From PhD students to teacher educators: Critical reflections through dialogue

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Dialogue forms an important tool for two Teacher Education Program Assistants (TEPAs) who are doctoral candidates concerned with negotiating their new roles in teacher education. Using Immanuel Kant’s notion of public and private reason as a philosophical approach, the authors attempt to make sense of their experiences of working with teacher candidates and the various expectations of teacher education in a large faculty of education, with more than 800 preservice students. Tensions between critical forms of research and the political realities inherent in teacher education, and the induction of individuals into teacher training cultures, become the structure of a reflective dialogue. Reflective dialogue eases the authors into a better understanding of their current positions in relation to the theoretical spaces of research and the roles and expectations of teacher education.

Keywords: teacher education, doctoral assistantships, public and private reason

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The enculturation experiences of graduate students in their roles as teaching assistants are increasingly being explored with a view to decreasing attrition in graduate programs and increasing overall well-being of doctoral students (Di Pierro, 2012). Preparation to become faculty as an induction process, and through mentorship, is an important aspect of the graduate student teaching assistant experience (Austin, 2002). Part of this preparation involves exposure to, and integration of, pedagogies of higher education, including the use of technologies and evaluation strategies (Park, 2004; Tillema &
Kremer-Hayon, 2005). Other researchers have examined the personal motivations that bring graduate students to the academic pathway (Bieber & Worley, 2006), and how a teaching assistantship is complementary to those forces and expectations. These studies were conducted across disciplines, from students in sciences, arts, engineering, and humanities, and include support for marginalized students such as women of colour and ESL learners. In this paper we try to understand the politicized nature of teaching assistants within the field of teacher education using a Kantian/Foucauldian philosophical framework and explain our experiences and challenges. It is a collaborative reflection on our experiences of being Teacher Education Program Assistants (TEPAs) whilst trying to conduct social justice-oriented research.

We came to the idea of co-writing a paper having both encountered similar yet different challenges instructing and mentoring pre-service teachers within a department or faculty of education. In the spirit of Freire (1970), in the sense that nobody can speak a true word alone, dialogue became our method of “coming to know”. He stated (1970):

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p.72).

Freire (1970) asserts human beings ideally should be moving towards ‘humanization’, and this happens when human beings engage in authentic praxis through critical dialogue - where dialogue is not simply a tactic but a way of knowing. Praxis that employs dialogue is more humanizing and liberatory as compared to the praxis of the dominant-elite who do not employ dialogue. According to Freire, the very act of naming things in the world does not come about in isolation but through ‘encounters’ that come through dialogue. Thus, as Roberts (2003) points out, when two or more people communicate with each other in order to elucidate a mutual object of study, there is not only a dialogue, but a humanizing praxis in the Freirian sense.

In our TEPA roles we found ourselves constantly negotiating critical research perspectives, such as those informed by poststructuralism, and more traditional, positivistic perspectives found in the teacher education contexts that we experienced. Through collaborative dialogue we acknowledge this tension and work toward a better understanding of our unfolding identities as teacher educators. From a methodological perspective, this paper is an attempt to make some sense of the complex relationships between teacher education and critical scholarly education research that underpins the transition process from graduate student to teacher educator. Additionally, the dialogic text can be seen as a writing tool that invites interpretation by both the writer and the reader.

We organized these different but overlapping concepts under the subheadings: i) Why are we writing? Fundamental challenges we face; ii) Teacher education as a philosophical-political problem; iii) From classroom to research and back to the classroom: Negotiating the self as subject/created identity; and iv) What is a TEPA? What could it be? We begin by first identifying some of the tensions involved with the TEPA position. Then we attempt to make sense of the transition from graduate student to teacher educator through dialogue and recognize that this is a fluid, non-structured
process. Lastly, we suggest how the TEPA position could be a constructive, preparatory position for graduate students in the field of education.

