

The Self You Have to Live With

Reconstructing our Identities in Light of the Problems and Persistent Dilemmas of Teacher Education

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Educational Foundations

Democratic Education

Problems and Dilemmas

A self is not something one is endowed with at birth... it is something that is being continually created as the day-by-day life is lived. Whether that self shall be vapid or virile, barren or productive, a source of misery or a source of power depends upon the interests that are cultivated, the thoughts that are permitted, the ideas and ideals that are laid hold on, the reactions that are enjoyed and therefore encouraged.

—Rhoades, 1938, p. 22

While much of self-study research interrogates teacher education practices in the classroom, recently external mandates and pressures have impacted our teaching in increasing ways. This self-study explores how deprofessionalization and seemingly ever-changing contexts (e.g., Delandshere & Petroskey, 2003; Zeichner, 2010) infringe upon our enactment of our teacher educator identities, and our efforts to mitigate these infringements. We are two mid-career, tenured, teacher education faculty members at the same university in the southwestern U.S. Laura works in the secondary education program, while Cheryl works in the elementary education program; we both also work within the graduate teacher education programs.

This collaborative self-study began over three years ago when our former dean required all teacher education faculty to attend a three-day training that had little relevance to our work and seemed to be another example of the deprofessionalization of teacher education. We presented these initial findings at the 2018 Castle Conference (Torrez & Haniford, 2018). The conversation at our presentation turned to ways to develop resilience as faculty working in teacher education. As a result, we began a second round of data collection and analysis, focusing specifically on resilience. We ground our work in Korthagen and Lunenburg's (2004) framework as we seek to serve *personal* (developing resilience), *institutional* (leveraging our work to push back against deprofessionalization), and *collective* (contributing to the field of teacher education) aims.

This paper documents how we worked to define professional boundaries for ourselves that would both sustain us in our work and that would help us make better decisions regarding where to put our limited resources. We sought to articulate for ourselves what we are concerned about (but have little ability to change) and what we have control over, in order to live a professional life more in line with our teacher educator identities.

Methods

Across almost three years, we have centered our work around different guiding questions. These guiding questions served as writing prompts that we addressed first through individual reflective essays. The first year we articulated our professional identities through exploring where we felt deprofessionalized. In the second year we wrote about resilience as self-care in order to better understand how we can persist as the teacher educators we each seek to be in the current context. As a result of unpacking our understandings of resilience and self-care, we discovered that we each set different professional boundaries stemming from different interpretations about what we have control over, leading to the writing prompt: “Explore the ways we each frame differently our areas of concern and control and what impact the different framings have on our identities as teacher educators and on our navigation of this current deprofessionalized context.”

Grounding our analysis in professional dialogue (Guilfoyle et al., 2004) we began by reading one another’s essay. Next, we had multiple conversations where we raised questions, sought clarification, and found that “our differences gave us new lenses to think about the issues we confronted” (p. 1110). We recorded each meeting, coding the transcriptions for additional themes about our areas of concern. We do not agree on everything, and intentionally unpack our differences for greater insight (Schuck & Russell, 2006). Data included all individual writings, transcriptions of recorded dialogues, and critical friend memos.

As we describe in more detail below, ultimately, we began to frame our conversations around “problems and persistent dilemmas” (Cuban, 1990, 1992, 2001) within teacher education. We returned to all our data, coding for where we had talked about issues that were affecting our sense of professionalism and our identities as teacher educators. Then we categorized these issues into whether they were solvable problems or persistent dilemmas. Finally, we organized the persistent dilemmas into themes, representing the types of perennial challenges we face. Through this last round of analysis, we constructed an understanding of how we can set better boundaries at our particular institution, based on a historical understanding of teacher education in the United States.

Outcomes

We begin by telling the story of how we came to understand the importance of setting professional boundaries through determining whether an issue is a problem or a persistent dilemma. To do so, we turned to historical literature to determine whether and how the challenges we face have roots in the past. As we describe below, this historical and foundational literature became another critical friend to whom we turned to reframe our thinking.

Determining Control and Concern

In our conversations, we spent time focused on how teacher education is different from many other departments within a university setting. As Cheryl remarked in one of our conversations, “the lines are never really clear for a lot of teacher educators – what’s teaching, scholarship, service, I mean, those lines kind of blur sometimes because I think they all kind of intertwine for us” (Transcript, 7/16/19). This blurriness often makes it challenging for faculty to make clear decisions about where to invest their time and energy. In circumstances where there is so much work to do and a lack of clarity about priorities, we found it difficult to create our own boundaries.

