

Learning About Self Through a Multi-Institution Inquiry Into New Teacher Preparedness Post-COVID

Valerie A. Allison, Laura C. Haniford, Pamela J. Powell, Christi U. Edge, Carol Moriarty, & Laurie A. Ramirez

Teacher Preparation

Pandemic

Multi-institution Collaboration

Co-critical Friendship

Six researchers from five different institutions in different regions of the United States came together through a chance meeting in a virtual conference in the summer of 2021. They found they shared a common concern: the impact on new teachers' preparedness and confidence who had had their preservice educations interrupted and altered as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. For over 16 months, they have collaborated to develop and carry out large-scale, mixed methods, multi-institutional study that included collecting and analyzing survey data and focus group interviews from alumni of their five universities' teacher preparation programs. The self-study investigation described in this chapter explores how working collaboratively and interrogating the consequences of the pandemic for our former students led to insights into our own practices and identities as teacher educators. What we did not anticipate was how challenging it would be to design and carry out mixed methods, multi-institution research, nor did we anticipate how much we would enjoy the community-building process of working together across institutions. We share findings related to our three research questions: What did we learn about ourselves and our institutions through our work together designing a mixed methods large-scale research project? What unintended learning opportunities arose as a result of working together? What did we learn about the formation of new research groups?

Context

We are six teacher educators working in five US states who have come together to investigate the impact of the global Covid pandemic on our recent graduates' confidence and preparedness to assume teaching positions. As a component of this broad study, we collected and analyzed survey and focus group data from alumni from our five institutions who completed certification requirements for elementary or secondary education in 2020-2021. Additionally, at the initiation of our collaboration, we had hoped to develop and provide online professional development workshops on topics the participants identified as areas they wish to enhance in their teaching.

Three of us are at institutions in the American Southwest, one in the upper Midwest, one in the mid-Atlantic, and one in the Southeast. With the exception of Carol, who is a Ph.D. candidate, all of us are veteran teacher educators, each with more than 14 years of teaching and research experience at the collegiate level. For all of us, our efforts to work collaboratively to undertake a study that includes numerous institutions and research partners was a departure from our individually established research agendas. Further, none of us felt well versed in carrying out inquiries that compared to this one in scope. Finally, most of us had not previously worked together. We met when we attended a

virtual Invisible College session during the summer of 2021. Designing and starting a research project while getting to know one another was new for us as well.

Aims and Objectives

This self-study investigation explores how working collaboratively and interrogating the consequences of the pandemic for our former students led to insights into our own practices and identities as teacher educators. We anticipated that feedback from our participants on the strengths and weaknesses of their preparation, in general and during the pandemic, would expose us to individual vulnerabilities we would need to navigate as collaborative research partners. We also hoped to investigate our collaborative processes in designing and carrying out professional development opportunities for our participants. What we did not anticipate was how challenging it would be to design and carry out this research, nor did we anticipate how much we would enjoy the community-building process of working together across institutions.

When we initiated our collaborative inquiry, the question we had hoped to investigate was focused on what we might learn about our own teacher education institutions and our roles in them through developing and providing professional development to first-year teachers who had completed their teacher education during the pandemic. We had envisioned ourselves being able to fill through inter-institutional web-based professional development opportunities gaps our graduates had in their preservice preparation as a result of the pandemic. What we did not foresee, at the time, was how challenging recruiting first-year teacher participants would be. Because we had such low response rates on both the survey and the focus groups, we adopted the following new research questions for the self-study component of our research:

- What did we learn about ourselves and our institutions through our work together designing a mixed methods large-scale research project?
- What unintended learning opportunities arose as a result of working together?
- What did we learn about the formation of new research groups?

Literature Review

The COVID-19 global pandemic affected systems, institutions, and countless facets of the lives of individuals across the world. Salient to our study, educator preparation programs (EPPs) were significantly affected in areas of fieldwork and student teaching, the typical capstone for EPPs. Literature published to date chronicling the throes of the pandemic speaks to the challenges incurred in teaching in PK-12 systems and EPPs (Eady et al, 2021; Sayman & Cornell, 2021; Schrieber, 2022; VanLone et al., 2022; Zenkov et al., 2021).

