1-1-2018

It's a Balancing Act: A Self-Study of Teacher Educators' Feedback Practices and the Underlying Tensions

Sherry Dismuke
Boise State University

Esther A. Enright
Boise State University

Julianne A. Wenner
Boise State University

46

It's a balancing act: A self-study of teacher educators' feedback practices and the underlying tensions

Sherry Dismuke, Esther A. Enright and Julianne A. Wenner

Boise State University, Idaho, USA

While there are documented benefits of full-time faculty participating in clinical supervision, challenges, such as conflicting time demands, personal bias, adherence to common evaluation forms, and power differentials, can create impediments to effective practicum supervision (Ciuffetelli Parker & Volante, 2009). We, as teacher educators, turned to reflection through self-study to investigate our professional practice with the aim of better understanding and overcoming those challenges. Like Bullock (2017), we utilized teacher candidates' perspectives to disrupt, confirm, and extend our narratives. We focused on the practice of giving teacher candidates feedback on their developing teaching during their clinical placement in elementary schools. Feedback is central to our work as liaisons (i.e., university-based supervisors) with teacher candidates in the field and critical to their learning and improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Through this self-study, we sought to answer the following research question: What underlying tensions constrain our feedback, as liaisons, to our teacher candidates in clinical placements? How can we better negotiate those tensions to make this work sustainable for full-time faculty?

Theoretical framework

Self-study researchers recognize the tensions of working in hybrid spaces between universities and schools (Martin, Snow, & Franklin Torrez, 2011; Williams, 2014). Martin, et al. found that clinical practice is intertwined in negotiating complex relationships in and across these hybrid settings. For example, Bullock (2017) found that teacher candidates often receive "conflicting messages" from mentor teachers and liaisons (p.181). Yet, conditions created in these hybrid spaces provide powerful opportunities for professional educators to learn in and from practice (Zeichner, 2010).

Sherry Dismuke (✉)

e-mail: cheryledismuke@boisestate.edu

D. Garbett & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Pushing boundaries and crossing borders: Self-study as a means for researching pedagogy*, Herstmonceux, UK: S-STEP, ISBN: 978-0-473-44471-6

In our university context, high quality clinical preparation is embraced as the cornerstone of an effective teacher preparation program (CAEP, 2015). Participation in clinical work is encouraged across non-hierarchical structures, including tenure-track faculty, administrators, part-time supervisors, full-time clinical faculty, and lecturers in the university (Snow, Martin, & Dismuke, 2015). This invitation to participate in clinical work creates dilemmas for tenure-track faculty who are encouraged to privilege research over teaching (Labaree, 2004). Despite the time constraints and tensions of balancing research, teaching, and service for faculty, our program liaisons meet regularly as a group to "share publicly their work with each other and enact change, as they engaged in professional development through a community of practice" (Snow, et al., 2015, p.1). As teacher educators working in this hybrid space, we recognize our need to form communities to advance our professional learning and identity development. Dinkelman (2011) highlights this need for professional learning through communities of practitioners by reflecting that "Relationships with close colleagues, especially those of us who have intentionally come together to form collaborative inquiry communities of practice, play a crucial role in clarifying my identity as a teacher educator" (p. 320). Therefore, collaborative critical reflection and the joint decomposition of our own practice (Grossman, 2011) takes a central role, shaping our identity and practices as teacher educators.

We framed our reflection on our feedback practices through the five-level heuristic of teacher educator reflection (Nelson & Sadler, 2013). In level one, *technical reflection* (Wellington & Austin, 1996), we viewed our feedback practice through an externally mandated state-wide framework for formatively and summatively evaluating preservice and inservice teachers (i.e. The Danielson Framework for Teaching [FFT], Danielson, 2013). Schön's (1987), work on *reflection in and on action*, guided reflection on participation with our candidates in our reflective practicum in hybrid spaces. We used an iterative process of professional reflection, taking up *deliberate reflection* of the perspectives of others and *personalistic reflection* centered on critical self-examination and the improvement of our own practices (Vali, 1997). Next, we extended our learning through the use of critical reflection with intentionality by making our findings public to problematize our feedback practices. Finally, we utilized our findings to advance future inquiries, professional learning, and improvement.

