EXPLORING SELF TOWARD EXPANDING TEACHING, TEACHER EDUCATION AND PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Edited by Oren Ergas, Jason K. Ritter

ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING

VOLUME 34

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ADVANCES IN RESEARCH ON TEACHING, VOLUME 34

EXPLORING SELF TOWARD EXPANDING TEACHING, TEACHER EDUCATION AND PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

EDITED BY

OREN ERGAS
Beit Berl College, Israel
JASON K. RITTER
Duquesne University, USA

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
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ABOUT THE SERIES EDITOR

Stefinee Pinnegar is an Associate Professor of teacher education at Brigham Young University. Her research interests focus on teacher thinking, teacher development, narrative research, and self-study of practice. She is the editor of the Advances in Research on Teaching Series and specialty editor of Frontiers teacher education strand.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Nicole Albrecht, PhD, lectures and researches in the topics of mindfulness and wellness at RMIT University and Flinders University in Australia. She also supervises course work projects in the Master of Education (Wellbeing and Positive Mental Health) program and runs courses privately for teachers related to mindfulness and nature-based mindfulness.

Heesoon Bai, PhD, Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada, is an educational philosopher and a psychotherapist with deepening interest in holistic contemplative education and development of the post-egoic self. Her academic publications are downloadable from http://summit.sfu.ca/collection/204 Dr. Bai's Website: http://www.sfu.ca/education/faculty-profiles/hbai.html

Scott Bowering, a doctoral student in Philosophy of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada, is a Vancouver-based visual artist and educator who has exhibited work in Canada and internationally. His research interests focus on the intersection of contemplative inquiry, philosophy of science, and collaborative process in educational practice.

Avraham Cohen, PhD, adjunct faculty at Adler University in Vancouver, BC, Canada, has been working in the field of counseling and psychotherapy for 50 years and has been teaching and mentoring counseling graduate students for over 20 years. His work draws from humanistic, existential, process-oriented approaches, and meditation. Website: dravrahamcohen.com

Blake A. Colaianne is a PhD candidate in Human Development and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on the development of prosocial skills that lead to flourishing in late adolescence, as well as the development and evaluation of mindfulness and compassion-based programs in schools.

Oren Ergas, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the faculty of education, Beit Berl College, Israel. His research and teaching focuses on curricular and pedagogical aspects of contemplative practices and mindfulness in education. He has published widely in journals focused on curriculum theory, philosophy of education, and teacher education.

Mary Lynn Hamilton, Emerita Professor, University of Kansas, co-authored *Self-Study of Practice as a Genre of Qualitative Research* (2009) with Stefinee Pinnegar and the *International Handbook for Research on Teaching and Teacher*

Education with John Loughran (2016). Her interests combine teacher knowledge, social justice, and the self-study of practice.

Kevin J. Hulburt is a PhD candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at Pennsylvania State University. His dissertation research focuses on the intended and taught curriculum of a mindfulness intervention for educators. He is interested in how mindfulness and compassion-based practices can impact schools and teaching.

Julian Kitchen, Brock University, is lead editor of the *Second International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices*, *Narrative Inquiries into Curriculum-Making in Teacher Education Practices*, and S*elf-Study and Diversity II: Inclusive Teacher Education for a Changing World.* He is co-editor of the journal *Studying Teacher Education.*

Ellyn Lyle, PhD, is drawn to inquiries that seek to overcome fragmented or dehumanized approaches to education. The use of critical and reflexive methodologies shape explorations within the following areas: teacher and learner identity; praxis and practitioner development; and lived and living curriculum. Find out more about her work at https://yorkvilleu.academia.edu/EllynLyle

Muga Miyakawa is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada. He is interested in the intersection of critical pedagogy and holistic education.

Stefinee Pinnegar is an Associate Professor of teacher education at Brigham Young University. Her research interests focus on teacher thinking, teacher development, narrative research, and self-study of practice. She is an editor of the Advances in Research on Teaching Series (Emerald) and specialty editor of Frontiers teacher education strand.

