

**EXPLORING THE TENSIONS OF TEACHER EDUCATION
THROUGH COLLABORATIVE SELF-STUDY**

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Abstract

This paper profiles the experiences of seven teacher educators who engaged in a 9-month collaborative self-study focused on exploring the text *Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education: Understanding, Teaching and Learning about Teaching* (Loughran, 2006). In this paper we illustrate how we developed shared understandings of our dilemmas as teacher educators and enhanced collaboration as we engaged in reflective discussion focused on relating the text to our practices. Analysis of our experiences documented the applicability of the framework of tensions (Berry, 2008) as a lens to understand the dilemmas we all negotiated as teacher educators. We extend these understandings by detailing how we encountered these same tensions as researchers within our collaborative self-study learning community and how shared understandings of our tensions developed through this self-study, enabled us to later develop a common language to engage in collegial discourse. Implications include the recommendation of faculty development through collaborative self-study and the development of collaborative research protocols upon the formation of such groups.

EXPLORING THE TENSIONS OF TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE SELF-STUDY

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of teacher education, faculty development of those who teach teachers has received little attention (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Martinez, 2008). This paper profiles the experiences of teacher educators who engaged in faculty development through a collaborative self-study focused on exploring the text *Developing a pedagogy of teacher education: Understanding, teaching and learning about teaching* (Loughran, 2006).

We first provide an overview of the complexities of teacher education with attention to Berry's (2008) tensions. Following our methodology, we detail how these tensions were pervasive in our reflective discussions relating the Loughran (2006) text to our teacher education practices and how we also encountered each of these same dilemmas within our learning community as we engaged in learning about teaching teachers through collaborative self-study. We next illustrate how the shared understandings of our tensions as teacher educators developed through this collaborative self-study later provided a common language for collegial discourse. We recommend faculty development through collaborative self-study and the development of collaborative research protocols to manage some of the tensions we encountered as collaborative self-study researchers.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher educators engage in promoting the development of candidates' knowledge *for* practice, knowledge *of* practice, and knowledge of self (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Loughran, 2006). Compounding the complexities of fostering these understandings is the need to simultaneously foster candidates' abilities to develop positive student-teacher relationships, and

the flexibility required to respond to unpredictable classroom situations (Loughran, 2006).

As they attempt to meet candidates' multifaceted needs, teacher educators encounter many contradictions and competing concerns (Berry, 2008; Loughran, 2006). Berry (2008) described these dilemmas as tensions that teacher educators must learn to negotiate. Through self-study of her teacher education practices, in conjunction with analysis of the literature, Berry (2008) identified six interconnected tensions in teacher education as those between:

1. **Telling and Growth:** telling candidates about teaching and facilitating their growth through active learning;
2. **Confidence and Uncertainty:** promoting confidence in candidates' teaching abilities, while making explicit the uncertainty of teaching;
3. **Action and Intent:** managing dichotomies that may exist between teacher educators' actions and candidates' perceptions of their intents;
4. **Safety and Challenge:** negotiating when and how to move beyond safety and embrace the challenges of uncomfortable learning experiences;
5. **Valuing and Reconstructing:** valuing candidates' experiences and conceptions, while enhancing their abilities to reconstruct them; and
6. **Planning and Being Responsive:** balancing planned learning opportunities with being responsive to unanticipated opportunities as they arise.

Researchers have called for clarity in identifying the common dilemmas of teacher educators (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Zeichner, 2007). Berry (2008) suggested that the six interconnected tensions she described provided a framework to enhance understandings of the issues and dilemmas that characterize teacher educators' practices.

Teacher practitioners' understandings of their shared dilemmas have been enhanced

through engaging in reflective collaborative exploration of their practices and common concerns (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Such collaborative inquiry is anchored in authentic conversation, which requires safety and trust, is voluntary, happens on common ground, demands good content, resists the bounds of definition, develops over time, and has a future (Clarke, 2001). Although there was evidence that learning communities could promote such discourse amongst teachers (Clarke, 2001; Dufour & Eaker, 1998), faculty development within these contexts appeared to be underexplored.

