The Researcher Inside Me: A Quest for Meaningful Research in a Shifting Academic Landscape

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Introduction

We are three university-based teacher educators who, in this contribution, reflect on our development as researchers. From 2000 onward, our participation in the world of research has become more intensive. As a result, our images of research and our thoughts about the importance of research to teacher education have changed. *Collaboration* and *self-study* proved to be essential during our journey, as these enabled us to better understand our own incentives for doing and using research in the context of teacher education. Together the three of us formed a small self-study group that supported our journey as it enabled us to collaboratively reflect on our transition from teacher educator to a new identity of teacher educator/researcher. This transition took place in a changing academic landscape, where educational research became an important and new task of teacher educators and where teacher education was reorganized and repositioned within the university. The journey described in this chapter started in 2007, when one of us (Ari de Heer) participated in the first Dutch trajectory for self-study research aimed at teacher educators (Lunenberg et al. 2010). His participation in this trajectory further improved our understanding of self-study research and helped us to become more familiar with the international self-study community.

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Starting Point: The Self-Study Trajectory

At the beginning of our collaborative self-study, we became more familiar with research in the domain of teacher education while exploring our personal incentives in doing so. Key in this process was the self-study trajectory Ari participated in. An analysis of his personal log and a questionnaire completed in the self-study trajectory resulted in a narrative about what doing research meant for him. This narrative constituted our starting point for reflecting collaboratively on our development as researchers:

> I am a senior teacher educator and learned about research procedures and methods during my self-study trajectory. My personal goals in this trajectory were being able to give more effective feedback on the research proposals of my students, improving and elucidating educational practice by doing research and finding a way into a field of educational research that was new to me. The trajectory was strongly driven by rigor (which is typical of research cycles). It meant that I had to sharpen my plans constantly. Taking responsibility and presenting my ideas was important. My audience consisted of the other participants in the trajectory, colleagues, and conference participants (Conference Dutch Association of Teacher Educators, S-STEP Castle Conference). My log[1] contains many remarks and reflections on my own presentations and the presentations of others.
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> I had to adjust my definition of research. In this process research became more accessible; it did not emerge as something big and unattainable. Far from it, since it is now part and parcel of my own practice. It was a learning process in which I was confronted with a new perspective on my professional behavior and I adjusted my professional identity accordingly. As a consequence of the self-study trajectory, I became determined to deepen my role as a researcher. I participated in a follow-up self-study community, but even more important, I found my fellow travelers (Hanneke and Martine) in my own professional environment.

The Context of Our Collaborative Self-Study Research

In Fig. 1, we present our professional environment, which served as the context for our self-study research.

During our collaborative self-study research journey, we worked at the teacher education program of Utrecht University and were part of a so-called teacher educators team that consisted of teacher educators of subjects related to the domain of social sciences and humanities (history, geography, philosophy, etc.). During the period in which our collaborative self-study research was conducted, we extended our research activities in different ways. Ari began to participate in the *Academic School* (a subsidized professional development school where innovation, practitioners' research, and teacher education are combined). Hanneke started a PhD trajectory at the Graduate School of the Faculty of Humanities (Utrecht University). Martine started a PhD trajectory at the Graduate School of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences (Utrecht University).

