Self-Study as Professional Development: Some Reflections from Experience

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Introduction

There I was: a newly qualified teacher teaching in what many defined a very difficult school. At the end of every single day during my first year of teaching, I returned home without much energy left for planning future lessons, let alone analysing my own practice with the aim of developing professionally. I felt as if I was thrown into an unknown planet where everything was rather new to me. In such a situation my main aim was to survive, a common feeling for newly qualified teachers (Brouwer and Korthagen 2005). Moreover, I wanted to survive by copying what seemed to work for other teachers, which I have since learned is another common survival strategy among new teachers (Griffin 2003; Weiss and Weiss 2001). I was just another mortal being entering the teaching profession.

With time, I managed to adapt to my new role as teacher as I increasingly felt more comfortable with what I was doing. Without knowing it, I had created a comfort zone comprising habitual routines where I did not have to think much about my practice. Because of this comfort zone, I seldom questioned whether my practice could be improved in order to facilitate student learning. Tacit learning from experience helped here, because, as Schön (1983) and Mason (2002) contend, a lot can be learned from practice. But soon the learning is replaced by habits gained from such unquestioned practice. In reality, we sometimes find ourselves doing things without even realising that we have learned to do them. Such habitual practice therefore has the capacity to form professional assumptions that the practitioner is unaware of and subsequently finds hard to articulate.

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Self-Study as a Corrective Measure to Experiential Over-Learning

Taken-for-granted assumptions and habitual practice were thus formed very early in my teaching career. After some time, if unanalysed and unchallenged, these become taken-for-granted to the point that the beginning teacher gets stuck in his/her own habits, unable to articulate the assumptions that led to such routine practice. In Dewey's (1938) words, 'experience may increase a person's automatic skill in a particular direction and yet tend to land him in a groove or rut; the effect again is to narrow the field of further experience' (p. 13). This happens because habitual practice blocks us from seeing possible alternatives as we constantly repeat our practice; thus closing down, rather than opening up new experiences (Day 1999, 2004; Loughran 2006; Mason 2002).

The introduction of a completely new syllabus and a reform in the examination of physical education shook me out of my comfort zone in my second year of teaching. By doing so, these changes acted as critical incidents where I had to change habitual practice in order to manage new challenges (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1994; Schuck 2002). But there is a prerequisite to changing habitual practice, for one cannot simply change a habit without analysing that same habit. Take smoking for example. One can decide to quit smoking but it is impossible to do so unless the smoker analyses his or her habit prior to seriously attempting a change. The same argument holds for habitual professional practice and in my case the best tool at my disposal to analyse my practice is what I (and others) have termed reflective self-study. It is through such a tool that I started questioning what was previously taken-for-granted; i.e. habitual practice and the assumptions that make up that practice. Such questioning of accepted routines and the consequent change to habitual practice are seen as the hallmark of reflective self-study.

> Becoming involved in 'improvement' is not only about becoming 'better' but also to do with becoming 'different' through questioning the taken-for-grantedness, the habits, the comfort blankets that we wrap around ourselves from time to time and by adopting a more problem-posing teaching posture … It is about questioning practice with confidence so as to open up new possibilities and new directions for action (Ghaye and Ghaye 1998, p. 67).

As I argued in my personal journal, *'intentional learning and the need for change progressed in parallel because if we are to change we need to learn, and learning facilitates change'*. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) similarly argue that informed change is a complex process that inevitably involves learning. Additionally, deeper understanding and learning are indispensable if the practitioner is to embrace the notion of ongoing development and improvement of practice and see these as desirable. It is for this reason, coupled with my commencement of PhD research, that I engaged in self-study. Such research was optimally suited to my needs since I concur with Zeichner (2007) whose position 'rejects the dualism of research either contributing to greater theoretical understanding or to the improvement of practice and argues that self-study research should attempt to work on both goals simultaneously' (p. 36).

