Weaving Our Strengths

Sustaining Practices & Critical Reflections in Teacher Education

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Teacher Education   Critical Reflective Practice   Reflective Practice   Metaphor

A good life is like a weaving. Energy is created in the tension. The struggle, the pull and tug are everything.
- Joan Erikson

As two early-career teacher educators, who are also fiber artists, with a nearly decade-long friendship, we have recently begun to reflect on our own pedagogical movement in relation to the pulls, tugs, and tensions of our everyday lives. We both work in public universities in statewide systems in New England, located in the Northeast part of the United States. We entered our roles in 2016 and 2017, respectively, and joined departments of Education that train and prepare pre-service educators for teaching careers in the PK-12 field. When we joined the field of teacher preparation, we fully recognized the challenging teaching climate that we were about to enter. A recent report from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) surveyed a group of university leaders to better understand the current state of teacher education across the country (AASCU, 2016). This survey revealed multiple challenges for teacher preparation programs, including: (1) a PK-12 field that is asking teachers to "do more with less" as they navigate growing expectations with limited autonomy, low wages, constrained budgets, and teacher shortages (2) declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs, increased university costs, and limited resources and budgets; (3) policy challenges that include increased federal and state accountability, shifting accreditation requirements, and a dramatic increase in alternative and emergency certification pathways; and lastly, (4) a growing demand for quality teachers for all ages as a generation of teachers plans for retirement in the coming years (AASCU, 2016). It is in this challenging context that we found ourselves, two new teacher educators, learning how to navigate the professional setting of higher education.

As researchers and educators, we knew that this transition would be a tricky one, as others have also documented their struggles with the transitions into new roles and institutions. Our personal experiences mirror the literature from the field of identity development, which highlights the required shift away from the role of classroom teachers, while simultaneously navigating complex social and structural contexts within higher education (Ritter, 2007; Williams et al., 2012; Young & Erickson, 2011). The added demands and threats to teacher education, as highlighted by the AASCU study, make this transition even more challenging, which can result in negative self-views (Izadinia, 2014). However, we also know that self- inquiry and community support are instrumental in sustaining teacher educator development (Bullock, 2009; Izadinia, 2014; Williams et al., 2012).

Like many new professors, we struggled with the transition to teacher education from graduate school (Murray & Male, 2005) and realized that we needed a support system to help sustain our work. We developed and began the practice of routine check-ins with each other and collaborative online journaling to support our development as critically reflective

practitioners (Brookfield, 2017; Buchanan & Clark, 2018). This process of self-study led us to create our own framework of critical reflection, which asks the educator to thoroughly examine their teaching contexts, pedagogies, and commitments. Having used this framework for three years, it has become an integral piece in our approach to creating and sustaining humanizing pedagogies in our college classrooms. In addition, we have also collected data on how our pre-service teachers engage with and respond to the framework, which has both demonstrated their development and reciprocally influenced our own growth (Buchanan & Clark, 2018). While our framework for reflection has been generative, we have been also searching for an analytic tool to help us further understand the adjustments, tactics, and strategies that were emerging in our discussion and critical reflections.

This study is focused on how we chose and used one specific analytic tool: a metaphor of weaving, to both deepen and broaden our collaboration and reflections. Inspired by our shared interest in the fiber arts and textiles, we decided to use the practice of weaving as a metaphor for our work – within both the higher education institutions in which we are working and teaching, but also the broader field of education in the United States. We chose the methodology and framing of self-study to enact this metaphor in our reflection, furthering our analysis and deepening our understanding of our own pedagogies. In this self-study, we posit the following research questions: (1) what are the institutional restrictions or barriers that we have found ourselves challenged by?; and (2) what actions or tactics have we used to navigate these challenges? Our analysis of the answers to these two questions has provided us insight into how our professional identities have adjusted to working in the field of teacher education. We use these insights, which focus on relational and humanizing pedagogies, to propose this new methodological tool for our peers and colleagues who are entering careers in education.

