Practice-Focused Research in Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract and Keywords

A review of the field of practice-focused research in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) reveals four broad genres of qualitative research: case studies of teacher education programs and developments; research into student teacher experience and learning; inquiry into teacher educators' own learning, identity, and beliefs; and conceptual or theory-building research. This is an eclectic field that is defined by variation in methodologies rather than by a few clearly identifiable research approaches. What practice-focused research in ITE has in common, though, is a desire on the behalf of teacher educator researchers to understand the complexity of teacher education and contribute to shifts in practice, for the benefit of student teachers and, ultimately, for learners in schools and early childhood education. In this endeavor, teacher educator researchers are presented with a challenge to achieve a balance between goals of local relevance and making a theoretical contribution to the broader field. This is a persistent tension. Notwithstanding the capacity for practice-focused research to achieve a stronger balance and greater relevance beyond the local, key contributions of practice-focused research in ITE include: highlighting the importance of context, questioning what might be understood by "improvement" in teacher education and schooling, and pushing back against research power structures that undervalue practice-focused research.

Drawing on a painting metaphor, each genre represents a collection of sketches of practice-focused research in ITE that together provide the viewer with an overview of the field. However, these genres are not mutually exclusive categories as any particular research study (or sketch) might be placed within one or more groupings; for example, inquiry into teacher educators' own learning often also includes attention to student teachers' experiences and case studies of teacher education initiatives inevitably draw on theory to frame the research and make sense of findings. Also, overviewing the field and identifying relevant research is not as simple as it might first appear, given challenges in identifying research undertaken by teacher educators, differences in the positioning of teacher educators within different educational systems, and privileging of American (US) views of teacher education in published research, which was counteracted in a small way in this review by explicitly including voices located outside this dominant setting. Examples of different types of qualitative research projects illustrate issues in teacher educa-

tion that matter to teacher educator researchers globally and locally and how they have sought to use a variety of methodologies to understand them. The examples also show how teacher educators themselves define what is important in teacher education research, often through small-scale studies of context-specific teacher education problems and practices, and how there is value in “smaller story” research that supports understanding of both universals and particularities along with the grand narratives of teacher education.

Keywords: initial teacher education, preservice teacher education, educational research, educational practices, theory practice relationship, teacher researchers, qualitative research, practice-based research, self-study

Introduction

Teacher educators who work in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) offer unique insight into teacher education through research that is close to practice. They engage in practice-focused research to better understand the experiences of student teachers; their own identities and actions as teacher educators; knowledge and pedagogy in their educational fields; the contexts of their teacher education work; the (un)intended effects of teacher education policies and initiatives; and implications of particular developments on the preparation of new teachers. This research is typically small in scale and grounded in particular contexts. It can be published under a range of different labels, including Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) (Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004), teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), reflective practice (Munby & Russell, 1994), practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009), action research (Altrichter, Posch, & Somekh, 1993), or research that has no particular label ascribed to it but clearly focuses on curriculum, learning, and pedagogy in teacher education. Whatever labels this research is given, there is a close connection between trying to understand and improve local teacher education practice and also aiming to advance the development of the broader knowledge base in teacher education (see among others Cochran-Smith, 2005; Loughran, 2007; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015).

The rise of these related forms of practice-focused teacher educator research is, in part, a response to an intensified focus since the early 1990s on the nature and quality of teacher education and increased political use of teacher education as a lever for change in school and early childhood education sectors. Teacher education has been a matter of concern among policymakers for some time, particularly within a “teacher education as a policy problem” discourse (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2008). The close attention given to teacher education is arguably based on an assumption that the quality of what happens in schools is primarily a result of the quality of teacher education, which is a consequence of a conception of teaching and learning “that ostensibly portrays them as existing in a direct ‘cause and effect’ short term, immediately measurable, linear relationship” (Loughran & Hamilton, 2016A, p. 3). The rise of practice-focused research has also been assisted by disenchantment with the progress made by academic experts who produced knowledge in scientific research settings “on” teacher education, but who

may have had little practice-based understanding of the field, and the assumed “fallacy of objectivism” (Denzin, 1970) in experimental education research designs in the 1970s. Teacher educators have therefore taken to researching teacher education themselves. Much of the resulting practice-focused research is qualitative in nature. Rather than testing the relationship between variables and cause-and-effect, these researchers use their own practices and experiences as the primary site of data collection and understanding. Qualitative research is the dominant paradigm within which these teacher educator researchers have worked since it allows them to “work the dialectic” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004) of scholarship and practice to deepen understanding of the complexity of education, rather than control it.

The double agenda of this research—to expand and enhance teacher educators’ personal knowledge and practice while contributing to a public knowledge base—presents a challenge for teacher educator researchers; that is, achieving a balance or “sweet spot” between goals for personal or local relevance and making a theoretical contribution to the broader field. A claim to the importance of balance between local and public knowledge is not to minimize the value of situated, context-specific research in advancing personal understanding and practice, which are important outcomes in and of themselves. Rather, the argument for balance highlights the potential identified in literature for teacher educator researchers to do more to intentionally and explicitly make connections to theories and research developments in the field and to make a public contribution through the expansion of “chains of inquiry” (Shulman, 2004) because “real improvement,” in the sense of improvement across the field and beyond personal practice, is not likely to occur on the basis of an individual study, unless the study is of such scale that it represents a program of scholarship in itself (Zeichner, 2007).