Methods

We engaged in a collaborative self-study, borrowing from phenomenology, (Merriam, 1998; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009, Hamilton, 2009) to identify the principles and practices at the core of our professional experience. We took a systematic (Samaras & Freese, 2006) hierarchical approach to reflection (Nelson & Sadler, 2013; Valli, 1997), moving from reflection on and in our own practices (Schön, 1987). We began with a personalist reflection in a private space and continued publically with small group critical reflection to examine the spaces between self, practice, and hybrid contexts (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2004). A collaborative examination of the phenomena provided us an opportunity to "probe practice" (Hamilton, 2009) across cases and question individual understandings of practice (Martin, Snow, & Franklin Torrez, 2011; Loughran, 2004). We took this approach to focus on facilitating further development of our collective and individual knowledge and practice (LaBoskey, 2007; Hamilton 2009) and improve teaching and student learning.

Participants

Each of us are university-based teacher educators who transitioned from public school teaching to work as teacher educators. During this self-study, we taught university-based courses, conducted research, led school-university partnerships, and served as liaisons for elementary candidates in their year-long clinical experiences (i.e., professional year). As liaisons, we conduct weekly seminars and observations of our candidates' teaching. Shannon is a third-year, clinical assistant professor with her FFT certification and served as a liaison for five years. Elisha is a first-year, tenure-track assistant professor who completed her FFT training midway through this self-study. She has teacher education experience from her previous university. Penny is a second-year, tenure-track assistant professor who already completed FFT certification. She also has teacher education experience from her previous university. We also serve as liaisons in public schools partnered with our teacher education program that serve communities living in poverty. Additionally, five of our teacher candidates and mentor teachers collaborated with us in this project as participants; however, in this chapter, "we" refers to the three teacher educator participants only. IRB approval was obtained from the university and school district, and participants provided written consent.

Data sources and analysis

We followed our feedback interactions with five teacher candidates in three schools across the 2016-2017 school year. We collected formative observations and assessments scored on the FFT and observation notes. We audio-recorded and transcribed debriefing conferences of the observations. These data were collected for our teacher preparation program, whether or not teacher candidates participated in the study. The teacher candidate participants were invited to complete a survey on their perceptions of clinical feedback after they graduated to mitigate power differentials that existed as our students. Additionally, we completed three electronic surveys responding to jointly constructed prompts, kept reflective researcher journals, and participated in collaborative conversations as critical friends.

Pre-analysis

Before interacting with the data, we completed Survey One eliciting wonderings, predictions, and fears regarding the examination of their own feedback data. Each of us then created narrative journal entries.

During analysis

We engaged in qualitative cyclical coding of our own feedback data sources transcribed and presented verbatim. We read and identified initial emerging codes in the transcripts. Next, we "chunked" the codes into themes to identify primary trends across documents, highlighting key characteristics of individual feedback patterns. We wrote memos and journal entries. Then, we completed Survey Two, responding to prompts about patterns and concerns. A discussion of the individual memos ensued toward agreement on procedures for reading one another's transcripts, memos and personal journals, we discussed what it means to be a "critical friend" (Hamilton, 2009) tending to trustworthiness, integrality, and potential difference in our analysis. We committed to using descriptive and inquiry based language and lenses to examine the data rather than lenses of evaluation and judgment. This helped us establish boundaries in our feedback to one another. We each agreed on a sampling of one another's data to review. We conducted an analysis of the debriefing transcripts, including frequency counts of types of goals set and an analysis of the length of talk time across liaisons, candidates, and mentors in debriefing conversations. Finally, we examined the qualitative and quantitative linkages across the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Post-analysis

After reading the data, we created response memos for each data source. Then, we completed Survey Three, where we provided evidence of validations, extensions, and challenges to our feedback practices based on all the data and then proposed individual and group improvement goals. Collaborative conversations ensued identifying themes across our data. We analyzed the themes we identified as central to our professional experiences more deeply as they related to our question.

Outcomes

We discovered that all three of us perceived "doing it well" - providing meaningful feedback to our candidates - as a *balancing act* across a variety of variables and relationships. This balancing act manifested for us in three tensions.