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[1] For this part, Ari used an overview of his logs (from 2007) and his answers on a follow-up questionnaire of the 2007 self-study trajectory.
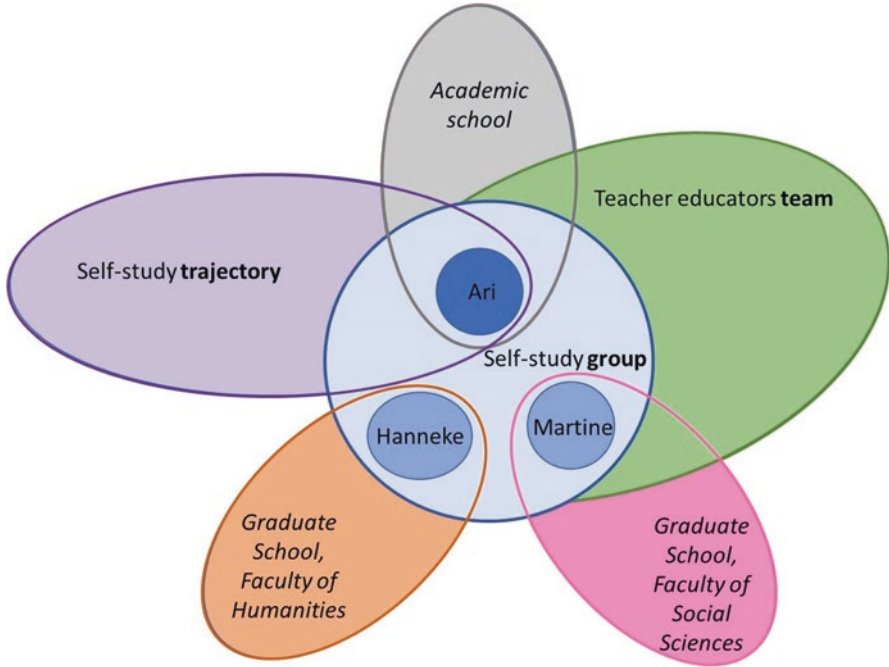
Fig. 1 The professional environment of the authors of this chapter

Stages

Our collaborative self-study consisted of the following stages:

1. Studying an innovation in teacher education: the School Adoption Project
2. Seeking our pathway between the tower and the field
3. Studying boundary crossing between two cultures
4. Home in the tower? Dealing with the field?

We will firstly report on our quest to realize a self-study research project in our team of teacher educators (Stage 1). Subsequently, we will report on a reflective stage that was focused on understanding how to deal with the growing importance of academic research and how to relate this to our world of teacher education. We will discuss the friction that resulted from our efforts to link our research experiences to our participation in a conventional academic setting (Stage 2). Using a boundary crossing framework, we present a second self-study research project, in which we explored our images of the culture of the teacher education world and the culture of the research world in this changing landscape (Stage 3).

At the end of the chapter, we will reflect on where we are now and on the future (Stage 4).

Studying an Innovation in Teacher Education: The School Adoption Project

In this century, research has become more important for Dutch student teachers and teacher educators because of changes in society and in university policy (Bronkhorst et al. 2013). As a self-study group, we tried to respond to this trend by combining the development of a community of practitioners with research on an innovative project, the so-called School Adoption Project (Tuithof et al. 2010). While realizing our project, we were inspired by discussions in the world of self-study about the balance between *self*-reflection and the value of systematically exploring particular experiences (*study*) and making them relevant to a broader community. We were especially interested in the position of the (self-study) researcher as a participant in the field of research (Geursen et al. 2010). Below, we (the members of the self-study group) will explain the process in our teacher educators team in detail.

The teacher educators team met monthly to discuss our teacher education practice. In one of these meetings, we (Ari, Hanneke, and Martine) expressed a desire to the teacher educators team to become a learning community: we wanted to stretch individual learning to a higher, collaborative level of learning. After a positive response from the teacher educators team, we planned four team meetings to set goals and to determine procedures, and we met with the dean, an expert in the field of learning communities. In these meetings, the following building blocks for developing a learning community were discussed:

- Creating a collective learning agenda
- Reflecting on the question whether we are a community of practitioners or a community of learners
- Establishing and creating a common interest
- Determining our collective identity (our "Flag")
- Taking care of safety in our communication
- Trying to make things visible, i.e., to "try to show products" (see also Wenger 1998).

