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## Scaffolding Development of Clinical Supervisors: Learning to be a Liaison

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## **Abstract**

Teacher education as a field has embraced the idea that clinically-based teacher education will better support teacher candidate learning and the learning of their future preK-12 students (AACTE, 2018; NCATE, 2010). Likewise, teacher education scholars have emphasized the importance of learning to teach well in clinical practice (Darling-Hammond, 2014). We five women teacher educators engaged in a collaborative self-study to investigate our different perspectives and our institution's hope for mentoring and preparing new liaisons. Our collaborative self-study focused on the research question: *What are the key factors that play a part in influencing the developmental trajectory of a liaison?* Through a collaborative self-study of our clinical supervision work as university liaisons, we identified the importance of community toward developing agency as teacher educators. Our year-long self-study involved journaling about our liaison experiences and our developmental trajectory in becoming teacher educators across time and multiple contexts.

## **Keywords**

clinical supervision; collaborative self-study; teacher educator development

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## Introduction

Teacher education as a field has embraced the idea that a clinically-based teacher education will better support teacher candidate learning and the learning of their future preK-12 students (AACTE, 2018; NCATE, 2010). Likewise, teacher education scholars have emphasized the importance of learning to teach well in clinical practice (Darling-Hammond, 2014) and identified the role of supervisor and the practice of supervision as the observation and feedback that takes place within clinical practice (Burns & Badiali, 2015; Burns, Jacobs, & Yendol-Hoppey, 2016). Clinical supervisors are often charged with the observation and evaluation of teacher candidates - those in preparation programs studying to become teachers (referred to hereafter as “candidates”). However, the role of “supervisor” in these clinical field experiences is undervalued (Burns & Badiali, 2016, 2018), and their pedagogy is underdeveloped and under-conceptualized. In our teacher education context, we focus on clinical practice and demonstrate institutional value for supervision being enacted by university-based clinical supervisors, *or liaisons*. Liaisons are, in fact, charged with the observations, formative feedback, and summative evaluation of teacher candidates in field experiences. Liaisons are also charged with building partnerships with school sites, supporting mentor teachers in their roles as school-based teacher educators, working in communities of practice (Snow, Martin, & Dismuke, 2015), and cultivating new educator development across the professional life span. Certainly, liaisons in this context are engaged in the complexities of clinical pedagogy in supervision (Burns & Badiali, 2016).

Within our context, university-based teacher educators have carried out prior studies on how one becomes a teacher educator through teacher educator experiences (Snow, Dismuke, Wenner, & Hicks, 2019). Having an interest in the professional development of teacher educators and the practice of clinical supervision for candidate development (Butler, Burns, Frierman, Hawthorne, Innes, & Parrott, 2014; Goodwin & Kosnick, 2013), we created a community of practice to study our experiences as new and veteran university liaisons. We quickly came to a formalized collaborative self-study to both query our practice as “improvement-aimed” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2007; Loughran, 2007) and uncover key aspects of learning to be a liaison. For this study, we spent one academic year purposefully documenting and systematically studying our experiences in this community of practice, as (1) a veteran professor and college administrator who participates in liaison work; (2) a new tenure-track assistant professor serving as a liaison for the first time in this context; (3) a veteran clinical faculty member and program coordinator with experience in this context; (4) a new clinical instructor familiar with the context but serving for the first time as a liaison in a full-time position; and (5) a first-time, part-time “adjunct” liaison. With our different perspectives and our institution’s hope for mentoring and preparing new liaisons, we determined our study could inform clinical practice in teacher education, the development of clinical supervisors, and teacher educator professional development. By connecting these areas of study, the preparation and development of teacher educators in clinical practice may be addressed while highlighting the importance of clinical practice in teacher education. Our collaborative self-study focused on the research question: *What are the key factors that play a part in influencing the developmental trajectory of a liaison?*

## Context

Engaging in collaborative self-study requires deep attention to context as a powerful influence on the experience being investigated. We are five women with varied levels of experience with preK-12 education, teacher education, and clinical supervision. In our clinical work as university liaisons to partner schools, our candidates across teacher education programs spend two semesters in field experiences across a “professional year,” with support from a mentor teacher and university liaison. Liaisons visit partner school sites weekly for informal and formative observations, site-based seminars, and meetings with mentor teachers, in addition to individual “check-ins” with candidates and mentors. As we found ourselves in new places in our work - whether it be serving as a liaison in a new context or supporting new liaisons in different ways, we began meeting regularly to study our practice.