According to the research, teachers in the field experienced a sense of loss and grieved the impact of the pandemic on their relationships with students and their work conditions (Sayman & Cornell, 2021). Teacher educators also experienced challenges in providing authentic learning opportunities for teacher candidates without being physically present in schools and classrooms (Eady et al., 2021).

As a result of the pandemic, the workload for students in EPPs was also affected. Zenkov et al. (2021) asserted, "While this is an unhealthy scenario, it's also a consciousness raising affair" (p. 122). Schrieber (2022) concurred, "The unanticipated challenges that have emerged during this time have required instructors and students to adapt, the transition to remote instruction presents opportunities to implement new practices that enhance student education..." (p. 110). Central to our inquiry, as VanLone et al. (2022) suggested, "student teachers who had incomplete student teaching experiences may need additional support during their novice teaching years" (p. 8). This concern that alumni from our five programs, who began teaching in 2021, would not be fully prepared for all their roles and responsibilities as novice teachers led us to initiate this collaborative investigation.

Foundation

This study is built on tenets of self-study research: collaboration, critical friendship, and dialogue. Lighthall (2004) posited collaboration is "the single most prominent feature of the self-study enterprise" (p. 231). The self-study community has long advocated critical friendship in researchers' methodology (Lighthall, 2004; Loughran & Northfield,

1998; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2004). Reminiscent of Fletcher et al. (2016), Olan and Edge (2019), and Stolle et al. (2019), we have sought, in this instance, to establish co-critical friendship relationships with one another across dissimilar institutions and without each of us knowing all the other researchers through past friendships and collaborations. We agree with Stolle et al. (2019) that the “three characteristics central to an effective critical friendship [are] vulnerability, reflection, and skepticism” (p. 23).

The open and respectful dialogue was paramount to establishing and maintaining our collaboration and critical friendship. As Placier et al. (2008) asserted, the fundamental power of dialogue is to build one’s knowledge: “Dialogue provides valuable ways of knowing. I come to know what I know as I say it” (p. 61). In the case of this inquiry, our dialogical exchanges occurred synchronously through Zoom meetings and asynchronously through dialogical journaling.

Self-study afforded our group the opportunity to explore and examine the tensions we lived and navigated in our individual EPP settings, and created an in-between space in which we could reframe and move beyond our individual settings. Fletcher (2020) calls attention to the in-between nature of self-study methodology and asserts the hyphen in S-STEP represents the hybrid nature of S-STEP research. Hybridity, argues Fletcher, is a central feature in S-STEP methodology. The idea of something made by combining different elements resonated with our goals to study our own and students’ experiences, our own and one another’s EPP structures, as well as our approach of using qualitative self-study methodology with quantitative survey data. Fletcher (2020) also suggests “S-STEP researchers often occupy a similar space as a hyphen does, residing in a middle ground” (p. 270). The “betweenness” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) and hybridity (Fletcher, 2020) of S-STEP characterize how we sought to better understand the public issue of teacher candidates transitioning into teaching post-pandemic and the private experience of learning from our alumni how we might work alongside them to provide additional support due to potentially inadequate field experiences during the pandemic (VanLone et al., 2022).

Forming the research team itself could be considered an element of our methodology. The team of six of us congealed informally at a one-day conference. Some of us were friends who had collaborated previously, others were acquaintances within the self-study community, and a few of us had never met before. Not knowing if the team would be disparate or if alliances would form, in the late summer of 2021, we began to meet weekly to plan the study. Our research team, accidentally but fortuitously formed, did not follow a prescribed trajectory but rather unfolded in a graceful glide as trust was built and plans emerged. Furthermore, we did not follow a formation of predetermined “principal investigators” planning and leading the research; it emerged as a shared leadership model with all sharing the lead on various parts of the study.

