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Collaborative reflection: Professional development among friends across contexts

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This inquiry presents an illustrative case of three teacher educator researchers' collaborative reflection process using the transcript of a virtual meeting. The researchers are long-term friends and colleagues working in different university contexts in the United States. The case is presented and analyzed to illuminate how the triad facilitates one another's professional development and engages in sustainable collaborative self-study research. Self-study tenets of collaboration, reflection, and critical friendship are delineated and demonstrated through excerpts from the transcript. Conclusions and recommendations are offered for teacher educators who hope to establish and maintain similar partnerships focused on promoting healthy and productive professional/personal relationships while also improving teacher education.

KEYWORDS

collaboration, reflection, critical friendship, teacher education, professional development

Introduction

How does critical, collaborative, reflection change teaching practice? What are the elements of critical friendship that help us explore questions of practice that are rooted in the specifics of our own teaching but that also transcend individual circumstances to contribute to the field of teacher education writ large? These were the questions with which we grappled while discussing this manuscript. In preparing for this work, we struggled with what we could add that was not a repeat of previous articles and chapters we have written, since we had already worked as a triad for a decade (Haniford et al., 2021; Allison and Ramirez, 2022; Ramirez and Allison, 2022).

We are three teacher educators who have worked collaboratively to support one another's professional development and scholarship on our practice over multiple years. Our collaborative, professional relationships grew out of personal affinity for one another. As we have noted elsewhere (Allison and Ramirez, 2022), our friendship and research partnership is not unique among those conducting self-study scholarship in teacher education practices. Similar friendship-based partnerships are evident in Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009), Coia and Taylor (2013), Loughran and Brubaker (2015), Stolle et al. (2019), Pithouse-Morgan and Samaras (2020) and numerous others. In some cases, the partners met as two of us, Valerie and Laurie, did as peers in graduate school (i.e., Pinnegar

& Hamilton), and in others, they evolved among colleagues at the same or across institutions (i.e., Coia & Taylor, Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras).

What all of these partnerships, including ours, share is a friendship that precedes and transcends the collaborative work. For us – initially Laurie and Valerie, and now Laurie, Valerie, and Laura – the strength and depth of the friendship has been paramount to our longevity as collaborators, and we would assert, in many ways it influences the quality and characteristics of our scholarship. We navigate all components of our partnership from the footing of our friendship. This has remained true through the inclusion of Laura as a third research partner in the past 5 years.

Laurie and Valerie's collaborative self-study partnership, which began with an initiative designed to keep them connected after they finished their graduate studies (Ramirez et al., 2012), evolved over time to include, among others, studies focused on being students of their own practice (Ramirez and Allison-Roan, 2014; Allison et al., 2020); navigating into, through and out of departmental level administrative roles (Allison and Ramirez, 2016, 2020b; Ramirez et al., 2020; Haniford et al., 2021); and addressing the crisis and repercussions of childhood sexual abuse (Allison et al., 2016; Ramirez and Allison, 2018; Allison and Ramirez, 2020a). Foci that have been consistent through our work include a shared commitment to transparency of practice, critical reflection, democratic principles in teaching, and social justice and advocacy.

Laura first met Laurie and Valerie at the 2012 Castle Conference, a biannual conference held in East Sussex, England, focused on the self-study of teacher educator practices. Laura did not return to the Castle until 2016, but at that time she immediately renewed her friendship with Laurie and Valerie. While the three of us kept in touch between 2016 and 2018 (the next Castle Conference), we did not begin to collaborate as self-study scholars until a similarity in our professional circumstances pushed us in that direction.

When we arrived at the Castle in 2018, all three of us were serving in some sort of leadership role at our respective institutions. Valerie was serving as department chair, while Laurie and Laura were both serving as program coordinators. During breaks in the conference, we found ourselves discussing some of the challenges we were facing in these ill-defined and poorly supported middle management roles. Our first self-study together was a self-study into the impact of our leadership roles on our selves as teacher educators, the effects leadership had on our teaching, and the challenges for time and balance in our personal lives (Ramirez et al., 2020; Haniford et al., 2021).

