

# **Tensions of Learning on the Job**

## **A Self-Study of Teacher Education Leadership**

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What does it mean to lead in teacher education? This is a question to which self-study scholars have provided some answers, but there remain opportunities to more deeply explore this question. Although there is an extensive research base in self-study on the transition from teacher to teacher educator (e.g., Williams et al., 2012) and a broader base of scholarship on higher education leadership as department chairs (Buller, 2012; Cipriano & Riccardi, 2010) and the deanship (e.g., Clift et al., 2015; Elliott-Johns, 2015), self-study research into teacher education leadership is still in its relative infancy (Allison & Ramirez, 2020).

In this self-study, we aim to add to this literature base by investigating the simultaneous transition into leadership of Diane as college dean, and Brandon as program director. And, although there exists scholarship that considers the implications of leadership on teacher educator identity (e.g., Clift, 2011; Loughran, 2015), we saw potential to add to this area by drawing on Berry's (2004, 2007a, 2007b) tensions of teaching by applying those tensions to our experiences in learning and enacting teacher education leadership. As such, we sought to answer the following question, How do we understand ourselves and work related to leadership in teacher education?

# Literature Review

Manke (2004) reviewed self-studies of leadership at various levels and contexts, ranging from public school administration to teacher education department chair, center director, division head, and dean. Manke identified four themes present in the literature at that time, issues of power, community, social justice, and reform. However, explorations of professional identity were absent in self-studies of leadership to that point. Over time, the implications of leadership on the professional identity of teacher education leaders has received attention, with the teacher educator and leader identity often in conflict. In a self-study of her transition into leadership, Clift (2011) found that “the life, obligations, responsibilities, and roles of a faculty member do not provide a clear framework for assuming the role and responsibility of a teacher education administrator” (p. 168). She added, “the roles associated with being a faculty member, researcher, and administrator sometimes conflict” (p. 168).

Loughran (2015) too noted a shift in professional identity, like that of teacher to teacher educator. He stated, “making the transition from professor to dean has highlighted for me the personal and professional challenges associated with the process of ‘becoming’ through a shifting identity” (p. 5). Loughran commented on the fact that leadership took him away from research and teaching he associated with his teacher educator identity. In several studies, Allison and Ramirez shared their experiences of transitioning into leadership (Allison & Ramirez, 2016; Ramirez & Allison, 2016; Ramirez & Allison-Roan, 2014). In Ramirez and Allison (2016), they highlighted the continued challenge in implementing their teacher educator identities and research but saw possibilities in exploring the intersection between leadership and teacher education to make connections between these two sides of their professional lives. Although tensions of learning and enacting leadership have been raised in this literature, including challenges, conflicts and discomforts, we found a formal consideration of tensions to be largely

absent. Badali (2012) and Ramirez and Allison-Roan (2014) mention tensions that exist in their practices, but the concept was not used as an analytical lens for understanding their leadership work.

Personal experience was regularly used by many teacher educators to orient their work and identity as leaders. Kitchen (2016) relied on his long-standing focus on relational teacher education, noting, “my prior experiences as an educator and teacher educator had taught me the importance of recognizing the wealth of professional experiences of my colleagues” (p. 75). Clift (2015) stated that “most deans had a personal history of leadership and service long before they became academics” (p. 23). However, many of these leaders noted limited training and support for leadership work, highlighting the need for universities and colleagues alike to support new teacher education leaders. Loughran (2015) expressed the importance of mentoring and used executive coaching and critical friendship to help him make sense of his leadership work (Loughran & Allen, 2014; Loughran & Brubaker, 2015). Additionally, Allison and Ramirez found co-mentoring to have a profound effect on their developing leadership identities and practices (Allison & Ramirez, 2016; Ramirez & Allison, 2016; Ramirez & Allison-Roan, 2014).

## **Theoretical Perspective**

Berry (2004) identified six tensions found in research on teaching teacher education. She noted these tensions can conflict and represent the “ever-present ambiguity of teachers’ (and teacher educators’) work” (p. 1313). The tensions identified were telling and growth; confidence and uncertainty; working with and against (or action and intent); discomfort and challenge (or safety and challenge); acknowledging and building upon experience (or valuing and reconstructing experience); and planning and being responsive. Berry (2007a, b) later wrote of these tensions in her practice as a science teacher educator, and we use her more recent terminology in this

chapter. Berry (2007b) noted these tensions “captured well the feelings of internal turmoil experienced by teacher educators as they found themselves pulled in different directions by competing pedagogical demands in their work and the difficulties they experienced as they learnt to recognize and manage these demands” (p. 119). Although tensions have traditionally been used in self-study to research teacher education practices, we see parallels between the tensions teacher educators and teacher education leaders experience. Competing demands and tensions exist in the work of managers, leaders, scholars, and practitioners. As such, we applied these tensions to our leadership work as defined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Contrasting Tensions of Teaching in Teacher Education and Teacher Education Leadership*