Act one - Balancing the development of teacher candidate identity and skilled practice

We identified a tension between providing feedback targeted at improving candidate functional competence on our common evaluation forms and more anecdotal feedback aimed at developing positive dispositions and teacher identity (Mayer, 1999). Each of our candidates mentioned that our (liaison) feedback was useful for improving practice while simultaneously commenting on how they felt supported and encouraged when given feedback. One candidate commented on the feedback survey, "Being someone that is hard on myself, the feedback allowed just the right advice and enough support to encourage me to keep going (CFBS p.2)". Each of us, independently, identified this balance as intentional in our practice. Elisha explained, "I think of the candidate as an individual…as a person with intersecting identities. I like to leave students with things they can feel good about, but also with specific actions they can take to improve upon for next time (Survey, 2017)". Shannon reflected on her candidates' comments, "Helping candidates build positive identities as teachers is central to developing their confidence. We are there to do more than calibrate and set goals. (Survey, 2017)" We all identified balancing feedback with candidates' various developmental needs; although, there were compelling differences as to how each professional reported negotiating that work. For instance, Elisha reported intentionally framing feedback messages that "have been shown [in social psychology research] to mediate and mitigate identity threats" (Survey, 2017). Reflecting on her underlying beliefs about feedback, she wrote, "different learners have different needs depending on the learning context, which means that different feedback structures will differentially serve learners" (Memo, 2017). Our teacher candidates' feedback served as a central data source that surfaced the importance of balancing feedback that fosters teacher identity as well as skills.

Act two - Balancing liaison and mentor teacher feedback

We as well as our candidates identified differences between liaison and mentor teacher feedback. Four out of five candidates identified the mentor's feedback as being incident- and context-specific while they categorized our feedback as more generalizable and conceptual. One candidate responded, "The feedback I was given from my mentor teacher was more day to day, contextual information. Feedback from my liaison was often improving more conceptual skills of teaching" (CFBS p. 15). While candidates found both types of feedback meaningful, they did have to balance multiple perspectives on their teaching performance.

Perhaps the most difficult relationship in the feedback triad to negotiate was between ourselves and the mentor teachers. We identified this tension as a central experience and lens through which we engaged in triad debriefing conferences, bi-semester meetings when the mentors joined our debrief conversations with our teacher candidates to discuss the candidate's development. We agreed that our central dilemma was creating space for the mentor to give feedback, while ensuring that we provided feedback that candidates could understand and take up to develop their identity and practice. We all saw creating that space as a way of honoring the mentors' expertise and experience. Each of us perceived and navigated this tension differently when giving feedback to candidates in these triad conferences. Elisha reflected on this tension as one in which, on the one hand, she was negotiating the need to cultivate long-term relationships with and build capacity in experienced teachers so they continue to serve as mentor teachers. On the other hand, she had to ensure that candidates received feedback that supported multiple developmental goals. Elisha named her strategy for dealing with this tension as "reframing and interpreting mentor feedback" (Memo, 2017). She intentionally referenced the mentor's feedback and connections she saw to broader themes in her own feedback. Shannon reported wanting to give mentors a voice to honor their knowledge, but used a strategy for steering feedback toward candidate's goals she called, "extending or adding on" (Memo, 2017) to balance the mentor's feedback with her perspective as a liaison. Penny reported being very guarded in these conversations not wanting to be "the big bad professor, coming in from the university to tell them what to do and how to teach and how to mentor" (Survey, 2017). She did not want to "risk alienation or offending the mentor" which has been documented as an issue in teacher education (Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009, p.16). She responded to this tension by taking a "listening role" to honor the mentor's jurisdiction over the classroom space and professional expertise. This proved difficult to negotiate at times, especially when the mentors (not trained in the FFT) would either inflate scores or underestimate the candidates' progress, since they lacked the vantage point of the liaisons that allowed us to draw from our knowledge of and experience with development across candidates and career trajectories.