If one acknowledges the potential of studies undertaken by teacher educator researchers to establish relevance beyond the personal and local, then questions that may arise include: “What are the methodological characteristics of qualitative teacher educator research that contribute to a personal and public knowledge base?” and, closely related, “What should characterize such research from a methodological perspective?” These questions invite consideration of the qualitative research approaches that are adopted by teacher educators in ITE and the methodological practices that constitute them. In this article, we present a sketch of this burgeoning field based on a review of a selected research and highlight key elements of this research landscape.

Using a Painting Metaphor

Applying a painting metaphor to the process and outcome of overviewing the field of practice-focused research by teacher educators working in ITE allows these phenomena to be characterized in familiar terms: “To be effective in promoting understanding of the phenomenon in question, the ‘familiar terms’ must be graphic, visible, and physical in our scale of the world” (Dickmeyer, 1989, p. 151). Use of metaphor helps articulate understanding and clarify meaning amid complexity (Jensen, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and

has a generative quality that allows the creation of new perspectives on the world (Schön, 1983). Even as the power of metaphor is acknowledged, it is important to remember that metaphors are incomplete representations of situations as they foreground and illustrate some properties of a process while but may obfuscate others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Understanding of practice-focused research in ITE might be different if different metaphors are used to explain and frame this phenomenon, and a painting metaphor presents but one way of understanding the field.

Thinking about a review of teacher educator research as a painting helps focus attention on how the field of practice-focused research in teacher education is framed and delineated, on the issues that may be highlighted and drawn to the fore or form part of the background, on different perspectives on how to judge the quality of research on teacher education practices, and on how viewers (who are readers) actively interpret and engage with research as they seek resonances with their own experiences and draw implications for their own practice settings. The picture we present to the readers of this article is an articulation and interpretation of what we have observed in the field of teacher educator research on teacher education practices. We highlight key elements of the methodological markers of this research landscape while not attempting to render in detail the different elements of that landscape. We draw on examples of different types of qualitative research undertaken by teacher educators to illustrate what “enactment” of this research looks like in different contexts, rather than being held up as superior examples of research practice that should be aspired to and emulated (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2009). Extending the painting metaphor, these examples also represent particular sketches or illustrations of practice in teacher education in and of themselves.

Author Positionality and Perspective

Just as the background influences of an artist in the creation of a painting may be more or less evident in an artwork, in sketching the methodological markers of this research field the positionality of the authors may be made more or less plain. In acknowledging positionality, qualitative researchers recognize that they have a position in relation to their subject that stems from aspects of their identities and biographies: “There’s no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all” (Hall, 1990, p. 18). In being explicit about this positionality, qualitative researchers are honest about their role in research and avoid false claims to objectivity and a pretense of neutrality. Open attention to author positionality is one of the markers of rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Berger, 2013). It is therefore important that we, as authors of this article, acknowledge our positionality as we sketch the field of practice-focused research in ITE.

Jane comes to writing about practice-focused research in ITE from her position as a teacher educator and researcher. Her more than 20 years of work and experience in teacher education in New Zealand and researching in relation to curriculum and pedagogy, learner experience (including school students and student teachers), and teacher

education practice have highlighted tensions that exist for teacher educators in researching in the context of their work. In particular, she is conscious of challenges for teacher educators in negotiating performance regimes that demand publications of particular types, including in journals that are valued for their academic status and ranking, but where these demands may be in conflict with teacher educators' personal sense of commitment to teaching and teacher communities and a sense of responsibility to contribute to these communities through research with practical applications (Abbiss, 2016). As a teacher educator with a hybrid identity that crosses educational boundaries (including school and tertiary education) and derives from membership of multiple teacher communities, she is sensitized to tensions experienced by teacher educators as they balance roles as teachers, academics, researchers, and practitioners from school and early childhood sectors and in the field of teacher education.

Eline first turned to practice-focused research about 10 years ago as part of her dissertation on how teacher educators learn and develop in the organizational, institutional, and social contexts of their work. She was inspired by the work of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) community and related forms of practice-focused research that are focused on mapping and conceptualizing what teacher educators know, rather than producing knowledge for teacher educators to use (Vanassche, 2014). As a researcher committed to a broader, more "pedagogical" understanding of teacher education, she could see the potential of this research to take a critical stance toward policies in many countries, including Belgium, that tend to further a "rather narrow and instrumentalist view of teacher education practice and scholarship" (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 14). Despite her enthusiasm for practice-focused research, it soon became clear to her that practice-focused research in general, and S-STEP in particular, were contested approaches. It was often argued that such approaches may be well suited as a means for professional development, but not for fully fledged research, with terms like "practice-focused" or "applied" research often implicitly conveying negative connotations in the academic discourse and community. Over the years, the effort of understanding where such claims come from and finding out whether or not they are correct became part and parcel of her own research agenda in teacher education.