Coincidentally, as we returned to our institutions from the Castle, we each left our administrative work. Valerie's term as chair was over, Laura resigned her coordinator position (in solidarity with two other coordinators), and Laurie was asked to step down. This strange coincidence probably helped cement our collaboration as we sought to process, understand, and make meaning from leaving our administrative positions in these different ways (Ramirez et al., 2020; Haniford et al., 2021). Returning to our roles as "just teacher educators" lead to further research conversations about where we were able to recenter our teaching and research without the stress, time constraints, and managerial tasks of our leadership roles.

As our friendship deepened, so did our research collaboration, and vice versa. This includes our processes in brainstorming new research projects, the nature of our communication with one another as we launch and carry out inquiries, the give and take of drafting and revising presentations and manuscripts, and ultimately, consideration in determining the order of our names on publications. In the 5 years since forming our triad, we have collaborated on inquiries into our identities as administrators (Ramirez et al., 2020; Haniford et al., 2021), on supporting one another's efforts to innovate and improve particular aspects of our practice (Allison et al., 2020, 2021), and more recently, to understand the influence of the world beyond our classrooms on our students and ourselves (in progress).

For context, Valerie is an associate professor working primarily with undergraduate secondary education students at a small, private, liberal arts university in Pennsylvania. Laura is an associate professor at a research-1 institution in New Mexico. Her students are both undergraduate secondary education majors and graduate students. Laurie is an associate professor at a moderately large state university in North Carolina. She teaches undergraduate and graduate students in her institution's middle grades program. The demographics of our student populations are as dissimilar as our geographic locations.

Valerie's students are primarily from the Northeast region of the United States and of traditional college-going age. Except for the few who live with family members locally, they reside in on-campus housing. Seventy percent of students are involved in extracurricular programing (i.e., athletics, clubs and Greek life). While not universally true, Valerie's students largely come from middle to upper middle-class backgrounds. Approximately 80% identify as White, non-Hispanic.

Laura's students are predominantly from New Mexico, with the majority being from the Albuquerque Metro area. The university is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution and in the fall of 2021 the undergraduate demographics were 42.2% Hispanic, 35% White, 7.7% Asian, 5.1% Native American and 2.1% African American. The school is a commuter campus, with 93% of students living off campus. Only 44% of students are of traditional college age.

Laurie's students, because it is a state school in rural Appalachia, are not highly diverse, with nearly 82% of students identifying as White. Latinx students make up 6.91%, with Black students at only 3.67%. The lowest demographic groups are Asian (1.58%), American Indian (0.306%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders (0.0415). Students are predominantly of traditional college age, and there are often few programs or supports for students who are less highly represented. Most students live on campus or in apartments nearby, which have multiplied greatly as the student population has grown. The bulk of the diversity seen on campus and in the community is related

to socioeconomic status, which is sometimes a contrast of the urban/rural/suburban regions from which they come.

Literature review

Foundations of collaboration

This study is grounded within the traditions of self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) literature which advocates collaboration for teacher educators in the study of their practice. Loughran and Northfield (1998) argued that working with important "other(s)" can lead to genuine transformation of practice, rather than simply rationalizing or justifying it. Further, collaboratively reflecting on practice involves others in the process of interpreting, challenging, and understanding data, creating the possibility of a multilayered impact on teaching practice (Tidwell and Heston, 1998). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) promoted collaboration, suggesting research is enhanced by multiple, and sometimes alternative or oppositional, perspectives as we consider our practices, potential problems, and positive aspects.

Both Loughran and Northfield (1998) and Mena and Russell (2017) posited that collaboration is foundational to self-study research, and that it is through collaboration that the integrity of research and researchers are enhanced. Ultimately, collaboration in self-study is seen as a means for enhancing the research's trustworthiness (Mena and Russell, 2017). Working with others who can provide a range of perspectives strengthens the trustworthiness of the data sources and analyses (Loughran and Northfield, 1998; Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009; Mena and Russell, 2017). In this work we have collaborated as a triad both in seeking the means for improving our respective practices, as well as in studying the consequences of those efforts for ourselves and, ultimately, our students. As such, we assert our research meets the standard of trustworthiness as it has been conducted collaboratively with the shared goal of better understanding and improving our teaching practices (Taylor and Coia, 2009).

