

# Retelling and Reliving the Story: Teacher Educators Researching Their Own Practice in Flanders



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## Introduction

In the next four chapters, we will present the experiences and findings from the first systematic project of self-study of teacher education practices in Flanders (Belgium), entitled “Learning and facilitating learning in the workplace: A project of self-study in teacher education.”

This chapter sets the scene and orients the reader to the rest of the section. In the following paragraphs, we first describe the context of this collaborative project (section “[Situating the project](#)”) and present the protagonists and the script underlying the different acts (section “[Participants and process](#)”). In the section “[Lessons on self-study facilitation](#)”, we present a number of lessons learned from our attempts to support and facilitate a self-study research group. As such, this section aims at contributing to a pedagogy for the facilitation of self-study in teacher education practices. The fifth and final section of the chapter looks ahead and introduces the rationale behind the three following chapters. Each of the chapters reports on the content and outcome of one particular self-study of practice included in the project in the form of a retrospective “tetralogue.”

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## Situating the Project

Almost 15 years ago, we got inspired by the *Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices* or S-STEP approach (Loughran et al. 2004). Over the years, we had the pleasure to work closely with international colleagues in this growing field (Kelchtermans and Hamilton 2004). We also rigorously reviewed the available research literature on S-STEP (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2015). These experiences inspired us to enter this field ourselves. In 2009, we were able to start the first project in Flanders (= Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) in which S-STEP constituted the central conceptual and methodological perspective. More in particular, we used the S-STEP perspective to address an important concern in the pedagogy of teacher education, that is, improving student teachers' workplace learning and internships.

The 2-year collaborative project was funded by a grant (public funding) from the School of Education (a collaborative network of teacher training institutes) and involved participants from five different institutes (i.e., three higher education colleges, one Centre for Adult Education, and one university-based program). As the title of the project "Learning and facilitating learning in the workplace: A project of self-study in teacher education" suggests, its goals were twofold. First, this project aimed to contribute to improving the support for student teachers' learning during their internships. As such, it was part of a larger research line on the pedagogy of workplace learning (Deketelaere et al. 2006; Kelchtermans 2009; Kelchtermans et al. 2010, 2013). We use the notion "workplace learning" in its broadest meaning to refer to all forms of practical training in teacher education. The focus on work-based learning also served to clearly define the purpose of the project. All partners in the project shared an interest in deepening their understanding of the complexity of workplace learning (internships) and the factors mediating it. Second, this project represented the very first attempt in Flanders to use the methodological and conceptual insights from the S-STEP approach. The teacher educators engaged in a systematic study of their own practice aiming to make explicit and question their tacit knowledge of how to facilitate student teachers' learning during internships (Kelchtermans et al. 2010). By systematically reporting on the results of their study and critically validating them in dialogue with colleagues, this work not only contributed to their personal development but also to theory building on the pedagogy of teacher education (Kelchtermans and Hamilton 2004; Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2015).

## Participants and Process

Participants in the project included six experienced teacher educators (i.e., "the teacher educators" in the remainder of this chapter; see also Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, b). They were self-selected and extensively briefed about the

**Table 1** Background information for the participating teacher educators (First published in Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 102)

Name	Institute	Affiliation	Research experience	Research topics/research questions
John	HEC	Bachelor's program in elementary teacher education	None	What aspects of student teachers' professional self-understanding are left unexplored in a competence-based approach?
				How does student teachers' self-understanding develop throughout the program?
				How can I actively support the development of their self-understanding?
Gus	HEC	Bachelor's program in elementary teacher education	Participated in several practice-based research programs	How can I describe student teachers' self-image at the end of the teacher education program?
				What values and norms do they adhere to?
Ellen	HEC	Bachelor's program in primary teacher education	Research assistant at the university for 1 year	What implicit and explicit messages do I convey to student teachers and school-based mentors with the assignments during practical training?
Tasha	CAE	Specific teacher education program	None	What is the impact of being unfamiliar with student teachers' area of expertise in post-lesson conversations with student teachers during practical training?
Carter	UBP	Specific teacher education program	Research assistant at the university for 2 years	What are the opportunities and pitfalls of being unfamiliar with student teachers' area of expertise?
Louis	UBP	Specific teacher education program	None	How can I describe my task perception as a teacher educator in post-lesson conversations with student teachers during practical training?

