

Striving to Sustain Ourselves

Ethical Tension of Relationship, Roles, and Responsibilities

Shaun M. Murphy & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Dialogue

Resilience

Experience

Relationships

This project seeks to uncover the threads of experience that sustain us and allow us to continue in the academy. As long-time teacher educators and scholars, we are committed to being teacher educator researchers who prepare teachers and a new generation of teacher educator scholars. Yet, having lived through waves of teacher education reform, ever-increasing scholarship demands, cycles of institutional leadership, and being weary, we began to question our resilience in teacher education. Provoked by Torrez and Haniford's (2018) presentation at the castle conference, we determined that as S-STTEP scholars, and experienced teacher educators, we would share our understandings of our lives as teacher educators with each other and examine them carefully, in order to develop knowledge of what had supported us in being resilient (continuing in our work as teacher educators).

In this inquiry we sought to uncover the threads of experience that sustained us. Taking an ethical approach in accounting for our experiences and the analysis of them, we used dialogue (Pinnegar & Hamilton 2009) centered in the three-dimensional narrative space (sociality, temporality, and place)(Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) to interrogate our stories and uncover the threads of experience that resulted in feelings of joy and hopefulness.

Context of the Study

The conceptual framework that guides this study draws from two contexts. The first is based on what the scholarly literature reveals about teacher education and about being sustained as teacher educators. The second aspect is our positioning in our own contexts. We begin by articulating how, for this study, we understood the obligations of teacher education in relationship to the literature on resilience. Then we explain how our contexts positioned us to inquire into what sustained us.

The Scholarly Context

Teacher educators face unique challenges within the university (Davey, 2013). More deeply than other fields of study, they must constantly negotiate the theory-practice divide. In order to educate teachers that thrive in teaching (Beltman, et al., 2011), they must educate teachers to enact practices and understand the theories behind them. They must help their students understand the demands of social justice, uncover their own privilege, and support the development of their own students. Mansfield et al. (2016) argued that teacher educators must respond to students in ways that promote resilience and thus, reduce teacher attrition. What this implies is that teacher educators are responsible for every possible action of an individual teacher. This responsibility begins when they are in our classrooms, and in a

strange way, continues when they enter their careers (and classrooms of their own). We have a sense that we must help them be prepared for all eventualities.

As Davey (2013) noted, because of the often conflicting demands of their commitments to teaching, preparing teachers, and studying teaching, learning, and teacher education, teacher educators' prowess as educators and scholars are dismissed not only within the academy but also in the larger educational research arena. Ethically teacher educators must make sure that teacher candidates have the content, pedagogical, and curricular knowledge needed to support all students they will teach. The resiliency research argues that they must also support the emotional and psychological well-being of teachers even after they leave teacher education (e.g., Roselle, 2007). Coss, Dunn, and Dotson (2018) argued that within the framework of the typical challenges faced by teacher educators, the local and national contexts exacerbate the tensions faced as teacher educators try to meet obligations.

We conducted this inquiry exploring specifically those aspects that enable our resilience and sustain us. While we explored definitions of resilience, our definition evolved over time but fundamentally we understood resilience as referring to positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity (Beltman, Mansfield, and Price, 2011). What we sought to better understand was Clará's (2017) idea of everyday resilience—in other words not resilience in the face of drastic disruptions or trauma, but resilience in the face of the subtle, on-going everyday difficulties and experiences of teacher educators. Beltman, Mansfield, and Price (2011) offered an interactive model of resilience illustrating the factors that enhance or reduce homeostasis or resilience. As we read the literature around resilience and dialogued about it, we were taken with many ideas, but the longer we read and talked, the more we came to an understanding that resilience was based on, and in, sustainability. We were seeking to understand what supported us as we continued to meet our obligations to preservice and inservice teachers and their students. We came to understand that in terms of resilience we were interested in everyday resilience and what in our life experiences sustained us as teacher educators.

Our Personal Contexts

We are both teacher educators and we each have been involved in teacher education for over 20 years. Despite our commitment to teacher education and teacher education research, we both feel beleaguered. In the past, we have often struggled to continue as teacher educators. Yet, the challenge to find purpose and joy has recently become more constrained. The source of our challenge and our questioning of our identity as teacher educators and whether we can sustain and continue to live a narrative of ourselves as teacher educators emerges from our contexts. Stefinee faces the challenges that come from the external context of teacher education in the US. Across the US, teacher education is under threat. New value added and certification testing demands threaten to flatten and make uniform the enterprise of teacher education. Further, state boards of education are increasingly seeking to disrupt—engaging new strategies for turning it over to for-profit agencies and local school districts. Because of the challenge of teaching in the current climate and the public's increasing dismissal of teachers, alarmingly fewer students choose to prepare themselves as teacher in higher education settings. As higher education faces funding challenges, colleges of education, particularly, teacher education become the target for budget reductions. Yet, the demands for performance as faculty are not reduced. Shaun faces similar challenges to teacher education as an enterprise, but the alternative certification movement and disrespect for teachers and teaching has not quite reached the level currently in place in Stefinee's US context.