While it is more common for individuals or dyads to engage in self-study (Loughran, 2006, 2007; Russell & Loughran, 2007), the benefits of collaborative self-study as a form of faculty development have been documented (Kitchen, Ciuffetelli Parker, & Gallagher, 2008; Latta & Buck, 2007). Latta and Buck (2007) described the professional learning of faculty during a collaborative self-study focused on responding to articles selected as a point of departure, while Kitchen and colleagues (2008) documented how collaborative self-study promoted authentic conversation amongst novice pre-tenure faculty. Our collaborative self-study builds on these by exploring the experiences of novice teacher educators who engaged in faculty development through book-study.

Methodology

Self-study is a scholarly investigation that documents faculty members' engagement in reflecting, reframing, and restructuring their experiences as teacher educators (Loughran, 2007). Rigorous transparent methodology is requisite to self-study, with this rendering it possible for self-study researchers to illustrate how their studies build on and extend the findings of others (Loughran, 2007; Zeichner, 2007).

As we were interested in exploring a process over time, we adopted qualitative case study

methods (Merriam, 2001) for this inquiry that took place at the Brantford Campus of Nipissing University, a small regional campus of a moderate-size Ontario Faculty of Education. The regional campus served a full-time equivalent student population of approximately 150 teacher candidates.

The catalyst for our group's formation was Arlene Grierson's (2010) self-study that recommended faculty development through collaborative self-study. During a faculty meeting, Arlene introduced self-study as a vehicle for faculty development and invited all interested faculty to form a group within which to explore the Loughran (2006) text.

The seven who elected to do so included six full-time faculty members, Arlene Grierson, Christina Grant, Maria Cantalini-Williams, Mary Lynn Tessaro, Jeff Bumstead, and Keith Quigg, and one part-time faculty member, Rick Denton. Maria was the only tenured faculty member, with Mary Lynn in her second year of a tenure track appointment. Arlene, Christina, Jeff, and Keith held full-time limited term contracts, while Rick held a part-time sessional appointment. At the onset of this study our experience as teacher educators ranged from zero (Christina) to six years (Maria). Although we later chose to self-identify, initially, we elected to follow standard research protocol, receiving ethics clearance and intending to use pseudonyms.

During our first meeting we focused on developing group protocols, with this intended to enhance our potential to achieve our goals (Stringer, 2004). For example, we discussed the importance of presenting and honoring diverse views, mutual respect, and confidentiality. Over a 9-month period we met monthly for between 1 and 2 hours to discuss predetermined text chapters and engage in discussion relating the text to our practices. Our readings prior to each meeting were focused on seeking answers to the following two questions:

1. What connections/points of resonance surface for me as a teacher educator?

2. Which ideas do I experience dissonance about as a teacher educator?

Arlene who had prior experience leading teacher action-research professional learning community groups (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2006), served as the group facilitator. In preparation for our monthly reflective discussions, she prepared and circulated a meeting agenda. Mary Lynn gathered and circulated minutes following each meeting. All group sessions were audio recorded, with the transcription and minutes of the previous meeting reviewed at the onset of each.

Our primary data sources were meeting transcriptions, with minutes of our meetings and individual surveys completed twice by each group member used to triangulate evidence (Creswell, 2002). Initial surveys completed in September prior to commencing our book-study, documented our individual perceptions of the key components of teacher education, challenges and strengths as teacher educators, and objectives of engaging in this self-study. Final surveys completed at the end of April, solicited post-initiative perceptions of the initial questions, and if, or how, this self-study affected our knowledge and/or our teacher education practices.

At the end of the 9-month period these data were analyzed through coding and categorizing (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 2001). First, we reviewed all data independently for identification of idea units, meeting next to discuss our individual interpretations, look for common patterns, and negotiate a shared understanding. We each independently identified a series of problems or dilemmas we reiteratively encountered as teacher educators. As we next began to organize the coded idea units into categorical clusters, Berry's (2008) tensions, which Arlene had become familiar with in analyzing her experiences as a novice teacher educator (Grierson, 2010), resonated with all of our group members. As a result, inductive coding followed whereby this framework was used to interpret our findings (Creswell, 2002).