Methodology

This paper extends the scope of our previous work to examine our practice within a larger context. We are also both fiber artists who have experience knitting, crocheting, weaving, and spinning wool. Over the past year, we have used the metaphor to make sense of our identity development as teacher educators in relation to the contexts in which we work. Using social practice theories of identity development (Alsup, 2006; Holland et al., 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991) we have been examining the ways we weave ourselves into, out of, and around the systems that shape our work lives. We understand identity development as an ongoing process that involves both narrativized (stories we tell about ourselves) and positioned (how we are situated by the contexts) elements. Understanding identity development through this framework highlights the ways that identities and practices are mutually constitutive, developing in tandem. As Izadinia (2014) found in her literature review of teacher educator identities: "The development of teacher educators' practice is connected to the development of their professional identity" (p. 427). As teacher educators, we engage in the good work of weaving the warps (the rigid, stable threads wound onto the loom) and wefts (the threads woven through the warp) of our textured lives.

Using this metaphor, the warp is the rigid system of education in which we operate (both PK-12 and higher education), and our analysis examines the challenges we have faced navigating that system. The weft is our individual moves among the institutional forces as we attempt to enact the commitments we have unpacked through our critically reflective process. The warps demonstrate how we are positioned and structured within the institution, while the wefts illustrate how our practices and improvisations guided our development as teacher educators. We have grounded our self-study in examining how we work within the structured system of education, while simultaneously acting to resist, change, and improve that exact system. The result is an in-process tapestry that is woven out of our collective attempt to redesign the local experiences of teacher education for our students and ourselves.

Figure 1

Weaving.
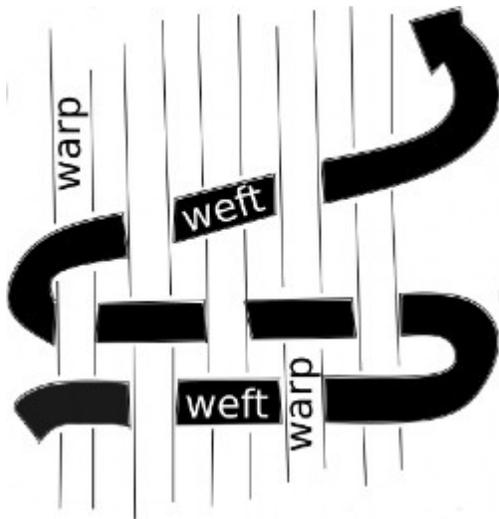
The use of a metaphor as a way to examine one's work, identity, and pedagogy is not a new one, as multiple qualitative and educational researchers have used metaphors as a way to examine and reflect on the journeys and movements that one may make in a career in education (Aubusson, 2004; East, 2009; Nias & Aspinwall, 1995; Perry & Cooper, 2001). Perry and Cooper (2001) highlight the benefits of using the metaphor as a reflective tool, as it "helps us make sense of our world and of the circumstances we are involved in... metaphors can be used as powerful educative tools." (p. 43). East's (2009) use of a metaphor in a self-study demonstrates how metaphors are especially helpful when used over time, to more critically examine one's practice through a process of stepping back from the everyday pedagogies. Aubusson (2004) also found metaphors as helpful in his work with pre-service educators, noting the way that metaphors fostered relationships and collaboration by creating a distance from some challenging emotional reflections. Much like the research done previously, we were able to use this metaphor to engage in more structured self-reflection. We posit here that the specific metaphor of a weaving practice is especially useful in a collaborative and critical reflective practice for new teacher educators.

Self-study is a helpful tool for our inquiry as it created a space for us to closely analyze the tensions we experience (Berry, 2007). Drawing from foundational aspects of self-study methodology (Laboskey, 2004), we engaged in a collaborative, interactive, self-focused, project aimed at the improvement of practice. Our data set was a series of conversations and shared journal entries that focused on our research question. Over the course of nine months, we wrote about our experiences in an online shared journal (using Google docs). In addition, we had bi-weekly phone calls to discuss issues that were arising in our work. The written journal entries and the audio-recordings of our phone conversations became the data which we coded and analyzed. Our writing helped us outline our stories and interactions, while our conversations became the dialogic framing that was needed to further our reflections. In order to organize this data, we created a chart where journal entries and conversational snippets were categorized as answers to the questions we pose in our critically reflective practice framework (Buchanan & Clark, 2018). The next phase of analysis focused on the moments where we specifically navigated (the weaving of the weft) in and around institutional structures (the rigid warp). We coded warps that arose as part of our reflections as well as tactics (or wefts) we used to navigate and negotiate those warps. For example, budget constraints, accreditation requirements, and teaching load were all identified as warps - constraining institutional structures. We noted and coded the moves, adjustments, and tensions that were present in those moments and how we maneuvered through them - both successfully and unsuccessfully. These wefts were nuanced and complex (re)actions we took to continually engage in critically reflective practice amidst the constraining context. In this way, the metaphor gave shape to our examination of our identity development. Figure 2 demonstrates how we mapped our warps and wefts onto the metaphor.