Shaun is more directly confronted with difficulties that emerged from accepting leadership responsibilities in a college of education. Both authors have been teacher educators for a long time and have weathered the challenge of tenure, rank advancement, and accreditation. Based on joining a discussion at the Castle Conference in 2018, we determined to explore further what sustained us in the face of the escalating threats to teaching and teacher education, and to us as teacher educators. In our study, we sought to better understand our resilience or lack of it in our own contexts as teacher educators. We sought to understand what supported us and enabled us to be resilient in our contexts, in our practices, and in our experiences.

Methods

In order to inquire into our resilience, specifically what sustained us, we turned to self- study of teacher education practices (S-STTEP). This methodology is appropriate since our study meets the five characteristics of S-STTEP outlined by Laboskey (2004). The study is self- initiated and self-focused, improvement aimed, interactive, uses qualitative methods, and exemplar-based validation. We argue it is improvement aimed because through this examination, we sought to understand what helped us feel sustained and enabled us to continue to meet our obligations as teacher educators. Through this work we hoped to uncover the understandings of our context that enabled us to create positive appraisals of being a teacher educator in the face of stress, challenge, turmoil, and sometimes trauma (Clará, 2017).

In designing the project and our analysis, we were always mindful of Dewey's (1938) notion of experience, this enabled us to develop a deeper understanding. In the process, we came to see how our understanding was shaped by stories we told and then retold in our interactions through letter and conversation. The act of inquiring into the narratives modified our understanding and subsequent experiences and led to new understandings of the sources of resilience in our experiences.

The data and data analysis involved in this project included a series of letters written by the two authors and their joint interrogation and analysis of the letters through conversation about them. Using dialogue as a tool for coming to know, we continually questioned the meanings that emerged in their discourse and interaction. This involved an ongoing process of dialogic process of data generation, conversation, and interpretation. This meant we engaged in letter writing, followed by conversations focused on negotiating the meaning of new events and reinterpretation of those reported earlier. These conversations brought forward new understandings and instantiation of older ones.

The letters became field texts which were placed in the three-dimensional narrative space of temporality, sociality, and place. The dialogue between us and subsequent letters continued to be understood within the three-dimensional narrative space. In other words on-going rounds of dialogue, letter writing, questioning, and more letters described our process of data analysis which we represent as dialogue. In our letters and conversations, we both recorded current experiences and our interrogation of those experiences pushing toward a deeper understanding of what sustained us. Our use of dialogue in letter and conversation provided a basis for developing the trustworthiness of our findings (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). In the letters we identified the issues we faced and the sources of experience that sustained us. We shared these documents on Google Docs. In addition, we engaged in weekly conversations in which we considered and reconsidered the letters; this was then followed by additional letters. We placed the experiences in the three-dimensional narrative space, meaning we attended to how sociality, temporality, and place shaped our experiences. This attention to the commonplaces enabled a deeper analysis of the narratives. This helped us uncover the sustaining elements of our experiences.

As we designed and enacted this inquiry, we recognized that the experiences we narrated to each other in letters and conversations were shaped by paradigmatic knowing and turned back on themselves, as they led us forward to new understandings of the threads of experience that sustained us and ultimately enabled us to continue to meet our commitments in being teacher educators.

Outcomes

The day to day can grind us down and lead us to be discouraged, but our regular conversations brought new life and hope to our understanding, thinking and our work, and ultimately led us to deeper understandings of everyday resilience (Clará, 2017). The places where we are and the contexts of those places—imposition from leadership, disrespect and unkindness of students and colleagues, demands of meetings, can be draining but can also center us in the context of teacher education. We begin by reporting the threads of our narratives that revealed our sources of support. These threads included friendship, research, roles, and responsibilities. We examine them through presenting and unpacking our data. As we dialogued, we came to understand that the experiential threads that supported us were also the threads

that threatened to disrupt us. Therefore, we return to the examples presented in our initial analysis and articulate the duality present in them.

Friendship

The first thread is friendship. As this excerpt from our letters reveals, our deep friendship allowed us to seek and garner support from each other and other friends regardless of the challenges we faced.