This article has grown out of our shared interest in practice-focused teacher education research. We are inspired by research at the nexus of scholarship and practice, but consider that with this sympathy also comes a need to critically question the work in order to safeguard its agenda. We are uneasy about a U.S.-centric view of teacher education research that has been observed to dominate research in top tier journals (see also Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) and to provide a grand narrative or generalized experience of teacher education based on the views and experiences of a particular group of teacher educators (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016). Both of us work in settings on the margins of the dominant conversation, albeit within English speaking and European contexts. Our focus of review as we "sketch the field" intentionally extends to European and Asia-Pacific research by teacher educators on teacher education practice. We are also concerned about expectations for the quality of research delivered by teacher educator researchers working in nonresearch-intensive settings, and challenges in achieving relevance to the wider

field in what are often small-scale, exploratory, qualitative research undertakings. For us, contributing to a public knowledge base involves making strong theoretical and methodological connections and contributions to the field, developing and expanding on ideas and existing bodies of knowledge in ways that resonate with practitioners and researchers in other contexts and that create relevance beyond a local situation, while recognizing the importance of context and questioning whether or how learning in one context may be at all relevant, appropriate, or even understandable in another.

Challenges in Reviewing the Field

What seems like a relatively simple task—to overview qualitative, practice-focused research in ITE undertaken by teacher educators—is actually quite difficult. Challenges relate particularly to the identification of research that is undertaken by teacher educators, the broad scope of publication of teacher education research, how the field of teacher education research is defined, and the positioning of teacher educators within different educational systems. While teacher educators publish research relating to teacher education practice, they do not necessarily identify themselves as teacher educators within the research. This can sometimes make it difficult to distinguish whether someone is a teacher educator or a researcher with an interest in teaching who wishes to advocate for change in teacher education relating to their point of interest. Also, the lines around who qualifies as teacher educators are blurred because some teacher educators identify themselves as specialist teachers in their subjects rather than as teacher education specialists. In addition, there is considerable variation in ITE provision internationally, and blurring of boundaries has occurred with a recent trend toward school-based teacher education in some countries and variation in the roles and positioning of teacher educators depending on whether they are located in schools, colleges of education, or universities (Kosnik, Beck, & Goodwin, 2016; Murray, 2016). Furthermore, research by teacher educators on teacher education practices is published in a wide range of sources. Although there are specific journals of teacher education, the dissemination of practice-focused research extends beyond these. Teacher educators, as members of different teaching communities, may choose to publish in ways that can have a more direct impact on practice in schools by speaking directly to teacher audiences, such as through education gazettes, websites, or national journals in their own language, although this can present dilemmas for them where they are subject to performance regimes that narrowly define research in relation to writing and publishing outputs in high-ranking academic journals (Abbiss, 2016; Gunn, Berg, Haigh, & Hill, 2016). The broad range of potential publication venues means that it is difficult to access a full range of teacher educator research for review purposes and any review necessarily relates to a limited range of published research.

Associated with the challenge of the wide scope of publication is a dilemma relating to definition of the field of teacher education research. Observations that published work on teacher education tends to privilege and provide a U.S.-centric view of teacher education (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013) raise questions about who gets to define the field of practice-focused research in ITE and how this field is defined by the

research practices it entails. On one level, it is defined by the international, English-language teacher education journals, with their particular blind review criteria and interpretations of the type of research that speaks to an international readership, and in publications that provide overviews of the field. To the extent that these publications are American or Anglo-centric, the field is defined in terms of American and Anglo interest. On another level, teacher education research is defined by teacher educators themselves, in a variety of national contexts, who publish in a range of venues and who disseminate their ideas to different and particular local research and teacher communities in various ways. Teacher educators define what is important in their particular national and local contexts, often through small-scale studies of context-specific teacher education problems and practices. These types of studies may be more or less “acceptable” for publication in particular journals.

In developing a preparatory sketch of the field of practice-focused teacher educator research, we intentionally reviewed articles in four dedicated teacher education journals (i.e., the *Asia-Pacific*, *Australian*, *Dutch*, and *European Journal of Teacher Education*) over two years. We focused on articles that were identified as written by teacher educators and adopted a qualitative research methodology. The sample of reviewed work was expanded from there through a snowball technique in which the reference list of the reviewed pieces led to the discovery and inclusion of other important work, and a careful “mining” of our understanding of the field as researchers who have worked and written in and about this field for a number of years. In doing this, we attempted to redress in a small way the privileging of particular voices. A different picture would be painted, or series of paintings developed, with consideration of the level and nature of practice-focused teacher educator research from a wider range of contexts, published in a wider variety of languages, and where the review frame is extended beyond teacher education journals to other publications where teacher educators may present practice-focused research.

Sketching the Field: Practice-Focused Research in ITE

Teacher educators who research ITE practices draw on a wide range of qualitative methodologies to help answer questions that are of interest to them and the broader community. This research has no single methodology ascribed to it. However, it does sit under the umbrella of “practitioner research,” where this is defined broadly to encompass a range of orientations and approaches that support teachers to engage in research on their practice from within (Feldman, Paugh, & Mills, 2004; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). In their use of different approaches, teacher educators appeal to different methodological warrants for understanding, which provide justifications for findings in light of evidence, and theoretical frameworks that help make sense of teacher education practices. In this, they champion the now widely accepted idea of the importance of research-based teaching and the ideal of the “teacher as researcher” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Elliott & Norris, 2012), applied in the field of teacher education. The theoretical foundations and

the methods used as “tactics” or “expedients” (Feldman et al., 2004) for gathering evidence that support knowledge generation are wide-ranging. The nature and appropriateness of evidence depends on the questions asked and the methodologies selected to address those questions. Broadly speaking, practice-focused teacher education tends to favor four identifiable but intersecting and overlapping genres of qualitative research: case studies of teacher education programs, practices, or initiatives; research into student teacher experience, beliefs, and learning; inquiry into teacher educators’ own learning, identity, and beliefs; and conceptual or theory-building research. We use the word “genre” to refer to an ad-hoc ordering of interrelated and coexisting ways of conducting practice-focused research and the methodological framing of teacher educator research.