As a result of the blurriness and sheer volume of the work, college and departmental leadership becomes essential in terms of framing what is important and prioritizing our work. Unfortunately, we have consistently had leadership that framed everything as a crisis; a catastrophizing of situational contexts. As Cheryl stated in one of our dialogues, “I also think we haven’t had leadership, consistent leadership, at any level who are decision makers” (Transcript, 8/19/19).

In the absence of authentic structural or institutional guidance, we have to set our own boundaries and priorities. We have to learn to position ourselves in ways that help us make good decisions for ourselves, our students, and our profession; to cultivate the ideals and actions that would once again bring us a sense of efficacy and renewal. It was at

this point that we started to dig into the difference between areas of concern and areas of control. Cheryl has found herself able to clearly distinguish between these two:

You see, for me, I had to get to a place where it wasn't in my best interest anymore to continue to try and push back all the time. Because a lot of that is just keeping people going in a circle or bringing new people in to the roundabout. They're just going to keep going round the roundabout. If somebody hops off, somebody else will come in, and fundamentally that's because of the leadership (Transcript, 7/16/19).

In contrast, Laura has struggled with defining these areas for herself. Responding to a writing prompt about areas of concern and control, she delineated the small list of things actually in her control before stating:

...if we care about education, if we want to be change agents for good in education, then we cannot allow ourselves to simply focus on the very basics of what we can actually control. We have to stretch a little and try and make a difference. But what are those spaces? Should we call them something different? Because this is a nuanced argument I am trying to make. If we simply focused on exactly what we can control, nothing in this world would ever change (Journal, 8/26/19).

In essence, as faculty we can either take a hardline approach to “concern and control” or we can focus on the grey areas where we might be able to exert some influence, even if we do not ultimately have control over the outcome.

As we discussed our different perspectives on setting these professional boundaries and making decisions about where to put our time and energy, we found ourselves talking about what we began calling the *Groundhog Day* nature of much of our work. This refers to the 1993 movie starring Bill Murray as a reporter who relives the same day over and over. We have found ourselves in meetings having the same conversations over and over and each time administrators treat them as though they were new. As Cheryl put it, “I’m wondering if the reason we feel this way is because there never has been a foundation built, because we keep having these circular, circuitous, groundhog moment conversations that literally have been going on for 13 years” (Transcript, 8/19/19). As a result of our iterative processes, we began framing our work around *problems* in teacher education that can be solved and *persistent dilemmas* that can be managed but perhaps not solved. The notion of *problems* and *persistent dilemmas* stemmed from a conversation Cheryl had at the annual conference of the Association of Teacher Educators (personal communication, 2019) and pushed us to return to Cuban’s work (e.g., 1990, 1992, 2001) on why certain reforms come up again and again in American schools.

Problems and Persistent Dilemmas

As Cuban (1992) defines them, problems are, “fairly routine, structured situations that produce some level of conflict because a desired goal is blocked...These problems have solutions” (p. 6). In contrast “Dilemmas are conflict-filled situations that require choices because competing, highly prized values cannot be fully satisfied” (p. 6). As he argues elsewhere, “Value conflicts, then, are not problems to be solved by the miracles of a science of schooling; they are dilemmas that require political negotiation and compromises among policymakers and interest groups...there is no solution, there are only political tradeoffs” (Cuban, 1990, p. 8).

When we used this framework for viewing our own frustrations, we discovered every issue we discussed as a challenge to our sense of professionalism was a persistent dilemma, not a problem with a straightforward solution. Every challenge ultimately reflected a value conflict that requires dialogue, negotiation and compromise. We had been approaching these issues as problems to be solved, not as dilemmas to be managed.

We classified our challenges into the following persistent dilemmas:

1. Vision and values
2. Assessment and accreditation
3. Leadership
4. Support and communication
5. Historical and sociopolitical contexts

Perhaps because Laura's graduate training was in foundations of education and Cheryl has studied democratic education, our thoughts and conversations kept returning to historical and structural issues that shape our work—the challenges and opportunities. These distinctions led us each to further reading: Laura to continue to frame and analyze our data from an educational foundation's perspective, and Cheryl from a democratic education perspective. Through this process of reframing and analyzing, we returned to the extant literature on the history of teacher education in the United States (e.g., Fraser, 2007; Labaree, 2004) and on democratic education (Dewey, 1916; Goodlad, 1984, 1994; Gutmann, 1987).