*Note.* HEC higher education college ("hogeschool"), CAE Centre for Adult Education ("Centrum voor Volwassenenonderwijs"), UPB university-based program ("universiteit")

nature, purposes, and structure of the project before they agreed to join. Project funding was used to buy research time from their daily job (i.e., 10% or 4 h of working time a week over a 2-year period). Each of the participants set up an individual self-study research project in his or her own practice, on an issue related to the facilitation of student teachers' workplace learning. Table 1 summarizes some background information of the teacher educators and the topics chosen for their self-studies.

Flanders has a dual system in higher education, with universities offering research-based academic training and different institutes for higher education (i.e., higher education colleges and Centres for Adult Education) providing programs for

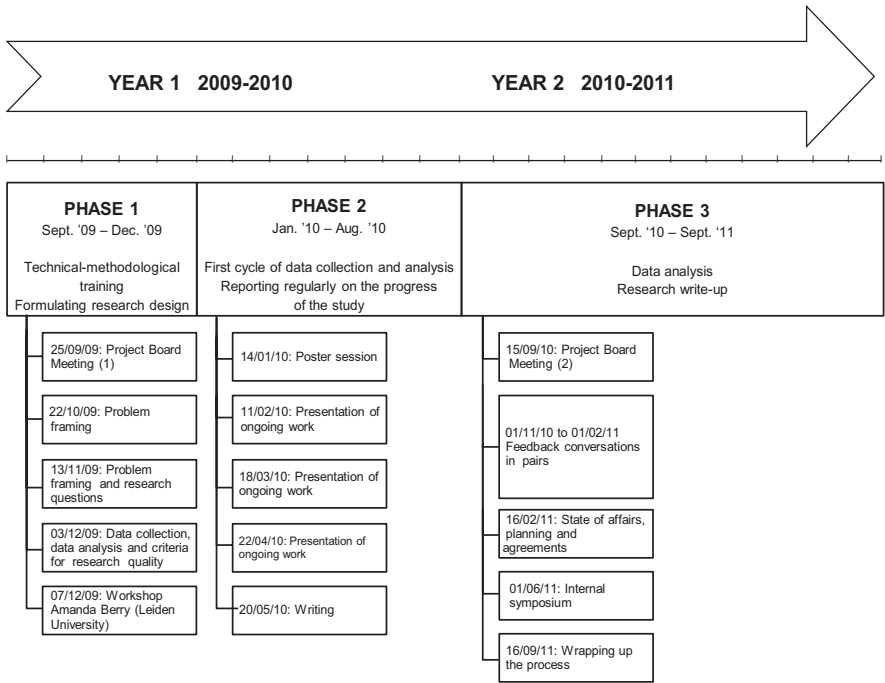
professional training (see also Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a). Although the higher education colleges have recently started to develop research expertise, this expertise is mainly in applied forms of research, while their core business remains the education of professionals. Fundamental and theory-oriented research has traditionally occurred primarily within the universities. As such, teaching and research in teacher education has been historically and institutionally separated and conducted by different people with different backgrounds and expertise. Because of the dual system in Flemish teacher education, the research experience of the participants in the project was limited (see Table 1). None of the teacher educators in this project, for example, had been expected to be active as a researcher, aiming to publish their work in academic or professional journals (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a).

To outbalance the limited research expertise and experience of the participating teacher educators, we deliberately included training and supervision in the development of research skills as part of the project agenda. As a professor in education at the University of Leuven, Geert Kelchtermans had initiated the project and was the overall project supervisor. Eline Vanassche joined the project as part of the research for her PhD. Both of them acted throughout the entire project as the academic facilitators, providing methodological and theoretical training, support, and coaching. Ann Deketelaere had a key role in supporting the final but crucial part of the writing up of the different self-study reports.

The project ran over a period of 2 years (2009–2011). The academic facilitators organized monthly meetings with the following agenda: (1) informing the teacher educators on the theory and practice of qualitative research (including case-study and self-study research); (2) coaching them in the design, implementation, and analysis of their self-study project; and (3) providing the conceptual tools for reflection and discussion of their self-study project. The research group met 12 times between September 2009 and September 2011. Figure 1 provides an overview of the research group meetings.