Methods

Data collected for this study included our individual journals where we recorded our perspectives and insights from working collaboratively with one another, from gathering and analyzing survey responses from participants about their preparation for teaching, and from planning and conducting a focus group with a subgroup of participants. Additionally, we compiled and analyzed recordings and transcripts from our regularly scheduled planning and de-briefing meetings conducted via Zoom. Finally, we read and responded to one another’s reflective journal posts on a shared Google document. In this space, we posed questions to one another (e.g., “What are you bringing to this collaborative study of new teachers?”) that encouraged our coming to know one another and our perspectives and interpretations of events related to our collaboration.

We systematically immersed ourselves in our individual and collective datasets in an iterative process, doing multiple readings to identify codes, emergent patterns, and questions for consideration as they relate to our research foci. (Merriam, 1998; Samaras, 2011). In Zoom conferences, we discussed the aggregate data, exchanged ideas, and identified together the broader patterns and divergent themes (Samaras & Freese, 2006). We prepared summaries of our individual and shared analyses and used these summaries as interim texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to promote further reflection. In preparing the report for this inquiry, we selected data excerpts that were representative of our datasets and illustrate the themes we collectively identify. We assert the trustworthiness of our collaboration was enhanced through the preparation and interrogation of our individual and shared summaries and analyses as we

worked to “member check” with one another our understanding of the experiences and perspectives in the group (Willis & Siltanen, 2009).

Outcomes

Navigating the Steep Learning Curve

To say this large-scale, mixed methods study has been a learning experience for all of us would be an understatement. We have learned about the different approaches to human subjects research approval at each institution, how to construct survey instruments, and how hard it is to recruit participants through email, particularly first-year teachers who are navigating returning to in-person instruction.

Out of the six participants in this project, all of us identify as qualitative researchers and four of us conduct most of our research within the self-study paradigm. This is not surprising, given that this collaboration grew out of the online Invisible College held in July 2021. In practical terms, this meant that none of us had put together a study of this scope and focus before. In our reflective journals, each of us commented on how much longer it took to get this study off the ground than we initially planned. For example, in their reflective journals, Laura and Valerie wrote:

One of the things I'm noticing in most of my early notes was just how time consuming it was to get the IRBs done. Most of my notes are checking on people's CITI training and IRB. I had multiple consultations with the IRB about the project. (Laura)

The learning curve was much steeper than I had anticipated for organizing and carrying out a multi-institution largely quantitative study. Likewise, the investment of time and energy was much higher than I had assumed it would be. I'm thinking specifically about my experience completing all the required CITI modules. It took me two full days to work through them all. I recognized that my investment of time was relatively small in comparison to Laura, Christi, Laurie, and Pam who had to navigate the IRB process at their respective institutions. I had the benefit of working at a small teaching college, and my IRB was happy to defer to Laura's for ensuring the collaborative study adhered to human subject requirements. (Valerie)

While the practical lessons we learned through our efforts to design and carry out a multi-institutional quantitative study were important, for this chapter we are focused on the findings regarding what we learned through forming our research group. Similar to when we travel to a new place, through visiting large-scale, mixed-methods research, we learned more about our home (qualitative, self-study research) by reflecting on what was different.

Through sharing with one another how our institutions and local communities responded (or did not respond) to the pandemic, we discovered that no matter what the response, the impact on us as faculty was the same. Throughout the pandemic we each felt overwhelmed, burnt out, and very worried. We worried about our students and what they were learning. We worried about whether or not our students would be safe. And we worried about how we could support our students through the experience. Sharing the worries we experienced during the pandemic was therapeutic, allowing us to put into perspective the disruption the pandemic had on our professional and personal lives, individually and collectively. Giving voice to long-pent-up angst encouraged us to heal and reclaim purpose and direction as teacher educators and scholars. Sharing the similarities and differences in our experiences allowed us to navigate the challenges of a multi-site project. Additionally, it was through reflecting on our differences that the type of skepticism discussed by Stolle et al. (2019) surfaced.

