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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Theoretical and Methodological Tensions in a Poststructural, Collaborative Self-Study Research Project

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This article examines the potential contradictions of conducting a collaborative self-study research project within a poststructural framework. It is a discussion about the use of theory in self-study research, rather than a report of research findings. The discussion is shaped through (re)consideration of a collaborative self-study doctoral research project. To consider the tensions between poststructural theory and self-study methodology, I first outline key aspects of humanism and link these to the underpinnings of self-study. Next, I discuss potential connections between poststructural theory and self-study research. I then provide a poststructural analysis of the use of experience in the self-study data to demonstrate ways in which theory can support us to (re)view taken for granted concepts in education. Finally, I propose that self-study researchers may find poststructural theory useful as a means to think differently about our current practices and to consider the potential effects of proposed practices.

Keywords: self-study methodology; poststructural theory; discourse; humanism

Unlike a traditional report of research, this article offers a theoretical exploration of potential contradictions that may arise when conducting a collaborative self-study research project within a poststructural theoretical framework. The article draws on the theoretical and methodological lessons learned from a collaborative doctoral research self-study in which I worked with groups of teacher educators from two New Zealand universities to analyse their understandings of social justice and the implications of those understandings for their professional practices. (For a full description of the research design and findings, see Sandretto, 2004). Participants were provided with multiple opportunities to discuss their conceptualizations of social justice and to theorize their professional practices in relation to social justice. They reported that they saw their participation in the research project as an opportunity to keep social justice 'on the agenda' in their own thoughts and work.

A collaborative self-study methodology for doctoral research presented unique challenges. On the one hand, I had to make explicit to my examiners the ways in which the majority of the work in the thesis was my own in order to demonstrate my ability as an emerging researcher, a requirement for doctoral thesis research. On the other hand, I wished to apprentice myself into collaborative research methodologies, a theme that continues in my research program today (Sandretto & Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006). This article explores the productive space between the collaborative and the

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individual, 'between both honoring the "voices" of research participants and the demand for interpretive work on the part of the inquirer' (Lather, 2006, p. 50).

This article examines the potential contradictions of attending to issues raised by poststructuralists while working within a collaborative self-study framework. In particular, I consider how humanist discourses, which are pervasive in teaching and teacher education, are challenged by poststructural theory. In the following sections I link humanism to the underpinnings of self-study. Then I discuss potential connections between poststructural theory and self-study research. I continue with a poststructural analysis of the use of *experience* in the self-study data from the doctoral thesis to demonstrate ways in which theory can help us to (re)view taken for granted concepts in education. Finally, I propose that self-study researchers may find poststructural theory useful as a way to think differently about our current practices and to consider the potential effects of our practices.

Teacher Education and Self-Study: Working within humanist discourses

Discourse is a key concept of poststructural thought. It encompasses the notion of language or text, but it is more than that (Foucault, 1972). Scott (1988, p. 35) describes discourse as 'a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs'. In education we have fields of discourse pertaining to teachers, students, teaching, curriculum, assessment, classroom management and so on. Discursive practices, such as teacher education practices, authorize what is possible or knowable: 'Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when and with what authority' (Ball, 1990, p. 2). Thus discourses of teaching and teachers shape the kinds of teachers we want to be and the kinds of teachers we can be.

Humanism is a broad way of thinking that places humans at the center of meaning making. As Flax (1990) describes, there are some common elements in humanist themes: identity is conceptualized as stable and coherent; language is viewed as transparent and reflecting the objects it is describing; and rational scientific inquiry can produce valid, objective and reliable knowledge. While humanism can be thought of as a way of thinking about ourselves and the world that has that has become taken for granted by some educators (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000), I do not wish to invoke images of a coherent, unified discourse. Foucault (1984) describes humanism as 'a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time, in European societies; these themes, always tied to value judgments, have obviously varied greatly in their content, as well as in the values they have preserved' (p. 44). He elaborates the humanist underpinnings of Christianity, Marxism, Socialism and other seemingly different movements. These multiple themes of humanism indicate their diversity and pervasiveness, thus making it difficult to reject humanism wholesale: 'the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection' (Foucault, 1984, p. 44). In many ways humanism, and the various discourses that draw upon themes of humanism, is our default setting or default discourse(s).