Dear Shaun

... I remember the time I first met you a little differently—who wants a single story anyway. ... I remember walking ...with you to meet your partner. We left you on the street as his car approached and I remember wondering (because I liked you so much) would we be close enough friends that one day I would meet him actually. Sort of a funny precursor of our current relationship wherein both of you are so dear to me and every interaction renews me.

So I was lying in bed this morning (Saturday) resisting getting up and taking on the mantle ...of my day....I recalled when I met you in New York and you were so distressed, my heart was torn. I was appalled that anyone would cause you so much distress....We needed to talk but mostly just to be with each other. I was loathe to let you return to your place...So often in my own life when I have experiences of distress like yours, those around me, ...try to help me see how my action could, should, might have been different and things would then be different. I did not want you to hear that from me or feel it since I felt the opposite that what you were experiencing was real, your conceptualization of reality was accurate, and that you had acted in faith, diligence, and kindness.... On Saturday, I feel my role as a teacher educator more clearly than during the week all of the many obligations that press—I feel profoundly the conflicting obligations. Love, Stefinee. (11.10.2018)

This field note shows the ways friendship, over time, supports us. In it, Stefinee highlights the beginning of our friendship, the commitment to the friendship and caring for each other that was evident in that friendship and a subsequent tension in the life of Shaun regarding a work transition. What is essential in this field note is the reference to friendship. Over the year of conducting this research, we reaffirmed our friendship and realized it is foundational in sustaining someone. Importantly as well, is the ability to discuss all aspects of our work in teacher education with each other. Both of us are long term teacher educators and Shaun wrote,

...I would claim that the support of a friend and colleague, who knows the system, is huge. ...This last week I felt totally behind a rock and a hard place with the dean and surprisingly the department. I was able to be blunt with some people... So can we say that facing problems is a way of remaining resilient? I also try to breathe, to focus on my breath. They call this mindfulness but in some ways I think it could be called body-ness because I need to be reminded to stay in my body and not give into my monkey mind. So I breathe and stay aware of my body and safety at the moment....One of my major anxieties is this job as department chair. The anxiety resides in my not knowing how to do the job. I will admit it does get better, so for someone like me it is about knowledge... (12.30.2018)

Shaun argues first the helpfulness of a friend and then he provides an authentic assessment of his ongoing experience in facing the challenges of leadership, because of the deep friendship he reveals himself and the depth of his experiences and understanding.

Research

We are committed scholars and enjoy scholarship both as we engage in research and as we are able to share the things we learn from research with others. An aspect of the strong professional friendships we have is the opportunity to discuss our learning about educating teachers. Shaun recounted a presentation he made at another university (as opposed to the one in which he works),

It was a great talk [on Indigenization] and I truly loved being in the company of people who saw our work as valuable and important. I did have something to say...but I was able to talk about Indigenizing as something that involved people and was not just a concept...that we Indigenize by making a space for Indigenous people. People nodded in the audience. I went around and shook as many hands as I could before the talk. It all went well. I'm glad I went. (11.30.2018)

In this account, Shaun shares how his presentation to this group of people was sustaining because it was valued and he felt that what he said informed those present. This account resonated with Stefinee who recognized that she often felt sustained in similar ways when she saw others impacted by the things she communicated. In our responses to each other, both of us came to realize that our work as researchers and scholars was sustaining. We like to do research. We value the methodologies we use in our work. When we can engage with others and share what we know through publication or presentation it sustains us.

Roles

We realized that when we are able to enact our many roles as teacher educators in ways we desire that we are sustained. We feel renewed when we enact these roles with fidelity and can meet our responsibilities. In the earlier quotes here, the thread of enacting our roles with authenticity in ways we prefer is evident. It is obvious when Stefinee spoke of lying in bed on a Saturday and reviewing her week and letting joy in her work overtake feelings she might have of being less than successful. It is there in Shaun's description of his presentation and the response to it. Further, Stefinee wrote:

[This week] I realized how much academic work ... sustains me. Yesterday I did two reviews and I felt so invigorated. As I read and responded to the work. Figuring out ways to be supportive and critical at the same time....Doing this brings me calm and great satisfaction. This was a new understanding--not a shock because I have known it for a long time, but a reminding that I really love academic work. (11.04.2018)

Stefinee reveals the ways in which her scholarly role sustains her. Even when it is demanding, engaging wholeheartedly in the roles we enact as teacher educators and as we develop new knowledge this brings calm and satisfaction.