Jennifer was focused on studying teacher educator professional development (Goodwin & Kosnick, 2013), as she was increasingly focused on the complex phenomenon (Cochran-Smith, et al, 2016) of how one becomes a teacher educator. Jennifer recognized that new teacher educators are rarely purposefully prepared to supervise candidates (Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2015; Kosnik et al., 2011), and she felt this was her responsibility after hiring university liaisons. Her focus on studying how one learns to be a liaison was initially framed from a sense of duty in her administrative role. Jennifer had been a liaison in this context for 15 years and had been instrumental in co-constructing many of the professional year assignments and professional practices.

Hannah served as a university supervisor in another context and worked as a teacher educator during her doctoral program. She was a tenure-track faculty member who was new to this context and this role of university liaison. In her first journal, where we each wrote about the pathway to our current positions, Hannah shared, “I wanted to be in a place that valued research and valued teacher education” (10/11/2018, p. 1). Hannah had worked in supervisory roles at another university running practicum for secondary education students and supervising candidates in a literacy clinic.

Sherry had been a university liaison and mentor to new liaisons for several years. She also served as the Elementary Education Program Coordinator and had deep connections to clinical practice in this context. In fact, she had completed her teaching certification and doctoral work through this university. She taught courses for candidates during her graduate program and continued to do so as a clinical faculty member. She had served as a mentor teacher in one of the university’s partner schools for many years, and hence, had a nuanced perspective of clinical field experiences and the multiple roles and responsibilities for which partners engaged.

Angel also had a rich background within this university context and had taken up multiple roles in teacher education. Angel had been a mentor teacher and one of the first “liaisons-in-residence” in her partner school. This position involved a mentor teacher also serving as a liaison within the partner school, conducting formative observations and serving as a site-based supervisor for candidates. Angel had served as a model liaison-in-residence who chose to move to the university in a full-time position as Clinical Instructor.

Stefanie was another former mentor teacher (who taught in the same partner school as Angel). She left her classroom to become a full-time doctoral candidate and was simultaneously serving as a university liaison in a part-time, adjunct position. She had previously completed an educational leadership program so she had studied instructional leadership and the state framework for teaching that guided evaluation in this context. Stefanie shared, “I remember Jenn and Sherry telling me that this would be a way to effect change on a larger scale, as I am working with many student teachers who then will have a lasting impact on students of their own” (Memo, 10/2018, p. 1).

Another important, layered part of our context includes the varied positionality we held. Our collective roles included a dean’s office role, program administrator, new faculty, and graduate student. This was a structure that was at first intimidating. The practice of meeting twice a month with direct supervisors to discuss problems of practice created a new dynamic. This is not to say that preK-12 faculty do not work closely with principals in problem solving teams; there is, however, always a distinct role in positionality in those situations. As Angel described, “It is understood who will be making the final decisions.” It took some time for us to work through authority within our different university roles and within this collaborative self-study context.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

For our theoretical framework we used both conceptual foundations from our programs and from our perspectives toward clinical supervision in this context. We begin with instructional leadership frameworks for our work as clinical supervisors and move into theoretical frameworks for this study that are also the foundation for our clinical practice settings. We include our emphasis on communities of practice and an inquiry stance toward teaching and then describe how social network theory informs our practice and how we considered data from this study.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership was a focus in our collaborative study, as we believed in the power of clinical, or reflective, supervision in guiding the growth of teachers and supervisors (Garman, 1982; Nolan & Huber 1989). Identifying the dynamic interplay of multiple dimensions within tensions of supervision (Author, 2008), our collaborative self-study worked from an understanding that our liaison work was based in reflective and developmental supervision (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2014). We recognized that there are times we may need to provide more direct information to candidates and times we could push them toward more inquiry-oriented, self-directed growth. We might work from a procedural, – “complete the cycle of supervision” perspective where we are more concerned with the steps in an observation cycle. Or we might frame our work in a more conceptual perspective based in a fluid, relational process (Snow-Gerono, 2008). We recognized the importance of tools and strategies, relationship building, professional growth, and tensions within these frameworks. Using clinical supervision and the tensions between conceptual and procedural understandings and practices to guide our analysis allowed for a focus on our developmental growth as supervisors.

