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 The Power of Self-Study:

A Journey of Two Teacher-Educators Quest for Professional Growth

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**Context of the study**

Our journey toward self-study demonstrates how teacher educators can take a careful, systematic look at their practices in relationship to their educational beliefs (Hamilton, 1998) This journey began a decade ago and how we evolved through what we see now as four distinct phases in our own professional growth as teacher educators. The first phase was as parent and teacher. The second phase was as the university supervisor and mentor teacher. The third phase was as program coordinator and teaching methods professor. The current phase is as colleagues. In each of these phases, we had an opportunity to develop teacher-educator buy-in (TEBI) in our new relationships. Research from the Center for Teaching Quality (Ferriter, 2013) states, “Teachers buy into change efforts that they believe are important…. and doable.”According to Hamilton (1998), when teacher educators are open about their beliefs concerning teaching and commitment, they must make sure that the two are in harmony and trust can be established in the TEBI relationship. This self-study will share the story of us, Jamey and Kris, and, the progression and relevance of these four phases in our self-study journey as teacher-educators.

**Aim/objectives**

Our self-study started as a response to a need voiced in the Institute of Higher Education (IHE) community for better assessment measures of initial certification teacher education programs and the need for professional development for our mentor teachers (Crowe, 2010; Gardiner, 2007). While investigating the literature, we discovered connections between teacher-educator research, TEBI, and self-study methodology. Critical friend work has been studied by teacher educators working with colleagues (Bass, Anderson-Patton, & Allender, 2002; Kosnik, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006; Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003; Schuck & Segal, 2002; Tobery-Nystrom, 2011), as does this study. What began as a Critical Friend Network (CFN; Tobery-Nystrom, 2011) to examine the initial certification teacher education program became a necessary function for the two of us to grow as teacher educators.

A critical friend is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50).

It is our shared view that a critical friend is essential if self-study is to involve critiquing existing practices and reframing practice; a critical friend also provides essential support and maintains a constructive tone. We became for each other a Critical Friend Network (CFN) – validation group drawn from one’s own professional circle including educators and students (Tobery-Nystrom, 2011).

**Methodology/theoretical framework**

Along with commitment and time, dialogue, collaboration, and critique are important components used to help teachers buy into professional development, particularly with the sharing of writings and ideas among peers (Hord, 2004). Peers can play an essential role in offering supportive feedback and alternative perspectives, and providing peer review as an essential attribute of teacher professional growth and practice (Li, Liu, & Steckelberg, 2009; Wilkins, Shin, & Ainsworth, 2009). Teachers who inquire into their practice with others receive “benefits from the support of colleagues engaged in similar enterprises and the scrutiny of the wider educational community” (Clarke & Erickson, 2006, p. 5). Russell (2002) notes that the act of recognizing and sharing tensions with colleagues allows a teacher to work towards a professional and transformational change in teaching. Bodone, Guðjónsdóttir, and Dalmau (2004) add that “collaborative dialogue” contributes to the iterative and ongoing process by which uneasiness, and even dissonance, becomes a catalyst for new perspectives, new findings and teachings, new action, and new questions (p. 773).Similarly, Gadamer (2004) speaks of “the communion” that occurs through dialogue and states,

To reach an understanding with one’s partner in a dialogue is not merely a matter of total self-expression and the successful assertion of one’s point of view, but a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were (p. 371).

We were willing to make our work available to the critique of each other as a CFN to improve the quality of our teacher educator practice (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). This self-study represents four years of intentional dialectical discourse based on Adler’s (1927) summation that “in its purest form comes from ordinary and familiar human conversations thus discovery of dialectical and philosophy at the same time”.

Personal practice grown out of the practitioner’s belief system, and, thus tends to be comfortable. It is often difficult to make changes or to ascertain if those changes have improved practice (Russell, 2002). Our collaborative inquiry (Palmisano, 2013) self-study used intentional dialectical discourse (Adler, 1927) to reframe how our teacher educator knowledge was constructed and applied to our teacher educator practices. Collaborative inquiry engaged us as teacher educators in self-directed and participatory learning, moving beyond collective passive learning to learning with and from colleagues through action and reflection. We starting looking at all communication (conversations, texts, emails) as part of our inquiry, and began to discuss the intention behind these exchanges. This led to the formation of our own deliberate set of guidelines for successful dialogues similar to that of the Ethical Response Cycle (Newman & Pollnitz, 2002). When in a communication about programs, research presentations and publications, we were comfortable with either one of us making a decision and moving forward with a series of actions, careful to communicate to the other. When it came to relationship issues, we were much more deliberate in setting space and time to deal with the issue (student, program, system), finding we were mindful of each other’s beliefs.