Findings

Our findings support Berry's (2008) assertion that the six interconnected tensions she outlined were pervasive issues that characterized our practices. Through this collaborative self-study we developed shared understandings of these tensions and a common language to engage in discourse about them.

In relating the text to our practices, we shared the complexities of revealing the uncertainties of teaching and exposing our vulnerability, while simultaneously promoting confidence in candidates' perceptions of us as more knowledgeable others. Our interconnected tensions between **planning and being responsive** to unpredictable learning situations, and between **confidence and uncertainty**, are illustrated in the following discussion.

- Christina So I did share with them [my students] and started talking to them about it [my teaching dilemma] and how would I do this differently... But in any case I didn't come from a place where I was confident, like explicitly discussing the process of being a teacher educator as a way to model, but rather out of reaction, which he [Loughran] talks about too. So my discussion with them about this [lesson] fell apart and how come, was out of reaction and not a place of confidence. That is the only thing I can think of in my head that would separate having to worry about whether they were going to judge me and criticize me for being vulnerable.
- Mary Lynn I get exactly what you are saying and I know that we have all experienced those moments just as classroom teachers experience those moments when everything kind of falls apart...having to make that decision, do I expose my vulnerability or do I just continue on?
- Christina But is he not talking about making that process explicit to your students?
- Arlene He is talking about, to me ...is the whole notion of problematizing whatever it is you are doing...if you make everything seem stable and certain, you don't create thoughtfully adaptive teachers because they think that there is a script. They think that there is a right way to do it and if you do a, b, c, d, you are going to get to the right answer. And that is really to everybody's detriment.
- Christina Of course
- Arlene But of course in problematizing things and illustrating how the wheels come off the bus when you are teaching too, you are right, you make yourself vulnerable. And it takes an incredible amount of confidence. (Meeting December 12, 2008)

In exploring the need to **value and** enhance our candidates' abilities to **reconstruct** experiences, the importance of also developing understandings of our own beliefs as teacher

educators, and making these explicit to candidates resonated.

Rick There is something on page 61 that I highlighted...they can't be expected to know what we stand for without making an explicit and vigorous effort to communicate this. I mean if we want them to be the best teachers they can, they need to know who we are and what we stand for. (Meeting December 12, 2008)

As we next began applying practices recommended in the text, such as articulating our principles for practice and our pedagogical decision-making, our tensions between **telling and growth** and **planning and being responsive** increased.

Arlene There is that dichotomy too that he recognizes, that tension between modelling and giving them enough information that they can practice and apply.
 Christina Sure enough it showed up in the chapter for me....when modelling what your own practice is, you cannot meet the balance. Because I have been trying consciously to make it [my pedagogical decision-making] explicit.
 Maria To try it out.
 Christina So now I have come to a point where I have to stop myself. I talk too much about myself as a teacher educator. And it is almost taking up too much class time, explaining about what I am doing and why, and it is taking away from the energy of the activity itself.
 Arlene And again, it is like the tension of unpacking, of covering and uncovering that we talked about, which is really embedded in everything we do. How do you balance that, between a teacher-directed versus a student-centered approach? How do you be student-centered and responsive to the needs of the students and allow time for them to articulate their needs? (Meeting January 9, 2009)

As we later discussed how at times, our **actions and** our students' perceptions of our **intents** differed, we questioned whether we fully understood their perspectives. This provoked Keith and Mary Lynn to research candidates' perceptions of ideal teacher educators, and share their findings with our group who related them to the text. Our interconnected tensions between **valuing and reconstructing** our teacher candidates' perspectives, and moving beyond **safety** to embrace our resultant **challenges** are revealed in our discussion about candidates' perspectives excluding the value of dissonance.