A key tension in our roles as university liaisons is our focus on developmental supervision (Glickman et al, 2014), while at the same time honoring our requirement for teacher evaluation. We are required to provide scores according to a rubric for teaching performance and submit final grades. Our coaching role is not distinct from our evaluative role so the tensions within our practice are paramount (Snow-Gerono, 2008). Recognizing a focus on procedures and conceptual relations, we also note the importance of development as teacher educators. Jacobs, Yendol-Hoppey, and Dana (2015) studied doctoral candidates who engaged in inquiry for their growth as teacher educators. Similarly, we engaged in a collaborative self-study to determine how we learn to be liaisons, including our roles as clinical supervisors.

### **Communities of Practice - Inquiry Stance**

Communities of practice, where clinical supervisors work together to study practice, guide not only the liaisons in this context (Snow, Martin, & Dismuke, 2015), but also professional development for supervision as a field (Zepeda, 2017). Recognizing knowledge as socially constructed, we worked in community to study practice (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Wenger, 1998):our roles as clinical supervisors, our roles scaffolding new teacher development, and our own professional development. Vangrieken and colleagues (2017) highlighted the importance of communities of practice in professional development through a systematic review of scholarly literature (Chou, 2011; Gallagher, Griffin, Parker, Kitchen & Figg, 2011; Keung, 2009). The influence of interpersonal dynamics and vulnerability in inquiry communities was noted. Vangrieken and colleagues (2017) cite Attard (2012), Jones and colleagues (2012), and Snow-Gerono (2005a) in pointing out “dissensus is argued to stretch people’s ideas, provide learning opportunities, and enhance collaboration” (p. 55). Our collaborative self-study noted tensions in supervisory practice, as well as interpersonal relationships at varied levels.

One of the most important foundations of our teacher education programs is an inquiry stance toward teaching (Snow-Gerono, 2005b; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2014) define an inquiry stance toward teaching where “this stance becomes a professional positioning, owned by the teacher, where questioning one’s own practice becomes part of the teacher’s work and eventually a part of the teaching culture” (p. 9). Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2015) also identified “teacher professional learning through the seeking and embracing of ‘unwelcome truths’” (p. 604). As we engaged in our study of personal, professional practice, we worked within tensions of clinical supervision frameworks, tensions of knowledge construction and vulnerability/positionality, and tensions of analyzing practice in a collaborative space.

### **Social Network Theory**

As we valued communities of practice and the social co-construction of knowledge they allow, we worked from a frame of social networks – we took up multiple roles and responsibilities within one title. Although we all served as liaisons in our community of practice, we also entered partner school sites where we were the lone representative from the university. Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar, and Burke (2010) claimed “social capital is concerned with the resources that exist in social relationships (sometimes referred to as ‘ties’) between individuals as opposed to the resources of a specific individual” (p. 364). This aspect of social networks

informed our consideration of how we learned to be liaisons as “content that flows through relationships” (p. 364). We sometimes felt isolated within the clinical settings of our work while at the same time building relationships in partner school sites and with each other across sites. Dynamics of social network theory allowed us to study our interactions across multiple contexts in a shared community of practice.

## Methods

To answer our research question, we engaged in a collaborative self-study (Hamilton, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). We probed our private and public practice in concert with colleagues to uncover what processes were at work in “becoming” liaisons. Simultaneously, we shared a focus on generating professional knowledge that would improve and enhance our individual and programmatic practices (Hamilton, 2009). We positioned each other as critical friends as we examined each other’s data and engaged in partner and small group analytic dialog; we were collaborative, active, meaning makers (Olan & Edge, 2019) in supporting and transforming each other’s professional growth (Petroelje-Stolle, Frambaugh-Kritzer, Freese, & Persson, 2018).