Spivak (1993) uses the metaphor of 'mother tongue' to describe the relationships of subjects to language:

> A mother tongue is a language with a history – in that sense it is 'instituted' – before our birth and after our death ... We learn it in a 'natural' way and fill it once and for all with our own 'intentions' and thus make it 'our own' for the span of our life and then leave it without intent. (p. 69)

In this sense, humanism functions as our mother tongue. As such, we often regard our mother tongue as the norm to which all other is compared. As a standard then, it is not examined. St Pierre (2000) also describes the ways in which humanism has become taken for granted and normalized: 'Humanism is the air we breathe, the language we speak, the shape of the homes we live in, the relations we are able to have with others, the politics we practice' (p. 478). Thus it is unlikely that we will ever be post-humanists. Following the advice from Foucault (1984) regarding the pervasiveness of the 'humanist thematic' (p. 44), it might be futile to strive to do so.

A significant array of research conducted in and on teacher education has drawn upon humanist discourses, not surprising given their persistent nature. Four discrete strands are discernible: research on the learning characteristics of individual students; research *on* the actions of teachers; research *with* teachers examining teacher thinking; and, research *by* teachers (Clarke, 2001). The self-study of teacher education practices is an example of research *by* teachers.

The members of the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) special interest group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), formed in 1993, have been instrumental in promoting research *by* teacher educators *for* teacher educators (Clarke, 2001). They call upon educators to study and theorize their own professional practice as a means to improve education, although Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy and Stackman (2003) highlight the potential for self-study to be applied to academic disciplines outside of education. Self-study research projects seek to uncover and make explicit the practices of teacher education that often take place behind closed doors (Hamilton, 1998).

Self-study research, like all research methodologies, is grounded in a series of assumptions. The assumptions of self-study research are primarily located within a humanist framework. This is because self-study, in general, is based on the assumption that there is a 'self' that the researcher can gain access to through reflection on information gathered about one's professional practices as a teacher educator. This humanist self is deemed to be able to engage in 'a form of reason capable of privileged insight into its own processes' (Flax, 1990, p. 41). Self-study research places 'the self at the center of self-reflective inquiry' (Brown, 2004, p. 277). It 'is the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the "not self"' (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 236). Researchers engaging in self-study research 'privilege self in the research design, recognizing that addressing the self can contribute to our understanding of teaching and teacher education' (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008, p. 17). This view that 'when we speak of the authentic self, we mean the whole self' (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 829) implies a core, constant self that can be uncovered and studied during the research process.

Previous self-studies have considered true selves (Allender & Allender, 1996), false selves (Richards, 1996), and hidden selves (Williams, 1996). Feldman, Paugh and Mills (2004) explain that the self can be studied through research on the self, on one's self in practice, or on how we understand ourselves in practice. This 'self-directed' research (Feldman et al., 2004, p. 949) rarely unpacks how the self is conceptualized. This suggests the default discourse of the 'conscious, stable, unified, rational, coherent, knowing, autonomous, and ahistoric individual' (St Pierre, 2000, p. 500) of humanism.

Self-study research often refers to the term *voice* to describe this notion of a clear, coherent speaking self (LaBoskey, 2004). The desire for voice reflects the work of feminist researchers and critical theorists concerned with ensuring that all voices can be heard (Pilcher, 2001; Trueba, 1989). Following the call to represent the voices of women and other minorities in research, self-study researchers call upon teachers and teacher

educators to voice their experiences. Teachers and teacher educators have described ways in which research *on* teachers failed to be of use to them because it failed to capture the real story behind the complexity of teaching. Thus it is argued that 'self-study work eliminates the problem of academic colonization because teachers and teacher educators represent their own voices in the research' (Elijah, 2004, p. 256).