Case Studies of Teacher Education Program, Practices, or Initiatives

Case studies, or small-scale, bounded inquiries of phenomena or “cases” in their real-world context (Yin, 2011), are a common approach in ITE research. Studies in this genre concern themselves with the impact (broadly defined) of specific teacher education programs, practices, or initiatives. What is defined as a “case” and the empirical practices that constitute this genre of research thus vary considerably.

A first case level is the immediate context of the pedagogical interactions between teacher educators and their student teachers in a specific course or initiative (e.g., Amir, Mandler, Hauptman, & Gorev, 2017; Hamodi, López-Pastor, & López-Pastor, 2017). The study of Amir et al. (2017), for instance, examines the case of student teachers’ discomfort in formulating a research question for their action research projects as part of a research literacy course in a teacher education program. The authors clearly present the process to the reader, drawing on a variety of sources that include artefacts from students’ work and online forums, and highlight the need to create a safe space and support student teachers in finding the tender spot for their research projects in terms of disciplinary content, rather than general classroom management. In doing so, they stay close to the everyday processes and practices of teacher education, defining their case on the micro level. The work of Johnston (1997) and Fickel, Abbiss, Brown, and Astall (2018) are examples of case studies on the second or program level. The earlier of these examples was written collaboratively by teachers and principals from schools and researchers and doctoral students from the U.S. university involved in a professional development school project. The six-year longitudinal study explored the tensions of cross-institutional collaboration as they arose from their joint efforts to design and implement a master of education program. The latter describes how a masters level ITE program in a New Zealand university was coconstructed with the local Māori community and the distinctive program elements that resulted, and the researchers reflect on how this supports the development of culturally responsive teachers. Both of these examples start from and examine specific program initiatives within their broader sociocultural and policy frameworks. This hints at a final group of case studies taking the impact of the broader social, cultural, political, and institutional context on one’s practice as the case of study. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber (2009), for example, examined the “shifting landscapes on which teachers live and work” (p. 142) and the ways these shifting landscapes impact what can and could happen

in teacher education. The metaphor of landscapes invites attention not only on issues of globalization, immigration, and economic disparities, but also on the complexities of Aboriginal teacher education programs and the necessary focus on language revitalization and cultural teaching. In doing this, these authors tie the macro level into the micro level of everyday practice.

Case study is sometimes claimed as the sole or main methodology in teacher educator research, but our review of the literature shows that many researchers pair it with other research methodologies. Such combinations include, for example, narrative case studies that are based on stories told by participants and the meanings that are constructed through these stories, grounded theory case studies that seek to develop theory from and about the specific case at hand, or action research case studies that clearly focus on the improvement of a particular (aspect of) practice. Researchers may also make implicit rather than explicit use of case study, where research is not labeled as case study even though that research is clearly “bounded” and focused on particular, context-specific practice initiatives that are interesting for their particularity or illustrative potential. By way of illustration, research by a small group of student teachers engaged in a place-based initiative that required them to work in an authentic special education setting to develop a sensory resource for use by students with special learning needs (Best, MacGregor, & Price, 2017) is explicitly presented as a case study; whereas research relating to an initiative to overhaul practicum arrangements within a particular undergraduate primary ITE degree, whereby practicum roles and relationships were reimaged (Grudnoff, Haig, & Mackisack, 2017), may be seen to fit the broad description of a case study although it is not explicitly identified as such.

Case studies are varied in terms of their methodological operationalization, but what is central to this genre of work is attention to “understanding complexity in particular contexts” (Simons, 1996, p. 225). That is, case study research lends itself to a thorough, focused, and deeply contextualized investigation of a particular issue (practice, initiative, program). In describing what is happening in particular cases but also analytically making sense of why something might be happening, researchers enable readers to draw wider conclusions from case studies about where and how implications drawn may inform teacher education more broadly and be applicable beyond immediate contexts. Case study authors invite teacher educators or researchers “to turn to, or rely on, and use the concepts, methods, and inferences of a practice as the basis of their own theorizing, research, or practice” (Mishler, 1990, p. 419).

Case studies are typically small-scale projects because they are manageable for a solo teacher educator researcher or a small group of researchers with limited resources (i.e., time, funding). More important, though, and considering educative rather than pragmatic reasons, they are used by teacher educators to enable them to gain deeper and more nuanced understanding of particular initiatives, inform practice, and raise questions that apply beyond the immediate context. Case studies can be understood as contemporary education history insofar as they document educational developments and any claims made about such developments can be substantiated by recorded and verifiable evidence

(Goodson, 2012). Through case studies, “experience is made public to invite judgement in dialogue, and such judgement rests upon the possibility of an appeal to evidence” (Stenhouse, quoted in Goodson, 2012, p. 107). Case studies that evidence particular teacher education program developments, practices, or initiatives thus contribute to the historical education record. Individual case studies contribute personal teacher educator insights relating to specific teacher educator experiences and teacher education contexts, located in time and place. Collectively, though, they provide a picture of the concerns and interests of teacher educators relating to developments and challenges in teacher education, within and across national boundaries and across time—a collection of sketches drawn together that in combination provide a wider view.