This chapter thus allows me to share with readers what I have learned about self-study research through my engagement with reflective self-study. In trying to do so, I was allowed what Berry and Kosnik (2010) term the rare luxury of going back and re-analysing available data coming from a number of self-studies I was engaged in. I use extracts from personal journals of studies that took place over the past 10 years to strengthen the arguments made.

Taken-for-Granted Professional Assumptions

Through experiencing self-study, I have come to believe that the most important aspect of teacher learning is the examination of one's own tacit understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions (Loughran 2006). This is even more accentuated when considering that these understandings shape the way we interpret experiences and construct knowledge (Nissilä 2005; Orland-Barak 2006). Therefore, erroneous assumptions can distort our view, consequently leading to misinterpretation of what is happening in our classrooms.

Through personal experience I contend that as I go deeply into critically analysing my own assumptions, I realise that deficiencies exist and I try to reframe them. This is indeed the basis of transformative learning (Kraft 2002; Ward and McCotter 2004) because as I altered my beliefs, I increasingly realised that my practice must also change. This provides further support for the work of Sparks (2002) and Coburn (2003), who argue that there is a correlation between changes in assumptions and changes to professional practice. In reality, '*if learning stops, change stops too and we will keep on doing a hundred years from now, what we are doing now*' (Personal Journal). This is exactly how I felt before engaging in reflective self-study, and my experience resonates with Lockford's (2002) statement that:

> With time, the actors become accustomed enough, habituated enough, to live within their roles and to play that script on demand, playing it even when that drama has no catharsis, where the only comfort is the familiarity of habit (p. 78).

I do not mean to argue that experiential learning is not possible if experiences are not analysed. However, such learning would be mostly tacit, and it is difficult for the practitioner to be fully in control of tacit knowledge. Even worse, tacit understandings control the way a person views his/her future experiences. Reflective self-study is fundamental to consciously learn from professional experience and to investigate our own tacit learning. For the practitioner-researcher, experience and reflective self-study form a symbiotic relationship. In truth, self-study has made me an informed decision-maker and afforded me better control and understanding of my actions and the contexts in which I operate. Similarly, I do not make the claim that the creation of habitual practice is always an evil. What is harmful to professional practice is that if such habitual routines and professional assumptions are never analysed and modified where necessary, our practice never changes, whether or not

these practices are achieving the results they are set to achieve. According to Schön (1983), 'when this happens, the practitioner has over-learned what he knows … [and] reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning' (p. 61).

The Relevance of Learning That Emerges from Self-Study

Professional development opportunities need to be directly relevant to teachers' needs. If they are, teacher learning and improved practice are more likely (Hunzicker 2011). If new learning seems relevant to my needs—for example, if it is linked to a problem I perceive—I already feel the need to change. However, when learning does not appear to be immediately relevant, is highly abstract, or is perceived as being far away from the realities I face as a teacher educator, it is either ignored or just accommodated within my comfort zone and it rarely challenges habitual routines. Thus, such new learning will rarely result in change of practice.

Unfortunately, many teachers complain that traditional professional development opportunities usually lack relevance but in contrast, self-study, especially when conducted in a community of professionals engaging in self-study, can promote learning that is directly relevant (Armour and Yelling 2007; Attard 2012; Duncombe and Armour 2004; Gallagher et al. 2011). In fact, I experienced the learning emerging from reflective self-study as immediately relevant and applicable to my needs. In such a way, it was difficult for me to become a prisoner in my own cage (WestEd 2000). Relevance of learning through self-study is boosted by not having a pre-set agenda where *aspects to develop* would have been previously decided upon. Instead, professional aspects need to be chosen by practitioners themselves according to what they deem relevant; i.e. issues that emerge from, and are having a direct impact upon their practice. As I argued in my personal journal, just like students, '*teachers feel the need to talk about something that is either troubling them…or something that they're really enthusiastic about*'. According to Loughran (2010), self-study offers an opportunity to practitioners to delve deeper into such issues. As Campbell (2002) suggests, 'teachers researching their own classrooms have the potential to locate development where it arguably should be, in the hearts and minds of the teachers, in their everyday lives and work' (p. 31).

