

## **Self-Study Supports New Teachers' Professional Development**

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New teachers face incredible challenges, and often alone, forcing nearly half of all newly hired teachers to leave the profession within their first five years (Darling-Hammond, 1997). As teacher educators, we believe one of the key ingredients in teacher education is self-study of one's teaching practices with systematic collegial support. We have each witnessed and researched the power of the self-study tool for teachers' professional development in the programs we have directed (Freese, 1999; Kosnik & Beck, 2000; Samaras, 2002). In each of our programs, students are expected to reflect regularly on their teaching and their students' learning through journals, action research projects, related life histories, evolving philosophies of education, and ongoing quarterly and semester self-evaluations. Some students engage in systematic self-study in a final master's paper or portfolio.

Zeichner wrote 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). Although there have been numerous writings about self-study for teacher educators (Cole, Elijah, & Knowles, 1998; Hamilton, Pinnegar, Russell, Loughran, & LaBoskey, 1998; Kosnik, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2005), little attention has been given to what self-study can do to support new teachers. In this article, we discuss what teachers need to know about self-study and then offer three examples of teacher self-study and the difference it made for the teachers and their students.

## **What Teachers Need to Know about Self-Study**

Self-study is a professional tool teachers can employ for learning about and modifying their approach to teaching. Lived experiences and beliefs about learning influence how teachers' think about their teaching practice, which in turn is enriched through dialogue and critique with colleagues (Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2004). Examining one's own learning and teaching serves as a conduit in understanding students' learning and culture. There are many benefits to conducting self-study of teaching practices.

*Self-study builds a collegial problem-solving network.* Self-study is about learning to be open to change in a changing world of teaching. It is best done with others or at least one critical friend. This type of collaboration is useful to beginning teachers because they gain the support and expertise of colleagues, and they begin to see that experienced teachers also must work on their practice.

*Self-study bridges to ongoing, manageable inquiry.* Beginning teachers are often overwhelmed with everything they have to do. Through self-study, they learn to identify what is successful and focus on improving just one or two aspects of their work. This makes their task more manageable, leads to a greater sense of accomplishment, and allows them to go on to further needed changes in their classroom.

*Self-study has immediate utility in teacher and student learning.* Self-study for beginning teachers is beneficial because it is context-specific. It focuses on their classroom, the harsh realities of teaching, and the multiplicity of overlapping dilemmas teachers face. It also serves as a platform to develop practical instructional techniques situated in the needed changes identified by the teachers themselves.

## Self-Study in Practice

Teachers have sought a wide variety of self-study methods to explore the assumptions behind their practice. These include journaling, interviews, narratives, videotapes of one's teaching, education-related life histories, and multiple forms of artistic expression. Let's take a look at Sara's self-study work through journaling.

*Sara's self-study.* Sara is a practicing teacher on the edge, exhausted and disappointed about her classroom management and her students' behavior. She is "burnt out" after only two years of teaching. Searching for some solace, she works with a team of teachers in Initiatives in Educational Transformation, a George Mason University professional development program for K-12 practicing teachers, and uses the self-study technique of essaying about her action research to think about how her teaching impacts her students' learning. She gathers with other teachers and their university mentor at a coffee house and talks about the changes she will attempt in setting up a democratic classroom while also looking closely at what she contributes to the conflict at hand.

Her main problem is dealing with twenty-seven fourth graders who are constantly calling out and disrupting the flow of her lessons. She ponders: "How can I harness classroom talking in a way that will allow for the open flow of ideas while showing concern for the common good and rights of all individuals?" In her research portfolio Sara writes, "I am learning that the more power you are willing to give to your students, the more respect and responsibility they are willing to give in return." She is successful in creating a more comfortable classroom environment, building trust with her students, and developing a process for self-monitoring through multiple strategies: (i) Sara conducts student interviews, questionnaires, class surveys, class meetings, and observations to know her students, understand their learning styles, and

misbehavior; (ii) She also solicited and implemented students' ideas for agreed upon rules for quiet, listening, class signals, class transitions, and class rules; (iii) She developed a series of mini-lessons on social skills geared to help children become more aware of the agreed upon behavior; (iv) Sara utilized collaborative learning groups where students practiced social skills; and (v) Through a self-study of her teaching practices, she noticed her behavior of talking too much or using too much control. In her journal Sara states:

Not only am I helping the students to grow and learn about themselves, but I am definitively uncovering details about myself as a teacher and as a person. ... I really like to take charge of the classroom. ... It is sometimes hard for me to let them get into groups and run discussions and guide their own learning...This whole process has made me look even harder at the way I run my classroom and the way that students learn.

