

Exploring New Ways of Knowing as Ex-Administrators

Re(k)newing Our Selves as Teacher Educators

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Teacher Education

Critical Friendship

Self-Study

Critical Reflection

Transition from Administration

Three mid-career teacher educators, each of whom involuntarily served as mid-level administrators are now in a similar position of having left those roles. Each has a different story to tell and come from very different institutions, yet find themselves experiencing many of the same issues and frustrations. This collaborative self-study was an intentional study of and reflection on how their administrative roles impacted or changed their perspectives on teacher education in general and how it changed them each personally. The weight of the role had lasting implications for their personal and professional selves. Their reflective journals, weekly online meetings, and responses to each other's experiences resulted in findings that can inform the work of others in similar positions or circumstances. Those findings, while both similar and distinct, reveal enough commonality that we, as teacher educators often placed in positions of leadership, need to consider the implications for our practice, our students, our scholarship community, and our selves.

Context

We are three mid-career teacher educators each recently separated from departmental administrative positions at different US institutions. Being mid-level administrators was not something we had sought, but instead resulted from unique circumstances in our institutions, where we were each asked to step into roles for which we felt wholly unprepared and in which we received little to no mentoring or support. Coincidentally, we all now find ourselves having recently relinquished our administrative roles and have returned to full-time faculty roles. In retrospect, we recognize that being administrators served to inform and alter who we are as teacher educators (Clift, 2015).

Each of us left our leadership roles differently. Valerie, who served as department chair for six years at a small private institution, came naturally to the end of her term and it was a comparatively smooth exit. Laurie, on the other hand, was asked by her department chair, after almost seven years, to step down from her program director role in order to "focus on her teaching." She is at a moderately large state institution. Laura resigned her position as program coordinator after three years (along with another coordinator in her department) when she found the work untenable and support nonexistent. She works at a large state university. As we describe below, how we left our administrative positions had an impact on our transitions back to full-time faculty. While we each had distinct circumstances in leaving our leadership positions, we have found that we share some emotional and philosophical frustrations. Many who have been in leadership or administrative roles may find some of our experiences resonate with their own.

Objectives

This self-study documents our journey back to “just” being teacher educators, reflecting collaboratively on the changes we see in ourselves, our practices, and our values. In many ways, we expected to see we have changed, and yet we hope we have also remained true to what we believe is at the core of effective teacher education. This study highlights where we are now, how we arrived at this crossroad, and what we learned from our experiences.

Framework

The two major tenets of self-study that guided this research are collaboration and critical reflection. As Kitchen, Berry, and Russell (2019) argue, “conversation and collaboration with peers can have a powerful impact” (p. 93). Our collaborative efforts as we each left leadership roles and returned to our full-time faculty positions, offered the support and safe space necessary for the transition. We hoped this study would be helpful to others in similar positions, as there is a lack of literature about both ending leadership and about teacher educator collaboration (Kitchen, et al., 2019).

One of the most notable forms of collaboration in self-study research is critical friendship. Shuck and Russell (2005) maintained that “a critical friend acts as a sounding board, asks challenging questions, supports reframing of events, and joins in the professional experience” (p. 107). That critical friendship was paramount as we embarked on this journey together, after years of being leaders (involuntarily at first) and gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully navigate those responsibilities. Walking away was not an easy task and there were situations in which we found ourselves in need of a sounding board to process the change, typically in times of crisis or perceived ineffective leadership.