Such claims were supported in one of my recent studies where reflective self-study was promoted in a collaborative environment. One of the participants came up to me and enthusiastically stated: 'This is the best form of professional development I have encountered throughout my teaching career' (Attard 2012, p. 210). This was later echoed by all of the other participants of the study and they specifically stated that it is the relevance of learning that mostly helped them appreciate such a professional development opportunity. Participants also reported working harder on their own development when compared to traditional in-service courses. As one participant stated, 'having the freedom to reflect upon and discuss topics we deem as relevant has indeed made this a positive experience, as my enthusiasm to dive into the world of professional learning has increased' (Attard 2012, p. 208).

Conversing and Collaborative Others in Self-Study

Conversing with other professionals offers the possibility of feedback and exposure to different viewpoints. Unfortunately, this is not always possible as professional isolation can be a reality in today's educational institutions, promoted by administrative work and heavy workloads. In similar contexts, collaboration and sharing are limited at best and non-existent at worst. However, as I engaged in my daily reflective writing I felt the need to converse; to make arguments; to obtain multiple viewpoints; to ask questions and give hypothetical answers. In Mills' (1959) words:

> I do not know the full social conditions of the best intellectual workmanship, but certainly surrounding oneself by a circle of people who will listen and talk – and at times they have to be imaginary characters – is one of them (p. 01).

I thus started conversing with my journal. In reality, I was conversing with myself, but the journal was situated as the other: a partner in conversation (Meriläinen and Syrjälä 2001). The unpredictable course of thinking while writing is very similar to when two or more people converse. During informal conversation, one thing leads to another and nobody can precisely predetermine the outcome of such conversations. Writing promoted an internal reflective dialogue – a conversation with oneself – where the same unpredictability found in informal conversation is present (Conle 2001; Glaze 2002). In fact, while writing I unconsciously had multiple selves and I constantly made arguments as if I was debating. I therefore agree with Ellis and Bochner (2000) that the narrative we construct 'displays multiple layers of consciousness' (p. 739). It is interesting to speculate on the role these multiple selves play. When analysing my personal journal, I became conscious that on multiple occasions I imagined myself in various positions. These ranged from the role of parent to that of school administrator, from student to policy maker, from prospective teacher to teacher educator, and from PE teacher to elite athlete. Whatever role I take while engaging in reflective self-study, the aim is that of trying to obtain varying viewpoints regarding the issue in question.

But why is conversing with oneself healthy for the practitioner engaged in self-study? Bohm (1990) suggests that through dialogue we: disclose assumptions, beliefs held, as well as practical theories; reveal our understanding and our knowledge; and our learning through conversation may lead us to action. Yet, do these same arguments hold when conversing with oneself? Through my personal experience with reflective self-study I contend that the aforementioned arguments do hold. The important thing is that 'it values a multiplicity of voices and perspectives' (Brunner 1994, p. 17). It comes as no surprise then that Schön (1983) promotes internal dialogue as essential for reflection. Maybe what various fields term as reflection is simply the ability of the practitioner to converse with himself/herself as regards aspects of professional practice while being able to study issues from various angles.

Although such internal conversation is priceless, not having critical friends can, however, limit one's professional development. At present, I am surrounded with critical friends with whom I can share and discuss various issues related to practice.

What a change this has been! My own professional development seems to have been given a boost by such collaborative practice. New understandings can now be discussed with other professionals who can highlight any short-sightedness from my part. Such newly created knowledge can be useful to them too, in the sense that they might be awakened to new aspects of their practice and research that until then went unnoticed. This is reciprocal, since on many occasions colleagues who shared their new understandings with me prompted me to look further into particular issues, and at times also made me question my held assumptions.

> *As soon as I met [my colleague], he talked to me about some problems he was encountering with his research students. He also argued that changes were needed but was uncertain as to which path to take. When he asked for my opinion, I told him that I had never faced that problem before, but in reality, going unnoticed does not mean that the situation is not problematic. I promised [my colleague] I would ask my students for their opinion and have a think about it before getting back to him* (Personal Journal).