**Why are we writing? Fundamental challenges we face**

For both of us, the experience of being a Teacher Education Program Assistant exposed significant concerns that were disruptive enough to warrant writing about them. In this section we take up the question of criticality in our TEPA roles along with the constraints associated with engaging social justice issues in such a space. The tacit question is: What kind of teacher educators will we become should we be fortunate enough to obtain a position? The economic context in all of this is that TEPA and Teacher Assistants (TAs) are often in a situation where they need the money, thus often feel “lucky” to have a position (even though they provide the university with cheap labour). From another perspective, concerns about social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984) that are inherent to education as an institution provide the very anxiety needed to even think about taking a critical stance towards teacher education (Anyon, 2011; Apple, 1982). The dialogue below represents an excerpt of a much larger conversation where we begin to untangle our discomforts in our TEPAs positions. It represents both the “data” and the “analysis”, as we selected the following excerpts to represent our core sentiments from longer and more numerous dialogue texts. They are presented as the original text.

Erin: *I am finding challenges in transitioning between the spaces of researcher and teacher educator. I feel like I am wearing many hats at some times and other times having to choose between them. For my TEPA, I do workshops with teacher candidates and often their instructors. I am never with them more than three hours and often much less. While I am providing practical resources for teaching, I am also trying to instill a sense of critical engagement with the work that we do as teachers and a sense of resistance to what is considered the norm, as I talk about environmental education. Many times, the instructors -- experienced teachers -- have told me afterward that I have opened their eyes to many issues.*

Jesse: *In my TEPA experience I was given the responsibility of mentoring a small group of teacher candidates before and during their first practicum placements. One of my tasks was to introduce them to the roles of regulating bodies and to give them an understanding of Ontario schools that would help them function in various educational settings. Although I enjoy my work very much, I am also wary that very few spaces were opened to challenge the legitimacy or role of institutions such as the Ontario College of Teachers or the normalizing, taken-for-granted structures and practices of schooling. In the very same day I could be writing, speaking, thinking about anti-oppression or fundamental change in education as a doctoral student and then feel compelled to talk about institutions of education, classroom practices, and school structures as unproblematic.*

Erin: *I feel a great challenge in how to bring my critical engagement with systemic social and environmental issues into a very practitioner-oriented learning space. These pre-service teachers are struggling to absorb mountains of*
information and experiences and I feel like I am competing for their attention and their passion. I remember being in their shoes, so I can empathize, but at the same time that empathy for them seems to undermine how I feel about my own research work. It’s quite a quandary for me - feeling like, in those moments, it’s nearly a visceral tension. It makes me wonder how to balance between the big issues at hand and the needs of the students sitting right in front of me.

Jesse: A notable moment for me happened during a workshop I was giving about the organization of Ontario schools. I recall wanting to discuss the assumptions we have about regulating bodies for teachers, like where their mandates come from, whose values are embodied in their mission statements, but felt compelled to refrain. Open criticism of practices and institutions that have been normalized would appear strange and more importantly overtly antithetical to the very purposes of the workshop. Though I was not a “fully fledged” teacher educator, ethical-political problems were already appearing. How are we able to conscientiously enter into the professionalized space of teacher education where the motives that govern this space run counter to the projects we’ve begun as PhD students? Before this transition happens, or while it is happening, I think it is important to fundamentally re-think this transition from a research space to teacher education in a faculty of education.

Teacher Education as a Political-Philosophical Problem

It may be useful to view educating teachers and the transition from PhD student to teacher educator, as a political-philosophical problem at the fundamental level of how we are meant to reason in academic and professional roles. To represent teacher education as a political problem we turn to Kant’s (1784/1959) essay, What is enlightenment?, complimented by Foucault’s (1984) interpretive essay by the same title. It is acknowledged that using philosophical abstractions to deal with practical concerns education is fraught with issues, the most problematic probably being the ease by which abstractions can be detached from lived realities. Thus, we intend our use of Kant’s and Foucault’s ideas as just one way to think about moving from PhD students to teacher educators.