By seeking out historical literature, we were able to confirm that the issues we face are not new, they are persistent dilemmas. In order to provide examples of these dilemmas, we share examples from our conversations and writing, and tie them to examples we found in historical literature to demonstrate how they have existed perennially in teacher education.

Clinical preparation. One of the themes that emerged in our data was clinical practice and preparation. Cheryl often indicated discouragement about the increased lack of care and attention, by college leadership, to school/university partnerships. In one of our conversations, she stated, "It takes a lot of work, and space, and it currently isn't valued... And, it's actually been diminished and eradicated by the administration who doesn't conceptualize what some of this is" (Transcript, 7/16/19). This became a noteworthy theme in our data as much of her professional identity and work as a teacher educator has been focused on clinical practice and school/university collaborations. This particular challenge encompasses several of the persistent dilemma themes listed above. First, it is a matter of different visions and values. Currently, our college is looking for less expensive models of clinical preparation. Part-time instructors are less expensive and can be assigned a much larger supervision load than a professor. As such, many tenured faculty have felt pushed out of developing relationships with schools and working closely with the teachers and teacher candidates within them. It is also a matter of leadership. Without leadership that understands teacher preparation well, decisions tend to be made based on non-pedagogical rationales (i.e., college budgets) that tend to commodify faculty.

As we looked to historical texts within teacher education to determine whether this persistent dilemma has existed (as we suspected) over time, we found that not only has clinical preparation been a persistent dilemma, but the impact of larger historical and political contexts and events seem eerily similar. Cheryl noted that:

I have recently read the Pineville Vacation Conference Bulletin from August 1939. This was the first summer retreat of the National Association of Supervisors of Student Teaching (NASST). At the first evening meeting, a discussion was held around the following quote.

The new task confronting teacher education is, in part, the breaking down of the control of tradition and outworn practices and, in part, the building up of new concepts of education and a creative approach to the problems of teaching (p. 7).

In our conversations, we marveled at the parallels among these questions and calls for democracy and education that are ongoing and persistent dilemmas. We also noted the disturbing similarities in rising nationalistic and xenophobic political contexts between 1939 and today. The attention to the 1939 world situation led us to wonder in what ways our similar political environment has influenced the situation in which we currently work, and led us to revisit early work on democratic education. Dewey (1916), in the midst of World War I, wrote, "As this is written, the world is filled with the clang of contending armies" (p.147); "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p.87). This notion of a conjoint communicated experience was a prevalent theme in Pineville Conference regarding all aspects of teacher education.

In 2020, we again find ourselves in the midst of growing global threats to democracy and democratic education. Unfortunately, this too, may be considered a persistent dilemma, and we too wonder how has this iniquitous bedlam come to pass? (NASST, 1939). The readings (Dewey, 1916; Goodlad, 1984, 1994; Gutmann, 1987; NASST, 1939) that we revisited throughout our self-study reaffirmed our position that “the learning process takes place most ideally in a democratic environment and there should be a continuous searching examination of ...administrative structure and function in order to guarantee a democratic environment” (NASST, 1939, p. 21) for our teacher candidates and for us a teacher educators. We believe teacher education has a role to play in combatting these political threats. But we must first remember these are not new challenges, and our responses are often not new either.

Low-status profession. Another persistent dilemma in our data was the low status that we encountered within our college, across the university, and in local schools. We have seen repeatedly how we are treated as though we do not understand our work, or that we are problems needing administrative management. As Laura noted, “...this current administration demonizes teacher education as a department. It doesn’t value the faculty that are in this department, doesn’t value the work that we’re trying to do” (Transcript, 7/16/19). We also talked at length about how often some of the low-status treatment was rooted in personal and institutional sexism. For example, Laura, in describing a meeting she was required to attend with the dean stated:

...the dean has not taken no for an answer. I honestly believe that is due in part to his deep-seated sexism. Women are not supposed to say no. Women are not supposed to put their research and their careers ahead of service. Especially women as teachers and teacher educators, we are supposed to do this work entirely out of a sense of altruism (Journal, 10/3/18).