Foundations of critical reflection

Critical reflection, another foundational component of self-study research, has consistently been central to our work as teacher educators and researchers. Critical reflection, as Brookfield (2009) observed, is not an "unequivocal concept" (p. 218) with its competing and sometimes divergent definitions (e.g., Brookfield, 1995, 2009; Zeichner and Liston, 1996; Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002). Aligning with Brookfield (1995, 2009), we view reflection as being 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. Our definition of critical reflection has resulted in a stance of deconstruction where we are engaged in a "partnered practice of critical reflection," a process of collaboratively (de)constructing knowledge about teaching and encouraging one another to critically reflect on our practice alongside our desired goals (Berry and Crowe, 2009, p. 86).

Additionally, we are inspired by analysis of Buchanan and Clark (2018) of reflection within teacher preparation. They outline a set of questions for teacher educators and PK-12 teachers to support "critical, in-depth, collaborative reflective practice" (p. 453): Ask who and where; ask how and what; ask why. Through asking these deeper, more contextualized questions of one another, the hope is that the reflective focus will transcend an individual, technical approach and take into consideration the ways social context and issues of power and positionality impact our understanding of teaching and learning.

Foundations of critical friendship

Self-study researchers and scholars have long asserted the value of critical friendship as a component of researchers' methodology (Loughran and Northfield, 1998; Lighthall, 2004; Tidwell and Fitzgerald, 2004; Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009). Berry and Russell (2014) argued that through critical friendships, self-study researchers "develop new insights and perspectives that can challenge and strengthen their own work" (p. 195). Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) defined the roles that critical friends might serve,

> We engage critical friends or other collaborators asking them to question our data, our interpretations, our analysis, and our assertions about our practice. In this way, others in our practice are a valuable source of data and analysis as well as a source of confirming and disconfirming evidence for our understandings and assertions for action. (p. 15)

More recently, Stolle et al. (2019) identified two applications of the term *critical friends* in self-study research. In the first category, "one or more critical friends [is] supporting/coaching the transformation of another's teaching," and in the second, "one or more critical friends [is] supporting the trustworthiness of research methods" (p. 20). As we examine our own work through categorization of Stolle et al. (2019), we assert that we have synthesized the two. We characterize each other as co-critical friends or "co-mentors" (Allison and Ramirez, 2016). Our intent is to both support the improvement of our practice and to enhance the trustworthiness of our collaborative research on our practice.

There is not one "best practice" in developing critical friendships and carrying out the work of a critical friend. Mena and Russell (2017) contended, "A critical friend who already understands the researcher can help to review data, challenge assumptions, and suggest additional perspectives" (p. 116). Stolle et al. (2019) identified "three characteristics central to an effective critical friendship: vulnerability, reflection and skepticism" (p. 23). Assessing ourselves by characteristics of Stolle et al., we believe it is evident that we have been wholeheartedly vulnerable with each

other. Because we trust and are invested in each other, we seek to ask the kinds of contextualized, critical reflective questions described above (Buchanan and Clark, 2018). We see benefits in serving as co-critical friends to one another that are related to being simultaneously good friends and having many commonalities among us, but being in communities, professional and personally, apart from one another. Because we live and work in communities that are not geographically connected, we have not found it necessary to be cautious in our vulnerability and reflection out of fear it might influence relationships we have with individuals who intersect our three communities. Furthermore, because our institutions and our roles and responsibilities within them are dissimilar, we can offer one another an outsider perspective that we assert enhances skepticism.

Methodology

Our process as researchers and friends

As veteran self-study collaborators, we were invited to submit this manuscript describing our process of critical friendship, focusing particularly on how we balance support with focused, honest feedback to improve our practice. As regular collaborators, we have multiple, ongoing projects we are working on at any one time. As a result, we have regularly scheduled Zoom meetings to work on different research, manuscripts, etc. The excerpt we analyze below came from a meeting to discuss the focus of this paper.