The need to ' "practice what we preach" or "walk our talk"' (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 839) is a logical outcome of linking one's professional practice to an authentic self, the implication being that there are stable beliefs and values emanating from a core self that drive professional practices. Indeed, a number of self-study projects are concerned with the 'living contradiction' (Whitehead, 2000, p. 97), a contradiction between one's true self and one's practice(s) as a teacher educator that may or may not align with the self. The implications are that once the contradictions are exposed, the teacher educator can then modify personal practice to be congruent with one's authentic self.

The humanist conceptions of self, voice and authenticity employed by these self-study researchers have been critiqued by poststructural theorists. Poststructural theorists have called attention to ways in which the self we have come to know through humanist discourses is a social construction (Davies, 2000). As a social construction, we can consider its origins and its effects. How might a poststructural critique support self-study researchers to, in Loughran's (2007, p. 18) terms, 'better understand the complex nature of teaching and learning about teaching'?

Poststructural Theory and Self-Study Research: Possibilities?

Poststructural theory is an analytic tool that has been used to draw attention to the constructed nature of humanist discourses and the ways in which they have become taken for granted. Some researchers have described poststructural theory as 'anti-humanist' (Jones, 1997), positioning it in binary opposition to humanism (Davies, 1997; St Pierre, 2000). I will not, however, shift into a discussion where I privilege poststructural theory over humanist theory. I realize that 'poststructuralism cannot escape humanism since … it must always be implicated in the problem it addresses' (St Pierre, 2000, p. 479). Nonetheless, I try to move forward with the language that I have available because 'any act must assume unified terms to get started' (Spivak, 1993, p. 130).

Self-study research seeks to problematise the professional practice of teacher educators through reframing, or 'making the familiar strange' (Hamilton, 1998). Comparisons can be made between the projects of traditional ethnography and self-study that draw attention to the ways in which they both utilize humanist discourses. Britzman (1995), and more recently Vaughan, problematize the 'methodological tension' (2004, p. 389) involved in conducting poststructural ethnography. In raising the methodological question: 'Can there be an educational ethnography that exceeds the constraints of humanism?' (p. 229), Britzman (1995) draws attention to the ways in which traditional ethnography focuses on the role of voice and experience in ways that do not examine the discursive construction of those categories. In making a connection between the current research project, Britzman's (1995, p. 229) question about ethnography could be rewritten as 'Can there be a [self-study] that exceeds the constraints of humanism?'

In answer to Britzman's revised question, I propose that we do not seek to exceed the constraints of humanism and indeed, we may never exceed them. It has been argued that 'any attempts to combine a basically humanist position with a post-structuralist one appear theoretically dubious and difficult to substantiate' (Francis, 1999, p. 391). We might then ask if it is possible for teacher education to take advantage of the critical tools offered by

poststructural theory if any attempt to combine the two is 'theoretically dubious'. I believe that, by working in teacher education, I am necessarily working within humanist discourses and *must acknowledge those even as I seek to trouble them.* We can use poststructural theory as an analytical tool to expose the discourses that constitute self-study research, teachers, students and teaching and the effects of those discourses.

Certain discourses, however, are viewed as legitimate for certain fields. When a subject invokes a discourse that is not recognized in a particular field, s/he may not be heard (McWilliam, 1994). Teacher educators who are not able to draw upon the dominant discourses of teacher education may risk not being heard. Therefore, in such a context 'one might also be able to begin to employ more suspicious discourses that exceed practices of normalization' (Britzman, 1995, p. 235). In other words, self-study researchers who make use of poststructural analytical tools may be able to make use of different discourses of teaching and teacher education that could enable them to shift their practices.

It is important to note that although proponents of poststructural theory stress its potential for social change (Davies, 1994, 2000; Jones, 1993), others critique this potential (Francis, 1999). Varadharajan (1995), for instance, critiques the usefulness of poststructuralism in facilitating social change:

> If the discourses of postmodernism and poststructuralism have been responsible for decentering the patriarchal and imperialist subject by demonstrating that the unity and self-sufficiency of this subject is possible only at the expense of the racial, ethnic and feminine object, *why has this perception not produced the emancipation and self-acceptance of the object*? (p. xi, italics added)

Marxist critiques of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Cole, 2003) claim that these theoretical tools fail to provide 'answers' and thus cannot provide 'practical implications for social or educational transformation' (Cole, 2003, p. 496). Thus poststructural researchers have been accused of focusing on language to such an extent that they are susceptible to 'paralysing ambivalence' (Jones, 1993, p. 158), or failure to provide concrete strategies for social action. Indeed, these critics might argue that the use of poststructural tools in self-study research might preclude the improvement of teaching practices.

