THE PRESERVICE PRACTICUM: LEARNING THROUGH SELF-STUDY IN A PROFESSIONAL SETTING*

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Abstract

With its emphasis on personal, constructivist, and collaborative teaching and learning, a self-study approach has the potential to significantly enhance the preservice practicum. We begin by outlining various dimensions of the self-study approach and then note some of the challenges to implementing this approach in teacher education. In the central portion of the chapter we highlight four conditions or practices for achieving a self-study approach in the practicum. Under “integration of the campus program with the practicum,” we discuss the need for an overarching philosophy of teaching and learning, modeling a self-study approach on campus, interspersing the practicum throughout the program, designing assignments that cut across the campus program and the practicum, establishing a cohort and faculty-team structure, building close school-university partnerships, and involving university instructors in practicum supervision and school liaison. Turning to “satisfactory practicum settings,” we consider the selection and development of mentor teachers and partner schools. With respect to “appropriate practicum activities,” we note the need for flexibility with regard to teaching content and method and for an experimental, research approach to teaching. Finally, under “student teacher support,” we consider the importance of strong support from fellow students, university staff, mentor teachers, and the practicum evaluation system.

The practicum component of preservice programs is widely acknowledged as critically important and presenting a number of challenges (Goodlad, 1994;
Beck, Freese and Kosnik (1996). We believe that the self-study approach, which is the focus of this handbook, has the potential to address many of these challenges and to significantly enhance the value of the practicum to those learning to teach. In our own preservice programs, we have found that when student teachers experience a practicum designed in accordance with self-study principles, they tend to acquire a greater sense of ownership of their learning. They also obtain support and insights from each other, achieve a more collaborative relationship with their faculty supervisors and mentor teachers, and view the practicum as an opportunity for personal and professional growth rather than as application of pre-determined teaching strategies. As a result, teacher candidates generally experience a high level of satisfaction and achieve considerable professional learning.

The emergence of the self-study approach in teacher education, including various reform initiatives, is well documented in other chapters in this handbook (notably Loughran's chapter, “Learning through self-study”). It has also been addressed in earlier works by Cole & Knowles (1998), Zeichner (1996), and Zeichner & Noffe (2001). With respect to the practicum, key works from a self-study perspective include Zeichner (1990, 1996), and Knowles & Cole (1996). Given the coverage elsewhere of broad developments and themes in self-study of teacher education, this chapter focuses on more specific aspects of the practicum, showing in detail how a self-study approach may be – and has been – implemented in the practicum setting.

In this chapter, we use the term “preservice program” in a relatively broad way to cover all teacher preparation programs as distinct from in-service programs. In our usage the term includes not only four-year preservice programs but also five-year concurrent programs, fifth-year baccalaureate programs, and one- or two-year master’s programs that include a major preparation component. Our concern here is both with the principles of self-study and with their implementation in practice, namely, in the preservice practicum. Accordingly, we use the term “approach” to refer to self-study rather than terms such as “perspective” or “point of view,” which have a largely cognitive connotation. We sometimes refer to self-study as a “paradigm,” in the sense of an example or pattern that combines theory and practice.

The term “self-study” as employed recently in teacher education refers to a complex set of components and is not necessarily easily understood. Although the term works well for those who have used it for some time and have discussed its meaning at length, teacher educators new to the expression may find the term puzzling. Before proceeding to our discussion of the self-study approach in the practicum, we attempt to clarify the general concept by analyzing several of its components, indicating how each is connected to the overall idea of self-study.

The Self-Study Paradigm: A Personal-Constructivist-Collaborative Approach rather than a Technical-Transmission Approach

Dewey argued against seeing teaching as the transmission of ready-made ideas to students, saying that “no thought, no idea, can possibly be conveyed as an