### Data Sources and Analysis

Data collection ensued by engaging in individual memory work (Samaras & Freese, 2006), creating narratives detailing our personal journeys in becoming teacher educators. We also kept journals describing our experiences and responded to jointly-constructed prompts. We held meetings twice a month across the 2018-2019 school year to engage in collaborative conversations. In addition to group meetings, we sometimes dialogued in more private spaces, responding through partner conversations or responding to each others’ memos. Like O’Dwyer and colleagues (2019), we found overlaps and intersections in data collected both in our more public, whole group spaces, and more intimate spaces.

We engaged in several rounds of cyclical coding (Saldana, 2016). We began by reading our own journals, identifying codes and patterns, which we recorded in individual memos. To encourage transparency and ensure trustworthiness and integrity, we next talked through what it meant to be a “critical friend” within the hierarchy structures in our university roles (Hamilton, 2009). We then partner read one another’s data sets, creating probing and analytic comments for our partner to consider. Next, we engaged in another cycle of coding partner data. We went back to the data for a last round of coding, each of us coding two different colleague’s data sets. We met to “chunk” the codes into significant themes and identify trends across our experiences when considering, *What are the key factors that play a part in influencing the developmental trajectory of a liaison?*

## Findings

The purpose of this self-study was to investigate how we, as liaisons, grew and developed over the course of one year within our self-study group. Exploring how one learns to be a liaison yielded important findings related to a liaison’s journey: (1) an overwhelming importance of community in our learning; and (2) shared practice leading to agency.

## **Community Supports Liaison Practice**

A resounding theme was the sense of community that is necessary to develop as liaisons. Whether new to clinical supervision work or veterans, navigating our problems of practice proved to be daunting and isolating. Our communities involved each other, our candidates, and our partnerships, and helped us avoid isolation. They were multi-layered, interactive, inquiry communities (Author, 2015; Lieberman & Miller, 2008) that we used as spaces for problem-posing (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014).

**Isolation without community.** At our university, liaisons have much independence and trust to do quality work with candidates. A large amount of professional capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012; Author 2015) is endowed to them and much is expected of university liaisons. However, this automatic autonomy enhanced vulnerability and isolation in the multiple contexts within which we work. For some, the independent nature of this work felt isolating. Angel shared, “Although I have sought relationships and worked to build a strong connection with students, the work is extremely isolating” (Journal, 12/4/18, p. 1). Working through the isolation, we often pushed each other to keep a growth mindset. Each of us had to believe we could rise to high levels of professional independence and autonomy, but each also had to follow through to successfully complete our many responsibilities. Our self-study group gave us the sense of community each of us desired.

**Self-study group relationships.** Navigating roles as experts in the field while working to create lasting relationships, we again used our meetings to work through the challenges we faced in our separate but identical problems of practice. When reflecting together as a community, our self-study group delved into our roles as mediators, cultivating strong relationships through understanding and empathy, questioning where loyalties lie, ultimately knowing it is always with preK-12 students.

We became a supportive group that helped scaffold growth and understanding over time. Stefanie and Angel met for walks to support the challenges of becoming new liaisons. Stefanie wrote, “We shared ideas about liaising and discussed some of our challenges.” These walks became spaces where they were able to turn frustrations into wondering. Although we all struggled at times with frustration and insecurities when dealing with issues on our own, we were able to utilize “learning-focus and improvement/inquiry dialogue” with colleagues (Memo, 1/27/19, p.2) to turn to wonder and ease our disequilibrium. When Stefanie looked back across her journal she said, “ I am a completely different liaison. I feel like a completely different person. How did I get here? I attribute my growth to a solution-focused, inquiry minded stance that helped me get through a lot this year” (memo, 5/2/19, p. 1).

**Candidate relationships.** Our journal entries and discussions often followed a sequential pattern that began with navigating relationships with candidates. Focusing on the many aspects of mediating roles that create challenges and successes, we explored positionality, individual roles, and balance. Hannah reflected on trying to build a relationship with a coffee and bagel meeting:



I was hoping the gesture would start this first ever seminar with new folks off well. The majority were appreciative. One [candidate] shouldn't have even showed up, unless her purpose there was to see how combative she could be in one 45-minute span. She killed it. (Journal, 1/18/2019, p. 1)