Studies of Student Teacher Experience, Beliefs, and Learning

This cluster of studies foregrounds questions like “What are the experiences and beliefs of student teachers?” and, closely related to that, “How do these experiences and beliefs develop during or as a result of participation in teacher education?” “Experiences and beliefs” is used here as an umbrella term to refer to characteristics such as student teachers’ motivations to teach (e.g., Rots, Kelchtermans, & Aelterman, 2012), dispositions (e.g., the 2007 theme issue on dispositions in teacher education of the *Journal of Teacher Education*), beliefs about teaching (e.g., Löfström & Poom-Valickis, 2013), personal practical theories (e.g., Levin & He, 2008), or professional identities more broadly (e.g., Friesen & Besley, 2013). Researchers working within this genre recognize that most student teachers enter teacher education with prior beliefs about the nature of teaching, learning, knowledge, and social interaction-beliefs that need to be acknowledged and adequately addressed in professional teacher preparation. This genre of research clearly connects to and builds on the long-standing tradition of research on “teacher thinking” (as argued by Clark & Peterson, 1986).

While policymakers may favor larger-scale and quantitative surveys of student teacher experience and learning as a foundation for policy development, teacher educators themselves have turned largely to qualitative, “naturalistic inquiry” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to uncover and help them understand learner (student teacher) thinking and sense-making in its subtlety and complexity. They do this based on research that is often constructed as case studies relating to particular groups of student teachers in the context of specific teacher education programs, which reflects the overlapping nature of research genres relating to practice-focused research in ITE. Naturalistic inquiry, where the researcher is concerned with “uncovering various constructions held by individuals and often shared among members of socially, culturally, familiarly, or professionally similar groups in some social context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 230), involves the analysis of a variety of data sources, alone or in combination. Examples of naturalistic data sources that are produced by student teachers as part of their everyday participation in ITE programs include written assignments, reflective pieces such as written reflections and video diaries, planning documentation and teaching materials, and recordings of small group discussions. In addition, deeper understanding of student teachers’ experiences, beliefs, and learning is obtained through interviews. Interviews support a phenomenological focus on student

teachers' lived experiences in real-world settings and understanding of how those experiences develop (Holstein & Gahm, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Yin, 2011), expressed in their own words and accounts of their experiences in ITE.

An example of teacher educator research that draws on naturalistic methods is found in an inquiry by Tangen et al. (2017), where the researchers draw on student teachers' reflective video diaries, written assignments, Facebook posts, and focus group interviews as data sources, to help understand the challenges faced by student teachers and their identity negotiations as they participate in cross-cultural teaching experiences. On a similar topic relating to how student teachers learn to be culturally responsive through overseas teacher education study trips, another and explicitly labeled example of naturalistic research is found in the work of Santoro and Major (2012), which reports findings from semistructured interviews that were analyzed for recurring patterns of experience. These examples have in common a focus on student teacher learning in context, which provides touchstones from which to draw broader implications relating to the efficacy of teacher education practices (in these cases related to cross-cultural experiences) and the kinds of practices that support student teachers to confront assumptions about learners, communities, and cultures that are different from their own.

Inquiry Into Own Learning, Identity, and Beliefs

Broadly speaking, teacher educator research relating to teacher educators' own learning, identities, and beliefs focuses on the question "How can we understand and improve the role of teacher educators in 'enacting' the pedagogies and practices of teacher education?" Inquiry by teacher educators into their own learning, identity, and beliefs is a form of "intimate scholarship" (Hamilton, Pinnegar, & Davey, 2016) where the distinction between the researcher and the researched is removed. The focus is on understanding what teacher educators know, the beliefs they hold about their work, and how these understandings of their work may be conceptualized (Vanassche, 2014). This genre of research starts from a position that knowledge is expressed in, and results from, teacher educators' own practices and experiences. In being open to challenging their own assumptions and beliefs, teacher educators working within this genre attempt to uncover and make explicit "the why" underpinning "the what" and "the how" of their practice (incorporating aspects of their professional biographies as an academic, researcher, former teacher, but also aspects of their immediate and extended working context). They seek to understand how what they learn influences their pedagogical responses and to make changes to improve their practice, for their own professional growth and for the benefit of their learners (who are student teachers) and ultimately for children and young people in school and early childhood education.

This research genre encompasses a variety of methodologies that include and blend forms of action research, autobiography, reflective inquiry, autoethnography and S-STEP research. From this list, S-STEP research is the newest (sub)genre, having achieved status as a distinct movement through the establishment of a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association in 1993 (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015).

What distinguishes S-STEP from related forms of practitioner-focused research relates less to the specific research methods used and more to its methodology, particularly to the “focus on the self in a way that has opened our eyes to the importance of identifying and changing our ways of being humans who are teacher educators if we are to make significant changes in the ways that teachers are prepared” (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 974). In S-STEP, reflecting on and learning about the self as teacher educators is not incidental to, or an unanticipated outcome of, research on student teacher learning. It is an integral part of the research process where teacher educators problematize their own roles (as teacher educators and researchers), consider their own beliefs and assumptions, examine the impacts of their actions, and reconstruct their understandings through a systematic and purposeful examination of their own teacher education practices. It is “the study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the ‘not self’ . . . Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered” (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 236). It is an interest in “locating who we are in what we do” (Starr, 2010, p. 1). Implicit in the claim “who we are in what we do” is the acknowledgment that teacher educators’ identities and beliefs about the nature and purposes of their work inform their practices and vice versa, that their practices (re)shape their professional identities and beliefs as teacher educators.