Kant (1784/1959) describes the enlightenment as a way of out of “immaturity” that is not accepting authoritative directives when the use of reason is warranted. With the ostensibly ‘free use’ of reason comes an instruction (Wahlspruch), for which Kant is well known; “dare to know”. Foucault’s (2003) adaptation involves ‘the will not to be governed’. Taking these two aspects together, enlightenment thinking for Kant embodies a dual attitude, to think unfettered from authority and to be courageous in this thinking (Foucault, 1984). However, Kant recognizes that enlightenment (free and audacious) reason cannot be applied in every sphere. Sometimes obedience is required as is the case in policing positions, satisfying customers, or public administration. Kant therefore distinguishes between the public and private use of reason. For Kant, public reason requires that individuals reason in social groups, unfettered by the open agendas of
institutions and personal gain, as members of a universal humanity\(^1\). Private reason is exercised when we are simply a “cog in a machine” such as a civil servant pursuing particular ends according to a certain set of rules (Foucault, 1984, p. 37). In educational institutions these ends may take the form of accountability to curriculum, teacher regulating bodies, state guidelines and standardized testing.

As we come to understand the space of teacher educator, we see we are beholden to many institutional prerogatives and sets of standards, including: the faculty of education, school boards, state institutions and legislating bodies, accreditation and professional association bodies, and teacher federations. In this space, public reason and critique become subordinated to standards of practice, regulations, and “success” goals of these institutions. Foucault supports Kant’s identification of a space for thought outside the sphere of private interests, thereby establishing the use of theory (in the public space of reason) as social project of autonomy\(^2\). Figure 1 illustrates, on a basic level, how we use these assignations to conceive of public and private reason within the transition from PhD student to teacher educator.

**Figure 1.** Kant’s division between private and public in relation to teacher education

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1 These definitions of public and private do not overlap well with current usages that often situate public spaces as those controlled by government and private spaces as the more or less under the purview of

2 For Foucault, in terms of modernity, this involves thinking about what characterizes our current moment in addition to the subject of these moments.
Although idealistic, the diagram outlines the possible pathways whereby reason (in both spheres) becomes a political problem. The transition from PhD student to teacher educator can be viewed as similar to transitioning from Kant’s public space of reason to the private space. While this dichotomy is problematic, as the public/private division described here avoids an in-depth consideration of power and hierarchy, it simplifies perhaps the key tension of transitioning from a PhD scholarly space to teacher educator. In a scholarly space, where inquiry and theoretical positions can be pursued with more autonomy, PhD students may, if given enough support, question their own and others’ reasoning even up to the point where they challenge the very grounds of reason itself (Derrida, Porter, and Morris, 1983). In spaces of public reason PhD students can engage socially to think about people and societies, what needs doing, or where we have gone wrong. However, seen this way, public reason then becomes something that cannot exist simply by itself; it becomes something for which there needs to be a political solution or situation in order to give purpose and agency to intellectual work. Any reasoning that aims to transform the world necessitates some kind of action in the world. In Freirean terms, thinking and action are incomplete if one takes place without the other. We can now begin to see not just the interdependency of private and public reason (or teacher education and scholarly research) but the political problem of the use of reason in both spaces. If the public space (scholarly research) needs action or political change to give some kind of shape to ideas, it is necessarily demanding a situation by which authority takes command over reasoning. In this way the transition from PhD student to teacher educator can be thought of as a political problem.