As we are all at very different institutions across the US, we were able to collaborate as critical friends both as long time colleagues with similar interests and goals, but also as “external” critical friends. O’Dwyer, Bowles, and Ní Chróinín (2019) summarize the guidelines of their external critical friendship, which was helpful to our study’s focus. They utilized the following three pedagogical practices: problematizing practice, deepening deliberations, and recognizing learning. As we journaled and reflected on our experiences leaving leadership and returning to faculty positions, we were able to assist each other in each of these areas. For example, in responding to each other’s journals, we were able to problematize and highlight areas of possible conflict. For Laurie and Laura, in particular, there were areas of continued conflict as others took over the leadership roles they once held. They each felt compelled to resolve those conflicts, despite them no longer being their responsibility. Further, we were all able to delve more deeply, through collaboration, to “increase criticality” and probe the potential inconsistencies in our respective reflections, which were largely due to the emotionally charged nature of our experiences (O’Dwyer, et al., 2019, p. 151).

Critical reflection is always at the heart of what we do as self-study teacher education scholars. Aligning with Brookfield’s (1995, 2009) conceptualization, we assert that reflection is critical when it is motivated by the desire to be just, fair, and compassionate and when it questions the criteria, power dynamics, and socio-political structures that frame our practice.

Further, critical reflection includes dilemma identification, or problem framing, from multiple perspectives, examining practice, and working toward change. This process occurs by questioning and analyzing taken-for-granted assumptions, routines, rationalizations, and unexamined explanations (Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002). As we have transitioned from leadership back to “just” faculty, we have engaged in a “partnered practice of critical reflection,” (Berry & Crowe, 2009, p. 86), a process of collaboratively (de)constructing knowledge about leadership and encouraging one another to critically reflect on our assumptions, rationalizations, explanations, etc., providing us with the potential to reframe our work and reassess what we value, not just in our teaching but also more broadly in our personal and professional lives.

Methods

Self-study allows teacher educators to examine beliefs, practices, and interconnections between the two (i.e., Berry, 2008; Samaras, 2011). As self-study teacher researchers, we have always committed to aligning our research and teaching, making the two mutually informative and embracing study of our own practice with the goal to “improve teaching and teacher education and the institutional contexts in which they take place” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 844). Self-study allowed us to consider our practices and enactments of beliefs and values in teaching and leadership without the methodological constraints of other types of educational research (Roose, 2008; Zeichner, 2007).

Data sources included journals and email communication, an online collaborative space, and regular online meetings via Zoom. We prioritized journaling, envisioning it as asynchronous dialogue since we are in three different regions of the US. We used this platform to communicate critical incidents we encountered and wanted to reflect upon and process collaboratively as friends, colleagues, and research partners (Volckmann, 2012, 2014).

We conceptualized our virtual correspondences as critical friendship: utilizing trusted friends or colleagues to ask provocative questions, provide other perspectives, and offer critiques of ideas and work in a safe, supportive way (Russell & Schuck, 2004). This type of collaboration is essential “if self-study is to involve critiquing existing practices and rethinking and reframing practice” (Schuck & Russell, 2005, p. 213). Schuck and Russell (2005) posited critical friendship allows for provocative questions to be asked as well as provides the opportunity to more fully understand the context of the work. Because our roles and our institutions are different in scope, structure, size, and demographics, our collaboration provided broader (often divergent) lenses of understanding.

Data analysis was iterative, ongoing, and collaborative (Crowe, et al., 2018; LaBoskey, 2004). We identified emerging patterns and themes as we read journals, transcripts, and other online correspondence. As the months progressed, we generated data for this study, remaining focused on our research questions and circling back as new themes emerged or as we began to see differences in our experiences. We discussed emerging themes in our weekly online meetings, comparing our experiences, and noting where they were similar or distinct. Further codes were added, which prompted additional journals and reflections. While we have found both commonalities and differences, we continue to reflect upon our experiences, our frustrations, and the emotional repercussions of our now positions of “unleadership.”

Outcomes

Through this collaborative work, we hoped to better understand the impact leaving administration had on us both personally and professionally. Our analysis has revealed three major themes: 1) contradictory emotional responses to separating from administrative roles/responsibilities in different ways, 2) the mediating influence of our distinct institutional contexts, and 3) trying to regain personal and professional balance.