A quantitative analysis of the percentage of words spoken by the university liaisons and by the mentors triangulated the qualitative data and revealed differences in the balance of space that was afforded for mentor participation during debriefing conversations. Penny deferred most often to the mentor teacher in triad debriefing conversations talking only 34% of the time when the mentor was present as opposed to 73% of the debriefing conversations when the mentor was absent. She spoke nearly half as much, giving the mentor that additional space to give feedback. In contrast, Shannon talked 55% of the time when the mentor was present instead of 71% of the time, creating room for the mentor to give feedback but not to the extent Penny had. Finally, Elisha did the majority of the debriefing, talking 62% of the conference, when mentors were present, which was consistent with the 65% when the mentors were absent. In Elisha's conferences, the candidates tended to speak less when the mentors were present. These word count percentages align with our qualitative analysis. Elisha's strategy of "reframing and interpreting" mentor feedback for candidates required more decomposition and commentary than Shannon's "adding on or extending" strategy.

Each of us negotiated the balance between mentor and liaison feedback in a different way. Yet, none of us felt confident that our approach maximized candidate learning, while honoring mentor teacher expertise. After reflecting on and analyzing the data, we uncovered a common desire to be more intentional about the balance of talk time and power during triad debriefing conversations and a willingness to experiment with elements of one another's strategies to extend our practice.

Act three - Balancing the development of individual relationships with time constraints

We identified a third tension between nurturing relationships with our partner schools, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates and our time constraints as tenure-track faculty. All of us reported the establishment of relationships with candidates as central to providing meaningful feedback. Penny said, "I need to build a relationship with each candidate so that they know that I am a 'safe space.'" Shannon echoed this idea when she said, "'Doing it well' means taking the time to develop relationships with my candidates so I can better serve their needs" (Survey, 2017). All five teacher candidates rated feedback from their liaisons as meaningful and implied that their relationships with their liaisons supported their processing and use of feedback. From our liaison perspective, we experienced a constant tension between the time we invested in giving candidates written and verbal feedback, and our complex, high-stakes university workloads as pre-tenure faculty. We documented that supervision took two to three times more time than a traditional university-based course, although the credit allocated was the same. Viewing time as a critical, but limited, resource created tension between balancing personal and professional expectations for ourselves and from our candidates, mentor teachers, and partner schools for our liaison role with our college and university expectations for productivity in research and successful teaching. Shannon explained,

> *This work goes well beyond the 3-credit course load allotted to me by the university. I could do much less and still be meeting university expectations for this work.... I would rather do this well than cut corners and fit the job into the time allotted. The day I start counting hours, is the day I will have to quite this work (Survey 3).*

All three liaisons identified creative efficacy that allowed them to meet their own expectations. For example, Elisha said, "I now give feedback by email, through our portfolio system, and verbally, during our debrief conversations. I ask the candidates to record those conversations so they have a record of what is said. Even with that multiphase approach, time is and always will be a problem." Penny reported, "working around this by catching up with students informally on other days (drop-ins) or during our group seminar times" (Survey, 2017). However, all three of us identified limited time as the biggest constraint to giving skillful feedback. The knowledge that the additional hours and work dedicated to supervision went unrecognized by the university, but was highly valued by the partnership schools, professional educators, and teacher candidates created an additional layer to this tension for us. Each of us reported making personal sacrifices outside of work to meet both university productivity expectations required to obtain tenure and the professional expectations of our partners in our liaison work. Each of us framed this as a professional and personal dilemma as well as recognized the emotional cost of navigating this tension over time in the high-stakes environments of preK-12 schools and higher education.

Significance

Learning about our practice from heuristic reflection (Nelson & Sadler, 2013) through collaborative self-study offered insights into our own and others' approaches to balancing core tensions when giving candidates feedback in clinical settings. We found that our attempts to provide skilled feedback that supported teacher candidates' growth and development was constrained by the multiple demands on our time and the complexities of negotiating relationships with mentor teachers and teacher candidates. We recognized that negotiating these tensions are endemic to the practice of providing feedback. This finding was perhaps the most important, as it allowed us to put aside anxieties about "doing it right" and dig into what we can accomplish while balancing the complexities of this work.

Tensions made transparent through our self-study have resulted in actionable changes to our practice that we hope have implications for teacher educators. First, despite having the FFT as a common observation tool, we learned to value the differences across the feedback we each gave our candidates, especially centered on developing teacher identity and dispositions. This finding resulted in revisions to our observation form, including space for open-ended anecdotal notes and to document goals related to skills and dispositions. Second, creating alternative spaces for sharing feedback, such as phone conferences, afterschool meetings, or technology, show promise for reducing the time pressure from squeezing in feedback sessions during passing periods and recess. This opens up more space for all members of the feedback triad to participate in debriefs. Next, these data opened up honest talk with department administration to negotiate more realistic time allowances for faculty in supervision roles.