Figure 2

Weaving Ourselves.
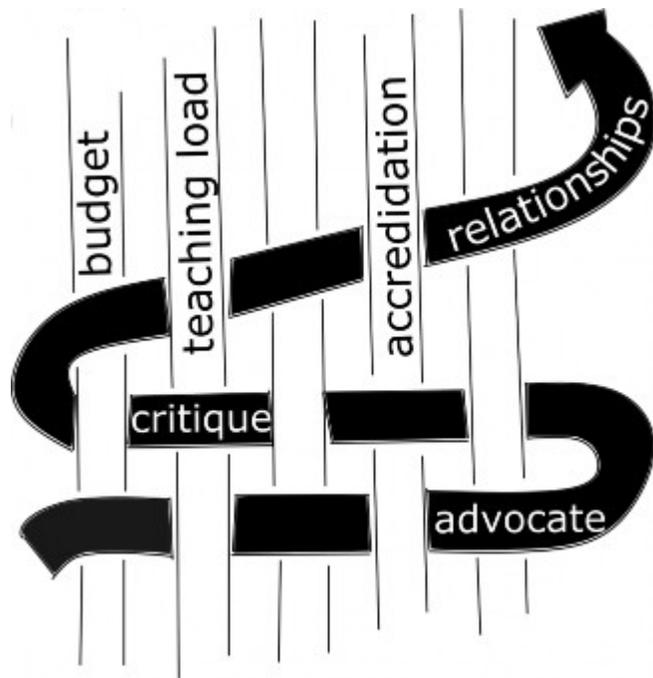
Our Findings

Our analysis has revealed a series of actions, or *tactics*, that we have taken to negotiate our respective institutions (De Certeau, 2005). These tactics, as described here, have helped us not only navigate the warp, but simultaneously work through some of the tensions that we have experienced, and engage in a collaborative and critical reflective practice.

Creativity & Criticality Under Accountability

One common warp that we identified in our journal and discussions is the ongoing, and often increasing, accreditation and accountability measures that we found our teacher preparation programs beholden to. These included both state and national measurements that linked our curriculum to the professional standards and content knowledge for educators in the field. As former educators and graduate student researchers of the public school system, this warp was not an unexpected one for us, as we had both experienced multiple levels of accountability in our work prior to becoming faculty. However, we were routinely challenged by this warp as new teacher educators, who were hopeful about the transformative potential in the design and creation of new content and courses for our pre-service teachers.

To navigate this warp, we found that we had to engage in some creative and critical acts in our daily pedagogical practices. We each worked to acknowledge the standards and requirements that are mandated by our accrediting bodies, but rather than "teaching to" these standards or tests, we chose to weave in and through them with a critical perspective. For example, in one of Maggie's pre-practicum courses, her pre-service teacher students are asked to focus on the state's professional standards for teachers, a set of guidelines that define the pedagogical and professional knowledge and skills that all teachers need to demonstrate in their practice. Rather than simply addressing each skill through a lecture in the college classroom, she chose to frame the standards using critical inquiry. She asked her students questions about the perspectives that are embedded in the skills, such as: "What does this standard mean to you?

What might it mean to someone else? How else might it be interpreted? What kind of pedagogy and teaching practice does this standard address? Do you agree with that pedagogy - if so, why? Who holds the power in the learner-teacher relationship in this pedagogy?" For Maggie, this critical framing was meant to do two things: (1) highlight and learn about the standard (the goal according to the accrediting bodies) while simultaneously (2) offering her students the space to question and think about the cultural and social constructs that are embedded in such standards and what

role that they (as future educators) might play in enacting them in different ways. This became a creative pedagogical act, asking students to think about how to address and engage with skill while also critiquing and questioning the assumptions that are embedded within it.