<b>Tensions</b>	<b>In Teaching Teaching (from Berry, 2007a)</b>	<b>In Teacher Education Leadership</b>
Telling and Growth	This tension is embedded in teacher educators’ learning how to balance their desire to tell prospective teachers about teaching and providing opportunities for prospective teachers to learn about teaching for themselves.	This tension is embedded in leaders’ learning how to balance their desire to tell faculty and provide specific learning opportunities related to strengthening teacher education as opposed to relying on them to learn about how to strengthen and innovate in teacher education for themselves.

Confidence and Uncertainty	<p>This is a tension experienced by teacher educators as they move away from the confidence of established approaches to teaching to explore new, more uncertain approaches to teacher education.</p>	<p>This is a tension experienced by teacher education leaders as they balance what they know about teacher education (and the culture of higher education/teacher education) with learning on-the-job of how to lead innovation/change in teacher education.</p>
Action and Intent	<p>This tension arises from discrepancies between goals that teacher educators set out to achieve in their teaching and the ways in which these goals can be inadvertently undermined by the actions chosen to attain them.</p>	<p>This tension arises from discrepancies between goals teacher education leaders set out to achieve and the ways in which these goals can be inadvertently undermined by the actions chosen to attain them.</p>
Safety and Challenge	<p>This tension comes from teacher educators engaging students in forms of pedagogy intended to challenge and confront thinking about teaching and learning, and pushing students beyond the climate of safety necessary for learning to take place.</p>	<p>This tension emerges in the discomfort created in the lived experience of the teacher education leader when engaging faculty in activities intended to challenge and confront program innovation, and pushing faculty beyond the status quo.</p>

Valuing and Reconstructing Experience	<p>This tension is embedded in the teacher educator’s role of helping prospective teachers recognize the value of personal experience in learning to teach, yet at the same time, helping them to see that there is more to teaching than simply acquiring experience.</p>	<p>This tension is embedded in the leader’s role of helping faculty recognize the value of their past experience and expertise as important to the puzzle, yet at the same time, helping them see there is more to teacher education than individual expertise and recognize the importance of building new and more comprehensive understandings of high quality teacher education programs.</p>
Planning and Being Responsive	<p>This tension emerges from difficulties associated with implementing a predetermined curriculum and responding to learning opportunities that arise within the context of practice.</p>	<p>This tension emerges from difficulties associated with change and responding to learning opportunities that arise within the leadership context.</p>

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## Methods

Given the importance of enacting reform in teacher education, of importance is how self- study can support the development of the leaders responsible for enacting that reform (Clift, 2015). Self-study served to help us as teacher educators serving in leadership positions improve our practice (LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2002). The research question driving this study is, how do we understand ourselves and work related to leadership in teacher education? We present these findings in the form of the tensions we experienced in our leadership roles.

Prior to the start of our study, we noted little support, guidance, or training in how to enact leadership roles in higher education and sought an “other,” or critical friend (Schuck & Russell, 2005), who might help us “act more wisely, prudently, and critically” in learning to enact our new leadership roles (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 161). Allison and Ramirez (2020) note that, “Leadership self-study inquiries heighten the importance of working with a trusted colleague, someone who is a confidential sounding board, provides an outside perspective unencumbered by institutional politics, and dispassionately challenges rationalizing or defensive thinking actions,” and that without critical friends, “teacher educator administrators might find themselves working in isolation and frustration” (p. 8).

## **Context**

In summer 2020, Diane will conclude her fourth year as dean of the college of education at a professional/doctoral-granting university in the southeastern United States. She taught for 13 years in the mid-Atlantic before moving into academia. Diane completed her doctoral degree at a highest-research activity university in the mid-Atlantic, where she worked closely in professional development schools and was surrounded by doctoral students and faculty with strong orientations toward teacher education, which directly informed her professional identity and work in leadership positions. Before her current role as dean, Diane was a teacher educator at three highest-research universities in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern United States. Over time, she held ever-increasing leadership responsibilities, including center director, department chair, and associate dean of educator preparation before becoming dean at her current institution.