In the course of our conversation about how to organize this paper, we began discussing the concrete changes to practice to which we each can point that are a direct result of our collaboration. Valerie brought up a community study assignment she adopted from Laura, leading to a conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of this assignment. All three of us began to discuss the challenges our students have in understanding how to learn about the communities of and surrounding a school and how important it is for teacher candidates to know how to build on the *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2006) available in each school context. As this discussion continued, we realized the structure of our conversation was familiar and part of how we work together. What we initially thought was one of our frequent "off topic" conversations became an example of how we work together to make changes to our practice, systematically study those changes, and make our learning public in a way that we hope is beneficial to other teacher educators.

In this paper, we use "dialog as a research stance or methodology" (Guilfoyle et al., 2004, p. 1109). Through our dialog with one another we "explore ideas, theories, concepts, and practice so that we develop understandings that allow confident action: physical, mental, or explanatory" (Guilfoyle et al., 2004, p. 1111). Through our work, we seek to explore what we know, how we have come to know it, and the implications of our knowledge for our work as teacher educators. We are interested in the interaction of "the self and the other in practice" (Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009, p. 12).

Self-study allows teacher educators to examine beliefs, practices, and the interconnections between the two (Berry and Crowe, 2009; Samaras, 2011). It offers a framework for inquiry that allows us to focus on efforts to "improve teaching and teacher education and the institutional contexts in which they take place" (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 844). Furthermore, our critical friendship and collaboration have been central in helping to support one another in our teacher education practices (and in life), validating our research, and offering other perspectives on our experiences (Samaras, 2011; Ramirez and Allison-Roan, 2014). Self-study allowed us to consider the individual selves of the study, our contexts and goals, from an insider perspective and without the methodological constraints of other types of educational research (Zeichner, 2007; Roose, 2008).

Because we live in different areas of the United States, we have used Zoom for our research meetings even before the pandemic. Zoom offers a way to discuss and create narratives around our experiences, despite the distance between us. Narrative is a mode of both reasoning and representation; we can both comprehend the world and our experience narratively, as well as share it narratively for the purposes of dissemination and critique (Richardson, 1997; Feldman, 2009). We regularly record our meetings to use as data. For this manuscript, we recorded the dialog and utilizing Zoom's transcription feature, we began by cleaning up and correcting the transcript created by the software.

We compiled the data *via* Google Docs and systematically immersed ourselves in an iterative process, doing line-by-line readings, identifying the particular moves in the discussion we wanted to further examine in light of the literature on dialog, self-study, and critical friendship discussed above. In our weekly online meetings, we returned to the transcript, discussed new developments, and refined our thoughts about what knowledge we were constructing in the course of the dialog, and what new knowledge we were coming to through further analysis. As Guilfoyle et al. (2004) remind us, "When an idea or understanding is articulated, just the act of saying or the act of listening to may be an act of coming to know" (p. 1161). While collaboratively writing, we were able to revisit the data, make new realizations, and discuss the importance of the work we were doing and had done.

Findings

Typically, our collaborations and research processes are qualitative in nature, leaning heavily on the work of self-study scholars (e.g., Pinnegar and Hamilton, 2009; Samaras, 2011). As a result, we structure this manuscript around this conversation, using it as an illustrative case (Mitchell, 1983). After we describe the conversation, we highlight the ways we use the similarities and differences between us–institutionally, professionally, and personally–as fertile ground for our own learning and practice.

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The following excerpt occurred about 10 min into an hour-long meeting held *via* Zoom[1] in spring 2022. We divide the transcript into sections in order to unpack what is happening as the conversation unfolds.