Karen Ragoonaden, PhD, teaches and researches in the Faculty of Education of the University of British Columbia's Okanagan Campus. Her publications and research interests lie in the area of mindfulness and well-being, culturally responsive pedagogy, and conceptions of teaching and learning.

Jason K. Ritter, PhD, is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Instruction and Leadership in Education at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA. His work can be found in a number of prestigious journals, including *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, and *Teacher Education Quarterly.*

Robert W. Roeser is the Bennett Pierce Professor of Care and Compassion at Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Roeser's research interests include adolescence and early adulthood, schooling as a central cultural context of students' academic, social-emotional and identity development, and the role of mindfulness and compassion training for teachers and students.

Charles Scott, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University, Canada. His research interests are in exploring the

development of integrated and holistic curricula, pedagogical practices, and integrated assessment that support contemplative inquiry in education. His contemplative practice is situated in the Yoga-Vedanta tradition.

Edward M. Sellman, PhD, is a lecturer at the Center for Research in Human Flourishing, within the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK. His recent research and writing focus on the relationship between education and deeper states of consciousness, accessed through meditation and peak experiences.

Sharon Todd is a Professor of Education at Maynooth University, Ireland. She is author of Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis and Ethical Possibilities in Education (SUNY, 2003) and Toward an Imperfect Education: Facing Humanity, Rethinking Cosmopolitanism (Paradigm, 2009). She is currently writing a book, *The Touch of the Present: Educational Encounters, Becoming, and the Politics of the Senses* (SUNY, forthcoming).

Joris Vlieghe is an Assistant Professor of philosophy and theory of education at KU Leuven (Belgium). With Naomi Hodgson and Piotr Zamojski, he recently published a *Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy* (Punctum Books 2018) and with the last author *Toward an Ontology of Teaching. Thing-centered pedagogy, affirmation and love for the world* (Springer 2019).

Piotr Zamojski is an Assistant Professor at University of Gdańsk, Poland. He has authored four books, including two recently written in collaboration with Naomi Hodgson and Joris Vlieghe (*Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*, Punctum Books 2017) and with Joris Vlieghe (*Toward an Ontology of Teaching*, Springer 2019).

Steven Zhao is a doctoral student in the Philosophy of Education program at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. His research interests include the existential and dialectical phenomenological perspectives of educational issues, the moral prospects of contemplative learning, and the intersections between phenomenology, contemplative studies, and Buddhist philosophy in education.

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We began to work on this book around the end of 2018. This acknowledgment is written in April 2020. During this span of time, and especially in the past few months, the world has changed in ways that none of us could foresee as the Coronavirus spread rapidly over the globe. We dedicate this book to the memory of those who have lost their lives to this virus and to the doctors, nurses, and healthcare practitioners who worked incessantly to treat those infected. May we all overcome these trying and challenging times.

Oren Ergas & Jason K. Ritter

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INTRODUCTION: WHY EXPLORE SELF IN TEACHING, TEACHER EDUCATION, AND PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Oren Ergas and Jason K. Ritter

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is in constant turmoil, facing ecological crises, corruption, poverty, war, violence, racism, and a myriad other problems. It is also increasingly interdependent, with circumstances, decisions, and actions having impact and implications far beyond their immediate context. Many view education as responsible for addressing the challenges of this tumultuous and interconnected global society in which we live. Yet, there is an incredible lack of clarity around what we ought to be doing in this domain. One thing seems certain though: a book on exploring self can strike some people as outlandish, possibly even escapist. Focusing on self in this day and age can be viewed as flying in the face of troubled times and as an act of solipsistic negation of interconnectedness. One then may be right to ask: how can this possibly be the right time for exploring self? Are there not other, better things we should be doing to expand teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research?

