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# Teacher Identity Development Through Critical Self Reflection

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TEACHER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH CRITICAL SELF

REFLECTION


By

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DEDICATION

To students past, present, and future. You inspire me every day with your thoughtfulness,

hard work, and creativity.  This work is for you.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**Introduction**

As a third-year first grade teacher, I consider myself relatively new to the teaching profession. Even so, I have already learned an immense amount about my teacher identity. The beginning years of teaching are often a formative period of an educator's career filled with both internal and external challenges. Yet educators are often left in the dark on how to work through these conflicts of teacher identity. My own experiences with teacher identity conflict has led me to wonder: *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?*

In this chapter, I will share my personal experiences that led me to a career in education and to pursue my research topic. Chapter one then highlights how teacher identity and critical self reflection are emerging as key areas of educational research. Finally, I shall establish a 'why' for my capstone project through my challenges in identity conflict and the importance of this work for various stakeholders in the field of education.

**Personal Experience**

When I first began working as a classroom aid, becoming a teacher was not my plan. It was my sophomore year of college, I was a biology major and was working as an elementary school classroom aid as part of a work study grant. My main motivator was that by working in a school, there would be no working nights or weekends. Despite my initial motivations, over time, I fell in love with teaching. When it came time to apply to medical school my senior year of college, I knew that there was no place I wanted to be more than in the classroom.

While this is not the most traditional pathway into teaching, this experience provided me with a unique perspective into the world of education. As a classroom aid, I had not taken courses that taught me how to teach or manage students. Instead, classroom management and teacher identity was formed through observation and hands-on experience. By the time I enrolled in the Master of Arts in Teaching program, I already had established ideas about my own teaching philosophy and teacher identity. While my teacher identity has been refined since entering a postgraduate program and working as a full time classroom teacher, many of my core beliefs around education hold true from my earliest days in the classroom as an aid.

As an aid, I was fortunate enough to work in the kindergarten classroom of a superb educator. This teacher had worked in the field for over 30 years, yet even with all her experience she was consistently improving her practice through professional development and education courses. Deeply embracing her identity as an educator, she acted as a member on several committees at her school and took in student teachers and practicum students. What I most admired about her, however, was that she treated each child with the utmost integrity and demonstrated an unconditional love for her students. She was a huge inspiration to me becoming an educator and was someone I wanted to emulate in my career.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I began working as an academic interventionist in a Twin Cities suburb. It was in this new setting that I discovered that each school was a unique community. At my last school, teachers were incredibly positive and worked together as a community. The teachers were proud to be educators and put an incredible amount of effort into their teaching. In my new school, educators

stayed in their classrooms, and when they did venture into the teachers' lounge, they often complained about other educators or their students. Most of my coworkers got to school as the bell rang and left as soon as their students were dismissed each day. Many educators also utilized a more traditional classroom management approach. In these classrooms, educators employed fear tactics to encourage positive behavior. Yelling and consequences, such as no recess or time outs, were commonplace. Not only did this environment seem unsupportive of student needs, it went against my beliefs about how children should be taught and disciplined. While working in this environment was a challenge, it opened my eyes to how vastly different schools and educators could be, and who I wanted to be as a teacher.

By the time I had completed my licensure and set out in my own classroom, I felt confident in my own educational philosophy and teacher identity. This is also when I discovered how challenging being a teacher really is. My first year of teaching, the principal told me my class was 'the most challenging group of kindergarteners our school had ever seen.' I was being hit, spit on, or kicked on a daily basis. Classroom materials were regularly destroyed, and a few students consistently attempted to run out of the building. Suddenly, everything I knew felt useless. I had tried implementing Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) strategies that were utilized by our district, and while they were helpful for many students, they were not enough to support the more advanced needs of some of my students. I even resorted to harsh consequences and occasional yelling because it felt like my only option. This made me feel awful. I was not being the teacher I wanted to be. My actions didn't match my beliefs.

While this first year of teaching was incredibly challenging, it taught me so much about how to be a teacher and my teacher identity. I learned how important it was to create clear expectations, structures and routines to support students. This classroom structure created more opportunities for students to have choice in their learning, which led to less physical behavior and outbursts from students. I also learned that my experience was not unique. In talking with fellow educators, many teachers shared they felt powerless in their classrooms and in their careers. While I had been interested in teacher identity for years prior to my first experience as a classroom teacher, it was through these experiences that I felt something was missing, and that something needed to change to support our students and educators.