Theme one: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The circumstances of our separation from administrative roles were varied and so were our emotional responses to the separations. Valerie's separation was a natural and anticipated progression of events at her institution, and so stepping down was, by and large, a welcome relief free of negative emotion:

Stop me if I've said this before... I really am appreciating/enjoying my teaching responsibilities and being able to be fully prepared and focused in the classroom now that I'm not the chair! I don't feel like I'm taking shortcuts or I'm too scattered. I feel generally more at ease and more patient with students who need extra support or direction. I hope those feelings persist! (Valerie's journal, September 8, 2019)

Although less frequent, both Laura and Laurie noted instances where they were able to appreciate the benefits of no longer holding administrative roles. For example, Laurie wrote:

If I have to look on the bright side, I have had more time to focus on things I really care about. I am trying to focus more on teaching and research, things that suffered because of the responsibility of being in an administrative position. More bright side – I have to go to very few meetings and I am never in charge of anything! (Laurie's journal, September 20, 2019)

Laura was also able to recognize some of the benefits of a return to full-time faculty, stating:

Once the incessant meetings to explain ourselves and help solve the problems no one was actually really willing to address ended last fall, I started to feel better. This was around October sometime. Nothing was happening but I just focused on teaching and research and stayed away from campus a lot. It was lovely. I felt great. (Laura's journal, September 23, 2019)

Over time, Valerie continued to feel she was able to focus on other elements of her personal and professional life. However, both Laura and Laurie found themselves frustrated with what they perceived to be real problems in both new and old leadership. In response to a decision made by administrators but not communicated to faculty, Laurie wrote, "To me, that is terrible leadership. No input, no transparency, and no communication. Even if they are just going to make decisions without us, as much as I disagree with that, they should at least give us a heads up" (Laurie's journal, October 26, 2019). Laura echoed Laurie's sentiments in her own journal, saying, "I've been avoiding going into this topic because I am so frustrated by things. I don't even know where to begin. Some of my issues are very similar to Laurie's—no communication, too many adjuncts, weird decision making that impacts students and my classes in negative ways" (Laura's journal, October 29, 2019). Both Laura and Laurie found their tenures as program leaders critiqued in public and private ways. Witnessing poor decision making, communication, and a lack of transparency in leadership after their departures seemed to add insult to injury. Which is related to our second finding—the influence of our institutions on our transitions.

Theme Two: Institutional Influences

Our institutional contexts, particularly upper administration, had a great deal of influence on how smoothly the transition out of leadership went for each of us. As previously mentioned, Valerie stepped down from her role as department chair at the end of an agreed-upon amount of time. Her replacement was chosen ahead of time and was able to consult with Valerie regarding questions about the work. Conversely, both Laurie and Laura found themselves continuing to do tasks that had been expected of them as program coordinators/directors because they were not being addressed by current leadership.

"So, last night (Friday at about 9:00), I emailed the chair, the assistant chair, and the admin assistant to let them know we need to up that number so students can register without issues. WHY AM I STILL DOING THIS???? This is no longer my job and I could/should just sit back and let the shit hit the fan, but I am still invested. Clearly, my successor is not that invested. Until I texted him yesterday, he had no idea how many students we had starting our program and he didn't seem too concerned about it. He never initiated a conversation about it. When I contacted him about that and other issues, he said, 'We will meet on Nov. 12, so we will talk about it all then.' Students started registering Nov. 1. We needed to have these issues resolved!!! Again, this begs the questions, why am I doing all this??? NMJ! (Not My Job!)" (Laurie's journal, November 2, 2019)

Similarly, Laura wrote about attending a meeting and feeling frustrated by what she saw as disorganization.