In 2020, Brandon will complete his ninth year as a faculty member at a higher-research university in the mid-Atlantic. He taught four years in the southeastern United States before completing his doctoral

degree at a highest-research university in the southeast. Brandon has held several low-level administrative roles, which includes three years as a program director of a master's degree program for licensed teachers, coordinator of a certificate program for provisionally-licensed teachers, and coordinator of a school-university partnership initiative. Brandon recently shifted to faculty governance leadership roles at the college and university level.

## **Data Collection**

Because we were employed at different institutions with differing responsibilities and time constraints, we used digital technology, namely Google Drive, to help us effectively facilitate data collection and analysis (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2017). However, data collection was not limited to the online spaces. We regularly cross paths at conferences and discuss our experiences and data, and occasionally communicate by phone. But most data were collected in Google Drive.

We began in March 2018 by sharing educational and professional autobiographies (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001). These autobiographies were meant to provide a foundation for our collaboration and critical friendship. We then engaged in on-going dialogue about our biographies, with the total word count being 30,730 words across the two documents. Afterward, we agreed to periodically post individual narratives related to our leadership experiences and engage in on-going discussion. Over the next year, Diane posted nine narratives and Brandon four, totaling 35,843 words. In Spring 2019, we shifted focus to a book study of Clift et al.'s (2015), *Inside the role of dean*. We wrote and responded to narratives for each chapter, totaling 39,746 words.

## **Data Analysis**

We used Berry's (2004, 2007a, 2007b) six tensions of teaching teaching as *a priori* codes and basis for thematic coding of data



(Saldana, 2016), for which we noted the tension in association with the thematic meaning. We identified themes independently and if we disagreed, we discussed the intent and meaning of a passage until we agreed on the tension and thematic meaning. Themes were entered into a spreadsheet, from which we looked for recurring patterns. For this self-study, we focus on two tensions (confidence and uncertainty, safety and challenge). We then engaged in focused coding of our themes (Saldana, 2016). This second level of coding resulted in the findings of this self-study. We sought validity and trustworthiness (Feldman, 2003; Mena & Russell, 2017) through critical friendship, presentation of early findings at a conference on supervision and leadership, and exemplars using “previously defined categories validated from research” (Mena & Russell, 2017, p. 115).

## **Outcomes**

Through self-study we found similarities in our career trajectories, reasons for accepting leadership roles, common fears and uncertainties associated with our leadership work, and how teacher educator identity informs leadership practice. In this section, we share findings from our on-going self-study research into learning leadership, with specific focus paid to the tensions of *confidence and uncertainty* and *safety and challenge*, and how those tensions play out in our work as teacher education leaders.

### **Finding Fit and Losing Self in Leadership**

For us, a consistent consideration in our work as teacher educators and leaders has been a desire for what we saw as professional fit. Diane recalled when she applied for the deanship, she “needed to learn more about [the college and faculty] and they needed to learn more about me to see if there is a good fit.” She noted the importance of fit, “I believe that leadership takes a fit between the organization and the candidate,” which can present challenges for any teacher

educator considering a shift to leadership. For Brandon, fit has been an on-going challenge as his teaching background is in social studies while his teacher education practice and scholarship has increasingly shifted toward teacher education more broadly. And although Brandon continues to periodically teach social studies education courses, which provides a sense of safety and confidence as a disciplinary knowledge base, his responsibilities in helping design, lead and teach in a master's program for practicing teachers shifted his attention away from social studies. As he made this move, Brandon saw a problem for those interested in teacher education, "It becomes hard to find the right 'fit' because of our teaching and scholarly interests, especially in an environment where disciplinary practice dominates." This movement can create uncertainty and professional challenges for teacher education leaders. Having undergone a similar shift in her career, Diane commented that "morphing is natural for some of us within our institutions when we see pockets of possibility but [that it] sometimes causes rums."

Although Diane sought institutional fit when she applied for the dean position, she was quickly challenged by the lack of alignment between her teacher education practices and scholarship and the college she led, "One thing that I have had to learn to live with is that the college didn't yet have the quality programs that I had studied and wrote about." Diane was aware the college "had challenges and needed direction," one of the reasons she was hired, and has worked with faculty on program development and changes in institutional culture, but she feels her own professional and scholarly input has "really been limited." This created uncertainty surrounding her identity, as Diane noted her passion was to "make a difference in education and, more specifically, the preparation of great teachers." However, as she took on greater leadership roles, Diane reflected, "I have lost myself [my voice] in all of that." Although we took leadership roles to help improve teacher education, we agreed about the impact leadership had on our scholarly identity. Our feelings are similar to how Loughran (2015) saw his "identity as an academic... challenged by the

daily requirements of the ever-changing nature of [leadership work]" (p. 6). Brandon noted, "My identity has been negatively impacted because of the administrative tasks I have been handed." Diane added, "You have no time [and little space to participate] as an administrator allotted to the work that initially drew you to teacher education in the first place."