**Professional Significance**

As a child, I attended a private Catholic school in rural Minnesota that was almost exclusively white. My hometown has a population of 1,143 people, and at the time of the 2000 census, 98.20% of the village's population was white (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Needless to say, I did not experience living in a diverse community until college. As someone who had such limited experience in diverse school settings, I remember feeling embarrassed and even ashamed of my limited knowledge of other cultures. Fairness and justice have been virtues I have always valued, and it was my goal to learn about educational equity. I didn't want to feel ashamed anymore and make sure my students were receiving the best possible education. What I found was that educational equity and critical self reflection are deeply intertwined. Most school systems are still created to serve white, middle class students, not taking into account the varied abilities, identities and life experiences of schoolchildren. As I reflected on my own experiences in

the classroom, critical self reflection components appeared to be missing from our model. If our approach to behavior did not take into account the identity development of educators, then it was limited in its ability to be successful.

When I first began working in an elementary school as a classroom aid, I was struck by the contrast in identities between the school staff and student population. The school staff was mostly female and white, while the student population consisted of many nationalities and cultures. While some educators regularly discussed their own identities and made a cognizant effort to include opportunities for students to learn about various cultures in their education, others spoke little of the racial differences, some to the point of ignoring they exist. The demographics of schools I have experienced in my teaching career are not rare, it is actually quite typical for many public schools in Minnesota. 95.7% of licensed educators in the state of Minnesota identify as White compared to 63.2% of students Additionally, 75.8% of Minnesota teachers identify as female (Wilder Research, 2019). With such a stark contrast between the demographics of students and educators, the importance of understanding and developing teacher identity through critical self reflection cannot be overstated. Through understanding of oneself and their positionality in education, educators are better equipped to disrupt prejudice and implicit bias not only within their classrooms, but in the education system as a whole. The positive effects of this are numerous. Not only does this help students to feel more welcomed and seen in their classrooms, it can decrease incidences of behavior and suspensions and increase educational outcomes for all students, lessening the opportunity gap.

**Chapter Summary**

Through my own experiences as an educator and in conversations with fellow teachers, I have learned that conflicts in teacher identity are more common than one might realize. Despite this, many educators feel powerless in these situations or unsure of how to work through these conflicts. This has led me to the following research question: *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?*

This capstone project will explore how educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity. Chapter two consists of a literature review to define teacher identity and critical self reflection. This includes a definition of the domains of teacher identity and common sources of conflict in identity development. I then utilize a scenario to apply research-based critical self reflection practices for teacher identity development. In chapter three, I will outline a professional development workshop for educators to engage in critical self reflection of their own teacher identities. Finally, this paper will conclude with a reflection on the capstone experience, as well as the limitations and considerations for future research.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

This literature review is guided by my research question: *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?* I begin by defining teacher identity and its subdomains, then exploring how and what identity conflict may look like between and within the various subdomains. Both critical self reflection and teacher identity have been emerging areas of interest in the field of educational research. This literature review further explores the interrelatedness of these ideas and applies critical self reflection tools identified in research to a fictional scenario of identity conflict.

Many districts consider critical self reflection an integral component to teaching and learning. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Education has created a guide for self reflection and facilitation with the objective of helping educators to 'think about their own social and emotional competencies, implicit biases, and engage families in a culturally responsive way.' Likewise, the Greater Lakes Equity Center, which operates as a regional technical assistance center, suggests that teachers engage in critical self-reflection as a means of becoming an equity-oriented educator (2016). For example, engaging in critical self reflection may allow educators to consider the methodology behind their choices in teaching practices, classroom procedures and materials, which in turn allows teachers to consider how these beliefs influence student learning. When educators understand how their practices affect students, they are able to provide instruction that promotes more equitable outcomes.

In order to understand the importance of culture, it is necessary for teachers to be reflective not only of their own identity, but their cultural identification and affinity groups. Doing so allows educators to grasp their positionality within various systems. Understanding one's own cultural identifications, teachers gain a deeper comprehension of their positions of power and the ways in which they interact with and access society. This also enables educators to explore what stereotypes and biases may be perpetuated through these identifications.