The meetings with the full research group were supplemented with individual support through e-mail, telephone, and one-on-one meetings with the facilitators (both on- and off-site). These individual meetings mirrored the agenda of the research group meetings, but the support was tailored more specifically to each individual's developing support needs during the different stages of the project.

In line with the S-STEP principles, we wanted to ensure that the findings of the studies would be made public. This “going public” on the findings is first important for methodological and epistemological reasons: presenting the research findings to an audience of peers, for critical questioning. Second, we wanted to contribute to the development of a shared professional knowledge base on the pedagogy of facilitating workplace learning in teacher education. As a first initiative to make our experiences public, we organized an “internal symposium.” Although “internal” may sound contradictory in relation to “forum”, we wanted to take a gradual, step-by-step approach in making the findings public. For several participants, sharing one's experiences beyond the relatively safe environment of the research group meetings



**Fig. 1** Overview of the research group meetings (First published in Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 103)

was a threatening prospect as they felt vulnerable and exposed.<sup>1</sup> We therefore allowed them to have control over the participants in the symposium: everybody was given ten “wild cards” to invite colleagues who they thought would be interested in the work and would engage in the conversation with an attitude of respect and appreciation, while also being critical in a constructive way. The second initiative in “going public” was turning the full report of the project into a book entitled “Lessen uit LOEP: Lerarenopleiders Onderzoeken hun Eigen Praktijk” (Kelchtermans et al. 2014) that became the first book-size report of S-STEP published in Dutch.

<sup>1</sup>This was in particular true for one participant who strongly disagreed with the dominant normative educational discourse in the teacher training college where he was working. This disagreement not only informed his practice but also guided his research interests in his self-study project. Elsewhere we have analyzed and reported in detail how the micropolitical tensions around different normative educational views negatively interfered with and almost jeopardized the quality of self-study research projects (see Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016b).

## Lessons on Self-Study Facilitation

Before introducing the other chapters in this section, we first want to zoom in on the complex but interesting question of how teacher educators' self-study research can be meaningfully facilitated. Although it is obvious that the teacher educators whose practice is the focus of the self-study are the key actors in this process, we found that the chances for in-depth, methodologically sound and relevant self-study research could be (and because of the limited research experience of the teacher educators needed to be) enhanced by creating an appropriate supportive environment (the context of the overall project) as well as by providing particular forms of support. An additional agenda of the overall project, therefore, was a critical and in-depth analysis of the particular pedagogical setup and positioning of the participants and the facilitators enacted in the research group facilitation. The facilitation started from a clear pedagogical rationale which was grounded in relevant research (on teacher and teacher educator professional development) and evaluated throughout the project.<sup>2</sup>

An essential condition for this facilitation and for the project as a whole, however, was the need to build and work from common conceptual lenses in order to establish a shared language. Or, to phrase it somewhat paradoxically, as an essential principle in the design and enactment of the project, we contended that doing justice to the *diversity* of the participants' working contexts, professional histories, and research questions also implied the need to develop a certain level of *commonality* in the ways of looking at and talking about the pedagogical issue of workplace learning on the one hand and one's own professional development as a teacher educator on the other.

In earlier work (Deketelaere et al. 2006; Kelchtermans et al. 2010), we had elaborated a model of workplace learning. Professional development as a result of workplace learning was conceived of as resulting from the reflective, meaningful interplay of three constitutive parts: the student teacher (intern), the cooperating teacher (mentor in the school), and the teacher educator. The interactions of those three actors were also interpreted as situated in their biographical and organizational context. This model operated as a map, helping to situate particular experiences or practices that were included in the individual self-study projects. Furthermore, it provided a common language to present and discuss practices related to workplace learning among the different participants in the project. Further elements of the common language were borrowed from the literature on reflection and the reflective practitioner (a.o. Schön 1983; Korthagen et al. 2001; Lyons 2010) and our work on professional development (a.o. Kelchtermans 2004, 2009), including broad and deep reflection, professional self-understanding and subjective educational theory, professional development as resulting from the meaningful interaction between individual and context, etc.

