Teaching Across Time and Space

A Collaborative Self-Study of Teacher Educator Identity and Critical Practices

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As teacher educators, our teaching practice and scholarship are informed by a value for equitable schooling (McLaren, 2015) and the promotion of inclusive and affirmative learning experiences for all students (May & Sleeter, 2010). Like others, our former professional experiences as educators in P-12 settings inform the work we do in preparing future educators and providing professional development to in-service teachers (e.g., Rice, 2011; Young & Erickson, 2011). Thus, our past is meaningful and contributes as much as our values to the enactment of our teaching and how we understand ourselves as teacher educators (Samaras, 2002).

Seven years ago, we were both at the same university in the United States. I (Adrian) was a doctoral student and language arts supervisor, and I (Tamara) was a faculty member, having recently earned tenure and promoted to associate professor. At that time, we had an opportunity to co-teach a graduate course on multicultural children's literature and literacy for in-service teachers. We utilized that experience to examine our teaching, our professional roles, and how we supported teacher development at the in-service level (Martin & Spencer, 2020). Since then, we experienced changes in our professional roles and settings. Now, each of us are faculty on

opposite sides of the United States. Despite these changes, we continue to reflect upon and grapple with the ways that we are enacting our professional roles and to consider how we promote pedagogical experiences that attend to the imperative for critical perspectives and educational equity. Understanding who we are as teacher educators (i.e., our teacher educator identities) as a site for self-study inquiry is intertwined with our values and dispositions towards criticality in teacher education.

Although teacher educator identity has been explored in teacher education and the self- study of teacher educator practices (S-STEP) literature (e.g., Bullough, 2005; Murphy & Pinnegar, 2011), much of this literature has focused on how such identities are constructed, understood, and enacted within particular contexts. Scholars have attended to the emergence of teacher educators' identities (e.g., Martin, 2018; Rice, 2011). However, little is known about the ways that teacher educator identities are influenced or affected by changes in time and space (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Clift, 2011) with an emphasis on criticality (Liu, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this self-study is to explore how our professional identities as teacher educators emerged throughout a temporal sequence (i.e., the last seven years) and across diverse geographic contexts. Specifically, we investigated how changes in time and place informed not only our understanding of self as teacher educators, but also the adoption of critical pedagogies. Ultimately, we sought to gain insight into the ways that we were enacting critically oriented teacher educator identities and how this could inform and improve our teaching practice across the arc of a career.

Theoretical Framework

Our self-study is conceptually grounded in critical perspectives (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). Thus, this investigation is informed by our values for educational equity and social justice, anti-racist and

anti-bias pedagogies, social justice teaching, and culturally responsive/culturally sustainable pedagogies. Collectively, this lens encapsulates the knowledge, skills, and dispositions teachers should possess to enable productive, meaningful, and relevant teaching experiences for all students. A critical orientation not only reflects the kind of teachers we seek to prepare, but also the kind of professional identity that we desire to enact. As we considered our prior experience co-teaching, we began to posit how, and in what ways, have we moved forward (across time and space) in relation to critical perspectives in our identities and our practice as teacher educators.

In the context of this study, we constructed critical pedagogies as educative experiences that are inclusive of issues of power, privilege, and oppression (McLaren, 2015). We believe that the enactment of critical pedagogies may appear in diverse forms; yet, what unifies this pedagogical approach is a value for elevating critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), or an understanding of how power is mitigated and how context bears influence upon relationships, particularly unequal social relationships. As individuals who possess marginalized identities, the adoption and enactment of critical perspectives are central to our aim of promoting a teacher workforce that is tolerant, inclusive, and affirmative of students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. I (Adrian) am a Hispanic male and a member of the LGBTQ community who has taught in predominantly diverse contexts. I (Tamara), am an African- American woman, who has always lived and worked in places where I am a racial minority; this is particularly on display when teaching, as the majority of my students have been white women. In our practice as teacher educators (both when we co-taught and now in our professional settings), teaching with critical approaches begins with a conscious reflection of the content to be covered, the underlying social and political elements that inform what we teach, the connections our students can make, and the questions they pose.

We work to promote a deeper appreciation for how systems,

structures, and practices function to enable or inhibit opportunities for equitable educational experiences in schools. Planning for such learning opportunities is a starting point for such engagement in our classrooms. Maintaining criticality is central to our in-the-moment decision-making and how we draw from student responses and participation to encourage inclusion and equity in classrooms and schools. Ultimately, the conceptual frames for critical inquiry and pedagogy served to inform our teaching and scholarship. Thus, the integrity of our teaching is bound with the integrity of our self-study inquiry.