Growing Through Vulnerability and Reflection

Despite the fact that five out of the six of us are mid-career scholars, the process of forming a new research group of this size and scope was a new experience. Looking back at our online meetings and written reflections, what became clear to us was that we focused quite a bit on building community and relationships with one another. Gradually, we shared stories with one another. We began by sharing what the pandemic had been like for us in our particular institutions. Through their journals Valerie, Christi, Pam, and Laura each related their experiences and emotions in being teacher educators during the pandemic.

In the spring of 2021, four of the 14 student teachers I supervised completed all but the last five weeks of their student teaching remotely. That is, they were teaching from their dorms via Zoom, Google Classroom, or Teams to students who were mostly sitting in the classrooms in the schools with their cooperating teachers. The other eleven student teachers were mostly in-person with their students and co-ops, with the exception of cases of quarantining or schools being shut down as cases increased in particular schools. It all was very chaotic! (Valerie)

For my practicum course, I really struggled. It was heartbreaking, even felt morally wrong to not be able to place students into schools and classrooms—that was the purpose of the course! My students didn't know what they were missing, but I did, and they suspected. We made the most of it, but with deep regret I just had to swallow down. (Christi)

Having been in the field of education for over forty years, nineteen of which have been at an institute of higher education (IHE), I bring history. I bring history of working with over 2000 children and adults in classrooms. I bring living history from the 1950's until today. I bring knowledge of growth, accessibility, and the ongoing fight for justice and equity in education. I bring memories of dark days in our history. But experience and longevity in the field did not prepare me for the COVID-19 Pandemic. (Pam)

I found teaching online really jarring last fall. I hadn't thought about the fact that due to politeness norms, students would be muted and so when I said things, there was no audible reaction. I was so grateful to students who reacted to things physically—laughing in a way I could see, thumbs up, nodding vigorously, etc. Otherwise, it felt like I was just talking into nothingness. Most of my students did keep their cameras on, I had two who never once turned them on. (Laura)

As we became more familiar with one another, we gradually began to share more personal stories of our lives in and beyond our institutions. In their journal, Valerie, Christi, and Pam noted,

I look forward to the Zoom meetings as opportunities to socialize with a group of professional women I see as friends. Personally, I don't have many social outlets working at a small college in a small town. I appreciate even when our chats are about grips because it helps me put into perspective my own frustrations with situations at my institution. (Valerie)

The pre-meeting conversations and numerous personal connections formed during our Zoom meetings provided an outlet for processing and talking through institutional and personal challenges alike.... Frustration from working for months without a contract, the fear of going on strike were weighty and distracting, yet the group was a place where I could be a part of something important and meaningful – something beyond my immediate institutional setting and even the significant personal challenges from an unexpected death in the family, a parent diagnosed with cancer, and COVID. Because we were a group united in our study, and because we shared a commitment to the research, one another, and teacher education, the group became a place of welcome, even escape...Each of our identities and experiences were embraced. (Christi)

One of the upsides of our work together was the laughter. Sharing concerns and frustrations provided an unanticipated intersection with one another. For me, this was a value added to our work and helped me navigate a pandemic time that none of us had ever experienced. Another joyful benefit was the opportunity to meet in person for the first time at AERA. Even though we had never been face-to-face, I felt that I was in the company of old friends. (Pam)

Over the last 16 months, we have developed real friendships, willing to share with and comfort one another through trials and traumas, large and small. In a recent phone conversation, Pam remarked to Laura how unusual our team is in her experience as a researcher. Because we are each focused on the success of the group and our research goals together, being vulnerable with one another has come relatively easily. One of the threads that tied us together and kept us together is what we bring from the self-study community. We are comfortable in discomfort and willing to be

vulnerable about our experiences during a time of great tumult. As Christi articulated in one of her final reflections, an image symbolic of our work together:

Out of the motion, isolation, displacement, chaos, fatigue, and unexpected respite of coming together on the heels of teaching through a pandemic, our group was like a roadside park along a flowing river—there, in the shade, we found connection and conversation that sparked into something more. Laughter and reality checks alike were afforded by sharing our worlds, through screens with one another and wandering out into the broader teaching world we share.