Such critiques highlight the theoretical and methodological tensions that seem likely to become evident in a collaborative self-study using a poststructural theoretical framework. As Lather (1991b) highlights, a central tension lies in 'how to maximize self as mediator between people's self-understandings and the need for ideology critique and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*' (p. 64). For my research, a tension lay in my desire to bring a critical eye to the research *at the same time* that I sought to maintain relationships with my colleagues.

I also wish to call attention to the irony involved in considering collaborative, poststructural self-study research, irony in the sense of an incongruity between an anticipated and an actual outcome. By drawing attention to theoretical and methodological tensions, the reader may be anticipating strategies to ease those tensions. Instead, I suggest that we do not seek to dissipate those tensions, but rather maintain an awareness of them: 'Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true' (Haraway, 1991, p. 149). I am proposing that teacher educators might continue to work within the humanist discourses of education *and at the same time* commit themselves to trouble them by making use of various theoretical tools to (re)view them. Spivak (1993) describes 'moves' that we can make that acknowledge we must start from the humanist discourses we have available to us, or 'making do' (p. 131), while at the same time critically analyzing those discourses and 'looking forward' (p. 131).

(Re)Visiting Experience

Deconstruction is a frequently used technique of poststructural researchers and theorists to expose and undermine binary oppositions as a means to question our taken-for-granted use of language. A binary is a pair of either-or terms in which one term holds privileged status over the other (Davies, 1994; St Pierre, 2000). The tool of deconstruction is often attributed to the work of Derrida, who according to Spivak (1990), proposes that 'deconstruction is not exposure of error, it is a vigilance about the fact that we are always obliged to produce truth' (p. 46). In this sense, Derrida is acknowledging the humanist constraints we live in where some might anticipate that the application of deconstruction would produce a 'new truth.' Spivak (1990) emphasizes this understanding of the limits of deconstruction when she explains: 'Deconstruction can only speak in the language of the thing it criticises' (p. 135). Yet again, we are limited by our mother tongue (Spivak, 1993).

Spivak (1987, p. 5, as cited in Spivak, 1993) explains that 'the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him [sic], persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility'. In the case of self-study research, the investigating subject is the teacher educator using poststructural tools to examine his/her own professional practices. In this section I examine the notion of *experience* in teacher education as discussed in my own doctoral research.

The role of experience featured significantly in that research. The word *experience* was frequently used by the participants as we worked together. A search of the NUD*IST database that was used to support the data analysis found 243 uses of the word *experience* in 31 of the 52 documents generated by the participants' interviews and discussions. This reliance on experience as the basis of knowledge is a hallmark of narrative research and self-study research (Lunenberg & Willemse, 2006). Self-study research draws upon a foundational *authority of experience* in teaching and teacher education (Munby & Russell, 1994). Self- study research presents a means for teacher educators 'to learn from personal experience' (Mueller, 2003, p. 82). In self-study research, lived experience becomes a privileged source of knowledge: 'the knowledge is in the experience' (Hutchinson, 1998, p. 137). For example, Berry (2007) examines the tension of 'valuing and reconstructing experience' as a means to (re)consider her practices as a teacher educator.

Yet from a poststructuralist framework, a limitation of narrative and self-study inquiry is the assumption that the stories represent a *real* account of someone's experience. Scott (1992) questions an uncritical privileging of experience and its humanist underpinnings. For Scott, merely reporting experience does not encourage questions into the constructed nature of experience. Narrative inquiry and self-study research foreground experience and the importance of reflection on experience. Teacher educators often use case studies (Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Maher & Ward, 2002) and written narrative (Florio-Ruane, 2001; Ware, 2001) as well as spoken narrative in the form of dialogue (Burbules, 1993; Fine, 1993) as a means for students to not only reflect on their own experiences, but to gain access to the experience of the Other without calling upon the Other directly to provide snapshots of their experiences for consumption.

