

A Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization: Extending and Improving Teacher Education Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper explores how a teacher preparation program in a liberal arts institution built upon the foundations of dialogic, relational pedagogy utilizes strong alumni connections to improve teacher education curriculum and support preservice, inservice, and teacher educators as they work to teach against the grain. Best visualized as an infinity symbol, we describe the ways our recursive mentoring loop supports ongoing, fluid collaborations between PK–12 schools and our teacher preparation program and discuss how maintaining and nurturing relationships with alumni experiencing new teacher socialization in many school contexts is mutually beneficial in supporting both preservice and inservice teacher development. We share three case studies of value-added experiences in which our alumni engaged as we reimaged the traditional temporal boundaries of teacher education. The recursive mentoring process invites each party to see how one’s aspirational education philosophy can be maintained even when it might go against the grain in a given school context. These relational, dialogic spaces foster teacher agency and collaborative problem-solving in schools and spaces of higher education.

Keywords: teacher socialization, mentoring, dialogic and relational pedagogy

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, our College of Education at Butler University welcomed the review team for our CAEP Accreditation visit. As we underwent the self-study process and worked to document and make visible our compilation of programmatic improvements to external reviewers for this cycle, we noticed a consistent theme. Nearly all of our teacher preparation programmatic improvements were directly connected to working closely and directly with recent program alumni as they navigated the early stages of their inservice teaching careers. This pattern did not arise serendipitously; rather, the pattern reflected the intentional development of a dialogic, relational ethos within our College of Education.

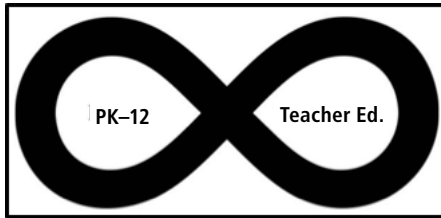
Best visualized as an infinity symbol (*Figure 1*), our pedagogical approach to teaching and mentoring supports ongoing, fluid collaborations and conversations between PK–12 schools and our teacher education program. The loop is initiated in the teacher preparation program when faculty and preservice teachers establish strong relationships, and it crystallizes as we collectively maximize those existing relationships beyond graduation from the program. The recursive loop stands in contrast to unidirectional or transactional examples of teacher education programs asking graduates to give of their time or classroom space to host preservice teachers with little in return except perhaps a few professional growth points and a note of thanks. It also stands in contrast to the unidirectional, transactional examples of novice teachers participating in one-off professional development workshops hoping the experts might have a solution to a problem the teacher is trying to solve. The recursive, circular motion of a loop that holds teacher education faculty and alumni together allows for the ideas and tensions of one educational space to influence the other and vice versa. As we collaboratively explore possibilities within both spaces, we address the theory-practice gap by engaging in a process that allows theory to inform practice and practice to inform theory. Additionally, this approach invites all engaged in those relationships—preservice, inservice, and teacher educators—into personal and professional transformation as the continuous dialogue between educational spaces

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

encourages all educators to maintain the mindset of a novice. This novice mindset is rooted in a view of learning as critical reflection and an act of consciousness-raising (Dirx, 1998) where we are all on our way and in the process of becoming more “wide awake” teachers (Greene, 1995) immersed in creative, relational, intellectual and moral work. Taken all together, this dialogic, relational approach and the resulting recursive loop offers models for teacher education and teacher socialization that are not bound by the temporal constraints of the teacher preparation program.

Figure 1.

Recursive Loop Model



In this paper, we explore the ways this recursive loop works in our independent liberal arts setting and the ways relational, dialogic pedagogy allows us to reimagine the occupational socialization of teachers and the traditional, temporal boundaries of teacher education. We find that this model of teacher socialization empowers novice teachers, university faculty, and our current cohorts of preservice teachers to push one another further and to go against the grain as the recursive loop fosters teacher agency and collaborative problem-solving in schools and spaces of teacher education.