Section one: Starting with historical practice

> Laura: Right, it's well, maybe it's two things, maybe it's in service of making the work better, but that work is the writing but it's also our work as teacher educators. I know that in our conversations and in the questions I asked you, I'm not just learning, I'm not just pushing you, I'm also pushing myself.
>
> Valerie: Right, so like the deeper our thinking goes as a collaborative, the deeper my own thinking about my teaching goes, and I can make changes to my teaching and so I think it's, I think it's the recognition I'm a better teacher because of the collaboration then I would be without it, without the two of you.
>
> Laurie: Right.
>
> Valerie: It's not just about supporting. It's about changing and the ways in which I can walk through things that I've changed in my practice that are a direct cause of our interactions.
>
> Laura: Maybe we should include some of that. Maybe one of the things that we can each do is just take 5–10 min and write down all of those things that we can trace that to. The direct changes I mean. Doing the strategies paper, I never would have done anything like that. I still use some of those strategies.
>
> Laurie: Which one do you not use?
>
> Valerie: The circle one. Yeah, I keep trying. I keep thinking it's just the way I'm implementing it.
>
> Laurie: It did not work as well as the other two, but I plan to use those in the fall.

Unpacking the excerpt

Above Laura refers to a "strategies paper," which was a project we carried out in fall 2018 (Allison et al., 2021). In doing so, Laura is alluding to her continued use of new discussion strategies in her classroom that she believes she would not have attempted without the prompting and support of our triad. The three of us confirm that we each continue to use at least some of the strategies we explored in that inquiry, demonstrating concrete changes to our practice.

In this initial excerpt, we began to articulate how our collaboration functions in a way that supports both our scholarship and our teaching practice. Ultimately, what is essential is that the reflection made available to us through our collaboration adds to our professional lives in ways that are demonstrable. We continue to adapt and change our teaching practice because of the critical friendship we share. Through the work we do together, our research and our teaching are strengthened. Investing in the collaborative relationship is also investing in ourselves.

Section two: Current dilemmas of practice

> Valerie: But, like my adoption of the Hammond book, changing of the community study. I'm dying to talk to you about how you are thinking about changing those assignments because I'm thinking about how I can tweak them to make them a little more effective in the context that I'm working in.
>
> Laura: What would be really interesting, and I wonder if you would want to do this. So I have a former student who was in my very first class here in 2007 and then he was in the master's program with me and now he's a doc student and I'm on his committee, but he also teaches the student teaching seminar for social studies students so it's just cool to have seen his progression and his dissertation is about community cultural wealth and ethnic studies. But I want to actually get together with him this summer to talk about the community assignment and to get his feedback so I'm wondering if we could have a joint session or something where we talked about what we liked about it and what we do not like about it and just sort of get his ideas about how do we help our students really begin to recognize the community cultural wealth that exists.
>
> Valerie: Yeah, after this semester student teaching and one of the student teachers sort of never could really embrace the fact that just because it was different does not mean that there's a deficit, I mean there's a deficit in terms of they do not have a lot of cultural diversity, they have other strengths, that if she'd been able to recognize those strengths.
>
> Laura: Interesting. Was she a white woman who had gone to predominantly white schools?
>
> Valerie: Yeah, and she's from a more metropolitan area that's very liberal and student taught in a school that's predominantly white and rural and very conservative. She just came away like I'm never going to teach in a community like this. And that's fine, but if we do not have people who can work across those differences, like she could have said the same thing if she had been placed in an urban setting.
>
> Laura: That's right.
>
> Valerie: So, helping them recognize there are ways of thinking that you are going to hear more likely in this scenario than another scenario, but how do you teach in a way that helps your students become citizens that can embrace

1 The transcript has been edited for clarity by removing filler words (um and like).

everyone. Not to get too far off track, but I wanted to do some of that work before we head back into the fall semester, but I can give them better structure to the assignment, because I think the assignments are good. I think that it definitely helped them have a different understanding of the communities than they would have if they had not done it, but I needed to help them dig a little deeper than they did.

Laura: It's making me think that it needs to be more scaffolded, the whole assignment in some way.

Valerie: I loved it because I had not done it before I left it pretty open ended. But now that I've had one iteration of them doing it, I can provide them with more direction.