**Outcomes**

We started this self-study process, thinking the focus was on creating teacher buy-in with mentor teachers and teaching candidates involved in an initial certification teacher education program. What we discovered was that as teacher educators, we had to go through the same process.

Whitehead (2005) asks,

What would happen, then, if researchers in IHEs were sanctioned by their institutions and the broader academic community to throw off their “expert” mantles and act like ordinary, curious people with practically oriented questions, including questions that might challenge “the system”?

Through four distinct phases (parent and teacher; university supervisor and mentor teacher; program coordinator and teaching methods professor; and colleagues), we found we were deconstructing what we thought we knew about ourselves and our teacher educator practice. We knew the persistent problem of transferring new learning into practice could be overcome by centering learning on our teacher educator practices. Through collaborative inquiry self-study, we had a goal to make our work more intentional, coherent, and evidence based.This was accomplished through a closer look at each phase of our self-study relationship.

**Phase one- parent and teacher**

When we first met, Jamey’s son was a fourth grade student in Kris’ classroom. In this first phase, Jamey believed her TEBI to Kris was defined by the care and expertise of instruction she observed when Kris taught her son. Kris demonstrated dedication to students and the teaching profession that Jamey admired. Kris believed her TEBI to Jamey stemmed from Jamey’s commitment to Kris’ students after her son completed his fourth grade year in Kris’ classroom by continuing to come into Kris’ classroom to read with students.

**Phase two – university supervisor and mentor teacher**

At the same time Jamey met Kris in a parent/teacher relationship, Jamey was a university faculty supervisor and Kris was a mentor teacher. Jamey was impressed with Kris’ mentoring of pre-service teachers Jamey was supervising. Jamey, in turn, demonstrated the dedication to students and the teaching profession that Kris respected. This became the foundation in the relationship.

**Phase three- program coordinator and teaching methods professor**

Four years later, Kris joined Jamey at the university, teaching in the initial certification teacher education program Jamey coordinated. Jamey asked Kris to join her in a self-study of this program, only to find it imperative to explore each’s individual teaching practices with a focus on TEBI. Our prior knowledge of each other created an initial ability to trust one another as we ventured into these new roles. We believed the need for time to have deep and rich discussions held true for all teacher-educators when they were engaged in professional development. We began planning and implementing new professional development opportunities for the mentor teachers in the schools where Jamey placed teaching candidates and we knew we needed to provide time for the mentors, as well as, for us, to reflect. The lack of time challenged our ability to effectively communicate with one another as well as with the mentor teachers. We had to begin purposefully setting aside time to have critical friend conversations about our teaching craft and the current trends and needs of our mentors to determine what professional development we would provide.

As we discussed these connections, simultaneously, our relationship was changing again to one where we were seeking out opportunities for research and the collaborative development of educational presentations and publications.

There is a body of research that suggests that teachers themselves are their best resource for ascertaining and implementing knowledge (Cochran & Lytle, 1990, 1999; Laidlaw, 2004, McNiff, 1993; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996; McNiff & Whitehead 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy 2001; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Knowing and understanding this research, we decided we were our own best resources. We needed to find time to explore what knowledge each of us had to offer, and determine how we wanted to share that knowledge. The days of casual conversations for us were over, and, it was time to take our professional relationship to the next level via a deeper collaboration through a CFN.

**Phase Four: Colleagues**

Collaboration is a fundamental requirement in self-study (Hamilton, 1998). And a critical part of collaboration is finding a colleague that can serve as a critical friend in this collaboration. A critical friend acts as a sounding board, offers opportunities for reflection, is a co-learner, and asks challenging questions (Costa & Kallick, 1993, p. 50). When we reflected in the beginning it was all about the initial certification teacher education program, and, little to do with each other as teacher educators who desired individual growth in her teacher educator practice. As the years passed, Jamey’s reflections evolved to being directly about her teaching practice. Jamey learned that she valued her work in the initial certification teacher education program and mentor teachers, as part of her daily work. With the move to a new program coordinatorship, Jamey’s focus shifted to issues within the M.Ed. special education, and, a new set of professional goals. As Kris completed her first few years of university teaching, she was focused on the teaching candidates but with a new strand of reflection that was looking for the teachable moments. She was reflecting on the teacher candidates’ application of knowledge and skills. Kris also had a shift in her work to coordinating the M.Ed. Literacy program.

