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Michaelann Kelley · P. Tim Martindell ·
M. Michael Pérez

Knowledge Communities in Teacher Education

Sustaining Collaborative Work

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Foreword

The Invaluable Scholarly Contribution of an Account of a 20-year-long Collaboration: The Value of the Work of the Portfolio Group

In reading *Knowledge Communities in Teacher Education: Sustaining Collaborative Work*, we were reminded of one of our own passages:

> As we move forward in becoming a teacher educator [and teacher] working in the midst of experience and practice, we learn and grow. We shift in our understanding, experience tensions, resolve problems, develop relationships, and learn about being a teacher educator. We stand in the perfect place to reveal, act on, and expand our knowledge about teaching, teacher education, and being a [teacher or] teacher educator. (Hamilton and Pinnegar 2015, p. 39)

Much of what we believe about teacher development, growth, and change as a teacher and teacher educator is captured in this quote and in this volume. Indeed the power of this book, for us, is that it provides clear and strong evidence of the things that led the Arizona Group (e.g., 1996) to embrace and pursue self-study of practice (or self-study of teacher education practice, S-STEP) methodology to develop scholarship on teaching and teacher education. Early on in the teacher research movement, a

group of scholars argued that the voice of teachers was ventriloquized by university scholars and thus the potential contribution of teachers to research on teaching and teacher education was either silenced or absent from the discourse. Clandinin (1985) introduced the concept of personal practical knowledge as the knowledge teachers acted on in their teaching and curriculum making. Bullough and Gitlin (2001) provided methodological tools that could be used to document and promote the developing knowledge of beginning teachers as a potential contribution to research on beginning teacher development. Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1993), *Inside-out: Teacher research and knowledge* argued for the need for the contributions of teachers and provided tools that could help teachers in making such contributions. Clandinin and her colleagues (1993) provided clear evidence that narrative inquiry conducted by teachers and teacher educators could document the growth of teacher and teacher educator knowledge in an alternative teacher education program that took experience and practical knowledge as the site for teacher growth. Olson and Craig (2001), working from a teacher knowledge orientation, added key terms for understanding teacher knowledge with ideas like secret stories and cover stories. My colleagues (see Arizona Group et al. 1996) provided an understanding of the shift from teacher to teacher educator. The portfolio and teacher reflection movement as represented by scholars such as Nona Lyons (1998) emerged about this time as well and provided guidance that could sharpen teacher skills in developing as researchers and contributing to the conversation in research on teaching. Since these early days, while teachers have contributed studies of their knowledge, it has often been rough sledding since the primary task of teachers is teaching and promoting the learning and development of their own students.

This work bridges the time from those early days of teacher research and the potential of teacher research in this day and time. In doing so, it makes important contributions to research on teacher tools for capturing teacher knowledge and identity formation, tracking teacher development, documenting the success of reform efforts, the value and mechanisms of teacher, teacher educator, and school leadership collaborations (and how such work can lead to systemic change and personal growth), the power of knowledge communities, and the power of teacher-led professional development.

In this book, we are introduced to a group of teachers who came together amid a Texas educational reform movement and formed the Portfolio Group. In an unprecedented move, they continued to work

together and support each other in learning, school change, and professional growth. They did this through their collaborative and individual scholarship, their commitment to conducting and to publishing research, and their obligations to promoting growth and change in themselves, schools, and each other. Their collaborative continues to thrive even after 20 years and the participants continue to contribute to research on teaching and teacher education. However, endurance and commitment are not the only contributions of this book. The major contribution of the volume is its straightforward articulation of the path of the collaborative and the tools, techniques, and accounts of experience that provide insight and wisdom about how other educational research collaborations could thrive in the midst of the business of the lives of educators, the political realities, and the challenges in personal lives. Indeed, this book is both a practical and theoretical work. It provides practical tools based in theoretical concepts that others could embrace in ways that could lead to other efforts.