Laura: I've been thinking that too, is there something we can do first? Is there something that we can do second? You know, I have changed it where I have them talk to their focus student from the student study assignment about how would you define your community? Who is important in your community? And then I have them talk to their mentor teacher about the same thing, before I have them then go sort of start exploring the community. To help try and ground them, because if they just do an Internet search all I get is like test scores, and…

Valerie: Free and reduced lunch rates.

Laura: Yeah, there's a Walmart here. And that's not at all what I want.

Valerie: One of the co-ops said, you should have them drive the boundaries of the district. Because the rural district that this one student was in, I mean the catchment area of it is just huge, and there are some really backwoods places there, places where you cannot get Internet period. You just could not get Internet. But the poverty is sort of hidden because it's so rural. And these kids are coming in, on the bus, you know it's largely invisible what the circumstances are that some of these kids are living in.

Unpacking the excerpt

There are several elements to the above excerpt that bear unpacking. First, Valerie brings up the example of the Community Mapping assignment and states there are changes she would like to make to it. Laura agrees it needs additional tweaking in order to meet the goals we each have for our students. Importantly, Laura did not take offense at Valerie's assertion that some revision needs to happen. Instead, she agrees and they begin to talk about what worked well and what worked less well and ideas for how to systematically improve it. There is trust here and the focus is on making the work better, not about our own egos.

You can also see the explicit recognition that perhaps we might benefit from an additional perspective when revising the assignment. We recognize our own limitations, especially in terms of deeply understanding the places where we work, and reach out when we feel an additional viewpoint would be useful. Because we each teach in communities different from the ones in which we were raised, we seek to challenge our own beliefs about our current communities, and we hope to do so in a way that is transparent and that supports our licensure students in also confronting their beliefs about the schools and communities where they are placed.

Next, Valerie described a specific case from her context that caused her to think more deeply about the purpose of the assignment. In the above excerpt, you can see some of the critical reflective questions (Buchanan and Clark, 2018) that helped us begin to unpack what is specific to Valerie's location and what are larger, more systemic teacher education issues. While this example is situated in Valerie's location in rural Pennsylvania, there are elements underlying this case that resonate across all three of our institutional contexts, as we discuss next.

Section three: Working across differences and similarities

Laurie: That's really similar to here. I mean we have one high school for the entire county. And the unique geographical terrain often makes it difficult for buses to get kids to school, with some years seeing 20+ days where a large portion of students just cannot get there. Virtual learning has helped, but there is still a huge disconnect and disruption for parents, teachers, and students.

Laura: Do you have hollows?

Laurie: Oh yeah.

Valerie: We do not have hollows, we have hollers. [Laughter].

Laurie: I mean, some of my students have lived in that holler, I mean their families have lived there for generations.

Laura: Right, right.

Laurie: This place is old.

Valerie: That just breeds a sort of way of relating to the rest of the world when that's your understanding of home.

Laura: The same is true here too, right? There's generations of people who have lived in the same little sub communities, even in Albuquerque, the South Valley or you know tribal areas, these are generational, like long, long generational… that's fascinating.

Laurie: You know it's good and it's bad because I think it sort of limits them in some ways to the broader world outside of their small communities, but in other ways, like one of the things that the Appalachian communities really value is land. And they have a tie to the land.

Valerie: That's how it is here too.

Laura: That's how it is here too!

Laurie: It's like a source of pride, like they are not giving that up you know, like their streets are named after them, and you know it is.

Valerie: That's the thing, for my student teachers, because most of them are coming from outside of this area. And they cannot wrap their heads around that notion of being tied so closely to a place, right. You know that's what I need to help them on.