In two subsequent team meetings, we worked with our colleagues on creating a common ground and discussed relevant questions such as "How do we learn as professionals?" The team members firstly shared their ideas in pairs and then made a plenary inventory. The social aspect and the aspect of learning together were most frequently mentioned as the gains of a learning community. In the third meeting, the first objective was to create a common learning agenda. A second objective was to make clear what the common interests of the teacher educators team were. Thoughts about this subject were exchanged in groups of three. Every group was asked to go for a walk and then return with an idea that energized all three members of the group. It was agreed that during this walk neither "no" nor "but" would be uttered, and the possibilities of the ideas that were suggested would always be visible. Three

ideas were reported: (1) school adoption,[2] (2) sharing good practices, and (3) thinking out of the box. The team also agreed to disagree about the differences in our interests. In the fourth meeting, we made an inventory of the desires and the needs of the individual team members. In the discussion about this process, the teacher educators team took one important decision: to take on the challenge of organizing a project called School Adoption. This project comprised the other proposals (sharing good practices and thinking out of the box) as well.

During the preparation of the project, the team discussed the desire to maximize the experiences they would share as teacher educators in this project. It was envisioned that this project would enable the team to function and grow as a community of practitioners (Talbert and McLaughlin 1994). The team members also expressed a desire to become more actively involved in the process of researching their own teaching practice (Lunenberg et al. 2007), which was greatly stimulated by management (following the trend of evidence-based education). All members of the team welcomed the possibility to learn more from their experiences, and they collectively decided to combine the School Adoption with practitioner research (i.e., self-study), hence to stimulate collaborative team learning. The following four characteristics of self-study methodology, listed in the *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices*, determined the choice of research methodology (LaBoskey 2004; see also Berry 2008):

1. Self-initiated and focused: the team as a learning community.
2. Improvement as an aim: the School Adoption Project as a focus for research and innovation.
3. Interactive cooperation with colleagues: the School Adoption Project was planned and executed with the whole team.
4. Multiple, primarily qualitative methods: we analyzed interviews, portfolios, mail exchanges, and transcriptions of plenary discussions.

In January 2009, 20 student teachers participated in the School Adoption Project: student teachers took overall teaching and organization of a Dutch secondary school at level 4/5 (pupil age: 16/17 years) for 4 days. The teacher educators were present at the school during these 4 days and collaboratively taught and reflected with the student teachers.

Two Self-Study Layers

To ensure that the School Adoption Project could serve as a learning endeavor for the teacher educators team, the three of us focused on the idea of working with research questions. Because we knew this project would only be successful if the entire teacher educators team was involved (Wenger 1998) – with heart and

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[2]A project in which students adopt part of a school and bear all the responsibilities inherent to this adoption

hand – we carefully planned how we would approach our colleagues. In the next meeting of the teacher educators team, we discussed the details of our research plan. We suggested that all members of the team would not only cooperate in the execution of the project week but that everyone would also formulate a personal research question (the first self-study layer). To ensure ownership and participation, everyone was free in their choice of a research topic of interest and instruments of data collection. In the following meeting, we introduced some theory and research methodology. So, the three of us facilitated and coordinated the research process. We wanted to show the possibilities inherent to carrying out research, and we also wanted to speak about research as a normal way of looking at your own work from a more analytic perspective (Schön 1987).

The three of us subsequently formulated an underlying self-study research question:

What is the effect of working with research questions on the development toward a community of learners?

In the week after the School Adoption Project, we conducted in-depth interviews with all the collaborating teacher educators.[3] The interviews lasted about an hour and revolved around two main themes: (1) working with the personal research questions and its results and (2) personal experiences in the project. Then we organized two team meetings that were dedicated to collaborative reflections on the outcomes. In one of these meetings, we also asked our colleagues to respond in writing to the question: what did you learn personally and what did we learn as a team? The interesting outcomes of our study were among others that the teacher educators and students shared the feeling that they all "took a plunge" (De Heer et al. 2010, p. 74) and that working with an individual research question helped the teacher educators to structure their impressions of the processes that took place, which in turn also structured the discussions with colleagues about the project. The study also proved stimulating to the team discussions about pedagogical approaches, especially with regard to the tension between safety and challenge (Berry 2008). We reported the results of this study at the Castle Conference in 2010 (De Heer et al. 2010).