Teacher education becomes a political problem as soon as we recognize the difficulty in not following orders or rules. For teachers and teacher educators this means to think and reason without allegiance to curricula, government regulations, skills that must be taught, or disciplinary rules. Kant’s hope was that universal reason could be embodied at higher levels of government and trickle down. Since this is doubtful at best it means there is a direct need to also be able to think freely at practitioner levels. This puts teachers’ demands for autonomy in the classrooms in a slightly different perspective. The question for a PhD student in education then becomes to what extent can this audacity to know or think without authority, be taken into a teacher education practice? In other words, how do we assure ourselves a space of public reason in a space where we are meant to be obedient to private interests? The political dimension thus involves not only negotiating the institutional realities that impinge on teacher education, but also how to not follow orders. Here the challenge is not just finding the reason to do it, but finding the political knowledge and skills to create possibilities. This political problem of teacher education needs a political solution.

Hardt (2011), in taking up Kant’s essay, argues that making a space for the use of public reason is more complex than simply clearing a space for it. Those people that have the privilege of escaping ‘immaturity’ and thinking for themselves in spaces of public reason are themselves a minority. If people are to then go and teach others they are automatically instilling a kind of authority or obedience thus negating a legitimate space for the public use of reason. A tempting response here would be to claim that such a space of public reason, free from obedience, is impossible. However, Hardt outlines another possibility in terms of exiting immaturity or following orders; that is to
simultaneously tear down all semblances of authority and hierarchy as we attempt to create spaces of public reason. That is, to engage in acts of disobedience and insubordination. As PhD students moving into spaces of teacher education we must endeavor to create the conditions for the continuation of the use of public reason; and this is done by selectively tearing down semblances of authority and governance. This transition must become one of political struggle, and will likely require problems with authority if it is going to somehow affect change.

While this philosophical model has helped us understand our role transition, the use of private and public reason (in the way Kant formulates them) can easily be inverted. Realistically, institutional mandates, research trajectories, funding bodies, and the political agendas of administrators, researchers, and corporations have profound effects on research attempted during a PhD program, and afterwards. Conversely, classroom spaces that respect the lived realities of students, their ideas and voices, though being constrained in the space of private reason, can easily become the spaces for the use of public reason; spaces where the authority of the ‘ivory tower’ is rejected and members think and work together toward the benefit of that community. In addition, taking into account Kant’s insistence of sociality as a key criteria for the exercising of public reason, we may seriously question who is actually granted access to the PhD programs and compare it with the diversity of learners encountered in an undergraduate, elementary, or secondary classroom which enables a richer dialogue between members of a learning community. In this sense classroom situations that value student voice and equity may exceed the capacity for the use of public reason found in many PhD programs. Furthermore, when students and teachers begin to openly reject the authority of institutions, as well as, ironically, the ideas coming out of research that are often given significant authority, they engender spaces for the use of public reason. Again, we return to the main argument of this section: that spaces of teacher education and the use of reason within, is inherently a political problem. Consequently, in teacher education it is imperative to turn spaces of private reason, following rules and various authorities, into spaces of public reason where students think in social groups for social change. Of course, there is no guarantee of this occurring, for while students and teachers might take up the processes of schooling and education as a site of political struggle, this may allow the space of public reason to enter the private. As we discuss, entering the space of teacher educator (from the space of a PhD student) is therefore, at a fundamental level, to (re)enact the politicization of reason.

Jesse: *While I think we should be wary about using philosophical abstractions to think about something as dynamic and situated as teacher education, I also think it important to actually spend time thinking about what it will mean to leave life as a PhD student. The joining of the two spaces, scholarly research and teacher education, requires the politicization of theory and research. First, because the existence of these two spaces is as we’ve said, a political problem, and second because without overt political action to engage the interests controlling teacher education little to no benefit can come from scholarly research (outside the purview of the interests controlling large institutions of education).*
Erin: *I think this dichotomous approach, while challenging in its essentializing structure, is a useful way for us to understand that there are distinctive differences between one's role as a PhD student and the role of the teacher educator. We don’t have to agree that this philosophical approach is the only way of understanding these spaces, but it gives a common place to at least talk through some of the tensions we are experiencing and where we each may find our own challenges in this process, and even how those challenges are connected or separated from each other.*