Methods

Our collaborative self-study is methodologically anchored in LaBoskey's (2004) guiding principles for self-study research. Thus, our work was: (a) self-initiated and focused; (b) improvement aimed; (c) interactive; (d) drew from multiple qualitative methods; and (e) demonstrated trustworthiness. We turned to Mena and Russell's (2017) prompts for self-study research by: (a) actively considering what we gained through collaboration; (b) employing more than one approach to analyze our data; and (c) articulating the ways that our work is trustworthy. Co/autoethnography also served as a frame to inform this work (Coia & Taylor, 2009). Furthermore, we turned to S-STEP literature to gain insight into how other teacher educators have collaborated to investigate, analyze, and draw insights about teacher educator identity and teaching practices (e.g., Coia & Taylor, 2013; Forgasz & McDonough, 2017).

Our primary data source was a researcher journal wherein we each provided entries about our professional practices and identities in relation to temporal and spatial contexts. We utilized Google Drive as a digital tool (Martin & Strom, 2017) and worked from a shared Google Doc over the course of a semester. We found the use of the Google Doc to be a digital affordance; this online platform allowed us

to read and comment on each other's entries and, if we were journaling simultaneously, see each other's writing surface on our computer screens in real-time. To be sure, we were not only working with each other in a collaborative self-study, but also writing as critical friends. The journal entries discussed our initial experience co-teaching at our previous institution, the changes we each experienced in professional setting and role, and reflections, narratives, and anecdotes about our teaching and our work as teacher educators.

We also employed secondary data sources. The secondary sources served to contextualize our understanding of self and our teaching over the last seven years by offering a pool of artifacts for this time period. These secondary sources were course syllabi, emails that chronicled our informal conversations, and memos from phone/Facetime conversations. Consequently, as we journaled and wrote to each other, the secondary sources provided a resource to review and reflect upon as we considered who we were and who we may yet become as teacher educators and scholars.

The trustworthiness of this work was enabled via the enactment of our role as critical friends; we read over each other's journal entries and engaged in multiple rounds of critical dialogue exploring not only how our approaches towards critical pedagogies surfaced across time and space, but also the understanding of self as critically oriented teacher educators. Over the semester that we journaled, we conversed via Facetime to discuss and review our writing. The conversations focused on drawing connections between our past and our present. We explored, questioned, and theorized how changes in time and space influenced or informed our commitment to critical pedagogies and equitable schooling. We reflected on our prior co-teaching experience and how we engaged and interacted with our students. Also, we hypothesized where, given the progression of time, we might be in the future and how we might understand ourselves. Given that our semester co-teaching was the genesis of this inquiry, we frequently returned to that initial experience and worked to map the

progression of our ontological sense of self as teacher educators, our values, and how these were being enacted in our classrooms. As we articulated our insights, we drew from our syllabi, our prior conversations, and journal entries to contextualize and showcase how these artifacts supported our preliminary musings.

After the semester concluded, we commenced the more formal analytic process. First, we each independently conducted a thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014) to identify emergent themes across the data sources. We drew from the prior dialogues and insights generated from our journal entries and the subsequent meaning-making from our conversations. Given our emphasis on critical pedagogy and criticality in our professional identities, issues of power, privilege, and oppression were at the forefront of our thinking as we each analyzed the data sources for evidence of how these surfaced in our work and understanding of self throughout different points in time and different settings.

Once we had identified initial emergent themes, we compared/contrasted our analysis. To accomplish this, we engaged in a secondary analytic process of data walking (Eakle, 2007). We articulated our individual analysis, highlighted the data sources that supported our interpretations and pondered the implications/relevance of our understanding of this inquiry. Having explained our process, we each responded to one another with questions or comments. As we proceeded through multiple rounds of data walks, we began to identify those areas of salience and commonality in our analysis, specifically concerning time and space as shaping influences on our identities and pedagogy. We now turn to the findings of this work.

Outcomes

Our analysis yielded three emergent themes. First, we recognized that although our positionalities shifted, our commitment and value for

equity-oriented and critical approaches to teaching and learning were constants across time and space. Second, changes in geographic and institutional contexts necessitated that we reframe the enactment of critical and equity-oriented practices. Third, given the progression of time, we discovered that our pedagogy must not only consider the temporal context in which our preservice teachers study, but also their anticipated future professional settings. As teacher educators, it does not suffice that we reflect on and consider our practice and identities as emergent from our past and present.

The progression of Time, Positionalities, and Commitment to our Values

Adrian. Throughout the past seven years, I have gone from being a language arts supervisor, P-12 teacher, doctoral student, and now a university faculty member. My work with students has promoted an appreciation towards supporting their understanding of issues of power, identity, inclusion, and exclusion in society. The change from teacher to teacher educator allowed me to more directly engage my students with critical perspectives. Despite the change in my professional setting, I continue to work with students of diverse backgrounds. I recall how, during my prior experience as a school district supervisor, I worked with teachers to include multicultural literature in their classrooms and suggested books and instructional materials to support this aim. When such suggestions were not taken up, I would articulate the imperative for all children to see themselves reflected in the texts they engage with.