Well, it all depends; it depends on what one means by "self" and by "exploring self." It depends on how we view the relation between self and world and between exploring self and teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research. In fact, a no less legitimate quandary might be whether the belief that the problems plaguing our planet and our global communities do not perhaps begin with self. After all, many of these problems would not exist had it not been for our very own selves being around. Another legitimate question might be whether exploring self is not perhaps a way to reaffirm interdependence if that is what is found at the end of such inquiry? Setting aside the need to address ecological and social problems by means of external engagements and policies and without

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committing to one ontology or another, perhaps deeply engaging the question of "who am I?" is the very act that is required in order to push the envelope of teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research.

Deploying such strategy would position us in good company. For Socrates, for example, there would be no such thing as "a right time" to study self. The right time to study self is "always," as he claimed: "I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that" (Phaedrus 229e–230a). For him then, knowing oneself was the task of life itself. Montaigne (1965) suggested "I study myself more than any other subject" (p. 821) and Kant, Goethe, Neitzsche, and others, held similar beliefs (Shusterman, 2012). Importantly, this focus on self is not reserved only for Greek or continental philosophy. Some miles to the East one can just as easily encounter Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Confucius, Patanjali, Bodhidharma, Dogen, or several other remarkable human beings who similarly regarded self-knowledge and the realization of self (or its insubstantiality) as an ultimate life task (Lewin & Ergas, 2018).

Why were these individuals so obsessed with self-knowledge, especially considering that, like Socrates, many of them viewed its pursuit as almost a lost cause? Because for many of them – and especially for Socrates – there was no distinction between exploring self, moral development, and living a good life. To be sure, we are not arguing that all of the above shared a view of what or who "self" *is*. Some, like the Buddha, in fact denied the very continuity attributed to this entity. However, it appears that many of them viewed the pursuit of self-knowledge as both a means and an end in its own right, which is how many, including John Dewey (1938), thought about education itself.

Interestingly, when we consider Socrates as a representative case, something quite peculiar happens. On the one hand, we marvel at his courage and wisdom and teach about his approach in introductory courses in philosophy of education; on the other hand, one can hardly say that educational policies, teaching, and teacher education follow in these footsteps; in fact, the opposite direction is far more prominent. We are more likely to teach how Socrates sought to know *his* self, but not our own (Ergas, 2017a). Contemporary policy and practice seem to be strongly pulled toward an education that purports to be neutral and focused on standards, tests, and accountability, as well as a strict adherence to "golden standards" in educational research (Baez & Boyles, 2009; Biesta, 2015). During their years of education, teachers are exposed to a hidden curriculum in which "tacit messages conveyed through the structures and practices of teacher education programs serve to further reinforce traditional notions of teaching, learning, schools and teachers" (Berry, 2004, p. 1303). These notions often involve pulling away from blurry domains such as the self and its idiosyncrasies, with students often heard nervously asking "whether they may use 'I' in their papers" (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. 6). As teachers enter schools, they may find themselves in a situation in which "[T]he existing values of the institution in which teachers must survive tend to have 'greater pragmatic value' than their own set of values…" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 272). Hence, in contemporary times, one feels that there is "a structural shift from teachers' accountability to

them*selves*, their colleagues and their students toward accountability to external bodies" (Ritter & Hayler, 2020, p. 2, italics added).

However, against this external orientation, which tends to predominate contemporary climate and educational policies, there are strands within the discourses of teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research that have been resisting this trend. Such resistance is not merely saying no to the alienating effects of policies that dehumanize the day-to-day practice of education, it is also about reaffirming the theme of self as a core interest for the theory and practice of teaching, teacher education, and its research. We find such movement in at least three domains of teacher education concerning its theory, practice, and research, all of which are discussed in this book:

The ontology of the teaching self – The first strand can be viewed as a clear continuation of Socrates's educational orientation within teacher education, encapsulated in Parker Palmer's parsimonious "we teach who we are" (Palmer, 2017, see Bai, Bowering, Miyagawa, Cohen, & Scott, this volume; Lyle, this volume). Following this orientation, various scholars have been articulating, studying, and exploring what might be called the "teaching self" (Bullough, 1997; Kelchtermans, 2009; Korthagen, 2004). It is a strand within the discourse of teacher education, which focuses on the teacher as a human being. There is something there in the teaching that is transmitted to students by the teacher, which perhaps explains some of the differences between learning the very same subject matter from one teacher to another. Behind, above, beyond, or perhaps within, the physics, geography, or math teacher, there is a person – a self. A variety of questions arise when considering this teaching self, this "being in the classroom" to paraphrase a Heideggerian term. Who is that person that enters the classroom? Why has s/he chosen to be a teacher? What drives him or her? What makes him or her wake up in the morning and face the incredibly difficult task of teaching? How exactly is that self, situated in/against/within/in relation to the world, the subject matter, and his/her students (see, Pinnegar & Hamilton, this volume; Vlieghe & Zamojski, this volume)? How does a teacher's beliefs about "self" shape the way she acts? What occurs within this inner sphere as a teacher goes about teaching, interacting (see Hulburt, Colaianne, & Roeser, this volume)?

Contemplative practices in teaching and teacher education – A discourse that resonates with this ontological domain concerns the diverse practices that scholars have been integrating into teacher education to engender student teachers' engagement with this "self". It is here in which we find the rapidly developing discourse of contemplative education, spearheaded by applications of mindfulness in teacher education (Albrect, 2019; Ergas, 2017b; Hwang, Bartlett, Greben, & Hand, 2017; Ragoonaden & Bullock, 2016; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2019). Drawing on a variety of wisdom traditions, teacher educators have been implementing diverse introspective practices including yoga, mindfulness, and journaling in their courses (Lemon & McDonough, 2018; Lin, Oxford, & Brantmeier, 2013; Palmer, Zajonc, & Scribner, 2010). We often say about research methods that what we find at the end of our quests is delimited at the outset by the method we choose. This might well be the case with pedagogies we choose as well. What we do as teachers and

lecturers, the choices we make, the way we ask students to attend – these all evoke certain selves within them (Ergas, 2017a). Contemplative practices entail a substantial broadening of the discourse of reflection in teacher education, for they bring forth different pedagogical means by which teachers engage and study their personal and professional identities hence illuminating new shades of who they are (Miller, 2013; see also, Albrecht, this volume; Ergas & Ragoonaden, this volume; Sellman, this volume).

Self-study in teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research – Self-study represents an increasingly popular and promising approach in practitioner research that recognizes the importance and centrality of self in educational settings and practices. Indeed, the distinguishing feature of self-study is that both practice and self are considered simultaneously. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that the emergence of self-study connects with the expansion of naturalistic and qualitative research methods, the influence of the reconceptualist movement in curriculum studies, the growing involvement of international researchers and diverse intellectual traditions, and the rising acceptance and influence of action research. Russell (2004) similarly suggested that self-study has built on work done in fields like reflective practice, action research, and practitioner research. Self-study is part of a larger "trend away from modernism and its assumptions about legitimate knowledge and knowledge production toward broadening what counts as research" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13). Insofar as self-study takes the life experiences of an individual as data to examine, it is a form of the biographical method (Denzin, 1989). Biographical research usually has a general purpose (i.e., to provide greater insight into the nature and meaning of individual lives or groups of lives) as well as a more specific purpose (i.e., to analyze a particular life or lives for some designated reason) (Erben, 1998, p. 4; see Ritter, this volume). Despite traditional leanings in the academy, the recent proliferation of self-study seems to indicate that a growing number of scholars agree with Samaras, Hicks, and Garvey Berger (2004)

> …that an examination of the personal history of teachers and teacher educators is a key piece in transforming teacher action and ultimately transforming the educational experiences of schoolchildren everywhere (p. 906).