Context

Historically, the occupational socialization of teachers has been perceived as an isolated process and one that “washes out” the influence of teacher preparation (Britzman, 1986; Labaree, 2004; Lortie, 1975, Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). While these ideas about teacher socialization extend back several decades, the concepts embedded within the foundational literature are worthy of continued investigation given the ways the findings persist

Rupenthal and Furuness

even as schools change and sociopolitical contexts shift. One theme which remains relevant is that once preservice teachers graduate from their preparation programs and encounter tensions in their work as novice teachers, they often feel as though they are left to “sink or swim” (Britzman, 2003; Lortie, 1975). As faculty in Butler University’s College of Education, we offer a different vision of teacher socialization where we utilize the relational assets of our small, independent liberal arts institution to counter the individualistic sink-or-swim binary.

We share this model for teacher socialization and examples of the recursive loop in action from our roles as agents within and beneficiaries of this recursive loop. While we are currently teacher educators within Butler University’s College of Education, we both experienced the recursive loop from a variety of perspectives. Shelly is an associate professor in the College of Education, the curriculum coordinator for the college, a graduate of Butler’s Masters in Effective Teaching and Leadership program, and a former middle school teacher. Michelle is an adjunct faculty member in the College of Education, a graduate of the Middle/Secondary English Education and Masters in Effective Teaching and Leadership programs, and a former middle school teacher. Over the years—in our roles as middle school teachers, graduate students, teacher educators, and researchers—we found ourselves entering the ongoing conversation around teacher socialization as we experienced and observed the ways novice teachers encounter tensions that they do not feel prepared to address or lack the support within their school context to address. As graduates and faculty of Butler’s College of Education, we recognize the ways a relational, dialogic ethos fosters collaborations that support and empower novice teachers as they navigate those tensions and leads to improvements to our programs within the College of Education.

Conceptual Lens

Aligned with the core purposes of a liberal arts education, our teacher education program concerns itself with the development of the individual and of her/his critical thinking abilities in the lifelong pursuit of a personally meaningful vocational path.

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

The theoretical foundation driving our pedagogical approach to teacher education in our small liberal arts setting derives from dialogic, relational epistemologies, as well as systematic teacher inquiry. Coupled together, these core aspects of the recursive loop empower teachers of all levels of experience and expertise to go against the grain as they encourage collaborative problem-solving within PK–12 schools and colleges of education.

Dialogic, Relational Epistemologies

In order to create space for transformative learning to take place, our program chooses a relational, dialogic approach to pedagogy with strong ties to social, feminist epistemology and an ethic of care (Lysaker & Furuness, 2012; Noddings, 2005; Thayer-Bacon, 1997). This view of teaching and learning is grounded in the belief that all learning comes from our need for social connection and knowledge is “something people develop as they have experiences with each other and the world around them” (Thayer-Bacon, 1997, p. 245). To intentionally engage in relational, dialogic pedagogy is to act in ways that maximize the fact that we are naturally in relation with others and to be receptive and give value to others’ ideas, tensions, and perceived possibilities. Implied in this approach is the belief that students’ (and alumni’s) knowledge and experience are equally important and brought directly into the curriculum through ongoing opportunities for dialogue.

Rather than positioning university faculty as the sole experts or privileging university-based knowledge, our relational, dialogic epistemology fosters shared meaning making between PK–12 schools and our College of Education. This approach is rooted in the understanding that power is “constructed and negotiated by all” (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002, p. 55), and it encourages the sharing of power where labels are not permanent and the relationship of the carer and cared-for shifts with context. Through this approach, mentoring becomes a two-way street. As Palmer (2018) wrote, mentoring “is a mutuality in which two people evoke the potentials in each other. ... [M]entoring gives us a chance to welcome one another into a relationship that honors our vulnerability and our need for others” (p. 35). By cultivating an ethos of “power

Rupenthal and Furuness

with” through continued dialogue and care for one another, we create fluid collaborations that continue even upon a preservice teacher’s graduation from the program. These relationships are what allow the recursive loop to take shape and encourage transformations across time and educational spaces.