**Jeff's self-study.** Jeff was a preservice teacher in the University of Hawaii Master's of Education in Teaching Program, a two-year program that emphasizes inquiry, reflection and collaboration. Like many student teachers, Jeff encountered unanticipated frustrations that led to questions about his commitment to teaching. He writes in his journal, "*So why bother? I see the end of the program as potentially being just that, the end?*"

Agonizing over his ineffective classroom management and student teaching performance, he decided to conduct a self-study of his teaching as his master's paper. At the beginning of his paper he wrote: "*My intention in this paper is to come to a better understanding of why I have chosen the profession of teaching, ..... It is my goal to not only put together my story, as a beginning teacher, but also to reflect on my own practice in hopes of improving my effectiveness as a teacher.*"

As Jeff systematically analyzed his beliefs about teaching and his role as a teacher, he wrote, *“When I look back over the past thirteen months I realize my perspectives on teaching and what it means to be a teacher have changed.. The idyllic philosophies of the first semester “arm chair” observer have been altered significantly after more extensive experiences on the battleground.”*

Through his self-study, Jeff arrived at some important understandings about himself and about teaching. His self-study resulted in a very basic philosophy that drives his teaching: *“What I do should be in the best interest of the student”*. He stated, *“Being too nice is not in the best interest of the students—kids may walk all over you. I am not in the classroom to keep everybody happy.”*

Jeff incorporated teaching strategies aligned with his evolving philosophy: (i) he changed his approach from being a *“friend to the class”*, to being *“honest, fair and firm”*; (ii) he based his decisions on what is in the best interest of each student. He stated, *“my class consists of twenty-nine individuals. Therefore, providing what is in the best interest of each varies greatly.”* (iii) he established a daily community circle which allowed him to hear the unique voices of each student, and build a safe community of learners; (iv) he established collaborative groups to foster the community of learners and address the needs of each and every student. Jeff’s self-study led to transformations in his beliefs and practice. As a result, the classroom management and classroom climate improved, and he developed positive relationships with his students. He learned that becoming a teacher is an evolving process. Most important of all, he learned that the students are at the center of the learning community. At the end of his paper, he states, *“There is a great deal of value in discovering and realigning one’s own philosophy of teaching.”*

*Nevertheless, I must remember that teaching is not simply about me, instead, it is about the students who trust me to navigate an entire year of their education.”*

**Angela's self-study.** Angela was a student in the Mid-Town preservice program at the University of Toronto. This is a small cohort program that emphasizes inquiry and community.

The student teachers conduct an action research project in each of their two practicum placements. Although they do individual projects, they receive strong support from their fellow students in the placement and from the faculty, who visit the schools often. Angela's specialist area is history, and in both her practicums she did research on effective approaches to teaching in this area. She observed and interviewed her cooperating teacher, interviewed some of her students, read relevant literature, tried various teaching strategies, and wrote reflection papers. Toward the end of the year Angela reported that, "through the action research projects, I came to realize the tremendous significance of taking time to know my students.... I realized that teaching is not about delivering a teacher-directed lesson at the front of the class, but about...planning my lessons to meet the specific needs of my students." Based on her research and professional readings, she arrived at three practical principles: (i) Learn and use the names of your students; (ii) Include active learning strategies; and (iii) Give feedback early and often. She worked closely with individuals and small groups of students who were experiencing difficulties understanding the historical events. She had the class read a popular historical novel set in the period, engage in small-group assignments, and participate in class debates linking the period to current issues. She found that the students' interest in history, which was previously quite low, soared when she showed that she was concerned about them and their ideas and not just in teaching them historical facts.

## **Implications for Teacher and Student Learning**

It is necessary to provide preservice students with self-study skills during their certification program, so that they have the tools to study and improve their practice. We have found that once teachers learn the self-study tool, they continue to use it as practicing teachers. Self-study should also be integrated more fully into induction programs. Rather than a one size fits all induction program, it can be tailored to each individual. Many school districts have some form of induction, and the self-study process can help focus the support of the mentor and/or principal on areas the teacher perceives as vital.

Teachers are finding that collegial support helps sustain them in the most difficult of times. Self-study also serves to model continuous learning, problem solving, and critical inquiry for their students. In addition, they are able to make other changes in their classroom to improve their students' learning.

As teacher educators, we work to model self-study in our preservice and inservice teacher education programs. When we invite graduates from our programs to talk to students about their beginning year, we acknowledge that the road ahead is difficult but most worthwhile. We are all reminded of the hard work, fatigue, and fear of failure in teaching, but also that, through self-study, we can improve learning. We are not only interested in studying a problem, but doing something about it. Our work begins to move self-study research into action for classroom teachers.

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