Diane has remained in her position as dean and will soon enter year five. However, after three years as program lead, Brandon stepped back from the leadership role to refocus his attention on scholarship while maintaining faculty governance leadership roles at his university and designing a new program. He was not abandoning leadership but, at least temporarily, refocusing his priorities due to uncertainty surrounding his scholarly identity. Given her commitment to a five-year contract, Diane sought opportunities to attend in other ways to her teacher educator identity and practice. She noted that "research and teaching gives me a break in the dailiness of running a college" and from the "interpersonal challenges, conflicts." Diane saw writing and teaching as providing "some insight into the faculty's work and...to be energized." These areas provided confidence, adding, "my scholarship is the one space where I can be who I want and explore the ideas that are important to me." Brandon concurred, "Part of our identity is the writing we do, and that writing often comes from time consuming, collaborative work with others." He summarized the tension that existed between research and leadership, noting, "It is hard to feel good when you cannot fit that part of your identity into your life."

## **Facing Fears and (Re)Defining Leadership**

A common theme across our narratives was the uncertainty we experienced in learning and enacting leadership. For Diane, this uncertainty manifested itself in her interview for her current position. Brandon asked, "What was your pitch for why you should be dean?"

to which Diane responded, “I actually told them in the beginning I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a dean or their dean.” Diane regularly expressed confidence in her teacher education expertise, experience in reforming and leading high-quality education programs, and conducting research on impactful clinical experiences like professional development schools, residency programs, and job-embedded professional development. At the same time, her inability to immediately “fix” the programmatic issues she identified in her college made her question her identity, stating, “I thought I might be able to help them with their challenges” but she was not able “to use my [her] strengths to solve the problems associated with the college’s teacher education programs.”

This tension of having expertise and an inability to immediately use it generated uncertainty and challenge for how she viewed her teacher educator and leader identities. Diane noted,

I felt like an impostor as I entered the deanship... I had no idea what it meant to be a dean. I had never been one. I knew much more about teacher education and doing teacher education myself than about leading teacher education. I have come to learn that these two things are very different.

This recognition of vulnerability provides powerful insights for those learning to lead. Similar to how teacher candidates can rely on an “authority of experience” (Munby & Russell, 1994), there can be an assumption that leaders know how to lead because they have observed leadership or served in lesser leadership roles. However, leadership is often something learned on-the-job (Gronn, 2015), with the collaborative exploration of practice serving an important role in moving beyond one’s personal authority (Allison & Ramirez, 2020). As Diane commented three years into her tenure as dean, “I am still learning what it means to be a dean, what it takes to improve

programs and help faculty be the best version of themselves, and the meaning seems to be shifting with time and need and as our programs improve. It is incremental though." A later conversation highlighted the benefits of self-study and collaboratively learning leadership in moving beyond the authority of experience, with Brandon commenting,

Ideally, engaging in self-study scholarship as a leader moves you past the 'unconscious trial and error' (Polanyi, 1958) stage to a dedicated, inquiry-based mode of learning how to improve your practice as a [leader].

Uncertainty in leadership goes deeper than distinct differences between identity and the enactment of practices associated with that identity. For us, fear has been a common concern. Diane reflected on prior experiences, "During my early leadership years as both chair and dean, there was always a component of fear, like a worry sitting on my shoulder, whispering in my ear... 'what will happen if...'" The cause for this fear was directly tied to personal experiences in environments where change was needed, noting that there are "important improvements you want to make and sometimes a group of faculty who aren't ready or willing to change and improve. I have watched groups of faculty takedown well-meaning leaders." As someone who saw potential in upper-leadership roles, Brandon responded, "That has always been a fear for me. You seek to do a good job and you think you are but experience resistance from some, who are often the overly vocal." After some thought, Brandon added, "We just have to acknowledge and accept the fear, and to not let it paralyze us."

Over time, these fears have subsided in ways. For Diane, experience gained as dean helped her develop significant understandings of what it means to be a dean, but that did not mean she believed that she knew all she needed to know. Clift (2015) shared Gmelch et al.'s

(2011) concept of the seasons of the dean. After reading this chapter, Diane commented that though she had learned the work of the spring dean (years one to three), as she entered her time as a summer dean (years four to seven), “I do not know what I don’t know for this season. What is it that would make me more effective now that I don’t know?” Brandon saw this uncertainty as a sign of confidence, responding, “It takes someone confident in their work and an acceptance of uncertainty to admit that. I wish more leaders would say as much.” He regularly admitted uncertainty with the teachers he taught, using it as a pedagogical turn to provoke reflection, with the teachers being appreciative. But he wondered, “Would it be the same if you [as dean] admitted uncertainty at points in your work with faculty?”

