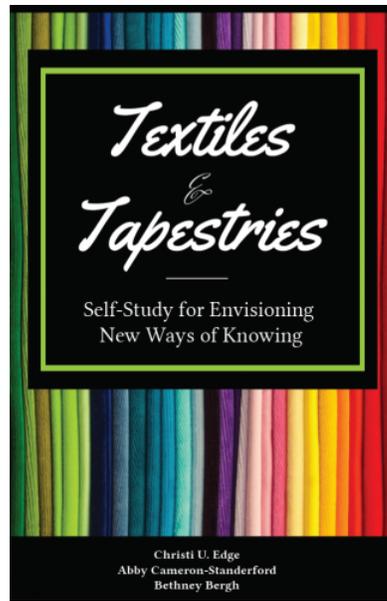
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