Teacher Agency and Inquiry

Our dialogic, relational epistemology positions preservice and inservice teachers as holders, users, and producers of knowledge. This view of teacher-as-agent supports Lytle and Cochran-Smith’s (1992) idea that “teachers are among those with the authority to know” (p. 447) and Craig’s (2010) understanding that what teachers “reflect on, build theories about, view as significant, negotiate meanings for, and act upon automatically informs their pedagogical interactions with students” (p. 868). For these reasons, it is crucial that teachers are a part of conversations about improving education for all students—including future preservice teachers—and those conversations must be frequent, consistent and sustained over time. Again, this offers a contrast to unidirectional “conversations” where teacher preparation programs only tap into the expertise of inservice teachers to host preservice teachers’ field experiences.

Since the early 1990’s, teacher research advocates such as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) called for “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers, [which] makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both the university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning” (p. 1). While “recursive loop” is the term we are using to label the theme that emerged from alumni contributing to our programmatic improvements, each of those improvements stemmed from systematic, intentional inquiry with and by teachers. Such inquiries have “particular potential for transforming the university-generated knowledge base” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 465) as they attend to the relationship between theory and practice by viewing knowledge in direct relation to action. We add that such inquiries and collaborations between teachers and colleges of education also have particular potential for transforming PK–12 and teacher education curricula as the exchange of ideas

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

and inquiries support preservice, inservice, and teacher educators in going against the grain. We see this potential especially in the context of smaller liberal arts teacher education programs where relationships and personalization are hallmarks. If the traditional process and product of occupational socialization teaches the educator to go with the flow, then the recursive loop is particularly important to helping educators turn the tide.

“Teaching Against the Grain” in both PK–12 and Colleges of Education

When teacher socialization takes the form of an isolated, individualistic process, it often results in the reproduction of a teacher’s institutional biography and apprenticeship of observation as teachers tend to replicate the familiar even though it might not be equitable, engaging, or worthwhile for their own students (Britzman, 1986; Lortie, 1975). Additionally, even when novice teachers try to put into action all they know and believe about teaching and learning out in the “real world,” they are not always met with enthusiastic support, once again leading to reproduction instead of transformation. For these reasons, we adopt a critical approach to teacher socialization (Zeichner & Gore, 1990) as the relational, dialogic pedagogy we employ in our College of Education emphasizes the need for raising one’s own level of personal awareness about our participation in systems and our place within those. These consciousness-raising and systemic transformations require us to collaboratively unpack and respond to the tensions our graduates experience as they assume full responsibility within classrooms of their own, as well as the tensions we continue to encounter as teacher educators.

We recognize that becoming and being a teacher is complex, intricate work that requires ongoing examination of one’s beliefs and practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009). That work sometimes requires going against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 1991). Rather than falling prey to the myths that everything depends on the individual teacher and teachers are self-made (Britzman, 1986), our intentional relational, dialogic pedagogy and the resulting recursive loop supports collaborative problem solving in spaces of PK–12 and teacher education as we challenge one another

Rupenthal and Furuness

to move from the position of an “instrumental knower” who sees teaching as fixed processes of black-and-white rules and sociopolitical forces as separate from oneself to the position of a “self-authoring knower” who engages in critical reflection and seeks to understand and shape the sociopolitical forces influencing our work (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). This collaboration generates agency. These relationships, in turn, function as critical friendships in that they support us in unpacking our tensions and working to challenge and change “beliefs, practices, or assumptions which inhibit effective teaching” (Adams & Mix, 2014, p. 39). As a result, all members of these relationships are better able to teach against the grain as we continuously (re)conceptualize and transform the ways we think, know, feel, and act like teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2008).

The Recursive Loop in Practice

To illustrate the ways dialogic, relational pedagogy can lead to transformative work in PK–12 schools and colleges of education, we offer the following three case studies as examples of the recursive loop in action. These examples capture ways Butler’s College of Education leverages relationships as a vital resource to improve preservice teacher education and PK–12 students’ education as a challenge to the myths that suggest the teacher socialization process must happen in isolation.

As mentioned in the introduction, Butler’s College of Education—which graduates approximately 40-45 elementary and 20-25 middle-secondary candidates each year—welcomed an accreditation review team in the fall of 2019. The self-study that proceeded the visit required the data collection to document programmatic improvements made between accreditation visits. The case studies offered in this paper were selected in part because the work with these teachers led to a specific documented program improvement highlighted in our CAEP review. In addition, these three models also held something else in common. Each example features a teacher who completed both her undergraduate and master’s degree in our program and whose thesis work was supported by the co-author. These specific cases serve to provide illustrative support and explanation our recursive loop model.