Laura: You know, I'm wondering if there's a way to design the assignment in the fall where at some point our students do some sort of cross institutional sharing right because…

> Valerie: That'd be cool.
>
> Laura: I try and do that in the class, so that they can see the vast differences that even exist in Albuquerque right, I think it would be even cooler and it might help them understand more about here to see the same sort of ideas and concerns reflected.
>
> Valerie: That would be fun. And that could be our paper for AERA.
>
> Laurie: That would be interesting, because I think again like we were talking about before about comparing and contrasting, but I think there will be some similarities. Obviously, there are going to be differences but there probably will be some similarities I would think.
>
> Laura: This is a great example for our paper right now because we are talking again about…
>
> Valerie: How do we improve student learning? And we are doing it collaboratively and it's growing organically through this conversation.
>
> Laura: Right and through really kind of staying in the boundary area, staying in these areas where we are exploring what's similar and what's different. We're exploring the similarities in difference, the differences that are in the similarities, because I love that there are these themes that sort of transcend some of the more common differences that we talk about, right like race and class, and you know I mean like what we just described is the same in rural Pennsylvania, in rural North Carolina, and in Albuquerque. I mean that's kind of crazy.

Unpacking our interaction

Working through dialog, we come to realize that even though our contexts are different, the challenges are actually very similar. The communities within which we work have histories and rootedness that matter to the educational experiences of the teachers and students in them. Regardless of location, our preservice teachers need to be able to recognize, honor and build from the experiences their students bring with them into schools. Importantly, none of us are from the places in which we currently teach, adding another layer of complexity to the work. We are trying to help our teacher candidates learn about and from communities we have also had to learn. We want our students to challenge their beliefs and preconceived notions about particular schools and communities so that their teaching practices are transformed and meet the needs of the students with whom they work.

It is this identification of elements that are both rooted in the particulars of our places but also transcend our places that make the work rich, interesting, and worth doing. We began the conversation above generally trying to brainstorm a focus for this manuscript. As usually happens in our conversations, we veered off track. We allow our conversations to flow naturally in part because we are friends. We are interested in one another personally and professionally. However, we also allow our conversations to flow naturally because it is not uncommon for us to find that what we thought was an "off task" conversation ends up helping us better understand a professional dilemma or question with which we are struggling.

Each of us has a commitment to helping beginning teachers understand the importance of community and place to learning. As is frequently the case in higher education, each of us is teaching in a place we are not from originally. In some regards then, we are not unlike Valerie's student described above. Through our collaboration and critical friendship, we have supported one another in examining our beliefs and practices for where they are aligned and where our practices fall short of our ideals. The original community mapping assignment did not adequately represent our beliefs about the importance of community in teaching. The practices it asked students to engage in ended up reifying deficit notions of some communities and students. As a result, we had to dramatically change our teaching practice. Because we are committed to the learning of our students and through keeping the core emphasis on the question Valerie asks, "How do we improve student learning?" the work becomes more focused.

Conclusions and Recommendations

How does our collaborative, critical friendship support our reflection and growth as teacher educators? We frame our discussion around how we support one another to explore our beliefs, practices, and the interconnections between the two (Berry and Crowe, 2009; Samaras, 2011). Over the 5 years that the three of us have worked together, we have seen time and again how seemingly off task conversations lead to new thinking and new approaches to our work. Sometimes it is challenging to distinguish which came first—the interrogation of our beliefs or our practices. In the above transcript, we begin by discussing changes in our practices that are a result of our critical friendship. However, that does not mean that our beliefs are not implicated in the same conversation. As long-time critical friends, we share a baseline understanding of one another's beliefs. Perhaps most important to our work, we understand the shared commitment we each have to teacher education and to our own professional development as teacher educators. We began the discussion with the understanding that we share beliefs about the importance for our students (in New Mexico, Pennsylvania and North Carolina) to challenge their own beliefs about particular communities and work to learn the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006) students bring with them into the classroom. However, while it can clearly be a benefit to have shared, unspoken understandings, we must work to ensure we do not make assumptions or let one another slide when considering our perspectives. Asking an additional person to provide critical friendship to us, as we discussed above, is one way we work to mitigate our familiarity with one another. Additional perspectives also help us see our blind spots.