I recognize how my values informed my decision-making, and how these have persisted into the present. Back then, I focused my rhetoric on the affordances of engaging with students in equitable and socially just ways as a benefit to them as learners. While I continue to discuss with my current students the benefits of equitable schooling along the lines of promoting learning, I am direct; my positionality as a teacher educator who values criticality and promotes critical views

is much more explicit. Greater consideration and emphasis is given to examining how inequitable schooling practices function as a form of marginalizing minority communities. For example, when discussing the practice of tracking in schools, attention is given to its intersection with race and social class, and the cumulative consequences this form of student grouping has for minority communities.

Tamara. I began my work as a university professor 12 years ago, after having spent the first ten years of my career working as a K-3 teacher, reading specialist, and district administrator. When Adrian and I began our work together, I had just crossed a few milestones that are impossible not to read as significant. For one, I was a new mother of twins and had returned to work after maternity leave only a year before. To layer over that, I had just returned to work that fall as a newly tenured associate professor. I was just coming to terms with my new personal and professional identity and I was now going to transition, yet again, to the role of "mentor" with Adrian (a doctoral student at the time). He and I quickly identified that in addition to our common research interests, we shared professional and personal overlaps; we both spent a significant amount of time working in public schools before our work in higher education and both came from traditionally minoritized groups.

While it is undeniable that the interpersonal and professional connection that Adrian and I shared was special, time and space demonstrated how seminal and generative this experience was for my professional career. After serving as a faculty member at the previous large public institution for 7 years, I moved across the country to take a position at a private faith-based small liberal arts college. Here, I now enter my 5th year as a faculty member and administrator. My current institution is highly mission-driven and I am regularly called upon to consider how institutional practices, academic teaching, learning, and leadership decision-making can center social justice and equity. Also, while my role as a "mentor" has not changed, it has

broadened to include significant work as one of the only African-Americans currently serving in an administrative role on campus. This has resulted in greater work explicitly examining the recruitment and retention of faculty of color in higher education.

Shifting Spaces and the Reframing of Pedagogical Practice

Adrian. My experience co-teaching with Tamara was my introduction to the practice of teacher education. While we focused on issues of multiculturalism and multicultural education in schools, most of the in-service teachers in our course were of White middle-class backgrounds, taught in predominantly homogeneous classrooms, or themselves lacked experience with diversity and critical perspectives. I conveyed a value for criticality and diversity through direct one on one conversations with students. In these experiences, I recall providing narratives of my P-12 years and the lack of representation of diverse families (including those like my own) in school texts, and the impact that had upon me. As such, engaging in a critical pedagogical practice with these in-service teachers necessitated an ongoing conversation to humanize the topics, themes, and foci that we engaged with. In many ways, I, Tamara, and some of the students in the course functioned as models reflective of the affective and socio-emotional impact that schooling practices and structures can have upon individuals of diverse backgrounds.

Now, in a different professional setting from when we co-taught the course, my courses are overwhelmingly minority-majority. Classroom discussions about issues of school inequities, diversity issues, and inclusion often emerge with the life stories and experiences of my students themselves. In this context, the formal discourse of critical pedagogy and perspectives may be new. However, once conceptual frames are understood (e.g., Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), many of my students are readily able to apply them to their own lives. For example, having discussed tracking practices with my preservice

students, many began to identify how they were tracked in schools as a consequence of being native speakers of languages other than English. For many, this meant an inability to take advanced or AP courses. In my pedagogy now, the relevance of critical perspectives is intimately connected with students' educational autobiographies. Whereas in the initial co-teaching course, critical perspectives often surfaced as an abstract lens of exterior concern, here, such views are part of the self. My teaching shifted from raising awareness of how a critical view sheds light on equity issues in schools, towards critical perspectives as a frame to understand how power is operationalized and mitigated upon my students themselves.

Tamara. The course Adrian and I taught focused squarely on diversity and children's literature. Up until that point, I had only taught general survey courses in a Reading Masters program; this was the first time I taught a course centered on diversity (and in my view, equity). In teacher education, I'd spent many years accounting the disconnect between the racial and economic diversity of K- 12 school children and the teaching workforce in U.S. schools. Indeed, being in the "minority" had always been a part of my experience as a professor in teacher education (both with faculty and when I stood in front of graduate students). Typically, these types of moments where race and equity were explicit would bring out longstanding myths and racist tropes, assumptions, and/or awkward silence. I would have to decide, as a pre-tenure professor how and to what extent, if I took on these challenges, what would the tax or consequences be for me? And yet, the combination of having the support of Adrian and the experience I amassed up until that point, afforded some of my earliest professional experiences centering equity and anti-racist pedagogy in my teaching. Additionally, this opportunity afforded the expansion of research and pedagogical areas, in which I could examine deeply the relationship between children's literature and literacy teacher education. Again, while these themes were not new, time and space informed a distinctly different pathway to further develop my practice.