Hannah was taking over liaison work in an environment that “worshipped” the prior liaison. This mention of navigating varying personalities and negotiating how to address the needs of individuals ran throughout all our journals. The blatant acts of defiance, frustration, and confusion by young adults put each of us in a position to take on a role we had not necessarily expected. Jennifer faced these challenges when a candidate and mentor teacher directly contradicted her advice on professional dress (Journal, 09/10/2018, p. 1). Angel reflected about a candidate who was texting her late in the evening in crisis mode: “I’m either the idiot who fell hook, line, and sinker for the epitome of ‘attention seeking’ behavior, or I am becoming the ‘helicopter mentor’” (Journal, 10/09/18, p. 2). Our initial discussions focused on behaviors and what intervention should be implemented to create a clear understanding of our liaison role, both for the candidate and ourselves.

Hannah recognized early on that building trust was vital to the candidate-liaison relationship.

The others reciprocated my welcoming smile with a nervous but friendly smile back... Four of the five of them told me they felt better after talking to me. They were scared about many things, but I guess they just needed to see that I’m not a monster (Journal, 1/18/2019, p. 1).

Sherry recognized incorporating trust as a habit of practice when new candidates were added to the mix mid-semester: “I backed the truck up, and I implemented a short community builder and intentionally invited them in...” (Journal, 09/12/2018, p. 2). Reflecting at the end of her first semester, Angel shared another perspective, “...in the beginning ..., the [candidates] just have to trust you. They don’t know you...they are hoping and praying you have their back” (Journal, 12/04/18, p. 1). This perspective highlights the ebb and flow of calibrating versus coaching conversations (Lipton & Wellman, 2017) that we all navigated on our journey of building trusting relationships.

**Partnership relationships.** Adding to the complexity of building relationships with candidates, the desire to forge relationships with mentors and principals was crucial to our liaison role. These relationships were cultivated as we balanced teaching candidates the art of teaching. We often questioned our roles in partnerships and perceived the power structures as relevant in learning to navigate new relationships. Jennifer theorized that the positionality that is naturally part of our role as university liaison “others” us, puts us in an outside position. We predicted the only way to combat this “othering” was to consciously build honest relationships (Memo, 05/19/19, p. 2). Sherry agreed, stating,

I have not spent the proactive time I could working side by side with my partners... Instead, I am reacting and putting out fires when they occur and then running onto the next thing. I really miss this part of the work. I am making a goal to return to this important part of my practice. (Memo 1/23/19, p. 2)

When asked to make life-altering decisions about candidates and mentors we barely knew, we realized the importance of relationships within partnerships. As we learned to ask questions, decipher the “story,” and maintain neutrality, we built agency within our roles.

### **Agency Develops with Community**

Agency was an evident component as we evaluated our development as liaisons. We viewed agency as the capacity to act purposefully and constructively to invoke change and progress for candidates, for ourselves, and for the systems in which we operated. Learning to be a liaison – learning how, when, and why one becomes competent in supervision work – involves developing agency. As a community we were able to navigate the emotionally-charged nature of our work, contemplate what our roles as liaisons entailed, understand the needs and the progress of others, and find trust and balance.

**Navigating the emotionally-charged nature of supervision.** We each experienced high highs and low lows; we took on the stress of those whom we were supporting, and we battled institutional constraints. One example of experiencing low lows from Stefanie was demonstrated early in the year when she evaluated her small group seminars. She felt defeated, stating, “I was pretty depressed after the last meeting, which felt like a failure – in spite of all of my hard work...” (Journal, 10/3/18, p. 4). Her agency was minimized by the lack of compensation resulting from the time she put in to support her candidates. Just two weeks later, Stefanie wrote about the positive responses from her candidates at their seminar. Heightened emotions, from negative to positive extremes, were often experienced in our group. After one semester in the field, we each brainstormed questions to pursue. Hannah wondered, “When and why do we feel more successful and empowered as a liaison? What are our ‘triggers’ for the high highs and the low lows?” (Memo, 1/31/19, p.1)

Two potential triggers surfaced in our work over the year – our level of stress, which was amplified by the stress of those around us, and our response to institutional constraints. Both left us questioning our capacity to engage successfully in our roles. Stefanie mentioned being “pretty overwhelmed by how overwhelmed [candidates] are” and felt their stress was “projected on [her] in a negative way” (Journal, 10/3/18, p. 4). Operating within such an emotionally-charged space often left us drained. For Sherry and Jennifer, this stress was true on multiple levels. They battled not just the stress of their candidates, but the stress of new liaisons and multiple responsibilities on campus. Recognizing her level of stress, Sherry stated, “I realized that some candidates have not even seen their liaisons. I put out a pretty controlling e-mail. I have to stop and breathe” (Journal, 9/24/19, p.2). Through collaborative conversations, we began to develop agency as we learned skills and strategies from each other to minimize run-away emotions, leaving space to tend to those situations that truly demanded our attention.