Researchers working and writing in this research genre have delivered convincing evidence that studies that are deeply personal both in their point of departure and object of analysis can achieve high-quality research with a relevance that extends well beyond the local context in which the research was carried out. In so doing, these studies implicitly reject the dualism that presents knowledge and research as either contributing to practical improvement or general theoretical understanding. Berry (2007), for example, articulated her own knowledge as an Australian biology teacher educator in a series of tensions: telling and growth, confidence and uncertainty, planning and being responsive, safety and challenge, action and intent, and valuing and reconstructing experience. These tensions actively contain contradiction and ambiguity in her everyday (experiences of) practice, but by connecting them to the broader research literature they also become generative in helping others to guide and inform their practice and inviting the consideration of new ways of responding to practice. The focus on the complexity of practice also marks the study from Nilsson (2010), who served as the facilitator of a group of engineering teachers in a Swedish master’s program in machine engineering where these teachers turned to self-study research as a way of developing their scholarship of teaching. Being a critical friend to these engineers and studying her experiences of her attempts to support the learning of others in the field provided a mirror on the ideas and beliefs she held about herself as a teacher educator, thereby highlighting “how making teaching visible through the use of self-study offers new ways to capture the complexity of practice” (p. 187). Another relevant example is the work of Williams and Ritter (2010), who explored their experiences of constructing new professional identities as former classroom teachers moving into teacher education using a self-study methodology. Using Lave and Wenger’s work on communities of practice as their analytical framework, these authors discuss “the tensions and dilemmas inherent in being ‘expert’ teachers and

‘novice’ teacher educators” (Williams & Ritter, 2010, p. 77). These are three examples of teacher educators abstracting from specific situations concepts and principles that apply to teaching more generally. While “staying true” to the problematic, messy, and dynamic nature of practice, as evidenced in the use of tension and dilemmas to represent teacher educator knowledge, researchers in this genre remind readers about important issues that influence the teaching and learning landscape, and capture and communicate something of interest to the broader education community.

We reiterate the claim of Vanasche and Kelchtermans (2015) that “self-study has the best possible way of having an impact on the field of teacher education practice and scholarship because it potentially involves change in the self and that is where change is least likely, but most apt to occur” (p. 520), which is a position they share with Clandinin and Connelly (2004). However, there is also an obligation on the researcher to show how the issues confronted by the self have a broader bearing: “Otherwise, there is no possibility of answering the ‘so what’ question, the question of significance, that wise readers ask and require be answered” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 25).

Conceptual or Theory-Building Research

Conceptual or theory-building research engages with the broad question “How can we better understand the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the work of educating teachers and the experiences of the different people (student teachers, teacher educators) involved?” Most qualitative teacher educator research on teacher education practices draws on theory in some way, including theories relating to how student teachers learn (e.g., social-constructivist theories of learning and semiotics) and the structural and policy contexts of teacher education (e.g., assemblage theory and cultural-historical activity theory); theories that underpin research methodologies and make some research approaches more appropriate than others to answer particular types of questions (e.g., feminism, postcolonial theory, grounded theory, and phenomenology); and concepts that help teacher educator researchers explain and make sense of what they observe and experience as teacher educators and in the course of their empirical research (e.g., concepts such as “third space,” “boundary crossing,” and “inquiry-as-stance”). An example of empirical work with a marked theoretical element is provided by Davey (2013), a teacher educator who theorizes the idea of teacher educator “professional identity” based on interviews with a group of New Zealand teacher educators relating to their ITE experiences and practices. She takes the idea of the valued professional self as a starting point and develops a conceptual model that highlights the professional discomfort associated with working across the spaces between professional groups and affinities. As argued by Zeicher (2005), “Framing research in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks is necessary for researchers to be able to explain their findings” (p. 741). Extending the metaphor of the painting in relation to practice-focused teacher educator research, theoretical frameworks and concepts help people “read” particular situations by offering interpretative tools that help them to make sense of the details in relation to the whole or bigger “picture.” Through theory, both researchers and the readers of research are able to see things that would otherwise remain invisible or escape their attention. In practitioner re-

search, though, the boundaries between research and practice are blurred, and practice itself can be understood as “a critical and theory building process” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 18).

Some teacher educator research is constructed in ways that intentionally and explicitly foreground or render in more detail the theoretical contributions of the research in the ITE picture and build arguments from theory, concepts, and models that help frame thinking and action. This research contributes to the development of new or expanded thinking on issues of teacher education practice. Not all research relating to teacher education practice and undertaken by teacher educators is thus necessarily empirical. Consider, for example, the work of Ben-Peretz and Flores (2018), who examine the tension or paradox “of implementing external policy versus using professional autonomy” (p. 203) and its implications for teacher education programs by a close analysis of the terms used in the international research that govern teachers’ work, such as accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, and teacher agency and professionalism. Theoretical research may include but goes beyond identifying issues and practical responses; as a matter of balance, the emphasis is on the theoretical contributions of the research. Like conceptual art, the ideas take precedence, and the reader’s response or experience is necessarily an interpretative act.