Rebecca found a similar practice in working to establish freedom and fun within the confines of the more rigid curriculum structures. For example, she adjusted a key assessment in one of her courses to broaden its scope. Key assessments could not be eliminated, as they had been selected in the prior accreditation cycle as tools to measure student progress on teaching standards. The original assignment was to draft an advocacy letter that highlighted the needs of diverse students. Rebecca expanded the assignment into an advocacy project that students actually carried out during the course. For example, last semester one of the students created a website on inclusive practices for LGBTQ+ students, which they promoted through their own social media networks (Cobalt, 2019). This not only fulfilled the requirements for the assignment and professional standards, but it has also become a text that Rebecca uses in the class for other pre-service teachers when they explore the experiences and needs of LGBTQ students. This kept the core goals aligned to the standard but allowed for students to engage with different mediums and modalities (they no longer simply had to write a letter), and moreover, they actually advocated for their issue, which allowed for a different level of engagement with the issues they had identified.

Navigating Multiple Institutional Spaces

As new teacher educators, we also found ourselves working across multiple contexts and spaces within the institution. For example, during an average week, we are teaching in the college classroom, attending committee and departmental meetings with our faculty colleagues, supervising and coaching our students out in the PK-12 public schools in our communities, and meeting one-on-one with our student advisees regarding their academic progress - to name a few. These different spaces, we recognize, require unique skill sets and professional identities. While our "teaching" requires a pedagogy of thoughtful and planned guidance, critical questioning, and an ability to connect our students' lives with the theory and practice from the field (all of which we have identified in our reflective work and discussions), our departmental and college meetings required a whole host of other skills, including careful listening, collaborative acknowledgment, and problem-solving.

Advising requires a deep knowledge of the institutional rules and requirements for students, along with consistent communication and one-on-one attention. When supervising, we found ourselves focused on our observational skills, offering support and guidance to our students as they practice their own new teaching skills in the classroom.

At times, the shifting of our skills was daunting - and we came across some challenges when we weren't able to make the appropriate shift. For example, in our college classrooms, we were questioning, critiquing, and examining language, discourses, and the negative impacts of schooling on America's youth. We then found ourselves in meetings about how our own curriculum will address a set of specific standards, ones that we must meet in order to fulfill the licensing obligations to the accrediting bodies. In these meetings, the critical perspective and questioning, we found, wasn't welcome or helpful. In our journal, we wrote about these shifts as a series of conflicting professional selves:

> *For me then - it is like two professional selves. In one, I try to undo the norms of traditional schooling in an effort to both provide my students a more humanizing experience and help them see ways they may do this as teachers. In the other, I uphold the professional norms and boundaries, even the particularly narrow ones of this institution, as a method of self protection so that I can continue to do the unraveling work in my teaching. In this way the weft reinforces the warp - making it stronger. And that feels like the conundrum of my engagement. In order to attempt to undo the thing, I recreate it. (Online Journal)*

Over the past few years, we have begun to establish a series of tactics to help us maneuver through these spaces, in an effort to engage our critical and humanizing commitments to education, while also ensuring that we can sustain ourselves within a system that we are also trying to change.

An example of these tactics can be found when we enter the classrooms of young children as teacher supervisors. Recognizing that we hold power in this position, we have identified specific ways to share this power among all of the

participants in the room. In one phone conversation about our practices as teacher supervisors, we discussed how we both jot notes in a notebook, eschewing our laptops because we think that the computer formalizes our interactions. We both sit with the PK-12 students in order to experience the lesson fully and chat with kids about what they are doing. In one instance a veteran cooperating teacher, with 20 years of experience, noted that no one else from the university had ever sat on the carpet with the kids. These approaches intentionally diffuse the authority embedded within the supervisor role and attempt to humanize the process of observation, because the experience of being watched and evaluated can be dehumanizing for both pre-service teachers and PK-12 students.

We have also learned to engage tactically in professional spaces within our colleges and departments. Department meetings, for example, involve participation from stakeholders from multiple backgrounds with differing positionalities. There is a culture in department meetings that is often unspoken, embedded within the local context. We have come to understand these cultures through participation, which has required us to re-examine our own positionality. In other academic spaces (teaching, advising, and supervising), we typically hold the most power in relation to other participants in those activities. In our teaching spaces, we are cognizant of this imbalance and actively work to question this role and share power with others. But our positioning is different in faculty meetings. And navigating that positioning required us to develop a different set of skills, including the ability to foreground different aspects of our identities as we move through the different institutional spaces.