When discussing professional issues with colleagues, questioning from their part with the intention of them better understanding your arguments also has a valuable role. This is because trying to articulate your thoughts while answering colleagues' questions promotes further thought on the issues discussed, and this subsequently promotes further knowledge construction that promotes professional learning and improvement of practice (Orland-Barak 2006; Zellermayer and Tabak 2006).

But why does collaborative self-study augment the benefits of the individual process? Put simply, the answer might be that studying a problem while having the perspectives of various people sheds more light than when done in isolation (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001; Nissilä 2005). Participants in the previously mentioned study where collaboration between self-study practitioner-researchers was being promoted argued that 'being exposed to alternative viewpoints was an immense learning opportunity and a strongpoint of this learning community', and 'through public reflection my professional development has received a big boost as I learned with and from others' (Attard 2012, p. 203). During collaborative self-study, there was scaffolding of ideas where participants constructed knowledge by building on each other's previously constructed knowledge and ideas (Orland-Barak 2006). Clokey-Till et al. (2001) describe the benefits of this process:

> It was this social nature of our learning that pushed us far beyond what was individually possible. It was hard to tell where an idea had originated. Even if one person initiated an idea, it was often developed further in conversation with others (p. 204).

In this way, collaborating practitioners are positioned as co-learners (Le Cornu 2005). Such collaborative practice between self-study participant-researchers is an added boost as it helps the individual practitioner go deeper into personal issues that are directly relevant to his/her practice. Public analysis should therefore not be seen as the end-point. Rather, it is a trampoline where individual reflective self-study recommences. This is because through the collaborative process knowledge construction alternates between personal and public analysis, and promotes the rethinking of professional assumptions (Orland-Barak 2006).

But if the collaborative process is such a powerful tool in teachers' professional development, is there also a need for reflective self-study on an individual basis? In

any type of professional development, individual identity is of utmost importance (Tillema and van der Westhuizen 2006; Calderwood 2000). Therefore, the individual should always be at the centre and knowledge creation needs to start with the individual. Although support in a collaborative environment is desirable, the individual needs to go back to the drawing board where new knowledge is adapted and analysed according to specific contextual circumstances. For instance, decisions regarding actions to take need to be on an individual level. Self-study practitioner-researchers should never feel constrained to *act* and *think* like other critical friends, as such practice would certainly mute the professional development of the individual since relevance of learning might be lost. Any collaborative process should promote professional learning that assists the individual in taking informed-decisions rather than offering packaged solutions for all involved to follow. Therefore, although collaborative self-study practitioner-researchers come together to learn from and with each other, each individual needs to take the decisions deemed best for his/her situation. The main difference is that each individual's learning is not isolated but complemented by that of others.

Unfortunately, the literature is replete with examples where consensus is the target (Collin and Valleala 2005; Stacey et al. 2004). For example, a teacher in Calderwood's (2000) study stated that in the collaborative environment she experienced, practitioners always felt the pressure to reach consensus, and they felt uncomfortable when this did not occur. Regrettably, extreme consensus seeking limits a healthy exploration of alternatives through the uncritical acceptance of solutions (Johnson 2003). This should not happen, as rather than being a boost, collaboration can hinder the development of the reflective self-study practitioner.

The voicing of various beliefs and conflicting views immensely aids public analysis and ultimately learning (Watkins 2005). This is because when facing ideas or arguments that conflict with our held views, the latter are challenged as we start to question and analyse them. This is done in parallel with the analysis of newly-presented arguments and ideas. This is why agreeing to disagree is an important condition, as it promotes the voicing of varying views and understandings; especially when considering that it is inevitable that different professionals experience differences in their practices and assumptions (Orland-Barak and Tillema 2006). Rather than being seen as a problem, varying viewpoints should be seen as manna from heaven because uncertainty and conflicting views are what I called elsewhere *a blessing in disguise* (Attard 2008). Of crucial importance is the necessary understanding that 'relatedness and autonomy are not opposites, as they are sometimes depicted' (Watkins 2005, p. 52). Hence, the questioning of held assumptions receives an added boost when one is exposed to various viewpoints, because with critical friends learning becomes 'a dialectic process in which individuals test their constructed views on others and negotiate their ideas' (Stacey et al. 2004, p. 108). Therefore, being surrounded by other self-study practitioner-researchers is of value, especially when considering that engaging in reflective self-study on an individual level is no insurance against the possibility of blinding oneself (Attard and Armour 2006).