Another challenge Diane noticed in her move to leadership related to how she defined her work with programs and faculty. As a faculty member and lower-level administrator, she could be “doing and being the change” as she was intimately involved with program design and enactment, whereas in her role as dean she had to redefine her responsibility as “pushing and facilitating the change.” As someone whose identity is closely associated with powerful teacher education, she “had difficulty figuring out the boundaries” so she does not interject herself too much into curriculum, which has historically been the purview of faculty. She noted, “My teacher educator identity has brought me to leadership roles where programs had room for improvement and I had the expectation to improve them.” Yet there is a noticeable tension in that as Diane has moved further up the leadership ladder, gaining increased managerial responsibilities coupled with the expectation to be responsive to external pressures and mandates, the immediate impact she can have on the design and enactment of good teacher preparation curriculum and instruction remains limited in scope.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Of clear importance to understanding our experiences as leaders is the recognition that leadership is largely “on-the-job training.” This is consistent with the work of Allison and Ramirez (2020) and Clift (2011, 2015) who noted their preparation lacked formal training and clarity of leadership role expectations, leading to role ambiguity as they entered their work. Our practices seem to rely on the assumption that “experienced, successful teacher educators have the dispositions and latent skills to be successful teacher educator administrators” (Allison & Ramirez, 2020, p. 16). Given this assumption paired with the expectation of learning on the job, it is no wonder that highly visible learning about leadership is stressful and complicated by fear when it is enacted with little support. This visibility - coupled with annual faculty evaluations, possible votes of no confidence and renewed appointments often based on feedback from those whom you are leading through challenging shifts in their own work- makes leadership lonely, and leaders often face legitimate fear in asking faculty to engage in the complex and time- intensive work. Our collaborative work provides further evidence that leadership learning can be supported through collaborative self-study by providing a space for reflection and sense-making.

The role of losing one’s teacher educator identity emerged as also central to the tensions that cut through our work creating another type of fear. In this case, the fear of losing one’s identity as a teacher education scholar emerged as we were left increasingly out of or not supported in the spaces needed to create visible programmatic improvements. As a result, we recognized our leadership would need to focus on working through others, including those who may or may not currently possess prerequisite knowledge needed to realize teacher education reform. When important knowledge is missing, what is the leader’s role related to supporting faculty learning and how do we learn to support the learning of others? As noted by many others, when we assume roles as teacher education leaders, we often

experience crises of professional identity as we are pulled further away from who we aspired to be as teacher educators (e.g., Beijaard, 2015; Collins, 2016; Wubbels, 2015).

Finally, the tensions that emerged within this self-study have implications for those interested in not only higher education administration but those committed to leading teacher education reform and innovation. Specifically, the tensions that emerged emphasize learning more consonant with leadership rather than more traditional images of administration or management. In seeking deep conceptual change in our teacher education programs, the two tensions we address speak to how we define our leadership roles as a result of our passion and commitment to building strong teacher education programs. This finding aligns with the work of Allison and Ramirez (2020) who suggest that the way individuals seem to find themselves in teacher educator administrative roles have implications for “how administrators define themselves in their roles, how they perceive and navigate the transition into leadership, and ultimately how they experience and balance the constraints and affordances of their leadership roles” (p. 13). In our cases, our commitment to reform in teacher education has significantly impacted the way we define our leadership roles, navigate leadership spaces, and negotiate the constraints and affordances of our efforts. The tensions point to the highly challenging, personal nature of leading teacher education reform, particularly when one’s identity as a teacher educator is entangled with the work.

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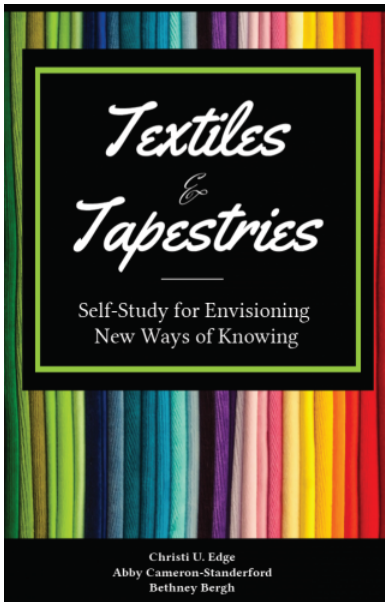
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