For us, not only are we marginalized by the broader university, our own leadership communicated to us both explicitly and implicitly that it does not value us as faculty. After re- reading about the history of teacher education in the U.S., Laura wrote:

What I am seeing in the data we have collected ... are issues arising from the tension between seeking status at the university, or being grounded in the work of K-12 teachers and in the day-to-day work of teacher education. Work grounded in teacher education is low status work in both the university and in K-12 schools. That is bound to be destabilizing for us—two smart women who went through rigorous academic training and who feel they have expertise in particular areas but then aren’t consulted (Analytic Memo, 9/9/19).

Teacher education has always had an uneasy and ill-defined place in universities, particularly in large state universities such as ours. One of the challenges resulting from teacher preparation being embedded in research universities is the conflicting demands arising from the university and from public K-12 schools. Colleges of education, and the faculty within them, have little credibility in either institutional setting (Fraser, 2007; Labaree, 1996). Labaree (1996) describes the history of teacher education in the U.S. as “...a long history of status deprivation” (p. 30). He argues that part of the challenge education schools face is that they remain dedicated to and focused on “social problem solving” (p. 30). Knowing this and recognizing the historical roots of the problem can potentially help us decide to either not let it bother us or when we do broach it with leadership, to be able to document how this is a historical (and gendered) phenomena. Is the low status of teacher education a problem that we can solve? No. Is it something we can choose to question and highlight? Yes. We have found that approaching our work with a historical lens can help us make better choices about where to exert our energy and time, allowing us to practice better self-care and become more content with ourselves as professionals by not spinning our wheels.

Our journey has led us both to different spaces, yet similarly a deeper intentionality towards carefully selecting where we invest our expertise, energy, and enthusiasm. Cheryl, reflecting on her desire to better cultivate the self she has to live with, wrote:

In revisiting Dewey’s (1916) considerations of education and growth,

Power to grow depends upon need for others and plasticity...Plasticity of the power to learn from experience means the formation of habits. Habits give control over the environment, power to utilize it for human purposes. Habits take the form both of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activity to meet new conditions. The former furnishes the background of growth, the latter constitute growing. Active habits involve thought, invention, and initiative in applying new capacities to new aims. (pp.52-53) [Analytic Memo, 9/8/19]

Laura has also chosen to apply new capacities to new aims:

But, this year I am trying to be clearer about where I might be able to exert some control. Notice that I have phrased that differently. Because ultimately I think all we actually have control over is how we respond to things. This year I am re-engaging. I am coming to meetings. I am showing up. And what I have decided to do is to simply try and state the truth as I see it when I can. To call out the subtext. To try and highlight inequities (Journal, 8/26/19).

These have been important decisions for us as we have navigated less than ideal contexts, tensions, and deprofessionalism.

What does all of this mean for our identities as teacher educators? How does this knowledge and these distinctions help us create and retain selves we want to live with? We have come to the conclusion that in approaching persistent dilemmas within teacher education, it helps to recognize that these are issues that must be continually negotiated and require some political compromise (Cuban, 1990). However, we bring our whole selves to these negotiations. We can stand in our knowledge of the field and retain our values and commitments while negotiating and managing the dilemma. While decisions made by others may infringe on our sense of professionalism (and they do), we can raise questions, point out problems, or even vehemently disagree. We retain our identities by standing up for our principles, even if the ultimate compromise is not entirely to our liking. As Laura noted in one of our conversations, "Your identity stems in part from where you choose to stand" (Transcript, 7/16/19).

Significance

Through this self-study, we moved between close analysis of our own experiences and contexts and stepping back to make sense of our experiences in light of the bigger historical picture of teaching and teacher education in the United States. As we sought to understand how and where to draw boundaries in our professional lives to become more resilient, it was both helpful and sobering to see the persistent dilemmas we face reflected across history. Helpful because it reminded us that the work we do is more akin to a marathon, not a sprint. We are not solely responsible for solving every problem and dilemma that arise in our programs and department. This thinking helps ground us and as a result helps us both feel more resilient in our work. However, we also found it quite sobering to be reminded that there are aspects of our work that seem to have changed very little in the last century. As we move forward, we seek to remain aware of the historical nature of the persistent dilemmas that we, as teacher educators, encounter regularly. We also continue to explore whether there are problem spaces within these dilemmas that might have solutions. Hopefully, through reminding ourselves that we are part of a larger social and historical struggle, we will be more resilient and better able to solve those problems that are within our purview.

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