Jesse: *Of course the dichotomy of public and private reason is problematic because it is quite often the case that scholarly interests in research spaces are controlled by the interests of large institutions, and often educational communities succeed in tearing down hierarchies and thinking autonomously outside of the educational goals intended for them (and the unintended ones). However, it is this inversion that gives me hope that transitioning from PhD student to teacher educator does not equal some kind of death for radical ways of thinking that will inevitably run counter to the expressed goals of what new teachers are supposed to learn.*

Erin: *I also think that this philosophical framework helps us to locate the entire set of tensions within a much broader socio-political time and space. As educators and educational researchers, we have a sense of impact and desire that is perhaps so intrinsically linked to the day-to-day, to the realities of citizens, that we need to step outside it to be able to see our place in it.*

**From classroom to research and back again: Negotiating the self as subject/created identity**

We all have experiences as students. Both of us have experienced the majority of our schooling through the formal public school system. We completed post-secondary studies in science and education and then enacted the role of the teacher. Both of us have had the chance to apply theory to practice as well as analyze practice toward developing theory, as teachers and researchers. Now as teacher education program assistants, there is a sense of trying to bridge and amalgamate these multiple identities and to emerge with a stronger sense of who we are as teacher educators, and how these overlap and inform the other. We have also identified this space of tension in Figure 1 as it relates to two other major sites of conflict.

While most scholars in education have a reason for taking up academic research, it is also important to think about why we want to teach new teacher candidates after our time as PhD students. Research on initial teacher educators in the UK demonstrates that postgraduate “tutors” in initial teacher education are often troubled by the mismatch between their personal ideologies and epistemologies and the standards that need to be met for qualified teacher status (Hallett, 2010). It seems probable that not considering this transition could be just as mindless or purposeless of entering research and scholarly work with no meaningful, personal, or political research agenda.
Jesse: While the research identity or subjectivity that is formed in research spaces deserves constant interrogation, I still see the primary negotiation being one of “How radical should I be?” I don’t think this question has an answer, but ultimately it will have to do with how complicit we “choose” to be (even through silence and inaction) with oppressive and dangerous discourses, structures, social relations, and material circumstances. All of these are only really encountered (intimately) in classroom spaces. By taking the risk that our theoretical and political commitments are challenged, subjected, and compromised we, at the same time, legitimate the space of research by working to tear down hierarchies, not following orders, and engaging the political world that research (should) ultimately exists to serve.

Erin: It’s true. Sometimes as a PhD student I feel we are committed to changing things, to troubling the mainstream, to asking questions. That’s what brought me into graduate studies in the first place. But on the other hand, there is such a practical and socially-located aspect to teaching and teacher education, sometimes the critique seems too far-fetched from the day-to-day.

Jesse: So then how do we negotiate the role of teacher educator as public intellectual and as practitioner?

Erin: There’s a lot of tension inherent to structures of education within such a behemoth system. It is hard to balance what teachers face in their realities and what they learn in the pre-service classroom. I feel like there is a constant sense of the practice trying to catch up to the theory.

What is our responsibility to our current and future students as we bring ourselves and our own learning back into the institution of teaching? As educational researchers, we recognize that the landscape is constantly shifting, as new theory and practices are brought forward. We also acknowledge that early career teachers need to feel grounded and secure in the institution, in all its many facets. Our commitment to being critical education researchers means creating safe spaces for teacher candidates to explore ideas while operating in a system that resists change.

What could the TEPA be?

There are certain aspects to the TEPA experience that make it unique. First, it is an earned position – funded graduate students must apply for these limited postings. There are few opportunities for graduate students to work in teacher education at some of the larger institutions, and for those who want to gain experience, it can be even more elusive. The TEPA experience is designed to provide encounters for graduate students in different ways: teaching experience at the undergraduate level (Bachelor of Education); allowing for mentorship from faculty in the initial teacher education program; and supporting graduate students’ preparation for the challenges of university teaching through opportunities such as delivering lectures, instructing large and small groups, as well as working one-on-one with students. The implied or intended ‘curriculum’ of the
TEPA, according to various training and discussion documents, indicates that time should be spent with as many course instructors as possible to observe different styles.