Arlene And I think that this was an offshoot of the conversation where we were talking about how intended messages and received messages are sometimes very different and our perceptions and an ideal teacher educator [from students' perspectives]

- are very different.
- Mary Lynn Well for me the piece that is always missing that it is so interesting because I have been reading a little bit outside of this on the areas of dissonance, and once again they are not going to say in their description of an ideal teacher educator, someone who makes me feel uncomfortable and someone who makes me think. But clearly I think he [Loughran] would.
- Arlene He would...the quote was something like an uncomfortable learning experience can be a constructive learning experience. (Meeting April 3, 2009).

Interestingly, we also negotiated Berry's (2008) six interconnected tensions in learning about teaching teachers through collaborative self-study. For example, balancing our **planned** book-study with **being responsive** through diverging to unanticipated topics like exploring our students' perceptions of ideal teacher educators was a tension to be negotiated on an on-going basis. Our debate over reflection on experience is illustrative of our recurring tension between **valuing and reconstructing** our pre-existing conceptions.

- Keith You said some things to which I disagree...But the experiences seen as central to learning can equally be argued as experiences, are also easily mistaken as learning. I think experience is learning.
- Arlene I agree with him [Loughran]. It is not experience that you learn from it is reflection on experience.
- Keith I disagree.
- Mary Lynn But he says that not all experiences are created equally... Not all experiences are educative. So it's not the experience... but you actually have to be educative.
- Keith Well I think experience is part of learning.
- Mary Lynn I think that it is part of learning but I don't necessarily [think it] reflects [learning].
- Keith Well I will tell you, experiential education I have always been a big fan of because I have seen so many young people who have had difficult times learn through their experiences.
- Christina I agree with you.
- Keith It is crucial for them.
- Maria ...but it is all implicit the reflection. I think it is just the cycle of when you experience something, [for instance] oh that's hot, kids know, everyone knows. It is just human nature that you reflect on what you have been through.
- Arlene But not everyone [does]. I think in the next [chapter] he goes into the whole notion of making your tacit understandings explicit. And that is the next part of this conversation. (Meeting December 12, 2008)

We each negotiated the tension between **telling and growth** not only as teacher

educators, but also as learners. In learning about teaching teachers, at times, like the candidates we instruct, we wanted to be told what to do rather than engaging in active learning.

Mary Lynn I am starting to read this wonderful anecdote of this teacher that goes through this process, but at the beginning he says but this is not a model for how to do this and I am like ugh, well I want the model! (Meeting April 3, 2009)

This tension was recurring. “As much as I can acknowledge there’s no one size fits all, I was shocked at how many times in those transcripts, I think I wanted the recipe. I wanted the tips and tricks. And so, it’s contradictory (Arlene, Meeting May 15, 2009).”

We also discovered that our participation in this self-study learning community created tension between our **actions and** our colleagues’ perceptions of our **intentions**. Over time we realized that our group might not be viewed as inclusive by other faculty and staff.

I worry a little about the outer circle and the inner circle...so you have to wonder about how this affects our outer circle of faculty and staff that aren’t included. I’m wondering if whether in a way we should have reported to our faculty...or invited people who hadn’t been here initially to come in. (Maria, Meeting May 15, 2009).

In reflecting on our experiences independently we recognized that our dilemmas as teacher educators were not unique.

The most profound moment for me was the revelation that other teacher educators experience the same tensions as I have experienced for many years such as the bond with students, the use of practical examples, and the ‘walking the talk ,while talking the walk’ experience. (Maria, Final Survey April 30, 2009)

However, it was through collaborative analysis of our dilemmas that we developed the shared language to name our tensions and shared understandings that we must learn to negotiate rather than seek to eradicate these dilemmas (Berry, 2008). “So, all you can do is manage, it’s not a matter of finding a solution (Jeff, Meeting May 15, 2009).” We perceived our group to support one another in managing the complexities of negotiating our tensions. “I can’t imagine going through my first year without the support of this group. (Christina, Meeting June 15, 2009).”

Our tensions between **safety and challenge** and between **confidence and uncertainty** were recurrent as we later extended our focus from faculty development to sharing the understandings we derived through self-study with others. “I just think we need to make a big decision ... because of course we said this was going to be safe space and we were going to be anonymous (Maria, Meeting May 15, 2009).” In negotiating our group members’ diverse perceptions of whether to accept the risk of candidly exposing our private experiences and our evolving perceptions without the use of pseudonyms, shared understandings of our tensions provided a common language for collegial dialogue.