Typically, all of these uses of *experience* are taken at face value, as a more or less accurate representation of what *really* happened. What many in teacher education, including myself and the participants in the research described here, seldom do is to problematise the construct of experience itself. Scott (1992) explains: 'Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside' (p. 25). What would it mean to re-examine a transcript excerpt and

to consider that: 'It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott, 1992, pp. 25–26)? In this section I consider 'experience... [as] a linguistic event' (Scott, 1992, p. 34). As an example, I re-examine an excerpt from a face-to-face meeting of the North Island group in which we are discussing a particular assignment that the preservice teachers had completed:

> Pamela [after long discussion and careful consideration, the doctoral research participants elected to be named in the thesis and any subsequent publications]: It's so valuable to have our students having those experiences where they confront their own... sort of ethnocentricity really. They see that there are other ways of seeing. I think that with all the, the value of intellectual, academic work. If they don't have that kind of experience, nothing changes. They just write essays, they can write essays very well. They can critically discuss, so they can begin to look at an intellectual level. But unless they have those experiences... I don't know... how it's possible to bring that kind of component through for all of our students. I hope there is a way that we can do that.
>
> Barbara: Well there should be... So it should be possible. I mean logistically, it would be, it's a big job [to have each student interview someone who is different from themselves in order to examine their own cultural positions].
>
> Catherine: They won't all have the same experience, but they will have a whole range of different experiences.

Barbara explained: 'I felt the interviewing was important for them to actually engage in a conversation with someone who is an authentic person from another culture.' In her initial interview Barbara described the assignment as 'based on... [something] real', meaning a real experience with someone who is different. The phrase 'an authentic person from another culture' raises a number of questions: How would someone be judged to be authentic? Which cultures would be different enough from the norm or majority group to count? For example, would a white South Afrikaner count as different in the New Zealand context? What else did the students learn from this assignment? Did she also talk with the students about the dangers of generalizing their encounter? About deficit theorizing (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005)? As part of this thesis research, I did not ask Barbara these questions, nor did any of the other participants. I can only speculate as to why we did not push her to consider alternatives to the ways in which she had conceptualized this assignment. Perhaps in spite of our articulated agreement to critical discussion we were hesitant to appear to be critiquing one another. As a neophyte researcher I lacked the confidence to push myself and my more senior participants to (re)consider the limits of our understandings.

This excerpt reveals a tension in seeking to conduct a collaborative self-study research project using a poststructural frame. On one hand, as a researcher using the tool of poststructuralism, I can be seen to be critiquing the discourses themselves. On the other, I could be seen as critiquing the participants for naively drawing upon unjust or inequitable discourses. In addition, we did not step outside the frame of teacher education and apply poststructural tools to question what counts as education.

Pamela's statement that 'it's so valuable to have our students having those experiences where they confront their own... sort of ethnocentricity really. They see that there are other ways of seeing', is drawing upon the discourse of the authority of experience (Fuss, 1989; Scott, 1992), a familiar discourse in teacher education (Larsson, 1986; Munby & Russell, 1994). This discourse privileges experience as a source of knowledge about teaching and about the self and the Other. All teacher education programmes have a practicum component to give students opportunities to have experiences of teaching out in schools with students. Many teacher education programmes also have community service

components to create opportunities for students to engage with the wider community (Butcher et al., 2003; Dudderar & Stover, 2003). These experiences are meant to provide students with encounters of difference, experiences with the Other and thus (potentially) to be confronted with the limits of their knowledge. Scott (1992) refers to this as the 'appeal to experience as uncontestable evidence' (p. 24). The privileged discourse of experience in teacher education leads teacher educators to assume that the students will become aware of their ethnocentricity simply as a result of having an experience with the Other.