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<sup>2</sup>For a more systematic overview and theoretical and empirical justification of this validation process, please see Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2016a).

This common language (conceptual framework) on professional development and workplace learning created a discursive setting in which the facilitation and support interventions for the self-studies of the participants could evolve. Table 2 provides an overview of the rationale behind the interventions.

Through systematic data collection on the design and the enactment of our facilitation during the project, we were able to test (i.e., empirically validate and analytically refine) the rationale behind it. The analysis of the data confirmed the validity of the rationale (propositions) we started from but also resulted in a number of refinements and modifications (amendments) to its original phrasing. The extensive presentation of the methodology, analysis, and findings of this study can be found elsewhere (see Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a). Below, we confine ourselves to

**Table 2** Pedagogical rationale (propositions): facilitator interventions, triggered learning processes, and desired outcomes (First published in Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 106)

Proposition	Facilitator interventions	Triggered learning processes	Desired outcomes
If we want professional development to result in qualitative changes in both teacher educators’ actions and thinking, then we need to support them during the process in making their normative views on teaching and teacher education explicit, as well as in critically evaluating them (through discussion with peers and others)	Challenging teacher educators’ normative assumptions about good teacher education	Creating an awareness and problematization of implicit, taken-for-granted, normative assumptions about teacher education	Validating and possibly rethinking these assumptions as the basis for optimizing and changing practice
If professional development results from the meaningful interaction between the individual teacher educator and his/her professional working context, then the individual experiences, issues, or questions of the teacher educators need to be interpreted and understood against the background of the structural and cultural working conditions in the teacher training institute	Contextualizing teacher educators’ practice and their understandings of that practice	Broadening the attention from the “self” to the “self as situated in the teacher training institute.” Creating an awareness of cultural values and norms in the organization and their impact on the actual practices	Becoming aware of the multiple influences in their practice. Enabling transfer of the knowledge gained in the process to the working context of their teacher training institute

(continued)

**Table 2** (continued)

Proposition	Facilitator interventions	Triggered learning processes	Desired outcomes
If professional development is set up through peer group meetings, then the meetings should exemplify the concept of a professional learning community, characterized by making explicit, publicly sharing, and critically interrogating one's actual teacher education practices in order to improve them	Striving for and acting from the guiding principle of the professional learning community	Creating an awareness of other perspectives on and approaches to educating teachers	Inviting teacher educators to consider multiple perspectives on educating teachers
If teacher educators and academic researchers collaborate in a research project aiming at professional development, then this collaboration should happen from a perspective of complementary competence in which the different expertise of both parties is mutually acknowledged and positively valued	Acknowledging and valuing the different but complementary competences of both parties Engaging in actions that explicitly elicit and draw on both types of expertise in striving for the research goals.	Suspending the tendency to immediately look for and enact practical solutions to a specific situation and taking time to interrogate, analyze, and understand the questions or challenges in that situation	Supporting and encouraging teacher educators to become the self-directing agents (as well as the ones responsible) for their research project

an abbreviated overview of the modifications to the original propositions, reflecting our contribution to a grounded pedagogy for the support and facilitation of self-study projects.

### ***Amendments to the First Proposition***

Based on our data analysis, we put forward three amendments to the first proposition.

*4.1.1 “Systematically reflecting on mirror data from teacher educators’ practices, as well as thoughtfully introducing relevant theoretical frameworks, facilitates the public sharing and critical discussion of normative beliefs” (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 107).*



In line with our conceptualization of professional development as resulting in qualitative changes in both teacher educators' thinking and acting, it was necessary to make participants' normative beliefs about teacher education explicit and critically discuss them throughout the group process, starting from data on their actual practices. Bronkhorst (2013) defines "mirror data" as the practice-based evidence that "holds up the mirror." Because mirror data are grounded in actual teacher educator behavior in practice and its outcomes, the feedback from the data has more authority and legitimacy and makes the participants' reflections more compelling and difficult to ignore. One example of the mirror data are the video recordings in Louis' self-study project, which clearly demonstrated that his actual behavior in post-lesson debriefings did not align with his highly valued constructivist beliefs about student teachers' learning (see below in chapter 19). Louis tended to act in a rather directive way, "telling" student teachers about the work of teaching and "directing" them towards ways to improve it rather than coaching them to reflectively explore and find alternative pedagogical solutions themselves:

It was absolutely shocking to see myself on the video: 'what are you doing?'; 'look at those poor students'. I really wanted to understand the impact of this behavior and learn how I could control the tendency to be so directive. (Louis, group meeting, Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 108)

However, the mirror data did not automatically contribute to the participants' professional development. For this to happen, it was necessary to make them the object of explicit discussion by all participants in the project, as well as introduce theoretical frameworks and concepts to problematize, rephrase, and capture their actual meaning and relevance:

*4.1.2 "Systematically reflecting on one's practice in order to make explicit one's normative beliefs implies that teacher educators have to engage simultaneously in two very different agendas. This can be a source of tension" (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 108)*

Explicitly having and taking the time to engage in a reflective, systematic study of one's own practice was a new and exceptional experience for the participants in the project. It clearly differed from their usual day-to-day hectic:

[i]n-depth discussions amongst colleagues are very rare. Questions like: 'how should we handle this as a team?', 'what is our vision?', are rarely asked. We always squabble about the small things and whoever screams the loudest seals the deal. That is one of the reasons why this was such an inspiring and motivating experience. (Ellen, focus group, Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 109)

Although the participants appreciated these reflective, learning opportunities, it meant that they had to engage in an agenda which forced them to leave their comfort zone and, more in particular, to suppress their tendency to start looking for quick, practical fixes for a situation or problem. Enacting the research-based attitude and going through a more systematic, reflective approach sometimes felt like too slow or too time-consuming, triggering impatience and sometimes even frustration:

There's a big difference between spending the day pragmatically putting out fires and reflective learning. It's really a different mode of being present in practice. It's about taking a step back and that really doesn't come naturally to me. Even if one is partly released from one's job, it's really difficult. It feels like stepping off the carousel to watch how the carousel is turning, but at the same time the carousel cannot but keep on turning. (Louis, focus group, Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 109)

*4.1.3 “These tensions need to be made explicit, since they may result in acts of resistance on the part of the teacher educators. For facilitators, it is important to be able to ‘read’ and interpret that behavior properly in order to avoid it jeopardizing the process of professional development” (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 109)*

### ***Amendments to the Second Proposition***

The analysis confirmed the validity of the second proposition but also added two important amendments.

*4.2.1 “Teacher educators’ professional development in terms of their practices and normative beliefs is affected by and will in turn affect the collective practices and normative beliefs of the organization (organizational culture). This can facilitate as well as inhibit individual teacher educators’ professional development. Facilitators need to be aware that supporting teacher educators’ development might bring them into conflict with their colleagues or teacher training institute” (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p.110)*

Teacher educators engaging in self-study research may be driven by normative views on their job that do not always match the views of the teacher training institute. When the findings of the self-study project provide additional evidence for their personal views and beliefs, they automatically also create a political tension for the self-study researcher to deal with. This is a very different type of task or concern than one's individual professional development, as it concerns one's position in the organization, the network of social relationships with colleagues, etc. Facing this challenge can be very threatening, even up to the point that the researcher renounces his/her own findings. This way, he/she not only loses an important opportunity for professional development for himself/herself but eventually may even jeopardize the potential of the entire research endeavor. Elsewhere we have discussed and documented this issue in greater detail (see Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016b).

Facilitators need to be aware of the possible political conflicts self-study researchers may find themselves in and make those the object of explicit, collective reflection. Acknowledging the potential conflict and collectively looking for ways to deal with it not only takes the burden of the threat it causes off the shoulders of the individual but is in many ways an essential condition to safeguard the professional

learning of the individual and avoid that it is simply given up as “not feasible in my institute.”