The time spent building community could be seen as “off topic” in that we were not directly speaking about our research project. In reviewing the videos from our meetings, we discovered there is always a certain amount of time spent on what we have come to call “community building.” As Carol described in her journal:

While coding the video recording of one of the group meetings a theme emerged. Approximately 25% of the time of the meeting could be coded as “off topic” or not devoted exclusively to the research topic. However, it seems in these consequential off topic moments a community was created, burdens were shared, encouragement was abundant. In this model, professional life blended seamlessly with humanity and the outcome was the creation of a collaborative multi-institution scholarly group of colleagues and friends. This type of working collaborative relationship has the potential to imbue research with head and heart looking inward and simultaneously outward creating a unique robust perspective on research.

Based on our experiences as qualitative researchers, many of us self-study researchers – we instinctively foregrounded issues of community building. While hypothetically we could have worked to be more “on task,” we could not simply remove our qualitative lenses because we were working with survey data.

Christi also addressed this community building in her journal, describing the relationships we have built as “power-with” (Edge et al., 2022). She defined power-with as:

A kind of strength that emerges from collaboration and empowering relationships forged through the research process and especially through the sharing of oneself and one’s teaching practices. This kind of power is ecological and creates an environment where things can happen, people can be vulnerable and grow, can venture into the unknown and emerge stronger, more knowledgeable, even transformed (p. 172).

Returning to the framework put forward by Stolle et al. (2019), we see strong evidence of vulnerability and reflection in our growing together as a research collaborative. As individuals in this newly formed group, we did not question our willingness to be vulnerable with one another. Reflection was built into the work through sharing stories of our experiences at different institutions, in different states, over the course of the pandemic. These shared stories cast our individual experiences in a new light, leading us each to reconsider decisions and ways of doing things in our home institutions.

Significance

Since the inception of self-study as a methodology, there have been discussions regarding how it is and is not like traditional research (e.g., LaBoskey, 2004; Russell, 2004). We have been privy to many conversations regarding the importance of expanding the discourse communities in which we share our work in order to broaden the impact and acceptance of self-study work. The conversations we shared as a research group across the timeline of our project have caused us to consider the importance of bringing our whole selves to whatever type of research with which we engage. As described above, we could not turn off our interpretive, self-study lenses, even when analyzing quantitative data. We consider this a strength of our work. Not only have we been able to see the people in the data more fully and clearly, but we have also seen ourselves.

Each of us has had her collegial and social circle enlarged through our engagement in the collaboration. This is noteworthy in light of the widely-recognized isolative effect of the pandemic on the lived experiences of individuals in all

walks of life. We were able to abate our sense of isolation in ways that were personally and professionally generative. Through conversations in which we described our programs (pre, during, and post-Covid) our institutions, and our states, we have developed a wealth of knowledge about the variations and commonalities in teacher education across the U.S. This in turn has opened our thinking to adaptations and refinements in our practice that we might not have previously considered. By listening carefully to one another, we came to reflect in a more skeptical manner on our own institutions and experiences. Our skepticism was not directed at one another but at the larger questions and contexts.

Though some of the initial goals for our collaboration have yet to be realized or have been amended, we have each grown and been transformed through our collaborative process. We each have a broadened understanding of the variation in teacher education programs across our institutions. We have each developed a deeper appreciation of the affordances and constraints associated with conducting mixed-methods, multi-institutional research and have developed new skill sets that will positively influence individual and collaborative future projects. We have been lifted up and renewed through the opportunity to get to know and support one another across a myriad of personal and professional life events, not the least of which is the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not hyperbole to assert that what began as a modest and tentative unplanned conversation in a virtual space has ultimately transformed us as both individuals and as a community of teacher educators.

References

Bullough, R. V., Jr., & Pinnegar, S. (2001). Guidelines for quality in autobiographical forms of self-study research. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 13-21. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003013>

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Eady, M. J., Green, C. A., & Capocchiano, H. (2021). Shifting the delivery but keeping the focus: A reflection on ensuring quality teacher preparation during a pandemic. *Education Sciences*, 11(401). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080401>

Edge, C. U., Cameron-Standerford, A., & Bergh, B. (2022). Power-with: Strength to transform through collaborative self-study across spaces, places, and identities. In B. M. Butler, & S. M. Bullock (Eds.), *Learning through collaboration in self-study* (pp. 171-184). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-2681-4_13

Fletcher, T. (2020). Self-study as hybrid methodology. In J. Kitchen et al. (eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 269-297). Springer.