The Dual Nature of the Threads

As we began articulating our threads and selecting evidence that informed and expanded them, we noticed a curious thing. The threads of experience that sustained us were also the threads that had the greatest power to disrupt us. We found that relationships, when filled with venom and unkindness, undercut our hope, but as we meet obligations to students and others, these relationships provide resilience. The same is evident in our various roles and the research we conduct. While these aspects of our work might challenge us, they also restore us. We may wonder if we are doing robust and significant research, but this is offset by doing the actual research. We can experience our responsibility and commitments as beleaguering and destroying or the converse. In exploring the dual nature of what sustains and disheartens us we rename the threads: Friendships become relationships. Research becomes teacher educator knowledge. Roles become responsibilities.

From Friendship to Relationship

Notice that when Stefinee wrote to Shaun about her Saturday reflections in the first section of findings she articulated the ways in which the source of Shaun's challenge was the disruptive, mean spirited, and unkind reactions of those with whom he was in relationship. We recognized that just as colleagues, leaders, and family can support us and increase our ability to meet obligations; they can also be the very reason we seek sources of sustenance.

From Research to Teacher Educator Knowledge

We recognized that we loved understanding, producing, and sharing scholarship. Shaun's account of his presentation on Indigenization and research findings with an opportunity to present his obligation and commitment provides evidence of this. Yet in Stefinee's explanation of her renewed understanding of the importance of research and scholarship, we

note a deeper understanding of what is sustaining. What these quotes reveal is what we, as teacher educators value and are sustained by, and we are able to utilize research and scholarship to develop our knowledge of teaching, learning and teacher education and share it with others. When our knowledge is dismissed or discounted, we feel under attack or disrespected.

From Roles to Responsibilities

What became evident in our exemplars and explanations of them is that while we value and are sustained by our many roles as teacher educators, we are most sustained when we can enact these roles in responsible ways. Shaun indicated that what was valuable for him in his presentation to others was his awareness that those others valued what he had to say and like him sought to enact their roles with responsibility. This thread of being able to act responsibly and with true fidelity in our roles brought deep satisfaction, supported us in problem-solving and sustained us as teacher educators.

Conclusion: Final Thoughts

As we were completing this paper, we were struck by a deepened understanding that our desire to be sustained as teacher educators came from our obligation to being teacher educators. We recognized that more than resilience we sought to endure. Through understanding what sustained us such as work, relationships, practices of teacher education, and seeking more of these experiences is the sustaining threads in our lives, and therefore we would be more likely to meet our obligations and endure as teacher educators. Stefinee's letter to Shaun uncovers how we seek to enact the things that sustain us, value the things that bring strength, and embrace the threads we uncovered here in order to endure.

Dear Shaun,

This is me writing in response to you. I have spent so many years here and I have friends and I mostly I like what I do, but I have lots of unfulfilled wishes and dreams. I have often, across the years, felt so alone and isolated here. I have always been clear that my colleagues are not here but elsewhere. This morning I intentionally listened to ... Larry Echohawk on forgiveness. I was reminded that even when we are in spaces where we must repeatedly forgive the same person for the same actions, forgiveness washes us clean and brings peace. Our hearts are tender and we both probably should have been farmers and lived in rural communities--but even then just our luck the farmer next door would take his/her frustrations out on us.

We are blessed to have each other--someone who sees our good and just loves us. Getting to work with students, getting to be creative, getting to develop new understanding, getting to try to make our spaces safer for others even if it can't usually be that way for us, gratitude for the good parts and the opportunities where we can grow and thrive. This makes me, and I hope you, whole and invites us into spaces of peace. Getting to peace to letting it go to being and becoming in sacred moments of rest--that sustains me and you are fundamental to that for me.

Stefinee

Finally, both of us find great value from the artistic and the poetic. We now share a poem we give to our students as they leave us to become teachers. We know they will need to be resilient, they will need to identify and seek out what sustains them and that doing so will enable them to endure as teachers. So we share this poem with you.

Packing for the Future: Instructions.

Take the thickest socks. Wherever you are going You'll have to walk.

There may be water. There may be stones.

There may be high places you cannot go without

the hope socks bring you, the way they hold you
to the earth.
At least one pair must be new, must be blue as a wish hand-knit by your mother
in her sleep.
Take a leather satchel,
a velvet bag and an old tin box – a salamander painted on the lid.
This is to carry that small thing
you cannot leave. Perhaps the key you've kept though it doesn't fit any lock you know,
the photograph that keeps you sane, a ball of string to lead you out though you can't walk back
into that light.
In your bag leave room for sadness, leave room for another language.
There may be doors nailed shut. There may be painted windows. There may be signs that warn
you to be gone. Take the dream you've been having since
you were a child, the one
with open fields and the wind sounding.
Mistrust no one who offers you
water from a well, a songbird's feather, something that's been mended twice.
Always travel lighter
than the heart.
(Crozier, 1999)

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