A broader sketch of practice-focused research in ITE therefore needs to include essays, commentaries, and analytical reviews that engage theoretically with practice challenges and policy contexts of teacher education. This theoretical research helps to make sense of perceived practice problems and tensions in teacher education. It includes research gathered in collections of articles with the purpose of reviewing and highlighting opportunities for advancing research in the field and offering new or different ways of understanding and thinking about teacher education practices (see, for example, Clandinin & Husu, 2017; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Loughran & Hamilton, 2016B). There are also seminal or key texts on teacher education and practitioner research that challenge and advance particular ways of thinking about the roles of teacher educators, teacher education practices, and research on these topics. One example is the work of Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006), who propose an initial framework of seven fundamental principles to guide the development of teacher education programs that are responsive to student teachers’ needs and expectations and make a positive difference. The “findings” (i.e., framework) are drawn from an explorative analysis of effective features of programs in which these authors work (i.e., the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada) and include descriptions of what these principles look like in teacher education practice; yet, at heart, their intention is to advance a particular conceptual model for what teacher education is, can be, and should be. Another example is the work of Cochran-Smith (2003), who suggests that

the education of teacher educators in different contexts and at different entry points over the course of the professional career is substantially enriched when inquiry is regarded as a stance on the overall enterprise of teacher education and when teacher educators inquire collaboratively about assumptions and values,

professional knowledge and practice, the contexts of schools as well as higher education, and their own as well as their students' learning. (p. 7)

Inquiry-as-stance refers to a particular way of looking at, and being present in, teacher education practice and contexts.

Recent examples of critical assessments of reform agendas and the “policy gaze” to which teacher education has been subjected (including Kosnik et al., 2016; McMahon, Forde, & Dickson, 2015) and that question the presentation of teacher education as a problem that needs to be fixed (for example, Mayer & Reid, 2016), can also be counted among the illustrative examples of conceptual or theory-building research. Examination of reform trends, the nature of reform in different national contexts, tensions between teacher educators' visions for teacher education, political agendas and public expectation, and the coexistence of multiple and potentially contradictory discourses (including social justice, future-focused, economic efficiency, teacher improvement, and accountability discourses) serve to deepen understanding of the structural and political landscape of teacher education. It also helps clarify how teacher educators' visions for teacher education are enacted in practice and provide a foundation for teacher educators to try and influence policymakers and politicians in relation to reforms of teacher education.

Standing Back and Viewing the Picture

Each of the four genres described represents a way of framing practice-focused teacher educator research. The short reviews of each of these genres are necessarily broad brushed and may efface some important differences between the work grouped together and similarities across the genres. They also represent just one way of categorizing this work; there are other possible ways of sketching the field. It is also important to appreciate that these genres of research are not mutually exclusive categories. It is likely, for example, that inquiry into one's own learning as a teacher educator also includes attention to learners' experience; and case studies of teacher education program developments do not occur separate from conceptual or theoretical work. These broad genre groupings, although briefly sketched and necessarily reductionist, serve to give readers who may be new to this field an overview of the broad scope of this work and highlight some of its main characteristics.

In standing back to view the picture, we ask what practice-focused ITE does and briefly consider future possibilities for this work; that is, what it can do. At different times, others have reviewed and suggested questions and perspectives for future research (including British Educational Research Association, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2014; Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996; Hamilton & Loughran, 2016; Zeichner, 2005) and considered how to move practice-focused research forward in relation to methodological matters (including LaBoskey, 2004; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015; Zeichner, 2005, 2007). We draw on arguments relating to the purpose of practitioner and teacher educator research to consider how teacher educators researching teacher education practice might continue to contribute to ITE practice and scholarship. In doing

this, we posit a dual role for teacher educator researchers in simultaneously developing local practice and contributing to the broader knowledge base of ITE. This view is consistent with that of Hamilton and Loughran (2016), who argue for a need to think globally and nationally and for the value of smaller stories alongside grand narratives as ways of recognizing international perspectives and the rich and disparate contexts of teacher education research.

What Practice-Focused Research Does and Can Do Better

As the complexity of the work of teaching is often underestimated (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & Le Cornu, 2015; Loughran, 2006), so is the work of teaching about teaching. The broad purpose of practice-focused research in ITE is to shed light on the complexity of learning and teaching about teaching and open up productive and generative ways of dealing with this complexity. Qualitative research on teacher education practices contributes to a public knowledge base for teacher education and the accumulation of evidence across studies adds weight to arguments that may be used to influence policy and practice beyond local ITE programs and contexts. This research effects change in practice, ranging from small changes made by individual teacher educators in their teaching to wider transformations within programs and systems of teacher education (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016). In doing so, it contributes to a broad understanding of “improvement” in teaching and teacher education (or what makes for “better” teacher education) by (re)opening the public debate on the question of what is considered good (or better) teaching, but it also challenges the dominant and accepted forms of research scholarship.