Managing stress, as well as managing the way that institutional structures impacted our practice, proved to be challenging. Jennifer expressed her concern about a shift in supervision work away from a focus on supporting candidates and toward accreditation and “checking boxes” (Journal, 10/29/19, p.5). She longed for the opportunity to engage in supervision work, void of the stressors, and void of the constraints:

I would give anything to be able to embed myself in a school (or 2 or 3 or even 4) and simply work together for simultaneous renewal...Isn't there a way to influence student learning while also working with preservice and practicing teachers. I have always believed yes. (Journal, 10/3/19, p. 5)

We all believed yes, but we continued to ponder what stood in the way of doing this type of work. We engaged in many emotionally-charged discussions about systems and practice, in hopes of wading through the lows, the stress, and the institutional barriers.

**Searching for comfort in our roles.** Determining what our role as liaisons entails involved looking at the implications of our level of comfort as we considered agency in clinical supervision. Our agency developed circumstantially, presented itself differently for different liaisons, and oftentimes lived on a spectrum opposite of self-doubt. We also realized that agentive supervision work varied with different aspects of our liaison role. Angel's reflections described her perception of the many different roles that being a liaison included – mother, counselor, evaluator, problem solver. Perhaps the newness of context and roles, or the steep learning curve, contributed to our sense of discomfort. As the year, and our agency, evolved, Angel presented another perspective on the comfort level in being a new liaison:

We want to feel comfortable in our path – we are doing everything we can think of: giving too much time, spoon feeding, letting people drown a bit, avoiding conflict, hitting conflict straight on, trying it all to figure out how our teaching selves fit into this new role...(Memo, 12/14/19, p.1)

The veteran liaisons in our group also described “learning and developing every day” and perceived the discomfort of learning to be a liaison from a stance of inquiry. Sherry stated,

Just when I think I have experienced it all, a new situation arises. Even if I have seen it before, the context and the people are different so you can't react in the same ways you have in the past. (Journal, 11/5/19, p.3)

Jennifer wondered about the relationship between comfort and complacency. She pushed back on the notion of being comfortable as a liaison, suggesting that our agency may develop when we experience discomfort: “Maybe we stay where we are comfortable and that stops us from pushing the envelope? I don't know...” (Journal, 11/3/19, p.5). Our self-study group provided us the time and space to discuss and work through discomfort and push back on the desire to stay comfortable. We were able to act more purposefully in the roles we embodied, and we worked to better understand, support, and advocate for candidates, for preK-12 students, and for fellow liaisons.

**Advocating and deciding.** As the year progressed, our agency and self-doubt shifted based on the systems for which we were operating, as well as our understanding of those systems, related processes, and actors. We each saw first-hand the ways that candidate outcomes were contingent upon our own behaviors and responses to behaviors of many actors. Part of supporting candidate

growth was understanding their needs and progress, as well as advocating for them through decision-making.

Much of our discussions centered on our hope to better understand the needs and progress of our candidates. Our agency, in part, hinged on first determining what our candidates needed. At the beginning of the year, both Stefanie and Hannah longed to establish what their candidates needed from them. Stefanie described how what she really needed was to know what her candidates needed from her. Hannah's feelings paralleled Stefanie's as she questioned the best way to understand her candidates' needs.

At points in the year when we felt that we clearly understood the best interests of our candidates, we showed agency in our decision making to advocate for them. Angel found herself mitigating one candidate's placement in a situation that felt as if there were circumstances beyond her control: "Clearly a political mess that I don't want to touch, but my job is to ensure she is fully prepared to teach and has a strong mentor to help her grow..." (Journal, 10/25/19, p.3). Angel had the agency in this situation to work through the politics to ensure that her candidate was in a space where she could develop as a teacher. Throughout the year, our agency also grew as we determined that candidates were not progressing successfully, forcing us to seek out the best ways to respond.