Reflecting on the School Adoption Project and the professional development of the teacher educators team helped the three of us to reconsider our own professional practice. We noticed that our identities as teacher educators were expanding. Our study on the learning of our colleagues and the teacher educators team added a new layer and made us conscious of the fact that taking some distance makes learning visible (see also above: building block 6). We also became aware that our development as teacher educator-researchers was challenging. This awareness turned out to be a crystallization point for the next step in our learning process as a self-study group. We felt the need to continue our discussion on educational research and decided to turn to theory to understand our own learning process. At the same time, however, the teacher education context in our university changed.

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[3] Thanks to Larike Bronkhorst for being a research partner in this intensive project.

Seeking Our Pathway Between the Tower and the Field

As our journey as a self-study group continued, the shifting academic landscape confronted us with the conventional academic culture, metaphorically referred to by Loughran (2015) as "The Ivory Tower." This is the location of the theory, while practice is considered to be the "swampy lowlands of educational practices" (Loughran 2015). In the Tower, becoming a researcher and being appreciated as an equal mean obtaining a PhD and conforming to traditionally valued research approaches and methodologies. We noticed that self-study research was viewed with skepticism in this conventional academic culture. Because of this, we found ourselves in a problematic phase of our journey as researchers: between two worlds of research, each presenting a different set of norms and methods (Akkerman and Bakker 2011).

Traditionally, at the University of Utrecht, the Department of Teacher Education was a separate interfaculty department. Although there always had been a research group within the department, the connections between teacher education and research activities were not very close. Most teacher educators were former (high) school teachers, who became teacher educators through experience and professionalization on the spot. The department regularly conducted research into the teacher education program, but the preparation, analysis, and writing of research were often done by (groups of) researchers, rather than in collaboration with the teacher educators. In their professional development, researchers followed an official path of "rites de passage" (Turner 1969), starting from a master in the educational or closely related sciences, followed by a PhD trajectory, and postdoctoral projects.

In 2008, a huge reorganization was announced: teacher educators would no longer be housed together, but in different faculties, depending on the school subject in which they had taught. Part of this move toward faculties entailed new future demands for the professionals, including the requirement that researchers should spend 60% of their time on teaching and that teacher educators should have a PhD. Rather than await the reorganization in the years 2008–2011, we decided to play an active role and to discuss and analyze our experiences in the changing context and our future plans for conducting research. We also decided to keep supporting each other in the process of writing a PhD proposal (De Heer 2010).

Studying Boundary Crossing Between Two Cultures

Reflecting on the Process and Our Search for Theory

We turned to literature on collaborative self-studies (e.g., Miller et al. 2002; Schuck and Aubusson 2006) to deepen our understanding of our development as teacher educators/researchers. Literature showed how teacher educators shared their aims and plans for studying their own practice and functioned as each other critical

friends in doing so. Other studies emphasized that, in order to facilitate development of professionals, it is important to connect to their professional identities (Geursen et al. 2010). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) emphasized that this identity is dialogical in nature, meaning that it is both stable, continuous, and individual, as well as multiple, discontinuous, and socially constructed.

We incorporated this concept of dialogical identity in the discussions of our self-study group, and used it to define the meaning of teaching, learning, and enacting self-study in our professional lives. We came to realize that we were crossing the boundaries between the "Educational Field" and "The Research Tower," and we decided to explore the learning potential of the concept of boundary crossing accordingly.

Boundary crossing usually refers to transitions and interactions of one or more persons across different sites (Suchman 1994). It has been argued that boundary crossing can be challenging. It often requires professionals to "enter into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore unqualified" (Suchman 1994, p. 25) and "face the challenge of negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid situations" (Engeström et al. 1995, p. 319). Yet, the challenging nature of boundary crossing also brings about learning potential, not only for the individuals doing the crossing but also for the communities that are crossed. Wenger (1998) stated that boundary crossing of community members prevents communities of practice from becoming stale (situated learning theory). Roth and Lee (2007) have stressed how collaboration between different activity systems can lead to meaning making and transformation of the intersecting practices. Reviewing the literature on boundary crossing, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) found four learning mechanisms that can take place in situations of boundary crossing. Table 1 provides an overview of these.