The Pitfalls of Self-Study

Self-study is not all rosy. It is a journey through a bumpy road, whose destination promises to be a better place from our starting point; even though many-a-time the destination is elusive. It is elusive because professional development through reflective self-study is a never-ending journey. This makes sense when we recognise that there is always room for improvement. But let us concentrate on what makes the journey so bumpy. Amongst other things, uncertainty and inconclusiveness are a constant – no wonder the final destination is elusive. Another reason for the road being a bumpy one is the continuous quest of venturing into the unknown, especially regarding professional practice. This is because new learning should lead to changes to professional practice with the intention of improving; for what use is new learning if it is not applied in practice? Finally, reflective self-study does not guarantee that the final destination is actually better, as the possibility of self-deception is always a possibility. After all, 'the aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle' (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001, p. 20).

The Importance of Tolerating Uncertainty and 'Not Knowing' in Self-Study

New learning and new insights emerging from self-study have made me an informed decision-maker, since my own learning backs my practice and decisions. However, the reader should not get the mistaken idea that the self-study practitioner-researcher is one who knows exactly what is happening and exactly what courses of action to take, since this is far from the reality I have experienced. In fact, Fitzgerald et al. (2002) asserted that 'self-study work did not always solve immediate problems' (p. 77). Without such a realisation, consciously or unconsciously omitting such negative aspects of inquiry can lead beginners in reflective self-study to convince themselves that they are not up to the task when they encounter problems, as 'experts' never seem to encounter such problems. My experience confirms, however, that rough and bumpy roads are more common than smooth highways in a journey towards learning and deeper understanding. On various occasions I wrote that '*confusion reigns in my head. It's like I've got fireworks in my head*' (Personal Journal). I have thus come to see reflective self-study as a tricky, complex and confusing terrain.

The professional practice of both teachers and teacher educators is dynamic, chaotic, indefinite and uncertain (Richert 2001), while for Borko (2004) 'meaningful learning is a slow and uncertain process' (p. 6). Therefore, the major two spheres of reflective self-study (professional practice and professional learning) are both uncertain terrains. No wonder that my life as a professional is full of dilemmas, incompleteness and uncertainties. But most of these went unnoticed before engaging in reflective self-study. It is interesting to note that unlike the creation of habitual routines, reflective self-study does not try to simplify the educative and learning processes. On the

contrary, it made me realise the complexities of a teacher's life, because I started questioning what was previously taken-for-granted. As a result I soon realised that at times '*the more I write, the more confused I feel*' (Personal Journal).

Even today, after more than 10 years of engagement in self-study research, more often than not the answers to my questions are plausible, for now, but hardly definitive. Embarking on a project of ongoing change brings with it risk, because we have to leave the familiarity of habit to explore the unknown. This is why change is difficult, as humans prefer inhabiting the familiarity of the known to venturing into the unknown. Thus, by engaging in reflective self-study 'the old certainties of tradition, custom, [and] technical efficiency … are rejected as rational grounds for practice and replaced with a process of dynamic interrogation' (Parker 1997, p. 122).