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

Michelle: From Student to Teacher and Back Again (and Again)

We begin with an example of the ways the co-authors participate as agents in the recursive loop. As a first-year English language arts teacher, Michelle encountered tensions when trying to put her philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning into practice in a public middle school classroom. Her professors' intentional emphasis on relational, dialogic teaching throughout her undergraduate years created a space where Michelle felt comfortable turning back toward her existing relationships in Butler's College of Education in hopes of getting the support she desired to push back gently but firmly against a curriculum that she knew did not serve the students in her classroom. While Michelle knew this based on her teacher preparation, she was also being reminded at every turn that as a new teacher, she still had a lot to learn. Michelle was looking to go against the grain. While the initial entry point was a novice alumna reaching out to her teacher preparation program for support, the outcome took the shape of a recursive loop. The loop started with faculty supporting Michelle primarily through helping her construct a research-based rationale supporting an approach to curriculum design more aligned with her beliefs while still achieving the desired results. The loop changed direction when Michelle's very real classroom tension provided the provocation for preservice teachers and faculty to engage alongside her.

The main tension Michelle encountered as a novice teacher was the disconnect between the "teacher proof" and "college ready" curriculum that her school district used in her language arts context and her knowledge of the possibilities for teachers as creators of developmentally appropriate, relevant, and engaging curriculum. As Michelle turned toward her relationship with a former professor (and co-author)—Shelly—for support, they collectively found ways to better identify, explain, and respond to this tension.¹ Simultaneously, through this

¹For more information, see Rupenthal, M.A., & Furuness, S. (2020). Middle school curriculum aimed at developing agents of change. *Middle School Journal*, 51(1), 5–11.

Rupenthal and Furuness

relational, dialogic work, Michelle and Shelly were able to explore other implications of this tension as it relates to how we prepare teachers.

This collaborative work built upon a decade-old relationship that began forming in 2010 when Michelle first started her teacher preparation program and Shelly was a new tenure-track faculty member led us to ask the question: Is it possible to develop a teacher education curriculum that removed the tension between accountability to academic demands and developmentally responsive practices? By co-investigating this tension, we were able to take steps to go against the grain in two different (yet interconnected) educational spaces. At the middle school level, this involved Michelle taking on the role of a teacher leader to encourage a redesign of English language arts curriculum at the school and district levels, utilizing her collaboration with Shelly as a springboard for conversations with her colleagues, as well as school and district administrators. For the teacher education curriculum, this involved making curricular changes to preservice methods courses to directly broach this tension with preservice teachers and imagining (and creating) a new space where novice teachers' tensions can be explored: a virtual professional learning community collaboratively constructed and accessible to both preservice and practicing teachers.

Amanda: Filling the Gaps between Teacher Preparation Methods Courses and Classroom Practice

The next example we offer seeks to illuminate the expansive nature of the recursive loop and the abundant possibilities for deep and wide connections between teacher preparation faculty and the alumni serving in PK–12 schools. Like co-author Michelle, Amanda is an alumna of both the undergraduate and graduate program at Butler University's College of Education. Amanda was an excellent preservice teacher and was hired directly into the district where she completed her student teaching. It is a district with which Butler University's College of Education has a formal partnership agreement for clinical experience. During her third year of teaching high school mathematics in 2015, Amanda engaged in systematic inquiry conducting her

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

thesis research, which co-author Shelly supervised. As part of her inquiry, Amanda developed a curriculum for a mathematics methods course based on gaps she knew existed from her own teacher preparation. In addition to hosting and mentoring a Butler preservice teacher, she used her prep period once a week to provide an hour-long workshop to all the College of Education secondary mathematics education candidates completing clinical experience in her department. The workshop curriculum focused specifically on methods for teaching complex mathematics. Her work as a practicing teacher, supported by her continued graduate studies, was instrumental in helping our program to solve a dilemma that many teacher preparation programs in small liberal arts institutions face: how to provide content-specific methods across each discipline with limited resources or limited faculty expertise in each discipline. Amanda's work represents a model of teacher leadership and teacher research that informs and drives teacher preparation curriculum. Her work supports a cycle, a recursive looping, of professional development benefiting both preservice and inservice teachers and stands as a model other small programs could implement. As she mentored preservice teachers from her alma mater where she continued to be mentored and supported, she simultaneously modeled for them how to continue professional growth and learning beyond graduation.