Fletcher, T., Ní Chríonín, D., & O'Sullivan, M. (2016). A layered approach to critical friendship as a means to support pedagogical innovation in pre-service teacher education. *Studying Teacher Education*, 12(3), 302-319.

LaBoskey, V. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817-869). Springer.

Lighthall, F. F. (2004). Fundamental features and approaches of the s-step enterprise. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 193-246). Springer.

Loughran, J. J., & Northfield, J. R. (1998). A framework for the development of self-study practice. In M. L. Hamilton, S. Pinnegar, T. Russell, J. Loughran, & V. LaBoskey (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing teacher practice: Self-study in teacher education* (pp. 7-18). Falmer Press.

- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Olan, E. L., & Edge, C. (2019). Collaborative meaning-making and dialogic interactions in critical friends as co-authors. *Studying Teacher Education*, 15(1), 31-43.
- Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research*. Springer.
- Placier, P., Pinnegar, S., Hamilton, M. L., & Guilfoyle, K. (2008). Exploring the concept of dialogue in the self-study of teaching practices. In Kosnik, C., Beck, C., Freese, A. R., & Samaras, A. P. (Eds.) *Making a difference in teacher education through self-study* (pp. 51-79). Springer.
- Russell, T. (2004). Tracing the development of self-study in teacher education research and project. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 1191-1210). Springer.
- Samaras, A. P. (2011). *Self-study teacher research: Improving your practice through collaborative inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Samaras, A. P. & Freese, A. R. (2006). *Self-study of teaching practices primer*. Peter Lang.
- Sayman, D. & Cornell, H. (2021). "Building the Plane While Trying to Fly:" Exploring special education teacher narratives during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Planning & Changing*, 50(3-4), 191–207.
- Stolle, E. P., Frambaugh-Kritzer, C., Freese, A., & Persson, A. (2019). Investigating critical friendship: Peeling back the layers. *Studying Teacher Education*, 15(1), 19-30.
- Tidwell, D., & Fitzgerald, L. (2004). Self-study as teaching. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 69-102). Springer.
- VanLone, J., Pansé-Barone, C., & Long, K. (2022). Teacher preparation and the COVID-19 disruption: Understanding the impact and implications for novice teachers. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 3(100120), 1-8.
- Willis, A., Siltanen, J. (2009). Restorying work inside and outside the academy. In W.S. Gershon (Ed.), *The Collaborative Turn: Working Together in Qualitative Research* (pp. 103-125). Sense Publishers.
- Zenkov, K, Helmsing, M., Parker, A. K., Glaser, H., & Bean, M. (2021). Portrait of the teacher educator as a weary pedagogue: Narrating our way to a post-pandemic vision of educator preparation. *Teacher Educators' Journal*, 14, 106–125.





Valerie A. Allison

Susquehanna University



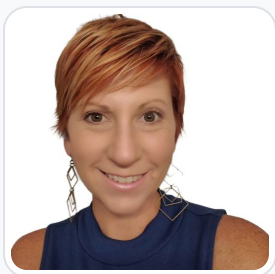
Laura C. Haniford

University of New Mexico



Pamela J. Powell

Northern Arizona University



Christi U. Edge

Northern Michigan University

Christi Edge is a Professor of Education and serves as the Director of Graduate Reading Programs and the Extended Learning and Community Engagement Scholar at Northern Michigan University. Her research addresses teacher education, meaning-making, literacy practice and theory, and distance education.



Carol Moriarty

Northern Arizona University



Laurie A. Ramirez

Appalachian State University

This content is provided to you freely by Equity Press.

Access it online or download it at https://equitypress.org/pausing_at_the_thres/YPRKWNMR.