Reflecting within our self-study group on the different learning mechanisms identified by Akkerman and Bakker (2011) helped us to understand our own development. For instance:

> Martine made a picture during one of our meetings in which she drew two different worlds, one well known, an old-fashioned building and the new – academic – world pictured as modern architecture where it is difficult to find the door. She commented on this picture: "I am gaining confidence, I feel that I am permitted to throw a stone in the pound of the scientific world."

Strengthened by the confidence we gained from incorporating theory into our self-study group for exploring our own development, we decided to explore our transformation from teacher educators to researchers in more detail. In the next section, we will describe this self-study research and share some outcomes.

Table 1 Overview of different mechanisms and accordingly characteristic processes of boundary crossing

Learning mechanisms	Characteristic processes
Identification	Othering
	Legitimating coexistence
Coordination	Communicative connection
	Efforts of translation
	Increasing boundary permeability
	Routinization
Reflection	Perspective making
	Perspective taking
Transformation	Confrontation
	Recognizing shared problem space
	Hybridization
	Crystallization
	Maintaining uniqueness of intersecting practices
	Continuous joint work at the boundary

Self-Study on Boundary Crossing[4]

We met regularly in the period 2008 up to 2011. In the process of reorganization, we decided to analyze our experiences with conducting research in a changing context. The underlying motive was to find out what was happening in our professional lives while finding our own way. In several sessions, we had discussions, prepared for writing articles, and arranged feedback and reflection meetings, depending on the needs of the moment. The agendas, reports, and materials exchanged in these meetings were collected. Two specific meetings were videotaped as data input. In the first videotaped meeting, we considered what we perceived as our qualities in both the culture of teacher education and the culture of research. We used the onion model (Korthagen 2004) to characterize what was happening regarding the professional identity of each individual member. We indicated to what extent and in what sense there was congruence between our positions of teacher educators and researchers and to what extent and in what sense we experienced a struggle between the two positions. We discussed and reflected upon each other's experiences. The second videotaped meeting focused on how the two cultures and positions of the participants were experienced in relation to each other. In advance of the meeting, we gave each other the following assignment:

Make a drawing/collage in which you visualize the following two questions:

1. What is your current image of the culture of the teacher education world and the culture of the research world?
2. What is your current image of your position in both cultures?

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[4] We would like to thank Joke Rentrop and Sanne Akkerman for their contributions to this study.

During the discussion, elaborative questions were asked regarding the perception of the two cultures through time; we asked each other to look backward and forward in time. In the discussion, everybody took time to explain the drawing, resulting in separate explanations and discussions of each of the drawings, respectively.

For analyzing the data, first a thick description (Guba 1981) was written about the reorganization that took place in the department in which we worked. We considered this important, because the political and strategic developments partly informed the need for us to move across the boundaries of our domain. Then, Ari analyzed the two meetings by watching the videos and summarizing how we experienced the transition in terms of boundary crossing and the impact this had on our professional identity and our learning. A first step entailed writing summaries for each of us based on our remarks about how we experienced the two cultures and the two positions and how these were related. Since the drawings that had been made for the second meeting turned out to be important means for us to describe our experiences, the visualizations in the drawings and the way they represented metaphors were also considered for each of us. As a second step, the learning mechanisms and accompanying characteristics of boundary crossing (see Table 1) were indicated and used to code the specific ways in which each of us described his or her individual transition process. Next, the results of the analyses were discussed in detail within our self-study group, together with another researcher who took the role of critical friend, in order to clarify specific coding and to interpret the results. The outcomes were presented and discussed at the ISATT conference in Braga (de Heer and Akkerman 2011).