This self-study led us as teacher educators, to recognize discrepancies between our beliefs and educational practices (Hamilton, 1998), and, then, through the lens of critical friends, we were able to analyze our teacher educator practice and beliefs. New insights were discovered in the education of our pre-service teachers, mentors, as well as our own personal teacher-educator growth.

We believe through collaborative inquiry, the notion of critical friendship is central to self-study (Loughran & Northfield, 1999). We considered ways of being an effective critical friend, giving particular attention to just how antagonistic a critical friend can and should be. We share an interest in teacher education practices. We are constantly facing the ever-changing field of education and its challenges. This is evident in the completion of this self-study as the desire was to model trustworthy reflection concerning a lived teacher educator practice.

Laboskey (2004) states as a central challenge the difference is in what people mean when they talk about knowledge. A distinction between producing knowledge and becoming knowledgeable is the difference between research and practice (Habermas, 1968). This is true for us. In the beginning Jamey was very theoretical and program oriented in decision-making and Kris was relationship oriented as a conduit for learning. As time has passed, our roles have been interchanging depending on the situation.

**Next steps**

When we reflected over the past four years, it is evident of improved teacher educator practices, documented in the establishment of collaborative inquiry in our classrooms, acceptance of presentations and publication, and successful grant applications to fund new programs. A focus on experiential learning experiences is a theme throughout our work. The following list is just a few examples of some of those practices:

1. We invited the pre-service teachers to attend the final field day event at a local elementary school to meet the community prior to starting a practicum experience (Phase II).
2. We provided a summer school experience for the pre-service teachers at a local elementary school (Phase III).
3. We developed an eBuddies – collaborative writing project for the pre-service teachers to learn how to teach writing as well as how to conference using Google Drive and Hangout (Phase III).
4. The pre-service teachers were given the chance to learn curriculum alignment and long term planning in a public school classroom by working with classroom teachers alongside their university professors (Phase III).
5. We opened the summer University PALS program to the pre-service teachers so they could have an onsite authentic teaching. It also served as a remediation option for struggling interns (Phase III).
6. We incorporated the University PALS Reading Clinic into undergraduate and graduate reading assessment courses. This provides one to one tutoring between interns and public school students struggling with reading (Phase III).
7. We developed a program called The Hub for all education stakeholders to build prior knowledge skills for families with a focus on early childhood learning and parent participation (Phase III).
8. We organized fieldtrips to The Hub for pre-service teachers and graduate students to learn about the diversity within our community (Phase IV).
9. We submit and present at national and international conferences (Phases III & IV).
10. We publish our self-study work (Phase IV).

We now model for others our own use of collaborative inquiry approach to explore agreements and disagreements about learning and teaching, uncover implicit knowledge, and analyze individual and shared understandings of how, why and under what conditions instruction and leadership yield positive results.

**Summary**

We know, as teacher educators, the power of reflection for pre-service and in-service teachers. Providing time to reflect allows for a greater chance of teachers to retain the material shared in each professional development session (Servage, 2008). This self-study provided an opportunity for us to reflect on our individual practice as teacher educators in an authentic, lived experience. We found we needed to develop the relationship of Critical Friends for each other’s individual practice required for our own TEBI. This step made it possible to engage in a collaborative self-study of our teacher educator practice.

We believe that when teachers have a voice and an opportunity to choose the topics discussed during professional development, it serves as a motivator (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Research indicates a strong need to incorporate commitment or buy in with professional development into a sustainable practice (McGee, 2012). We found ourselves, this year, challenged by many external factors that could have led us to the decision to function merely as colleagues without the intentional dialectical discourse. It would have been easier, but ultimately, we came to the decision, on our own, and then, purposefully together, that we would find a new road to work together.

We find that we need each other for our own learning to continue to move out of our comfort zone. This requires a critical friend. “Educators need the support to implement the ideas, reflect on them, ask more questions, and try the technique or method again. They need someone to bounce ideas off. This could be a formal meeting, a quick email exchange, or an impromptu chat in the hallway to discuss a few questions” (Bretzmann, 2015). We believe that we have taken this action to a purposeful self-study commitment as we have made the choice to work together but demand that the relationship be an authentic practice.

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