Discussion of Our Fibrous Selves

We came to our faculty positions rooted in critical theory with a commitment to the liberatory power of education and its capacity to create a more equitable society. We both began our positions by trying to enact that vision through programmatic and curricular change. However, we recognized that we did not always understand the strength of the warps and how they had woven themselves into the institutional culture. Because we did not initially understand the strength of the warp, we pushed too hard on the fabric, which made it difficult to make space for ourselves in between the warps. As a result, we have tactically shifted our efforts to what is in our control: enacting our vision of critically reflective practice in our courses and relationships and acknowledging the role that power plays in each of these spaces.

Using the metaphor and the practices of weaving, with the structure of warps and throwing of wefts, we have found that this methodological frame for our self-study allowed us to simultaneously distance ourselves from a challenging context, while also supporting one another as we work to construct and understand our professional identities. The field of teacher education in the US is rife with challenges that include accountability and oversight, tensions and budget constraints, declining student enrollments, and increasing demands for qualified educators. By identifying these needs, and examining them in our collaborative writing and discussions, we allowed ourselves to hold these challenges up for analysis, recognizing that they are indeed separate from our personal identities. Yes, these challenges exist and our work must address them. However, in order to sustain a pedagogy of hope, care, collaboration, and liberation, we must find the space apart from that context to sustain ourselves and support our students. We are not the warps, but rather we move among them, between them.

We also acknowledge the role that our critical friendship has afforded us in this work (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). We regularly discuss the importance of support systems in teaching and have found that in our collaboration, we have helped one another continue to imagine and find strength, optimism, and hope. We know that writing about our failures, discussing our challenges, and admitting our mistakes requires a level of vulnerability with each other, but we also know that in our work, we have been able to create a judgment-free space for one another. We aim to model a relationship that counteracts the many challenges that teacher educators face. Together, we acknowledge these challenges but do so in order to imagine new, better, and alternative ways to move through the institutions that we are in. Doing this together, for us, is better than doing it in isolation. For us, this collaboration, criticality, inquiry, and curiosity is at the core of not only who we are as researchers, but also who we aim to be as teachers.

Conclusion: Our Wefts as Our "Critical Hope"

Teaching is hard and the institutions of schooling in America present multiple rigid, restrictive, damaging, and even harmful contexts for both learners and teachers alike. To wake up and choose to teach every day presents an ethical quandary for critically thinking and theorizing educators. We are forced to contemplate how to navigate such challenges and restrictions and work to identify where and how we can make a change. As two new teacher educators in the field of public education, we have spent the past three years working to create a framework for how to sustainably engage in this work.

The metaphor of weaving was a helpful one for us because it enabled us to identify the warps - the rigid, seemingly immovable aspects of working within an institution. The metaphor becomes a tool for reflection, distancing one from the emotional component, and creating space for more objective, critical reflection. For us, the weaving metaphor and the process of identifying both the warps and the wefts helped us acknowledge our role, our power, and our purposeful tactics as we work to sustain a career in teaching.

At times, these tactics presented conundrums for us, as we identified aspects of our work that we were challenged or even damaged by, but they simultaneously energized us as we worked collaboratively to critically reflect and acknowledge both the pain and the "critical hope" that we engage in within our professional and personal pedagogies (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). We identified the moments where we are making intentional moves in our work, which helped us acknowledge that within these moves, despite the tensions, we are in turn, creating a stronger textile, one that is not simply the textile of our life, but also the textile of our social worlds, and the fabric of our fields. And it is in this strength, where we can find solace and sustainability in our work.

As we navigate these lives as both teachers and fiber artists, we will continue to examine, appreciate, question, and challenge these tensions. We will appreciate the ways that we move and weave through these tensions and celebrate the moments, however brief when the textile has not only become something stronger, but also something completely new.

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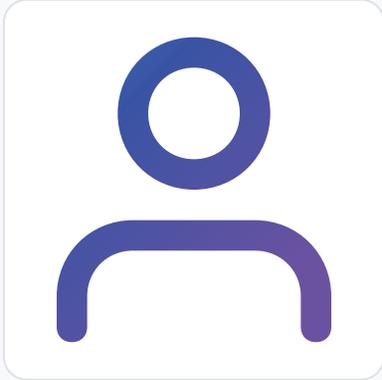
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