The book explains and articulates several tools and techniques for reflection and research that can be utilized to promote, study, and produce professional growth and school change. These tools include regular public reflection in a safe and nurturing environment. The participants are honest and understanding about the fact that while a core group has contributed across the years, they have allowed for the ebb and flow of lives (retirement, moving, embrace of new challenges) that led members to join, contribute, and leave (and sometimes return). They provide clear guidance and evidence for the power and use of portfolios to document, record, and study the learning and growth of teachers, the learning of students, and the evolution of educational systems. They demonstrate how research methods and methodologies such as traveling journals, regular dialogue (Hamilton and Pinnegar 2015; Bakhtin 1981), reflection (see Lyons 2010) narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), critical friends protocols (see https://nsrfharmony.org/faq-items/cfgvsplc/), and self-study of practice (Pinnegar and Hamilton 2009) can be supported and executed. They use these tools to create accounts that capture the ways in which their growth as teachers is promoted as they use these vehicles to study their work as educators. These tools enable them to stand in the zone of maximal contact of space where their past, present, and orientation to future experiences are brought together and result in shifts in their thinking and actions.

All the research processes, practices, techniques, methodologies, and tools are utilized to capture the particular. This is important because rather than seeking generalizability, these accounts provide a secure base for transferability and applicability. They elucidate the ways in which we, as humans, can read narratives and studies of particular experiences located in particular places and then apply these adjusting them to our own settings and practices. These tools and the accounts of their practical use provide an exemplar for Putnam (2004) who claimed that generalizable research studies have not been able to truly address the intractable problems of education. Instead he argues (and as the Portfolio Group's studies provide clear evidence), our best strategy is to provide strong studies of the particular that others can read carefully and adjust and apply in their own settings—learning from both the success and sometimes failure of others.

Another important contribution of this book emerges from the work that initially brought the group together—their engagement with and evaluation by a reform effort in Houston, Texas schools. The technique they employed was the use of portfolios to document the impact of the reform efforts in a group of Houston schools. These educators recognized that their commitment to developing schools that met the needs of students and resulted, not in changed test scores per se, but in promoting the increasing likelihood that the students in challenging schools would not just survive but thrive and more likely reach their potential. Like the Perry Preschool study focused on the practical effects of strong preschools on the lives of children (see Heckman and Karapakula 2019), test scores or usual evaluation documentation would not adequately or accurately capture either the processes of reform in these schools or the actual impact of them. This book provides evidence that schools that seek to employ and execute practical reform efforts targeted at the whole person need to utilize evaluation that documents the growth and change in schools, students, and teachers. Thus, this book provides explanations, guidance, and links to other resources that can support teachers and educators in such efforts.

Often, professional development literature, even the studies that promote the use of teacher research methodologies reported here, argue that these efforts must be orchestrated and led by university scholars in order to have rigor and be executed properly. While Cheryl Craig is clearly central in this work, her role seems to be an educative one—educative for the participants but also to promote her own learning and growth.

She participates as a contributing and equal member of this community. The evidence is that all of the Portfolio Group members contributed to, shaped, valued, and sustained this work. In contrast to other explanations of how to engage in such work, while Craig plays a role, the other participants have equal status and often emerged as the leaders in the group. The contribution of this work is the clear documentation and evidence it provides of the power of teacher-led professional development. Bullough and Smith (2016) in a strong review of the research literature reported on the value and power of teacher-led professional development and this book provides clear evidence of its potential to promote the kind of growth and development desired in educational settings. A clear position of these authors is that all of them are becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), beyond the publication of this book they will continue to seek challenges such as this and the others they describe in this volume.

Just as this book provides clear evidence of the power of teacher-led and orchestrated professional development, just as importantly it describes the ways in which collaboration across schools, districts, and educational levels provides an environment where educators can thrive and grow. The book robustly and repeatedly makes the case for the power of knowledge communities (Craig 1995) as a space where understandings about teaching, learning, and schooling can percolate, gain support, and promote shifts in thinking and action in ways that benefit schools and allow participants to both contribute to the learning and thrive in the setting. Craig (2013) cogently argues that all educators desire to create conditions in which they can become the best-loved selves they imagined themselves as when they became educators. However, the practical contribution is the accounts of these collaborations that provide guidance for those who would like to engage in, promote, or create knowledge communities as places where teachers, institutions, and leaders thrive and not merely survive. In our view,

> …the kind of scholarship most suited to these explorations is intimate scholarship. While intimate scholarship can be our orientation within a number of research methodologies, scholarship undertaken from that perspective shares a number of characteristics. (Hamilton and Pinnegar 2015, p. 39)