The **tension between confidence and uncertainty** that we all experience as teacher educators is also exemplified in collaborative self-study work, and incrementally so when we look at sharing our work with the teacher education community at large. This may explain why many are unwilling to engage in self-study and expose their vulnerability through admitting that being a teacher educator is uncertain, complex, and imperfect. (Arlene, Email Communication, August 22, 2009)

By the onset of our second year, our group routinely used the shared language of tensions and exploring how we negotiated Berry’s (2008) tensions in our teacher education practices had become an objective of most group members.

Berry’s tensions hold a great deal of interest, and continue to be a focus. This area was new learning for me and these tensions became a way for the self-study group to work with common language and understanding (Mary Lynn, Initial Survey, October, 2009).

As I am aware that the dilemmas represented by these tensions are not resolvable, I have been focusing on finding balance. In the brief two months of this semester, I have already encountered all of the tensions in my class. (Christina, Initial Survey, October, 2009)

The primary challenge that I identified in my individual self-study a couple of years ago was managing the tension between valuing and reconstructing candidates’ prior experiences. This continues to be a significant challenge and I feel fortunate to now have colleagues with whom I can discuss this dilemma. I am amazed how many times Rick and I now use the phrase “there’s that tension again” as we work together. Our language has definitely changed over the course of the past year. (Arlene, Initial Survey, October, 2009).

Through collaborative self-study we found that teacher education “is about nurturing,

whether we're nurturing our students or nurturing each other (Rick, Meeting May 15, 2009)."

Our experiences illustrate that collaborative self-study can provide a vehicle for teacher educators to nurture one another and explore their shared tensions.

Discussion

We acknowledge the limitations presented by the unique context of our position as predominantly novice limited-term faculty. However, by representing teacher educators who are neither tenured nor tenure-track, we give voice to those whose experiences are under represented in the literature (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Grierson, 2010).

Rigorous self-study requires interaction with others (Loughran, 2007). Through exploring the synthesis of the teacher education literature presented in the Loughran (2006) text we were able to interact with the experiences and perceptions of many other teacher educators.

Additionally, the varied background experiences of our group members created diverse perceptual lenses (Pajares, 1992). In sharing our views with one another through reflective discussions, we provoked one another to consider alternative perspectives (Risko et al., 2005). In part, this was supported by inclusion of those with and those without, the academic background of most faculty members. We believe this enriched our experiences by providing exposure to perspectives that may have otherwise been unexplored, and consequently we recommend inclusion of all interested teacher educators in collaborative self-study groups.

Our experiences support assertions that collaborative self-study is an effective vehicle for faculty development (Kitchen et al., 2008; Latta & Buck, 2007) and extend existing understandings. As we shared many commonalities with teachers who engage in reflective inquiry, insights from the teacher practitioner literature (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Stringer, 2004) informed our learning community development. Yet, these insights did not prepare us fully to

establish a collaborative research group. The benefits of developing principles to address the needs of those who collaboratively research their own lived experiences have been documented (McGinn, Shields, Fenton, Manley-Casimir & Grundy, 2005). We hold that self-study groups may be strengthened by developing ethical principles to address ownership and use of all data collected, authorship, and the rights of all who assume the dual role of researcher and participant during collaborative self-study research projects. Discovering that standard research protocol did not address our needs as collaborative self-study researchers, some of whom who sought to candidly share their personal experiences, brought forth unanticipated tensions that other collaborative groups may similarly encounter.

While researchers have highlighted the importance of formal leaders' commitment to the efforts of school-based learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998), our experiences demonstrated that self-study group leadership need not come from formal leaders within education faculties. Engaging in individual self-study of one's teacher education practices may be an important first step towards promoting faculty development through collaborative self-study (Grierson, 2010; Kitchen et al., 2008).