At one point I asked, 'Where are we on the agenda right now?' It was just so chaotic. So, as I tend to do, I started to try and nudge things in a direction. I started writing a list of challenges we face on one whiteboard so that we would have them together. One of the agenda items was once again, who is going to be program coordinator of secondary education? I said, 'Until we have a real conversation about the support the position needs, no one from secondary education is going to do it.' That then led to a conversation about what support coordinators need. It was then I just decided we needed to be more organized so I suggested we break into two groups—one group to work on a plan for coordination and

another to begin working on the revisions to the program we have been discussing for a while. (Laura's journal, December 19, 2019)

Part of the problem faced at Laura's institution is that after her resignation, no one from secondary education stepped up to be program coordinator. There was no one in leadership at any level who understood secondary education and how it operates differently from other licensure programs. This lack of understanding caused countless challenges and frustrations.

Despite the fact that each of our institutions varies in terms of size, demographics, and location, one similarity we experienced is a lack of continuity between leaders. At times, this lack of institutional memory seemed intentional. For example, after Laura resigned, no one took over as program coordinator for four months. At that point, a faculty member from elementary education volunteered to coordinate both elementary and secondary until a longer-term solution could be found. After a meeting of elementary and secondary faculty led by the new coordinator, Laura wrote, "I started to hear the new PC complaining about EXACTLY the same things we had been trying to get changed. And she would say it like it was new information to her" (Laura's journal, September 23, 2019). Similarly, Laurie found herself time and time again covering for the new program director because work did not seem to be getting done. "We really have NO IDEA how many students we will have in our cohort that begins in the spring until we do advising. So, I've been trying to check in periodically to assess our program needs. I realize this is not my job, but he's not doing it!" (Laurie's journal, November 2, 2019)

Even though the circumstances were better, Valerie also found herself struggling with how to support the new chair without second-guessing his work:

At some level, despite the smooth transition and having reasonable confidence in the new chair's capacities and integrity, I feel anxious anticipating what needs to be done that I no longer have control over. (Valerie's journal, January 17, 2020).

This theme resonated with each of us, despite our different circumstances. We each felt compelled to maintain some level of control, knowing it was no longer our role or responsibility. Through serving in leadership roles, we each learned quite a bit about our programs, administrative requirements, timelines, and expectations. While that knowledge can be useful; once out of leadership, this information caused all three of us quite a bit of frustration when we saw tasks not being done—either at all or in ways we would not have done them, i.e., with little transparency, no program faculty input, etc. Again, if our institutions had systemic or structural methods in place for building on our knowledge, that frustration could have been mitigated in some ways.

Theme Three: Walking a Balance Beam

The third theme relates to the professed loss of more balanced personal and professional lives during our time as administrators. Many self-study scholars have noted the self we bring to teaching is difficult to separate from the self we are elsewhere. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001), summarizing Pinar (1980, 1981), asserted "one always teaches the self," (p. 13). We three are active individuals who appreciate our respective hobbies and enjoy being outdoors, spending time with family, friends, and our dogs. Previously, those priorities were frequently lost to the demands of administrative responsibilities. Illustratively, Laurie journaled her excitement in reclaiming a "time when farmers' markets, camping, hiking, really *anything*, was a possibility on a Saturday morning!" Previously, she often represented the program at open houses, orientations, college preview days, etc. Similarly, Laura described an encounter with colleagues:

"On the way out, we saw the woman who took over the coordinator position along with another faculty member who my husband and I are friends with. This friend kept saying how good I look, how I've lost weight, how nice it was to see me enjoying myself. And I said more than once it's all because I am no longer program coordinator." (Laura's journal, September 23, 2019)

While ultimately we are each relieved to have more time to devote to teaching, writing, our families, and our hobbies, we have also come to recognize that leaving our positions resulted in a grieving process with which we are not entirely

finished. When we stepped down, we each “disappeared” from day to day activities within our programs and department. For Valerie, this was because

“I don't want to step on toes or give the impression I want the job back, so I spend a lot of effort biting my tongue and silently hoping things go the way I would like them to (i.e., the scheduling of senior level methods courses, my compensation for an overload, the development of the new special education cert.)” (Valerie's journal, January 17, 2020).