In questioning what makes good teaching, teacher educator research also serves a moral purpose and emancipatory function, uncovering structures that oppress and limit the freedom of students, teachers, or teacher educators (Feldman et al., 2004), and at the same time supporting them to challenge structures of schooling that perpetuate inequalities and promote schooling for a more democratic society and social well-being of children and adolescents (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, 2009). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue, this research is a critical means for knowledge-generation and professional development; “critical” meaning that it has the potential to challenge the status quo in schools and schooling. Teacher educators adopting a teacher-as-researcher stance means that they themselves take control of research agendas through their engagement in research relating to problems or questions that they think are important to address, hence uncovering and pushing back against power structures and dynamics in the educational research community that value (and devalue) particular types of scholarship and practice.

In producing “small stories” on particular ITE programs and arrangements, teacher educators’ practice-focused research illuminates the importance of contextual factors and the local variability of teacher education practice. Locally grounded research counters a tendency for teacher education to be painted in terms of “grand narratives” or unquestioned assumptions about the universality of developments, practice responses and teacher educator experiences, and the idea that what works well in one context will also hold in an-

other. However, while teacher education is context-bound, it is also an international concern, albeit “an international concern with complexities across countries and continents” (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016, p. 511). There is policy-borrowing across international boundaries, educational systems are measured by international metrics (including the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]), and many teacher educators would recognize shared concerns and problems in researching teacher educator colleagues in other countries. So, while practice-focused research in teacher education generally, and ITE more specifically, is valuable for its usefulness in the context within which it is generated, it is also important for the contribution it can make to a wider public knowledge base. This is not to buy into narratives that skim over the importance of national and local contexts, but to construct findings that are clearly grounded in local, everyday practice and have relevance beyond that local practice.

The “glocal” potential of this research also points at what is widely recognized as a big challenge for teachers educator research, or what this research could do better (e.g., LaBoskey, 2004; Zeichner, 2007), which is constructing understandings that have relevance beyond the local. Unless researchers make connections across research lines and purposefully build on each other’s work conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically, the findings in individual studies will have little effect in influencing those who are in charge of policies that directly affect teacher education and, equally important, practitioners and administrators in the wider teacher education community who are in charge of the everyday practice of educating teachers. Making connections across the field also helps ameliorate the tendency observed for small-scale and localized practice-focused research to present teaching practices as new that have actually been established and commonly practiced for some time and aids the expansion of knowledge in the field, rather than just repeating what is already known (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016). The aims of achieving local relevance and making wider, theoretical contributions to the field sit together but may be experienced by teacher educators as oppositional, depending on where teacher educators themselves see their strongest affiliation in relation to practice and scholarly communities.

Although this argument for stronger connections with existing research is widely acknowledged in theory, it is often negated in research practice (for an extensive overview of this critique, see Zeichner, 2007, and Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). This is not to say that individual studies do not make such connections, but that there is scope for stronger, more connected and theoretically located research. As Zeichner (2007) argues, much of the empirical research in the field consists of small-scale, often single-site studies that are difficult to connect to each other. Without connecting empirical research on student teacher learning and development with, for example, theoretical frameworks on organizational learning and workplace conditions, it will likely remain difficult to move beyond a descriptive-reflective level toward unpacking and conceptualizing the broader relationships between what is offered to student teachers in teacher education programs and the learning and education of children and young people.

A related challenge for practitioner research in teacher education is the need for work that challenges homogenizing narratives. Although some research recognizes international differences, much “assumes that there is, or can be, a universal approach to teacher education” (Hamilton & Loughran, 2016, p. 505). This results in grand claims about, for example, the effectiveness of particular strategies or program structures that ignore local differences. It is important to elicit and attend to the particularities of context in order to better understand the role and significance of variations in context in achieving shared understanding of teacher education challenges and possibilities for practice. In examining what might be learned by contrasting a global view of teacher education and a focus on the local and particular, Hamilton and Loughran (2016) argue for a scholarship of practice that involves an understanding of potential universals and particularities; where “contextual differences provide the research community with ways to see nuances as well as stark differences and imagine how programs and practices might be organized differently” (p. 511). Such research could provide a counterpoint to grand narratives or, put differently, show the value of telling and retelling smaller stories alongside these narratives. A tentative example of what such research could look like is a recent study of Darling-Hammond (2017), who identified and examined practices of teacher recruitment, education in ITE induction, and ongoing professional development in Australia, Canada, Finland, and Singapore, and compared these practices with established practices in the United States. She concluded that “while there are many different roads to the same ends, they should ultimately be judged by the extent to which they demonstrate potential to build powerful and equitable learning systems for students and teachers alike” (p. 307).

A Final Glance

In thinking about and sketching the field of what characterizes qualitative, practice-focused research in ITE, it quickly became clear that this research is defined by the variety of methodologies that are used rather than a single or small number of research approaches. An eclectic field of research is revealed that foregrounds practice concerns through different research genres, or ways of framing ITE research. Practice-focused teacher educator research reflects broad theoretical influences and ranges from research that focuses on particular personal, practical, and local concerns to research that engages theoretically with ideas about teacher education as a broad field of practice. ITE is a field of immigrants, with teacher educators coming to research teacher education practices from a variety of backgrounds and positions within teacher communities. Practice-focused, qualitative research undertaken by teacher educators provides a collection of sketches of ITE practice. Particular sketches in the collection may draw different viewers’ attention because of shared interest and because something resonates with their experiences, but when the sketches are seen together viewers also get an understanding of the broader, complex, and nuanced picture of ITE practice; a picture with shading, color, and depth.

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Practice-Focused Research in Initial Teacher Education

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Practice-Focused Research in Initial Teacher Education

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