The above three domains were in our minds as we began to consider this project. We each came to it based on our interest in the theme of "self" as it stems from our personal scholarship and work in teacher education. Yet, each of us has arrived at this theme from a very different angle. Oren's work has been focused around exploring the embodied mind in education (Ergas, 2017c), conceptualizing contemplative practices, such as mindfulness and yoga in education, curriculum, and pedagogy based on philosophy East/West and psychology (e.g., Ergas, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Ergas & Todd, 2016), and studying mindfulness practice in teacher education as a way of inquiring the "teaching self" (Ergas, 2017b; Ergas & Ragoonaden, this volume). Jason came to this with his work of examining his own evolving identity and practices as a teacher educator (e.g., Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Ritter, 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2016; Ritter, Powell, & Hawley, 2007; Ritter, Powell, Hawley, &

Blasik, 2011; Williams & Ritter, 2010), as well as his more recent work in teaching self-study to his colleagues (Ritter, 2017; Ritter, Lunenberg, & Pithouse, 2018). Both of us, however, saw that published work within the three strands mentioned above and especially the latter two – contemplative practices in teaching and teacher education and self-study in teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research – hardly exhausted the theme of self, nor made a strong enough case for discussing and advancing it. Quite to the contrary, we found that "self" is often overlooked, left hanging, possibly evaded in various ways as we elaborate here.

Beginning with self-study – A review of its literature reveals an overwhelming emphasis on the centrality of practice, with far fewer attempts to directly tackle questions of self (see Ritter & Quiñones, 2020). Questions, such as who and what is the self that studies and who and what is the self being studied, are hardly discussed (see Ritter, this volume). This is in spite of claims made by scholars known to have laid some of the foundations for this research approach, for example, "[T]he consideration of ontology, of one's being in and toward the world, should be a central feature of any discussion of the value of self-study research" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004, p. 319). The reasons for the lack of balance between the two foci of self-study – self and practice – are not fully clear to us. Perhaps, scholars working within self-study do not feel obliged to engage in such discussion, assuming their views of themselves and their work are embedded in their theoretical frameworks. Perhaps, they question what the merit of such an endeavor would be for actual teaching practice, given the purported ethical commitment of this approach to teaching (LaBoskey, 2004). Perhaps self-study scholars tend to distance themselves from such explorations in order not to be considered "withdrawn, self-reflective individuals, more concerned for themselves than the world around them" (Loughran, 2004, p. 20). For all of these reasons, the ontology of self in self-study seems to be far more an assumed domain, than a debated one. But this lack of attention seems awkward to us, especially in an endeavor that is often framed as "self-initiated and self-directed" (LaBoskey, 2004). We believe self-study practitioners should be more concerned with questions of who and what that self is and in what kind of ontology is s/he situated (Ritter, this volume). After all, one's view of self can act as a prism that influences how teaching aims, intents, actions, and interpretations are contextualized or applied, as well as offering a window through which others may try to understand those actions or outcomes.

Moving on to **contemplative practices and perspectives** on teacher education, and focusing here on mindfulness practice as the spearhead of this phenomenon, we acknowledge the merit of this practice as a way to develop teachers' ability to cope better with day-to-day stresses of the teaching life and reduce burnout (Birchinall, Spendlove, & Buck, 2019; Crain, Schonert-Reichl, & Roeser, 2017; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013). We also acknowledge the growing emphasis that connects mindfulness with teacher compassion, social–emotional competencies, and teaching practice (Hirshberg, Flook, Enright, & Davidson, 2020; Jennings et al., 2017; Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). At the same time, our sense is that a practice such as mindfulness, which emerged from