Laura intentionally stayed away from campus, not even attending meetings because she felt so demoralized and burned out from the experience of coordination and the way she was treated when she resigned. Laurie, because she was replaced so abruptly after years of service, had to disengage from what she felt was an unsafe and somewhat toxic environment.

For each of us, taking literal and figurative steps back from our programs and departments served to help us heal and recover from the challenges of leadership, but it also isolated us at our institutions and potentially caused a lack of continuity in the work. However, in looking at the cycles of the grieving process, our reactions seem natural. In the early stage of denial, we each practiced “avoidance” by disengaging from the work. While we did not stay in this stage long, Laura and Laurie in particular have cycled between “anger” and “depression” as they seek to return to more balanced lives as teacher educators. Working together on this self-study has shown us a path to the “dialogue and bargaining” stage because we feel ready to share our stories with others. As Laurie noted,

“I'm still at the frustration stage, but our collaboration on this particular study was proof that we have moved on to the dialogue and bargaining stage. Wanting to tell our stories and have others affirm them. I don't know that I'm yet fully at the acceptance stage” (Laurie's journal, January 20, 2020). To which Laura replied, “Oh, I am not at the acceptance stage. I want to be, but I'm not” (Laura's journal, January 20, 2020).

For us, this finding is not surprising, but it does raise questions about the cost of serving in leadership roles at any level within teacher education. Should this work have the kind of health and wellness consequences that we each experienced? How can those of us within teacher education better advocate for support for all engaged in the work—faculty (tenure track and not), staff, and administrators? How can we create contexts that allow people to remain true to and care for their various selves, rather than allowing one “self” to consume all we do, personally and professionally? These are questions that require further study and reflection from all in our teacher education community.

Significance

Self-study allows us to name, examine, and understand the influences on our selves and our practices, whether those are internal or external (Crowe, et al., 2018).

Reconnecting to and rediscovering our teacher identities and moving away from our roles in administration prompted this study and will hopefully encourage others in teacher education, especially those in transition, to examine their selves and their practices to improve teacher education overall. We now have a unique opportunity to intentionally realign our beliefs and practices and find our new selves, and we invite other self-study scholars to join us in investigating how our identities shift, over time, and based on circumstances out of our control.

We look forward to seeing how others in the S-STEP community have found ways to take back control of their own work, providing a pathway for others to avoid some of the pitfalls and consequences we encountered.

Our findings also point to the importance of support for those leaving leadership roles. Just as there needs to be intentional support and mentoring for people new to leadership roles, there needs to be attention and thought given to transitions and exits. This support and attention can help provide the type of continuity that Valerie's institution experienced through the changing of department chairs. It also ensures that faculty do not feel marginalized and further alienated in their own programs and departments in the way that Laurie and Laura did. We found support in one another

through the transitions, but we are also at different institutions spread across the U.S. Attention to transitions could also enable programs and departments to ensure work is progressive and that initiatives and procedures started under one leader are built upon, rather than each new administrator needing to reinvent the wheel. These realizations came to light in our online conversations and journals. We began to see the lack of meaningful, intentional transitions and the pattern across institutions was that conversations only happened in times of crisis. These processes and procedures are not only ineffective but likely create unsustainable leadership over time. Having served in the roles we did, we were acutely aware of the tasks that needed to be accomplished which suffered from the starts and stops of inadequate transitional thought, often affecting us as well as our students.

Finally, we found this study to be a healthy way to process and move on from our experiences as leaders in our institutions. This has been similar to the grieving process, in that we had to move through various stages in order to come to reconstruct our professional identities as “just” teacher educators. We each find ourselves at different stages, from frustration and anger to bargaining and even acceptance. Working together has allowed us to experience these stages safe from judgment, hopefully enabling each of us to “heal” more authentically. However, questions remain for us about the need to physically and mentally recover from our work. How can teacher education institutions and teacher educators create environments less toxic to the human beings within them?

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