The accounts provided in these chapters are all forms of intimate scholarship (Hamilton and Pinnegar 2015). They exhibit the principles that identify intimate scholarship. The authors and researchers in this work focus on the particular, which is a viable description of the studies reported in these chapters and, as Putnam (2004) argues, provide a source educators can use to promote change. Because the accounts make visible the learning and growth of the scholars, they often feel vulnerable. The recognition and acknowledgment of the messiness of this work and its accompanying politics reveal that the authors often in the past and even in the present stand and work in spaces of vulnerability. The studies focus on providing clear, adequate, and accurate accounts of the ontologies they observed, developed, and studied in order to produce knowledge that could inform the research community. The ongoing meeting and interaction of the members of the Portfolio Group and their explanations of the process they engage in clearly suggest that dialogue and interpretative interactions with each other pushed their work and provided a basis from which they could make change. Fundamental to intimate scholarship is attention to relationships and an acknowledgment of how relationships and the strength of relationships are vital to the work. Clearly, these studies and the 20-year history of the relationship of the participants and contributors are a tribute to the power of relationships in developing and promoting scholarship and change in schools, teachers, and students. Intimate scholarship is open. As these studies demonstrate, such scholarship is open in that it is honest and animates the actual experiences of those involved in the work. It is also open in that it always begins and ends in the midst of the work. What is learned leads to new learning and the development of new understandings rather than accounts that are closed and singular.

This collection of chapters contributes to the understanding of educators concerning several important issues. It describes promising tools, methodologies, strategies, and techniques easily utilized by teacher scholars and indicates how, through the use of these tools, educators can contribute important insights to the conversation of research on teaching. It reveals how focusing on the particular has the power to shift education and educators in ways that lead to solutions to intractable educational problems. It provides evidence of the power of evaluating school reform through the use of portfolios to document the actual shifts, changes, influence, and growth of actions taken. It demonstrates the power of teacher-led professional development and the potential of its use to

enable educators to thrive and become their best-loved selves (Craig 2013). Finally, it clearly represents intimate scholarship and is a witness of the potential for such scholarship to contribute to our understandings concerning educational reform, teacher growth, collaborative research, and the value of focusing on the particular to producing lasting changes. Lastly, the book as a whole is a provocative and delightful read.

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Preface

> When we began this journey we really did not know what it was. What we were doing felt "correct," but we didn't know what to name our method. (Hollingsworth 1994, p. 7)

This book, *Informal knowledge communities in practice: Sustaining teacher/teacher educator collaboration,* takes a critical look back at the twenty-two-year teacher and teacher educator collaboration informally called the Portfolio Group. Using archival data, critical dialogue, and interactive reflective writings, we examine our individual and collective experiences with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of elements that have contributed to strengthening our longitudinal association and collaborative teacher research work. We hope that others will encounter within these pages greater insights into how teacher and teacher educator collaborations are created and sustained over the long haul.

To that end, we share and explore our experiences through collective histories, counter narratives, and sometimes uncomfortable stories (Morris 2002) through which we have learned from one another. We understand experience as "a changing stream…characterized by continuous interaction of human thought with [the] personal, social and material environment" (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007, p. 39). For us, narratives "model not only a world, but minds seeking to give [the world] its meanings" (Bruner 2002, p. 27). As Lindemann Nelson (1995) explained, "counter stories…are told in dialogue with others…they are

…told together with other tellers, fragment by fragment, each person contributing to plot and character and…thought" (p. 38). Seeing the contributions of storytelling as "inseparable from ethical" (p. 72), Stone-Mediatore (2007) questioned ways in which these dominant plotlines, particularly their emphasis on objectivity, support "an ethics of indifference in the name of neutrality," whereas "storytelling asserts that responsible knowledge practices demand ethical orientations, in particular sensitivity toward others and mindful participation in our communities" (p. 72).

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P. Tim Martindell is a secondary English teacher at The Village School and an adjunct instructor at the University of Houston Downtown. In addition to his twenty-five-year teaching career, Tim served as the Houston A+ Challenge program coordinator for literacy and critical friendship, and the past president of both the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts and the West Houston Council of Teachers of English. He holds an Ed.D. and M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Houston and a B.S. Ed. in communications education from Miami University. He became part of the Portfolio Group in 2000.

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