Authentic conversation demands good content (Clarke, 2001). Our experiences illustrate how the substantive content of the Loughran (2006) text provided a springboard to engage in reflective exploration of the complexities of our practices. Over time, our conversations developed into those that resisted the bounds of definition, and diverged from the Loughran (2006) text to focus increasingly on our context specific needs and interests (Clarke, 2001).

Through interacting with one another and the literature (Berry, 2008; Kitchen et al., 2008; Latta & Buck, 2007; Loughran, 2006), we have documented the value of accumulating knowledge across self-studies (Zeichner, 2007). While the synthesis of the teacher education

literature presented in the Loughran (2006) text was an important point of departure, it was through scholarly analysis of the data documenting our reflective exploration of it that we came to understand our tensions. Our experiences support Berry's (2008) assertion that the tensions she outlined provide a framework to understand our dilemmas as teacher educators. Moreover, we extend existing understandings by documenting how we encountered these same tensions in learning about teaching teachers within our collaborative self-study learning community.

We hold that Berry's (2008) tensions may provide the clarity Grossman and McDonald (2008) note as required to define the issues and dilemmas inherent in the field of teacher education, and the shared language requisite to engaging in discourse about these dilemmas. However, we also recognize that it was not the framework of tensions alone, but also the process we used to explore these issues, that promoted our increased understandings. Although Grossman and McDonald (2008) called for clarity in identifying the common concerns of teacher educators and highlighted the need for a common language to engage in discourse about these shared concern, they did not explicitly recommend self-study. Our experiences support assertions that self-study provides abundant opportunities to uncover the issues that define teacher education, enabling teacher educators to collaboratively critically examine, and work towards improving their practices (Berry, 2008; Loughran, 2007; Russell & Loughran, 2007).

Significantly, engaging in this self-study has altered our collaborative research practices, some of our individual teacher education practices, and our discourse with others. For example, we began our second year of self-study by discussing protocols of collaborative research groups (McGinn et al., 2005), as a precursor to developing ethical principles to guide our work. Rick has infused case study analysis in his methods courses and Mary Lynn has engaged candidates in researching the perspectives of their students. Arlene is continuing to explore her tensions

between valuing and reconstructing candidates' prior experiences, and moving beyond safety to embrace her challenges as a teacher educator (Grierson, 2010). Christina has prepared an exhibition of visual art and poetry that she developed to depict our tensions. Positioning this display in the hall outside our faculty offices has provided a catalyst for discussion with other faculty, staff, and our teacher candidates, about our dilemmas as teacher educators and our self-study inquiry.

Importantly, our authentic conversations have a future (Clarke, 2001). Five members have continued into the second year of our group. Regrettably, we have lost the insights of Keith and Jeff who held non-renewable limited-term positions. In attempts to widen our circle, we shared our experiences and invited other faculty to join our group, with one new tenure-track faculty member electing to do so. We look forward to exploring whether the insights developed during our first year of self-study provide support as we document our continued negotiation of Berry's (2008) tensions and engage in book-study of *Enacting a pedagogy of teacher education: Values, relationships, and practices* (Russell & Loughran, 2007).

Concluding Thoughts

Increased understandings of the professional growth of teacher educators are required to advance the field (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Zeichner, 2007). This research adds to the literature by documenting how book-study through collaborative self-study holds the potential to foster the professional growth of teacher educators, providing a vehicle to explore and develop insights about their shared dilemmas. We support Latta and Buck's (2007) assertion that self-study:

positions us to confront self-understandings of the nature of teaching about teaching in order to enhance our practices. Self-study is thus key to our professional development and reflects our desire to do more than "deliver" courses in teacher education (p.189).

In closing, we hope that our experiences inspire others to engage in collaborative book-study and provide some direction. We also extend our appreciation to John Loughran for encouraging our efforts to develop this collaborative self-study group and echo the advice he provided upon our group's inception:

It will be hard work but the way to make it work is to try and always get people to focus on their practice, what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how they can examine the impact of it. The closer you keep it to their real work, the more the impetus to do something and to be involved. (J. Loughran, Email Communication, July 16, 2008)

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