At my current institution, I teach in both the liberal arts college and the school of education. As a result, I have had the opportunity to delve deeply into scholarship on teacher development, critical literacy and children's literature, and culturally competent literacy instruction. In this role, I have developed courses in teacher education that center the incorporation of texts that reflect the spectrum of human diversity and celebrate a plurality of voices and lived experiences. Given that the college centers social justice in its mission statement, I have also received additional resources (i.e., institution research grant money and course materials) to support this research praxis in my teaching and scholarship.

The Future and the Preparation of Future Teachers

Adrian. This self-study has highlighted a commitment to critical views over the last few years and how my pedagogy as a teacher educator has shifted with context. Yet conducting this work with Tamara has fostered the awareness that to support and prepare future teachers, one must not only draw from the past and present context, but also consider and be aware of possible and potential future settings tomorrow's teachers will work in. In my work, this has surfaced most unfortunately via the concern among many of my students regarding the increase of gun violence and mass shootings in the U.S.

Many of the undergraduate students in my social foundations of education course are quite young. They have come of age in a time when news headlines all too often report on catastrophes and the most unthinkable of circumstances among children and young adults in schools. Years ago, when undergraduates would raise this as a concern, I would find myself thinking that it was quite unlikely that they would ever find themselves in such situations. And yet, in the U.S, the issue of gun violence persists, and increasingly my students want to know if they, as teachers in their future schools will be safe, and what are they supposed to do in the event of an active shooter. Compounding this was a mass shooting that occurred blocks from my

university in December of 2019, an anti-Semitic incident where it is believed the actual target was a nearby yeshiva for young children. For us, as a university community, this hit home and was no longer an issue in other communities. I can no longer rely on the past to understand how to prepare my teachers. I need to consider what schools will be like when they enter the profession. Although I have realized this, I continue to grapple with teacher preparation in an era of mass shootings and gun violence.

Tamara. This project deeply impacted the way that I taught children's literature in my literacy courses and I now center it as a key tactic in my early childhood anti-racist teaching pedagogy. In addition to infusing this work into my teaching, I have embarked upon a multi-year collaborative study with graduate program alumni to support the implementation of multicultural texts into K-5 teaching practices. Currently, I am working with teachers to develop a Critical Children's Literature Group (CCLG). This focus group will regularly meet to discuss, select literature, develop lesson plans for implementation in schools, and serve as a broader network for socially just literacy education. For myself, the use of these texts serves a two-fold purpose. For one, in selecting and discussing these texts, it affords critical conversations on race and equity in early education. For example, recent text selections enabled us to grapple with content like White privilege in early childhood education, police brutality, and anti-racist activism. While the teachers vary in the types of K-3 schools they teach in (i.e., independent/urban, public/urban, suburban) I understand the responsibility of my teaching to promote these types of conversions in my work.

Conclusion

While geography, time and space have emerged as tangible factors in our evolution as teacher educators, and our positionalities in terms of professional roles have shifted, our racial/cultural/linguistic and

minoritized identities are constant. As such, we continue to grapple with course content, professional and collegial interactions, our scholarship and work with future teachers through these lenses. Relatedly, our commitment to social justice education remains a constant in our practice. And yet, the passage of time and space has also demonstrated how such a commitment, albeit consistent, is differentially enacted in diverse contexts. Factors informing this differentiation may be the demographics of our student population (as for Adrian), the roles we serve on campus (as for Tamara) or the topics our students feel most closely connected and drawn to explore. We have learned how investigating contextual variances and the passage of time can shed light on constants and variables in teaching practice, the connections between these, and our identities as teacher educators. Potentially, other teacher educators might find value in examining their own identities across time and space, and how these inform not only the sense of professional self but contributes to the educative experiences of pre and in-service teachers.

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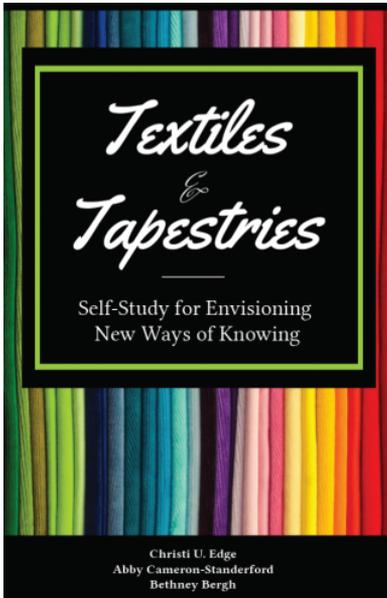
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