Dube, (2019) suggests that teacher identity and critical self-reflection are paramount not only when working with all students, but are short of a requirement for teachers of culturally diverse learners. Time and time again, research has demonstrated that education systems benefit learners of the dominant group. Teachers who engage in identity discovery and critical self reflection are more equipped to be cognizant of their own positionalities and create more equitable learning environments for students. Defining teacher identity and its subsets is the starting point for this process. In the following subsections, I will provide a definition for teacher identity to be utilized in this capstone project, as well define the various subdomains of teacher identity and the elements of teacher identity conflict.

**Teacher Identity**

While researchers have investigated teacher identity for many decades, it has grown in interest and scope especially over the last few years. Several definitions of teacher identity have been offered in academic literature, many with overlapping ideas and key terms. It is generally agreed that teacher identity consists of several subdomains (Mockler, 2011; Day & Kington, 2008; Day & Gu, 2007). Researchers also agree that

teacher identity isn't static, but rather consistently evolving over time (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Mockler, 2011). These changes are fueled by clashes in identity amongst different subdomains (Mockler, 2011; Day & Kingson, 2008). These general research findings on teacher identity will serve as a conceptual framework for this literature review and subsequent capstone project.
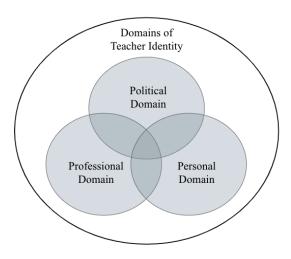
Domains of Teacher Identity

Figure 1: The three subdomains of personal, professional and political identity culminate to create teacher identity. This figure is a simplified model of teacher identity from the work of Mockler.

For this project, the three subdomains of teacher identity consist of the professional, personal and political (see Figure 1). The professional domain consists of the aspects of identity unique to teaching. The schools and school systems an educator has worked in can be particularly influential aspects of professional identity. A teacher's education, including but not limited to initial pre-teaching candidate programs, professional development courses, and professional networks such as unions, continually shape professional identity throughout an educator's career.

The personal domain consists of a teacher's personal life outside of the professional realm, including but not limited to class, race, and gender. One's personal interests and societal roles and relationships, such as being a parent or a member of a particular group, are all aspects of this domain. An educator's personal domain has been forming since birth and also includes an educator's own experiences as a student. All of these aspects of the personal domain culminate in how a teacher views their work as an educator.

The political domain is formed by discourse on education that exists outside of the profession. The most common factor of the political domain includes government policy, especially legislation that directly affects education. In recent years, the media has been a major proponent of the political domain. How education is portrayed in what people hear, watch and read on a daily occurrence affects not only an 'outsiders' perspective of the field of education, but teachers as well.

The professional, personal, and political domains do not exist as three distinct categories, rather, they are dynamic and intertwined. Each domain is constantly evolving, and as it does, so do others. For example: let's say a piece of legislation is introduced that would require educators to implement a new reading curriculum. This bill is hotly contested, with proponents calling the bill forward progress for education, and opponents saying it limits teachers' ability to make educational decisions in their classrooms. An educator has learned about this curriculum in their continuing education course and believes it would be a positive policy for students. Conversely, their teachers' union believes the government is overstepping. As a strong supporter in their union and a desire to be a team player, they feel compelled to support endeavors to stop the bill. In this

example, one event elicits several reactions in each of the educator's domains of identity. In the political domain, they witness the division this proposal causes outside of the educational realm. In the professional domain, she must take into account what her professional courses have taught her as well as her unions' position. In her personal domain, her disposition to create harmony evokes a want to be seen as a collaborator with her union. This example also illustrates that subdomains do not always work in unison. Often, different subdomains will elicit different and conflicting responses to the same event, called teacher identity conflict.

### *Teacher Identity Conflict*

Teacher identity is not a fixed persona, but rather a complex system that transforms over time. One of the biggest drivers of change for teacher identity is conflict between the subdomains. Identity conflict can take many forms and is different for every educator. While conflict can be uncomfortable, being able to work through and overcome this conflict is a necessary part of teacher identity and development.