Uncertainty and inconclusiveness also affect a person's emotions. Often I felt exasperated when, try as I might, I could get no correct and definite answers to the questions I posed. On such occasions my only possibility was to suspend the need for answers, because 'reaching understanding is not always possible here and now' (Oosterheert and Vermunt 2003, p. 162). Then I would engage in further observations, reflect on my previous and new observations and re-tackle the unanswered questions. This is because, according to Oosterheert and Vermunt (2003), 'new information is often needed … and this information is not always available in the present' (p. 62). Thus in reflective self-study, the practitioner-researcher has to enter *a suspended state of not knowing*, where one has to wait, engage in further observation, and analyse future observations with the intention of shedding light on such dimly lit territory. The realisation is that no simple solutions exist to complex problems faced by teachers and teacher educators, and what seem to be simple solutions are very often inappropriate (Houston and Clift 1990). Thus I agree with Campbell's (2002) statement that on various occasions the practitioner-researcher must have:

> The confidence to admit 'I've looked at the evidence, it has increased my knowledge and understanding, it has affected my practice but I've hit a wall – I don't know what to do next'. And living with uncertainty: 'it feels so messy. You don't think you are going anywhere or doing anything' (p. 30).

I must point out here that although in the initial stages I could not stand having suspended states of not knowing, I later realised that such suspended states promote further analysis of practice. It is doubt and discontent that make me look further and deeper into issues at hand and uncertainty and inconclusiveness powered my need to learn further. This is harmonious with Dewey's (1910) argument that doubt stimulates inquiry. After such a realisation, I constantly took the stance of what Grant (2001) called the uncertain inquirer, where I continuously doubted my own understandings. As such, although at certain stages I commented in my journal that *'uncertainty is a frightening thing'*, on numerous occasions I pointed out that I want to be surrounded by uncertainty throughout my professional career.

> *If I ever wrap enough certainty around myself, then I would be indirectly saying that I have learned enough and that is indeed a paradox. If this was to happen, I would stop reflecting and learning because no uncertain situation would urge me to go deeper into various issues. That would be a shame!!!* (Personal Journal).

As self-study practitioner-researchers we must not be impatient with our own learning. We must not aim for quick change and/or conclusions because learning is accompanied by inconclusiveness and uncertainty, especially when considering that making sense is not a split-second event but a process requiring substantial time (Czarniawska 2004; MacLeod and Cowieson 2001). Hence, my conclusions to specific issues are temporary, as I always leave room for possible error that can be highlighted by the acquisition of new understandings and learning. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) contend, 'in self-studies, conclusions are hard won, elusive, and generally more tentative than not' (p. 20). This is exactly what puts uncertainty, inconclusiveness, conflict and dilemmas into one basket, i.e. they all emphasise the lack of one clear way of doing things. If there was one unmistakable way of operating then reflective self-study would be useless and technical rationality would be the preferred procedure. However, in reality the self-study practitioner-researcher needs to engage in a never-ending process where the possibility of various solutions are analysed, with the final objective being the need for continuous change with the aim of constant improvement.

What is of utmost importance is the process of inquiry, the search itself. For in searching for plausible answers many possibilities are imagined and taken into consideration, analysed and tried out in practice. This is what makes reflective self-study an ongoing and never-ending process. On the other hand, as maintained by Schön (1983), many practitioners who do not systematically analyse their practice:

> …become too skilful at techniques of selective inattention, junk categories, and situational control, techniques which they use to preserve the constancy of their knowledge-in-practice. For them, uncertainty is a threat; its admission is a sign of weakness (p. 69).

Therefore, while uncertainty is seen as a sign of weakness for the technical expert, uncertainty is a sign of constant growth, development and learning for the self-study practitioner-researcher.

Translating New Learning into Improved Practice

Better understanding is a precursor to changing habitual practice, but simply '*understanding something does not imply change*' (Personal Journal). As Clark (1995) argues, 'it is one thing to point out a danger or an opportunity, and quite another to do something about it' (p. 27). Therefore, the self-study practitioner-researcher requires determination to continuously improve practice. This is not easy though, as changing habitual practice continues to intensify the feelings of uncertainty as in order to change and develop professionally, we take risks as we deviate from the comfort of familiarity while embracing the unfamiliar (Lockford 2002; WestEd 2000). Henceforth, '*if keeping the status quo is much easier than embarking on a project of change, courage and determination are needed on the part of the practitioner*' (Personal Journal).