Also, pedagogy is important; exposure to what works for different groups, such as differentiation between elementary and secondary panels. Additionally, there is an in/formal training program that runs alongside through a university teacher training office but it is not mandatory nor is the time compensated (Korpan, 2011). There are not often multiple offerings of courses, thus conflicts in scheduling can inhibit participation altogether. Ultimately, this training office has a nebulous focus, as it does not seem to acknowledge the difference between TAs and TEPAs nor the different strengths and experiences graduate students in education in particular may bring to the classroom given their background as classroom teachers.

As TEPAs, we are hired to provide support to the ITE program, therefore we presumably have some strengths to bring to it! However, is the TEPA constructed in a way that recognizes our teaching experience but supports our need to engage critically in post-secondary teaching?

Jesse: *For me, a teacher education program assistant position should include opportunities to reflect upon what meaningful or change-oriented teacher education would mean outside of the authoritative structures that surveil the TEPA (supervisors, faculty administration, unions, etc).* While TEPAs provide faculties of education much needed labour they can also operate as “experimental” places for “free” encounters at the faculty which are under layers of control. By giving TEPAs some space to determine how they will meet the challenges of authority and politicization, making the transition to teacher educator may be more thoughtful. *I think this can be best achieved by providing scheduled group meetings for discussion and reflection which are not governed specifically by TEPA contracts, yet are mentioned as an integral part of completing the TEPA and are thus assigned requisite paid hours. Such a discussion would have to be led and created by the TEPAs themselves; the administration essentially only providing the space and the time.*

Erin: *I took a doctoral colloquium that had a focus on the research and academic aspect of this journey, in a collegial and facilitated forum. It was an incredible opportunity. I think this further illustrates the lack of a similar space in which to grow and reflect as a community on our development as teacher educators.*

Jesse: *A colloquium for new teacher educators would be useful, although I would have some reservations about what governs it. What would the possibilities be for thoughts, suggestions, and criticisms and actions that come out of the colloquium?*

Erin: *It should be a space for a deep self- or co-evaluation process, because otherwise the impact of the experience feels too diluted, or too tokenized. I feel like to be successful in the PhD program one thing we need to accomplish is to be able to speak about our experiences teaching at the post-secondary level. While I have a degree of comfort with myself as a researcher, I am still trying to uncover*
my teacher educator identity. And I don’t feel there is the same space for discomfort in this practitioner space as there is in the researcher space.

Conclusion

We have endeavored to make sense of our experiences as TEPAs and the tensions involved through dialogue in terms of a theoretical perspective, and what the intermediary space of a TEPA entails or could mean. Dialogue has continued to help us re-form our own understandings of our experiences and begin to position the TEPA as a helpful transition space between teacher, graduate student and teacher educator. Change to the structure and opportunity of the TEPA experience should involve a thorough evaluation of the TEPA and how it may define the position in terms of the roles and possibilities it defines for doctoral students. Certainly, a collaborative (public) space is needed to begin talking about teaching, and this space must be collaborative, as well as free from hierarchies, prerogatives, and surveillance that could ultimately hamper the freedom exercised in that space - whatever it may entail.

We feel this piece of writing can be taken as a challenge to the status quo in teacher education as well as to teaching in higher education. We are wary about our current and future roles in education and through dialogue as well as the use of theory we have been able to articulate a way to proceed. Any change in TEPA positions or teacher education should ideally address both the political situations and forms of teacher education as well as the content of such courses (Petrina, 2004). Tackling both will require teacher educators, pre-service teachers and TEPAs to safely engage, share ideas and grow understandings in dialogue which can achieve both the humanizing praxis of Freire, and also social component of Kant’s notion of public reason.

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