Amanda's willingness to explore the gaps in her preparation and to build bridges across those divides between the mathematics department of our College of Liberal Arts and the College of Education has become a blueprint. She helped us find productive, specific entry points into conversations that connect liberal arts and professional teacher preparation. Amanda's initial work in developing the mathematics-methods workshop also became the blueprint to expand those alumni-led, content-specific methods workshops. In 2016, based on this innovative work with the potential for growth, Butler University's College of Education became the first Indiana school to be invited to present at a Teach to Lead Summit hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, the goal of which is to develop and amplify the work of teacher leaders. With Amanda's model and support, Shelly partnered with alumni in the English and Social Studies departments to implement similar

Rupenthal and Furuness

workshops. This work has continued to grow as evidenced by the initial example provided in this section resulting in the creation of a virtual professional learning community. This recursive loop is expansive in that a single tension may be the impetus for the collaboration, but when the tension is addressed from a collaborative, relational space inviting more collaborators in and widening the loop becomes a safe and energizing approach to solving problems of practice. In this recursive loop where strong, supportive relationships are central, both sides can acknowledge gaps and tensions from a place of curiosity and solution-finding, not accusation or fault finding.

Rebecca: Exploring Educator Identities and Vocation Extending Beyond the Classroom

While it is possible (and joyful) to provide many more examples, this final example offers a view of the recursive loop as an extension of our broader mission as a teacher preparation program within a liberal arts tradition. That is to say, our teacher education program concerns itself with the development of the individual and of her lifelong pursuit of a personally meaningful vocational path. Just like Michelle and Amanda, Rebecca is also an alumna of both our undergraduate and graduate programs. And just as in the examples above, a tension in the classroom and relationships fostered during teacher preparation led Rebecca back to Butler's College of Education and Butler faculty back into the PK–12 classroom space occupied by a graduate. Rebecca's tension as an elementary educator teaching in a content-specific class within an intermediate school context coupled with her school's early adoption of e-learning days helped the teacher preparation program redesign a middle-school methods course to prepare preservice teachers for e-learning. That collaboration was the basis for a chapter in a textbook on teaching middle school in a virtual setting². However, as life happened and her family grew, Rebecca

²Chapter appears in Furuness, S. (2018). Preparing teachers for the virtual middle level classroom. In B. B. Eisenbach and P. Greathouse (Eds.), *The online classroom: Resources for effective middle level virtual education*. Information Age Publishing.

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

decided to leave the classroom, but that didn't change her identity as a teacher. It also did not break or interrupt the recursive loop. Instead, it created the opportunity to begin a new dialogue with preservice teachers. Instead of hosting preservice teachers in her classroom, Rebecca now mentors preservice educators through her role as a guest teacher in our introductory course "Exploring Educator Identities." Rebecca shares the ways in which her teacher preparation and classroom teaching experiences have been instrumental in her successful transition to running her own wellness-coaching and consulting business. Rebecca has continued to help preservice teachers understand how teacher preparation can support them in finding teaching opportunities beyond the traditional classroom.

Rather than viewing Rebecca's departure from the classroom as a failure of teacher education in its ability to prepare teachers to persist in the classroom for an entire career life cycle, Rebecca's continued contribution to teacher education provides another tangible example to preservice teachers that navigating professional tensions in isolation is not necessary. The intentional relational, dialogic pedagogy and the resulting recursive loop supports lifelong learners as we challenge one another to continuously move toward "self-authoring knower" engaged in critical reflection. This recursive loop reveals to the preservice teacher that our relational, dialogic pedagogy is a core commitment. The relationship is not transactional or unidirectional. It is not dependent upon Rebecca being a teacher and providing a classroom to host preservice teachers in order to receive support from the faculty. The relationship is transformative. As each person in the relationship changes, so does the nature of the relationship and the needs and gifts each person brings to it. The relationship is of value by itself. The unbroken recursive loop Rebecca helps us reveal is our commitment to the relationships we are building.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