Pamela's statement that 'if they don't have that kind of experience, nothing changes' draws upon the discourse of experience that assumes that an experience with another who is different to oneself is sufficient to initiate change. Catherine's statement that 'they won't all have the same experience, but they will have a whole range of different experiences' implies that all of these experiences are equally valuable in providing opportunities for students to confront their own values and prejudices. Yet experience alone will not challenge students to reflect on their ethnocentricity. For some students, the authority of experience merely tells them what they believe they already know about the deficiencies of students and their families, or reinforces deficit theorizing (Gale & Densmore, 2002).

The above excerpt illustrates that even as the research participants in the thesis research sought to deconstruct their practices, they continued to be limited by the discourses available to them. Even Foucault (1985), for example, has described human experience as a social construction arising out of 'games of truth'. Yet he has also been critiqued for favoring experience: 'Theorizing in the late Foucault actually buys into the privileging of "concrete experience"' (Spivak, 1990, p. 56). This critique reinforces the notion that deconstruction relies on the language available to conduct its moves.

The researcher and the participants in the thesis research were also reliant on the language available to us. In this case we reverted to our default setting or mother tongue and remained within the dominant humanist discourses of teacher education, even as I sought to examine the language that the participants used to explain their understandings of social justice. In the end, the thesis research participants and I may be said to have failed to 'interrogat[e]... the dynamics of social expression that produce our understanding of experience in the first place' (Britzman, 1993, p. 31). Working and researching in a field that privileges experience meant that it was difficult for us to problematise the discursive construction of experience itself.

In the above analysis I considered the ways that the authority of experience in teaching, teacher education and self-study is not innocent or neutral. Lather (1991a) has explained that 'deconstruction foregrounds the lack of innocence in any discourse' (p. 156). In teacher education the privileging of unexamined experience can (potentially) reify prejudice and stereotypes, inculcating preservice teachers with deficit theorizing as their default mode for explaining why some children are not doing well at school. For these reasons, some might be inclined to remove experience entirely from teacher preparation programmes. However, I do not think it is that simple.

hooks (1994) describes a desire to attend to experience in the classroom 'without promoting essentialist standpoints that exclude' (p. 88). hooks and other feminist writers (Fuss, 1989; Hartsock, 1990) 'do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory' (hooks, 1994, p. 90). After examining the construct of experience in teacher education, Giroux and McLaren (1986) also advocate for a pedagogy that could 'engage student experience in a way that neither unqualifiedly endorses nor delegitimates such experience' (p. 234). The way forward then, may be through 'combining the analytical and experiential' (hooks, 1994, p. 89).

Britzman's (1995) observation that 'Discourses authorize what can and cannot be said' (p. 235) is useful in considering the potential outcomes of a poststructural analysis for my future relationships with my research participants and professional colleagues. The participants were working within particular cultural, historical, political and social contexts. Teacher education in the early twenty-first century relies upon certain discourses that allow it to be intelligible to the members of the teacher education community. The discourse of experience, as described above, could be described as a fundamental discourse in teacher education. The resilient discourse of experience in teacher education makes it difficult to propose alternative discourses, but not impossible. In following hook's (1994) proposal, then, teacher educators are encouraged to critically analyze their pedagogical practices, including the privileging of experience.

Still, as noted by a colleague, you cannot be blamed for not knowing what you do not know. Davies (2000) found herself positioned within particular discourses that at the time she could not unravel:

> Inevitably, from time to time I find myself immersed in a discourse that I am not aware of at the time, or find myself unable to pick apart the various discourses and relations of power that are at play in a particular space/time. I may catch myself being carried along by the force of a discourse that I do not, at that point in time, have the skill or resources to question. (p. 168)

Likewise, the thesis participants and I found ourselves reverting to our mother tongue of humanism and to the dominant discourses of teacher education even as we sought to deconstruct them. For example, in this excerpt from a South Island group discussion:

> Pam: Well, we talked about experience, but I wonder if we need to have an experience with a group in order to be able to see the injustices, or to have empathy. And then I wonder if we just naturally have it, but sometimes we'll learn to lose it...
>
> Ruth: Well we've to argue that it's not just experience because we can't, I mean if we're in the business of preparing teachers, we can't all give them experience.
>
> Pam: No, no, and everybody wouldn't have had experiences. I mean, I didn't growing up.