The epilogue to this study is that two of us have been able to find a more comfortable balance in our multiple roles. Although one of us has been advised repeatedly by faculty in the promotion and tenure committee to give up her liaison work and focus on research. Unfortunately, the third researcher in this study encountered such difficulties balancing the demands for scholarship and her liaison work that she has had to put this work aside for now, despite it being a key part of her teacher educator identity. This study and recent workload adjustment reaffirms the need for teacher preparation programs to find innovative solutions that honor the work of liaisons and provide time and space for teacher educator development.

References

Bullock, S. M. (2017). Understanding candidates' learning relationships with their cooperating teachers: A call to reframe my pedagogy. *Studying Teacher Education*, *13*(2), 179-192.

Bullough, R. V., Jr., & Pinnegar, S. (2004). Thinking about the thinking about self-study: An analysis of eight chapters. In J.J. Loughran, M.L. Hamilton, V.K. LaBosky, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (Vol. 1, pp. 313-342). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Ciuffetelli Parker, D., & Volante, L. (2009). Responding to the challenges posed by summative teacher candidate evaluation: A collaborative self-study of practicum supervision by faculty. *Studying Teacher Education*, *5*(1), 33-44.

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. (2015). CAEP Accreditation Standards Washington DC.

Danielson, C. (2013). Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching (2^{nd} ed.). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Dinkelman, T. (2011). Forming a teacher educator identity: uncertain standards, practice and relationships. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *37*(3), 309-323.

Grossman, P., (2011). Framework for Teaching Practice: A brief history of an idea. *Teachers College Record*, *113*(12), 2836–2843

Hamilton, M. L. (2009). The Somehow of Teaching: Small groups, collaboration, and the self-study of teacher education practices. In Craig, C.J. & Deretchin, L.F. *Teacher Learning in Small-Groups* (pp. 207-282). Teacher Education Yearbook XVII. Rowman & Littlefield Education, Lanham Maryland.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of educational research*, *77*(1), 81-112.

Labaree, D. (2004). The trouble with education schools. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

LaBoskey, V. K. (2007). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817–870). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

Loughran, J.J. (2004). Learning through self-study: The influence of purpose, participants and context. In J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. La Boskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *The international handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 151-192). Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Martin, S., Snow, J., & Franklin Torrez, C. (2011). Navigating the terrain of third spaces: Tensions with/in relationships in school-university partnerships. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *62*(3), 299-311.

Merriam, S. B. (1998) *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mayer, D. (1999) Building teaching identities: implications for pre-service teacher education, paper presented to the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne.

Nelson, F. L., & Sadler T. (2013). A third space for reflection by teacher educators: A heuristic for understanding orientations to and components of reflection, *Reflective Practice*, *14*(1), 43-57.

Pinnegar, S., & Hamilton, M. L. (2009). *Self-study of practice as a genre of qualitative research: Theory, methodology, and practice*. New York, NY: Springer.

Samaras, A.P., & Freese, A.R., (2006). *Self-Study of teaching practices primer*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Schön, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Snow, J. L., Martin, S. D., & Dismuke, S. (2015). "We do more than discuss good ideas": A close look at the development of professional capital in an elementary education liaison group. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring, 2015, 43-63.

Valencia, S. W., Martin, S. D., Place, N. A., & Grossman, P. (2009). Complex interactions in student teaching: Lost opportunities for learning. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *60*(3), 304-322.

Valli, L. (1997). Listening to other voices: A description of teacher reflection in the United States. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *72*, 67–88.

Wellington, B., & Austin, P. (1996). Orientations to reflective practice. *Educational Research, 38*, 307–316.

Williams, J. (2014) Teacher Educator Professional Learning in the Third Space: Implications for Identity and Practice. *Journal of Teacher Education, 65*(4), 315–326.

Zeichner, K. (2010). Rethinking the connections between campus courses and field experiences in college- and university-based teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1-2), 89-99.