We talked at length in meetings about how to know when we were doing candidates a disservice by not counseling them out of the program. Hannah and Angel both wondered about the long-term feasibility of some candidates' career trajectory in education. Angel noted, "I believe he is going to struggle greatly...but he won't harm kids; he will work to make sure students are learning...I hope" (Journal, 2/13/19, p.5). Our self-study group served as a space that empowered new liaisons to move forward in these situations with confidence. When reflecting on her extensive experience with counseling candidates and liaisons, Jennifer related her intuition about counseling students out to a favorite medical television show. She wrote, "Nobody can call time of death like I can" (Journal, 10/5/19, p. 2). The group later used her thought as a way to talk through indicators to watch for in candidates who may be better served on a different path and what that process entails. By the end of the year, the five of us had developed the agency to more confidently advocate for candidates in our decision making, even when that meant making the tough decision to counsel them out.

**Finding trust and balance.** We not only had to learn to trust our own abilities, but we learned that we also had to trust others. At times we all were guilty of doing too much for others out of a lack of trust in their abilities. For Stefanie and Angel that meant doing too much for their candidates. Stefanie wrote about a time where she offered to record her interns for an observation assignment. She reflected, "My efforts to help others often create extra stress for me so I need to be selective about the kind of help I offer... [this] provides an opportunity for me to brainstorm how I could approach this more intelligently next time" (Journal, 10/13/18, p. 7). Angel addressed a similar imbalance in her own practice when she wondered if "she was being a helicopter parent instead of coach or mentor"(Memo, 1/27/19, p.1). Angel also discussed taking extra steps to help candidates meet their basic needs in the program. For example, she secured a candidate's transportation when she had no way to get to her placement. Angel later reflected: "I also know the candidate is fighting Maslow's hierarchy pretty fiercely. I got her a computer,

because she didn't have one. She needs so much more, but I figured I would start there" (Journal, 10/9/18, p. 2).

Likewise, veteran liaisons struggled to find a balance in the amount of support they provided to new liaisons. Jennifer noticed,

Sherry talks a lot about 'liaison development'...I think we both think that way. And, last semester we were overwhelmed with the amount of 'new' liaisons. I wonder what will pay off for us in future. I need to keep reminding myself not to jump too soon. Liaisons are still learning. We are learning how to scaffold support. (Memo, 1/27/19, p.1)

Finding the balance between too much support and not enough was not always easy. Sherry, a veteran liaison, shared:

For others to grow, I have to be aware of a gradual release of responsibility. Being a leader means I have to trust others so they can build capacity. Give people space to grow along their own path, but you can't forget to feed and water them. (Memo layered comments, 1/30/19)

Engagement in this self-study, alongside new liaisons also manifested awareness. Sherry shared, "Reading the transcripts in this study really opened my eyes to new liaison experiences. This has helped me see how we might do this work differently and where I might be able to refine my mentoring skills" (Memo, 4/13/19, p.1).

## **Discussion and Implications**

Our self-study group discussed our work as members grappled to separate feelings of isolation from the autonomy granted within their liaison role. Together, we recognized that dealing with problems of practice in isolation often led to feelings of frustration. However, when we became vulnerable with each other and brought problems to the group, we were able to reframe them as "wonderings." Our community became a safe space to develop a capacity for trust and built confidence in self and others. By reaching out to each other, principals, and mentor teachers, we each formed communities that were readily able to support candidates and ultimately preK-12 students.

Acting as advocates for others through our decision-making was one collective source of agency. In exploring our experiences collaboratively, we gained the capacity and confidence to stop asking and just act; we identified validation and collaboration as two contributors to our agency. The degree to which one acts with agency is impacted by both internal factors and institutional or structural conditions (Miller & Patrizio, 2015). When contemplating what influences our confidence as liaisons, we determined that we need and long for validation as much as our candidates. Because we were also cultivating our professional identities, we struggled with autonomy when we were unclear and vulnerable. We needed a community of practice for validation and support in owning our agency as clinical supervisors.