Here we discussed the role of experience in developing an awareness of social justice issues and the role of experience in teacher education, but we did not trouble the construct of experience itself. By creating collaborative spaces where teacher educators and self-study researchers can 'find their deconstructive feet' (Davies, 1997, p. 282) we may be able to both *use and trouble* the dominant discourses of teaching and teacher education.

Self-study research proposes that collaboration is an integral component. Loughran and Northfield (1998) propose that 'being so personally involved in the experience may limit the ability to see beyond the experience' (p. 12). Based on this research, I argue that a collaborative approach does not *guarantee* that the participants will be able to question foundational discourses, or the taken-for-granted. Nevertheless, a collaborative project has the *potential* to enable researchers and participants to become aware of the limitations of their understandings (Lather, 1991b).

The Centrality of Theory in Research and Teaching

Loughran (2005) explains that 'the challenge of self-study is for teacher educators to look into their practice with *new eyes*' (p. 13, italics added). In seeking to conduct a collaborative self-study framed by poststructural theory, or to make use of new theoretical eyes with which to examine the study, I created a 'messy problem' (Britzman, 1995, p. 236). Like Britzman's conundrum in ethnography, all my participants might not have

wanted to, or have been able to, examine their understandings of social justice and their understandings of their professional practices outside of the frame of humanism. Britzman (1995) proposes: 'Such theorizing, after all, may not make sense to the people behind my text. Indeed, there still remains the messy problem of whether the people in my text, *if asked*, would see themselves as inventions of discourses' (p. 236, italics added). The phrase 'if asked' is important here. I did not consult the participants about this particular re-reading of their contributions as it formed a section of the thesis that was intended to demonstrate my abilities as an emerging researcher, and unlike the other chapters of the thesis, their input was not solicited. I cannot help but wonder how the authors of the texts under examination, in this case my research participants, would have felt about this critical examination of their words. How easy is it to separate the author from the discourses s/he chooses to draw upon? In other words, how can collaborative self-study researchers maintain a commitment to critique while they nourish open examination of their practices? This is an issue that future collaborative self-studies that make use of the analytical tools of poststructuralism may have to negotiate.

So where can we go from here? Any research methodology is underpinned by particular theories. In this article I have argued that self-study research is underpinned by humanist discourses, in keeping with many of the underpinning discourses of teaching and teacher education. In of itself, this is not necessarily problematic; matters become problematic when these humanist discourses go unexamined.

If 'the aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illustrate rather than confirm and settle' (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20), then we must look for useful theoretical tools to do so. Lunenberg and Willemse (2006) argue that 'the application of theory to focus the study and gain insight into the views and the behaviour of teacher educators … support[s] the professional development of teacher educators' (p. 96). Poststructural theory is one analytical tool that can support self-study researchers to critically interrogate the too often taken-for-granted discourses of teaching and teacher education. As a tool, it can support us 'to unpick (deconstruct) the language and texts of educators and schools in order to tease out their possible meanings – and thus their *implications for practice*' (Jones, 1993, p. 164).

None of the discourses available to us is innocent (Lather, 1991b). Like any other theoretical tool, poststructuralism 'can be used to dominate' (Ellsworth, 1990, p. 397). Researchers who seek to conduct self-study research within a poststructural framework may find themselves working in the borderlands between humanist discourses that constitute teacher education, and discourses of poststructural theory (Davies, 2003). In (re)visiting experience as it was constituted within the humanist discourses of teacher education in the self-study data, I illustrated the power of poststructural theory to trouble this foundational construct. Poststructural theory enables us to acknowledge that our knowledge is limited and partial (Ellsworth, 1989). As noted by Sikes (2006), theory is *both* 'essential and inescapable' (p. 43). Theories underpin all we do in education, whether or not they are made explicit. The challenge is to find useful analytical tools to make those theories explicit, consider the effects of those theories and consider new ways of practice.

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