Buddhism as a way of exploring the nature and liberation of *self*, has more to offer to teacher education (Low, 2019; Sellman & Buttarazzi, 2019). Indeed, some scholars have begun to draw connections between mindfulness practice and teachers' "habits of mind" – a domain that connects more directly to teacher selves (Altan, Lane, & Dotin, 2019; Hulburt, Coalaianne, & Roeser, this volume; Roeser et al., 2012). We still believe that there is more to be done in this respect, especially when considering how the discourse of mindfulness in teacher education is framed through its research (Ergas, 2019a). The intervention-based structure of research on mindfulness in education and in teacher education comprises the great majority of publications in this field (e.g., Ergas & Hadar, 2019; Hwang et al., 2017; Lomas, Medina, Ivtzan, Rupprecht, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2017). These studies are clearly necessary and helpful; however, they tend to overlook the actual educative process that occurs within the inner sphere of the teacher who practices. It is there, within 'self' that the 'deeper teachings' of mindfulness emerge, hence there is a need to turn to explore the phenomenology of the lived experience of such practice (Ergas, 2015). It is in probing such domains, we believe, that the merit of a focus on teacher selves becomes more visible and its contribution to teacher identity formation can be established (Albrecht, 2016; Ergas, 2017b; Hulburt et al., this volume; McCaw, 2019; Tarrasch, 2015).

Finally looking at the domain of **the "teaching self,"** we see Palmer's (2017) work as seminal. Such work goes straight to the heart of matter when it highlights the vulnerability, paradoxicality, and unknowability of the teaching self (see Bai et al., this volume; Hulburt et al., this volume; Lyle, this volume). At the same time, we envision various additional possibilities in this domain as well, for example, by considering the concept of "self" prior to considering the teaching self. Namely, who is that person prior to the institutional framing with all of those requirements that a "system" lays over her or him and constructs her or him in her image (see Ergas, this volume). Beginning with general conceptions of "self," allows us to draw on a variety of wisdom traditions, including East Asian (e.g., Bai et al., this volume; Sellman, this volume), indigenous traditions (Lyle, this volume), and continental philosophy (Vlieghe & Zamojski, this volume). It grants us with the possibility of considering "self" from perspectives, such as William James's I/me (Ergas, 2017c; Roeser & Peck, 2009), which opens possibilities for considering what it means to be human prior to allowing institutionalized ways to take hold of who we are. We can thus consider how concepts, such as the "ecological self," "Cartesian self," "socially constructed self," "relational self," "teleological self," and "fluid self" might enable us to deframe and reframe the ways in which we understand who a teacher is and what the verb "to teach" entails.

Picking on Loughran's (2004) point above, we certainly acknowledge self-study's concern with involving teachers in what seems to be relevant to their work with students. However, what we propose here is that the ballpark may be wider than the boundaries we tend to set for what counts as "relevant" and what at the end shapes who we are as people and as professionals. The concept of "relevance" begs the question of how teaching and research fit in within the broader scheme of life. How discernible ought that relevance be? Teachers and practitioners in other

fields in general are complex human beings. Their lives are always broader and their minds always vaster than the identities that institutionalized ways of knowing and being disclose and allow (Ergas, 2017b). Why not look more broadly on the question of who we are and how this shapes and is shaped by our work as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers?

Returning to the initial pondering of why a book on exploring self in teaching, teacher education and practitioner research, given the above, one might acknowledge then that there is good reason to explore this field, but still – what public value does it have? In other words, what kind of impact could such an endeavor have beyond our personal musings on our idiosyncratic selves? We believe that the public value of this book begins with the legitimization of looking at ourselves as a worthy endeavor as Socrates believed. While there was instrumentality there too, given that self-knowledge was tied directly to moral living, we do not see this as the same kind of instrumentality that is sometimes hinted at in teacher education. Teachers need more than tools and strategies for teaching to sustain their beings within this difficult profession. Teacher educators are not merely vessels for such tools. Both teachers and teacher educators are human beings on a journey worthy of inquiry. Their being deeply interested in their own development as human beings may well be part of what will make them care for their students. What drives us? Who are we? There is, we believe like Socrates, ample room to ask these broad questions and care a little less about whether this is practical and what particular outcomes it will yield. There is an adventure in being a teacher and in teaching, nested within the adventure that is life. Posing limits to inquiry sets limits to that adventure. We know of no one who had set foot at the end of all potential life adventures who could grant us with the knowledge of which paths of inquiry are worth exploring and which are not.