About the Two Cultures

The two cultures, the Educational Field and the Research Tower, were experienced as very different and as difficult to synthesize. The world of research was perceived as dominant:

> Hanneke made a drawing of realistic persons, representing the educational field, while the research part of her drawing was almost empty, only a piece of shit and a baby was shown, and she desperately commented; "If I want to fit in that culture, I have to create more commitment with the research world. I threw my stone in the pound, but that is not enough, I have to adapt and that feels a step further then I can take."

The entry into the world of education was experienced as more open and the entry into the world of research as more difficult. Hence, in our perception, it was a puzzle to legitimate the coexistence of the two worlds. It was helpful, however, to realize that writing articles, presenting at a conference, and writing PhD proposals were useful activities for crossing the boundaries toward the Tower.

Starting a PhD trajectory, as Martine and Hanneke decided to do, was perceived as a rite de passage (Turner 1969). It implied aiming to achieve a higher position in the research world and could consequently been seen as a transformation mecha-

nism. However, finding their way in the new culture was not a straightforward, linear process for either of them: in their perception, it contained high mountains and deep valleys, consisting of hesitation and of an inner dialogue about taking or not taking the perceived perspectives that are relevant in the transition processes.

Martine and Hanneke described the following tensions:

1. As teacher educator, you come from a world where positive feedback and personal growth are important pedagogical values and where relations are more informal. The world of research was identified as competitive, full of (unknown) procedures, and focused on scientific output instead of educational improvement.
2. As a teacher educator, you have to find out how to handle the move from your embedded/respected position in the educational world and your apprentice/novice position in the new world of research. You are both a skilled professional in one world and a novice once you have crossed the boundary.
3. As a teacher educator, you want to create a position in which you can create interwoven activities between the worlds of education and research, that is, act as a broker (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). As a newcomer to the world of research, this position is not immediately available; it takes a while to be able to take on such a position.

Ari decided to use his knowledge and experiences of boundary crossing in the context of working with the Academic School. Here, in the field, he was also confronted with a traditional "ivory tower" image of research. He stimulated teachers and student teachers in the school to create new and alternative perspectives on carrying out meaningful practitioner research.

Home in the Tower: Dealing with the Field?

Our Quest Continues

In 2015, the reorganization was completed. The PhD trajectory of Martine is in its final stage, and Hanneke has completed and defended her PhD. All three of us became at home in the Tower, but are we "home alone?" How do we feel about being in the Tower?

Looking back on our journey, we notice that feeling at home in the Tower has different meanings for all of us, and in our discussions, we agreed to disagree about the two worlds. Hanneke experienced a lack of teamwork in the research world, Martine had gained by the teamwork in the academic setting, and Ari mostly tried to find his own pathway. All of us learned a lot from enacting the subsequent self-studies described in this chapter. We had to learn to relate to the traditional world of research, and we did relate to that world in different ways, and we are still in different stages of the transition process.

One thing stayed the same from the perspective of the academic world in Utrecht University; the importance of self-study in that academic setting is still underestimated, despite the stone we have thrown into the pond. However, our quest continues. We made a narrative of our journey in both the worlds of research and teacher education and then organized an open workplace session at the Conference of Dutch Teacher Educators in Brussels in February 2016, where we presented the results of our discussions, together with the comments of a critical friend. This session has led to the start of a new community of Dutch teacher educators-researchers.

Final Words

We started this chapter with the statement that collaboration and self-study proved to be essential during our journey, as these enabled us to better understand our own incentives for doing and using research in the context of teacher education. Moreover, sharing experiences assisted us in understanding and coming to terms with our own boundary crossing processes. It helped us to identify inter- and intra-personal challenges and affordances of our journey into the world of research, and we were able to acquire a better understanding of our personal qualities and to improve our research skills accordingly.

Finally, because of our collaborative self-study, we have come to recognize the value of exploring the strengths and weaknesses of different perspectives on research. This so-called multi-perspective supported us in getting to know different and sometimes seemingly opposing research approaches from an insider perspective. This strengthened us in recognizing that different perspectives on research should not be considered as exclusive but as complementary.

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