*4.2.2 “Because of the possible conflicting relationship between the individual’s professional development and the practices and normative beliefs of the teacher training institute, it is often difficult for the teacher educators to leave the safe environment of the peer group and go public on the findings of their self-study (and their professional development). This is a sensitive issue that carefully needs to be dealt with in a step-by-step process.” (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 111)*

As already indicated in the former amendment, engaging in self-study research and the collaborative process of professional development embedded in the research group might create a safe, rewarding and stimulating “niche” for the participants. They can find recognition and encouragement, but at the same time, it might heighten the threshold to go back to their normal working environment and act upon their new understandings. Facilitators need to be aware of this possibility, acknowledge the issue, and act on it. Our choice of working with an “internal symposium,” for which the self-study participants were given control over the invitations, was one creative solution to deal with this tension, without, however, giving up the important dimension in self-study research of bringing one’s findings to the public forum for discussion and validation.

### ***Amendments to the Third Proposition***

The idea of a professional learning community operated as the guiding principle in the design and enactment of our facilitation and support practices. However, we found that positive, constructive collegial relationships might paradoxically also become a hindrance for the honest, critical debate and discussion that are essential for professional development to occur based on self-study. This made us revise and amend the third proposition as follows:

The quality of the collegial relationships amongst the peers in the research group needs to be actively guarded and stimulated because they constitute a crucial supporting factor in the risky process of self-study and professional development (...). Paradoxically, collegial relationships based on trust and acceptance that are too positive or too supportive might be counterproductive and hinder professional development, as they make it difficult to challenge and critically question normative beliefs and practices. The latter remains an essential condition for professional development (...).

As the ‘relative outsiders,’ facilitators can and should problematize the development of counterproductive collegial relationships and their normalizing impact. This is a difficult task in a sensitive area, but is essential in order to safeguard the research group’s potential for the participants’ professional development. (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, pp. 112-214)

### ***Amendment to the Fourth Proposition***

Collaborative self-study projects such as the one reported here clearly involve the coming together of different sets of expertise, that is, the teacher educators' "lived" experiences of practice on the one hand and the facilitators' methodological and theoretical research expertise on the other. Creating a collaborative environment in which these different but complementary sets of expertise are used, enacted, and appreciated is an essential guiding principle in setting up an effective support for self-study projects. But apart from the confirmatory evidence, we also had to conclude that "[e]ven when working from the idea of complementary competence and equally valuing the diversity in expertise, the group process may still install relationships of hierarchy and dependence. When this happens, these relationships are very hard to discuss and overcome" (Vanassche and Kelchtermans 2016a, p. 115). In many cases, it is quite convenient – and even comfortable – for participants in collaborative self-study research to reinstall relationships of hierarchy as a convenient strategy to diminish the pressure to take on responsibility themselves for the project processes. In our case, we found that it was very hard to engage all the participants in a collective responsibility for the development of the project as a whole, as we found ourselves being framed as the "experts from university." Participants acknowledged and were grateful for the (methodological and theoretical) expertise we brought to the project but – while doing so – at the same time kept putting the responsibility for leading and steering the project in our hands. This was not motivated by a lack of commitment or laziness but rather because they felt being "sucked back" into the urgency, immediacy, and complexity of their day-to-day duties, of which the participation in the self-study project was only a minor part. Establishing shared responsibility, collaborative work, and complementary competence remains valid and necessary as a principle for facilitating self-study projects, yet is not easy to achieve. This conclusion, however, should not be read as a defeat or dismissal of the principle but rather as an honest testimony and a refusal to suggest that facilitating self-study is an easy thing to do, even in very positive conditions.

### **Retelling and Reliving the Project: A Narrative Tetralogue**

So far in this chapter, we have tried to provide the necessary context information to situate and understand the accounts of the different self-study projects as well as our analysis of the facilitation process. In the next three chapters, we invite the readers to a "narrative tetralogue," presenting both an account of and a looking back on three different self-studies included in the project. The methodology was inspired by experiences in another international collaborative project (Kelchtermans et al. 2013). Our analytic conversation exemplifies a practice-based approach to the professional development of teacher educators: by analyzing actual teacher education

practices (and not just one's ideals, hopes, or aspirations for practice), we aim to deepen our understanding of why that practice works out the way it does.

Participants in the tetralogue are first of all the teacher educator who performed the self-study in his or her practice and next the facilitators of the overall project. Based on the reports that were published in Dutch (Kelchtermans et al. 2014), we engaged in an analytical conversation looking back on the particular experiences, findings, as well as the development of one's practice as a teacher educator since the moment the project ended.

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