Perhaps, what we suggest is an expansion of critical pedagogy's libertarian ethos, one that applies to teaching, teacher education, and their research. If critical pedagogy is usually framed around liberation of marginalized groups from oppressive policies, views, and norms (Freire, 2018), we are speaking of a liberation of self from its succumbing to institutionalization both by educational systems and by academic norms (Ergas, 2017a, 2017c). To be sure, we certainly understand the need for organizational structures to help maintain some semblance of conceptual and structural coherence (Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Hammerness, 2006; Tom, 1997). At the same time, we see both in our own daily work and in our student teachers, the prices of keeping "self" at bay, leaving a void that is quickly filled by norms and rules that reflect the systems' norms (see Ergas, this volume; Ritter, this volume; Sellman, this volume). These are often accepted without serious scrutiny often perpetuating the kind of alienation that those inhabiting these systems experience.

Elaborating these perspectives, we then believe that, yes – it is a right time to explore self in teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research. Exploring self is about ensuring that the institutions that we create as a society are questioned, critiqued, examined, reaffirmed, or transformed based on the perspectives of the lived embodied experience that each and every one of us lives here and now. That may well be a significant part of what education is about.

THIS BOOK AND ITS STRUCTURE

In developing this book, we set out to broaden the discourse around "self" in teaching, teacher education, and practitioner research, allowing authors to venture freely into this open terrain. We framed this as an opportunity to discuss the "elephant in the room" – the self that's always there, yet usually occupied with "things out there," not quite with what goes on "in here" or "from here" (see Bai et al., this volume). We argued that there is much to be said about the selves that we are that tends to be brushed away possibly because of academic conventions of scientific rigor entangled with taboos of subjectivity (Wallace, 2004). When approaching the authors of this volume we suggested a variety of questions associated with self, for example, when we speak about "self" – "teaching self," "self-knowledge," "constructed self," "the researcher self" – what do we mean? Are there "domains," layers, or constructs within the understanding of "self" that are particularly important for teaching and its research? How and why are they important? What role do practices such as mindfulness and self-study in research play, in "bringing out" (i.e., *educare*) the "self" of teachers, researchers, and students? Who is the "self" that engages in "self-study" and critical friendship? However, these questions were merely signposts. Authors were encouraged to develop their own questions as long as these positioned self at the center of the chapter and discussed it in a way that informs at least one of three domains – teaching, teacher education, and/or practitioner research.

This approach lent itself to a variety of perspectives falling mostly within the three strands mentioned above with some chapters combining more than one strand and sometimes examining relationships between them. Reading through the chapters reveals various conceptualizations of self, for example, the ecological self, the constitutive and constituted self, educational self, relational self, whole self, self-as-such, the teaching self, day-to-day self, contemplative self, teleological self, socially constructed self, and others. Each one of these can be seen as a prism from which to consider teaching and/or research.

Explicitly or implicitly, the chapters also express different understandings of the ontology of self, concerning how it is positioned in relation to the world and the kind of relationship at stake. Hence, chapters focus on self/other, teacher/student relationships (Bai et al., this volume; Pinnegar & Hamilton, this volume; Hulbert et al., this volume; Kitchen, Sellman, Zhao, this volume), self/nature (Albrecht, this volume), teacher/subject matter relationships (Vlieghe & Zamoski, this volume), self/society (Ergas & Ragoonaden, this volume; Ritter, this volume), and self-self, that is, how one relates to oneself in various ways (Ergas, this volume; Lyle, this volume; Sellman, this volume). In these different situations, oftentimes there was a dialectics involved in which self both defines and is defined by that to which it relates, possibly seeking some harmony in this constant dialectical dance.

The sources on which authors relied in order to develop their conceptions of self vary significantly with some drawing on continental philosophy (Vleighe & Zamojski, this volume), others on East Asian, and other wisdom traditions (Bai et al., this volume; Hulburt et al., this volume; Lyle, this volume; Sellman, this