For educators new to the profession, conflict between the personal and professional domain is especially common. For example, a new teacher may have a strong understanding of classroom management practices in their professional domain, yet how they wish to be perceived in their personal domain may limit their use of these strategies in the classroom (Dugas, 2014). Yet experiences of conflict are not limited to beginning teachers. Identity conflict is a common occurrence throughout a teacher's career, particularly conflicts between the professional and political subdomains. In one study, a veteran teacher shared how her school's emphasis on standardized test scores, a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, did not align with her own teaching practice that

was opposed to standardized exams. A conflict of her professional identity and political identity ensued. Professionally she felt pressured to prepare students for the test they were required to take, while politically she was opposed to such policies and methods of student assessment (Buchanan, 2014). In another study, high school social studies teachers faced an identity conflict when tasked with educating students in civics and government courses while also not disclosing their own political beliefs (Journell, 2016).

Resolving conflicts between identity subdomains is necessary for growth, however, this can often be a challenging experience that does not always end in a desired outcome. In one study, a woman who identified as a lesbian did not feel as though her personal identity was accepted in her rural, conservative school community. Unable to meld her personal and professional identities eventually resulted in her leaving the teaching profession (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2016). Another study found that when teachers could not teach the way they wanted to, a conflict between the professional and political domains, teacher agency and how teachers evaluate their effectiveness was altered (Buchanan, 2014). With such detrimental results of unresolved identity conflict, providing educators with more opportunities to engage in critical self reflection has been a focal point of many studies on teacher identity (Buchanan, 2014; Dugas, 2014; Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2016).

To this point, I have discussed identity, its subdomains, and identity conflict extensively. Identity conflict commonly occurs when there are differences in beliefs amongst two different subdomains. As teacher identity is a complex, ever-evolving system, disagreement between subdomains can be challenging, however, this discord is

necessary for growth. In the next section, I define critical self reflection and discuss how it plays a role in identity development, as well as the interrelatedness of these terms.

**Critical Self Reflection**

Critical self reflection has been suggested as an important tool for educators to work through conflicts of teacher identity (Buchanan, 2014; Dugas, 2014; Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2016). John Dewey was one of the first proponents of reflection in education almost a century ago, defining reflective thinking as both a sequence of ideas and a consequence, ideas supporting one another that lead to an outcome (Dewey, 1933). Under his model, reflective thought is conscious thinking that creates understanding for our actions. His definition of reflective thinking is a cornerstone to critical self reflection as it has been defined and researched over the last several decades.

Building on Dewey's ideas, Finlay defines critical self reflection as a process and an outcome, where one "learns through and from experiences toward gaining new insights of self and practice" (Finlay, 2008). Critical self reflection requires individuals to explore their positions of privilege and oppression, then use their discoveries to advocate for social justice. In this approach, individuals are not only engaging in critical reflection for their own personal growth, but also to reconstruct the societies and institutions they are a part of (Gorski & Dalton, 2019). In applying this to educators specifically, critical self reflection asks teachers to "actively consider gaps between their explicit and tacit knowledge in order to construct new understandings in practice" (Gupta, 2021).

Working to develop a praxis of critical self-reflection through reflective practice is an example of how teachers may confront their biases as a way to mediate identity conflicts (Dugas, 2014). When reviewing standards of effective practice for teachers, the

benefits of critical self-reflection often include improvement in professional development, reduction in self bias, increase in student learner focused interactions, and onee's increased awareness of self and others (Gorski & Dalton, 2019).

A common practice in the field is exploring identity development through simulations and creative scenarios to allow educators the opportunity to engage in critical self reflection that is depersonalized. This can be a necessary step in allowing teachers to develop the skill of how one meaningfully engages in critical self reflection. Below, we meet Kayla, a 23 year old college graduate who is beginning to experience identity conflict in her first year as an elementary school educator. This creative scenario that I have created will model how to engage in critical self reflection through simulations to gain the skills necessary for further, more personal, critical self reflection.

**Teacher Identity and Critical Self Reflection Scenario**

Kayla is a 23 year old college graduate in her first year as an elementary school teacher. Kayla identifies as a cis-gender, White, heterosexual, Christian educator. Growing up on a farm in the Upper Midwest, Kayla lived with her mother, father, sister, and brother in an upper-middle class household. Her family has owned a farm for several generations and are prominent members of the community. She identifies strongly as a Minnesotan, and although she knows her family is of European descent, does not identify strongly with any particular regions or cultures. Like many children in her small farming community, Kayla attended a K-12 private Christian school, where most other students were also white, Christian and members of farming families.