After writing this piece, we are also more aware of the role our personalities make in our collaboration. None of us have large

academic egos. Each of us is primarily focused on student learning and we are not shy about putting ourselves into risky research and teaching situations. Our relationship provides the safety net so that fear of failure is lessened. For example, in the discussion transcribed above, one of the first things we talked about were the different strategies we had each tried for a previous self-study (Allison et al., 2020). One of the strategies was challenging for each one of us, despite our different contexts and different student populations. It was helpful in our debrief of those experiences to know we had shared similar struggles. It helped us each to put into perspective that the failure was not due necessarily (or solely) to our capabilities as teacher educators.

In addition to understanding the ways we work together to unpack practices and beliefs, there are several additional themes that deserve underscoring. First, our friendship is the most important element of our relationships. We like and trust each other. Trust enables us to be vulnerable in our conversations, in our writing, and in our disagreements. When one of us raises questions of another, the trust we have developed allows us to hear critiques and questions in the spirit in which they are given. We know that one of the beliefs we share is that preservice teacher learning is the end goal.

We trust each other's writing as well. Sadly, what is not evident in a final manuscript of our work is the manner in which we are truly co-authors. Typically, one of us prepares a skeleton paper or outline and uploads it to a cloud-based word processing program (i.e., Google Docs.). From that point, we begin adding to and revising the manuscript both synchronously and asynchronously. We work on different sections or the same section in an organic fashion. As we read what one another has added, we make adjustments (adding and deleting) without concern that our edits will be perceived as slights. However, we all bring different perspectives, experiences, and strengths so we tend to "stay in our lanes" at times.

As co-mentors (Allison and Ramirez, 2016), research partners, and trusted friends, we intentionally navigate between our similarities and differences. While Laurie and Valerie are both originally from Utah, Laura is from Indiana in the midwestern United States. As discussed earlier, we share important elements of our teaching philosophies and we share an inquisitive stance toward our teaching. Our differences and our similarities matter in our collegial relationship. As a group, we do not make assumptions that our experiences or perspectives are the same. We take the time to ask and answer the kinds of reflective questions outlined by Buchanan and Clark (2018). Through asking one another to explain, to describe, and to clarify, our own individual thinking is reshaped and changed. We find ourselves again and again walking a tightrope between the similarities and the differences in each of our circumstances. Quite often unexpected similarities arise when we unpack the surface level differences.

Finally, we also share a tendency to be overly critical of ourselves. In that regard, our critical friendship often functions a bit differently. Through shared writing and conversations, one of us will share an interpretation of an event. Often that description focuses on how we failed to live up to an ideal or how we had not fully considered possible outcomes of a pedagogical choice. Inevitably, the response from the other two in the group is to provide an alternative explanation that is not simply rooted in our personal deficiencies but also takes into consideration the socio-cultural dynamics at play in our institutions and in teacher education. For example, while discussing a recent self-study regarding our abilities to serve as "warm demanders" (Kleinfeld, 1975; Hammond, 2014), Valerie discussed a student with whom she had struggled to create strong rapport. Valerie was highly critical of herself, writing in one of her journals, "I reward grace to those who are teacher-pleasers and withhold from those who do not. I'm disappointed in myself, but coming to this realization is important and provides me with the knowledge to do better" (January 17, 2022). While Laura and Laurie did ask Valerie to talk more about this insight and had her provide more details and examples, she ultimately did not need us to push her to be harder on herself. Instead, what Valerie needed (and what she hopefully received from us), was emotional support in thinking through whether this was an appropriate take away, and if so, what she should do to mitigate this tendency in her teaching in the future. But, through listening and talking with Valerie about her personal observation, both Laura and Laurie were then prompted to use this lens on themselves and their own relationships with students. Who do we each develop rapport with more easily and with whom do we struggle?

Knowing when to challenge and when to support is often a complex decision in teaching and in research. In some ways these choices are compounded in self-study research with a focus on studying our own teaching because studying our own teaching is, by its nature, tied to our identities as individuals and to our sense of competency and well-being. Our friendship is the solid ground on which we base our judgments of when to challenge and when to support. We do not always get it right in each individual circumstance, but overall, as Valerie said at the beginning of the transcribed conversation, "I'm a better teacher because of the collaboration then I would be without it."

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's note

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