Our communities of practice allowed us to push through our given autonomy from isolation into something more agentic. Although liaisons appreciate the autonomy to make decisions as skilled clinical supervisors, we also struggled with isolation in the hybrid space (Martin, Snow, & Torrez, 2011) of serving teacher preparation programs, school partners, and ourselves as professional teacher educators. Our findings indicate a need for attention to the nuanced, relational aspects of instructional leadership. Improvement-aimed inquiry communities are as important in teacher education as they are in preK-12 systems. As Hannah shared her original feeling of “Someone just give me the book that tells me what to do!” and her eventual conclusion: “Now I know that book would be meaningless,” we realize the importance of not diagramming the skills of clinical supervision as much as the contexts and complex realities of it when supporting new liaisons.

We have identified the importance of autonomy and the caveat that it often leads to isolation in clinical supervision and instructional leadership work. We have also identified the utmost importance of community in clinical practice and the professional development of teacher educators. Most importantly, our collaborative self-study showed us that community intervened in such a way that it influenced the isolation of autonomy into perceived agency and action toward improvement. Figure 1 highlights these influences in the work of clinical practice and supervision.

Figure 1. Community Intervention: Autonomy to Agency

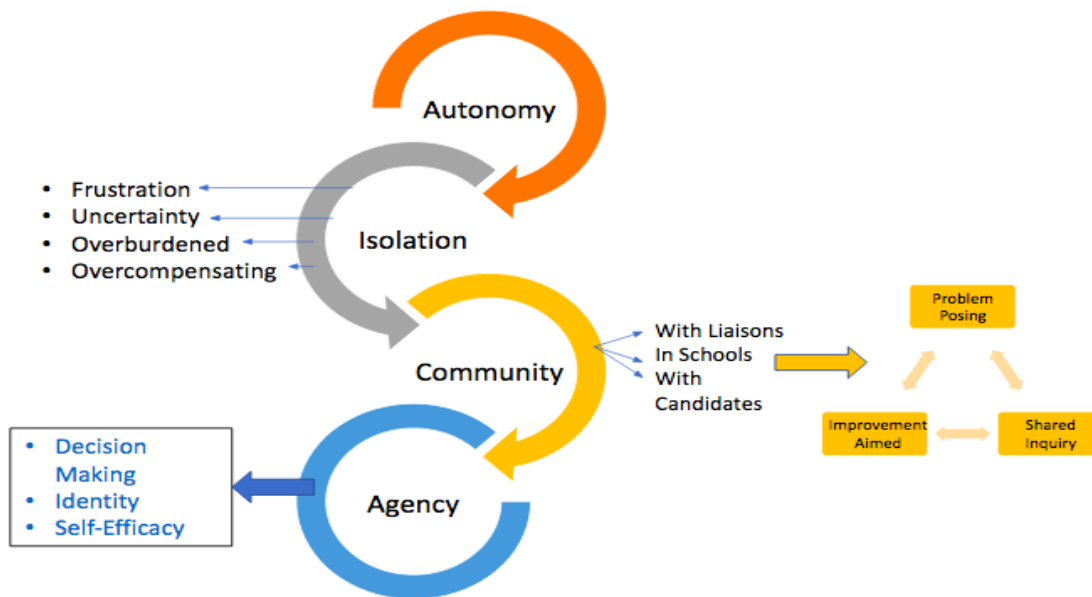


Figure 1. Illustrates how an inquiry community of practice can disrupt the isolation that can be felt by Clinical Supervisors working in clinical settings.

Although agency can be the product of positive associations between a goal and the outcome, meaning that our agency develops as we meet the goals we set, we also developed agency as we embraced our failures. We collectively viewed our supervision work as a form of facilitating candidate growth, despite our shifting levels of self-efficacy as we embarked on new situations

and challenges. We were empowered to continue taking risks in hopes of best serving teacher candidates. Our collaborative self-study into what it means to learn to be a liaison highlights the complexity of clinical supervision while at the same time identifying the relational components of the work overpower the technical aspects of the work. In our context, communities of practice and inquiry were keys to professional development. We will be sure to emphasize such inquiry communities for supporting development of clinical practice in the future. We strongly recommend continued investigations into these communities for the benefit of clinical practice.

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