Although changing professional practice requires effort and determination, it is a precursor to further professional learning. This is because such changes can offer the self-study practitioner-researcher rich new data about professional aspects that are of interest to him/her. If previous learning is not translated into practice, then s/he will experience saturation of data as nothing new can be observed. This can abruptly terminate the reflective self-study process, going against the notion of reflective self-study being a never-ending process.

Self-Study Is Not Fool-Proof

Throughout my engagement with reflective self-study, I have grown in my conviction that the learning that emerges from such ongoing research is not fool-proof. Therefore, the possibility of fooling oneself is still present for the practitioner-researcher (Fendler 2003), and because of this, not only did I start to question taken-for-granted assumptions about my practice, but I also started questioning insights that emerged from reflective self-study itself. Thus, I do not make the assumption that 'teachers' actions are necessarily better just because they are more deliberate or intentional. Re-analysing my previous learning happened mostly when insights and new understandings were made problematic as a result of further observation and analysis of practice. Hence, I regularly asked myself: '*Is this true, or is it what I want to believe?*' (Personal Journal) This is why I have previously argued in favour of having critical friends who are also experiencing self-study, as their viewpoints can be priceless, especially when they awake the inquirer inside of you. These viewpoints have the potential to challenge or substantiate my views that emerge from the self-study process, the result being a thorough re-analysis of my own views. As Mills (1959) contends, I 'try to think in terms of a variety of viewpoints and in this way… let [my] mind become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible' (p. 214). This is surely the way forward if one believes in the power of lifelong learning for teachers and teacher educators.

Conclusion

This chapter presents various aspects that the self-study researcher can encounter when engaging in self-study; where knowledge production is intended both for greater theoretical understanding and the improvement of practice (Gallagher et al. 2011; Ziechner 2007). The initial part of this chapter presented readers with how self-study research can be of value for teachers and teacher-educators in combating the possibility of being stuck in the comfort zone, where professional practice becomes habitual and professional decisions are based on unquestioned professional assumptions. The relevance of learning that emerges from practice is the catalyst for applying changes to professional practice with the aim of continuous

improvement. Such learning can also be augmented with the help of other collaborative self-study researchers, since being exposed to others' viewpoints enriches our own thinking processes. The second part of this chapter then highlighted that effort and perseverance are needed from the self-study researcher's part, if both professional development and research agendas are to progress. For example, the ability to tolerate uncertainty and 'not knowing' are important for the researcher, as these aspects make him/her look deeper while gathering further data. This is true for all research and is especially true for self-study researchers. Additionally, it is important for the self-study researcher to re-question previous learning, since our understanding of a phenomenon or situation is always partial. New observations of practice or the exposure to different viewpoints might shed doubt on previous learning; and such previous learning should thus be revisited.

My final point is that previous research into PE teachers' professional development (*cf.* Armour and Yelling 2007; Craft 1996; Duncombe and Armour 2004) has reported that PE teachers consider professional development opportunities as effective when they: provide useable ideas that are practical, relevant and applicable; provide challenging and thought-provoking issues; offer opportunities for individual and collaborative reflection; and construct learning that emerges from the real-world of teaching. All of these elements were present throughout my journey, especially when surrounded by other reflective self-study practitioner-researchers. It is unsurprising therefore that participants in the aforementioned study where reflective self-study was promoted in a collaborative environment agreed with the participant who stated that this was the best type of professional development he had ever experienced while saying: 'I have come to see it as a learning incubation centre' (Attard 2012, p. 210).

I have briefly attempted to share some aspects of reflective self-study. Although not exhaustive, I believe that these are the salient points that highlight my never-ending journey, a journey where practitioner research is used as a tool for continuous professional development. As a final word of caution to the reader, I would like to emphasise that the outcomes of reflective self-study are as unique as our DNA. The outcomes are unique because everyone experiences professional learning differently, and with such a realisation I do not attempt to put forward the above arguments as a blueprint. Nonetheless, the aspects described are meant to guide the reader in understanding various aspects of reflective self-study that the practitioner-researcher might face on his or her own unique journey.

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