As these examples illustrate, the recursive loop between our College of Education and alumni encourages us to reimagine what is possible in a variety of educational spaces. By maximizing the ways we learn in relation to one another and honoring all

Rupenthal and Furuness

forms of experience and expertise, we are better able to teach against the grain as the continued critical friendships support educators in moments where it might be tempting to consciously or unconsciously reproduce an inequitable or ineffective status quo. This intentional pedagogical approach surfaces the real-life tensions of practicing classroom teachers and creates opportunities for preservice, inservice, and teacher education faculty to explore those tensions as a community of learners rather than in isolation. As our three case studies illustrate, the recursive loop supported novice teachers as they went against the grain to challenge ineffective K–12 curricula, design more cohesive methods coursework given structural hurdles, and address a gap in teacher preparation for digital learning. Through these collaborations, faculty and inservice teachers work as co-learners who collaboratively scaffold developmentally appropriate support for the socialization of preservice teachers. In turn, preservice teachers begin to conceptualize how they too can teach against the grain when they encounter tensions in their own teaching as they see models of educators engaged in critical reflection and enter the recursive loop themselves as graduates. When considered holistically, this recursive loop builds the capacity of educators across the board. This loop costs nothing to implement and aligns well with the relational, personalized orientation that is a strength of small independent liberal arts institutions.

This work helps us see and understand that the curriculum of teacher education, no matter how strong, by itself is incomplete. Teachers of all levels of experience and expertise encounter tensions, especially when working to create schools as they could be as opposed to simply replicating schools as they currently exist. In this high-stakes, accountability-obsessed moment of our history, this recursive loop serves as a “value-added” proposition. It gives teacher education programs opportunities to continue to support teachers’ development and socialization toward a program’s stated mission and vision even after graduation while also improving the curricula for future preservice teachers. It disrupts the patterns of isolation historically associated with the occupational socialization of novice teachers and offers an alternative to the “washing out” of effects of teacher preparation. Teachers should be able to count

Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

on their preparation programs to keep a light on for them and help them navigate the tensions they encounter in the field. As writer Anne Lamont (1994) says, “Lighthouses don’t go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining” (p. 225). Teacher preparation programs, like lighthouses, guide boats coming and going—both preservice and inservice. Without the boats, the purpose of the lighthouse is unclear; without the lighthouse, the boats have a tougher time navigating the waters. While teachers are among those with the authority to know—extremely capable producers and users of knowledge—our recursive loop model offers support as teachers work to enter new, uncomfortable territories.

We acknowledge a potential criticism of relying so heavily on the relational, dialogic framework and upon alumni to shape teacher preparation curriculum is the potential for the dialogue to become an echo chamber. While some might say that our recursive loop simply allows us to hear our own ideas reflected back to us, we argue that the cyclical motion between PK–12 settings and our College of Education makes it so that we all are ever-evolving and learning. In other words, as our alumni circle back, they bring with them new ideas and experiences gained from working alongside their students and other educators in the field. Real teacher tensions and voices are amplified and addressed. These contributions both enrich and transform our College of Education, and such transformations would not be possible without our ongoing relationships with inservice teachers.

Conclusions

While our model of a recursive loop certainly brings more joy to the work as we build and maintain our relationships with graduates, our relational, dialogic approach most importantly leads us all in becoming more “wide awake” teachers (Greene, 1995) as we support one another in critical reflection and collaborative problem-solving. It improves the quality of the experience for preservice preparation by incorporating and amplifying practicing teachers’ voices and expertise, and it improves PK–12 experiences by providing ongoing professional support to novice teachers, especially in places where novice teachers may not get

Rupenthal and Furuness

mentors (or may not get mentors who share the same concerns). Ultimately, the recursive loop models lifelong learning and disrupts notions of expertise, two factors that empower teachers to not simply go with the flow, but to also go against the grain when necessary.

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Recursive Loop in Teacher Socialization

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Rupenthal and Furuness

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