Kayla chose to attend a Christian university in a rural community about an hour from her home. She enjoyed that many of her peers were from similar backgrounds and

held similar interests to her. She continued to attend church as her family had when she was younger, however, felt as though religion was less important to her than it had been to her parents.

Following many of her college friends, Kayla moved to a metropolitan area after graduation and began working as a teacher in a predominantly low-income, culturally and racially diverse community. This environment is very new to Kayla as it is drastically different from her home and college communities. For the first time, Kayla finds herself reflecting on her own identity, an experience she doesn't feel her teaching program prepared her for. While she views her personal identity as an individual committed to equity and inclusion, she is unsure of how to act on these beliefs. As a first year teacher, Kayla is just beginning to form a professional identity and understand the relationship between the various subdomains of teacher identity. Kayla feels conflicted in how to meld her personal, professional, and political identities, and how to manage her ideological beliefs in the classroom.

**Application of Teacher Identity Through Critical Self Reflection**

*Teacher Identity in Education Programs*

Kayla's experiences in identity conflict are very typical of a beginning educator. Despite the prevalence of conflict teachers' experience in developing their teacher identity, teaching educators to engage in critical self reflection is a rarity in teaching programs. When reflective pedagogy is present in teacher education, it often becomes too inwardly focused. Researchers argue that when reflective assignments are created without critical intentionality, they can cause more harm than good, reaffirming existing biases for students (Gorski & Dalton, 2019). In one study, Hong Kong students in a

Postgraduate Diploma of Education Program participated in an immersion program in Australia. Results of the study asserted that many international experience programs do not take into account the complexity of teacher identity and can increase identity conflicts that result in students reconsidering entering the teaching profession (Trent, 2010). Others argue there are ethical and political implications that have not been fully explored. The concern is that teachers will be encouraged to develop 'prefered' identities that results in an ethical dilemma (Zembylas, 2018). These studies do not argue that identity development is inherently bad, but rather that there needs to be a careful intentionality behind critical self reflection to make meaningful, conscious identity reflection. To promote purposeful critical self reflection in teaching programs, assignments must be structured and deliberate. This includes prompts that probe students to think deeply about power and oppression (Gorski & Dalton, 2019).

Another way to promote meaningful, conscious identity reflection at the collegiate level is to create 'brave spaces' in education courses. This is safe space for both students and professors alike to engage in dialogue to deconstruct their own biases (Medina, 2020). These spaces are emotionally supportive and critically reflective, led by professors sharing their own experiences and vulnerabilities to create an emotionally supportive environment for students to also engage in critical self reflection in a group setting (Bhansari, Park, Varghese, & Daniels, 2022). These brave spaces allow educators to form safe, non judgemental relationships with educational peers and are vital to engaging in critical self reflection (Bhansari, Park, Varghese, & Daniels, 2022; Ateh & Ryan, 2023).

***Brave Spaces for In-Service Educators***

Just as 'brave spaces' are important in education programs, they can also be an indispensable tool for in-service educators in professional settings. Research consistently demonstrates that school environment is directly correlated with commitment, resilience, and confidence (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2015). Especially for young teachers experiencing identity conflict, veteran teachers can be a source of support. By creating a brave space in schools themselves, teachers are able to dialogue and validate that this disequilibrium amongst subdomains is important for identity development (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2015).

### *Identity Activities*

One of the most important aspects of identity development through critical self reflection is to understand one's own identity. This is especially critical for educators who have not previously considered their own identity and positionality in the communities they serve. Identity charts and Implicit Association Tests are two ways in which educators can engage in identity discovery and begin to critically self reflect. In doing so, educators become explicitly aware of their own identities and how these identities may differ from their students. Through Implicit Association Tests, teachers can further explore their identities by uncovering beliefs that they may be unaware of. Such activities can motivate educators to become more aware of their identities and engage in critical self reflection to enact change (Ateh & Ryan, 2023). Results of research on the effects of such identity activities support the idea that using identity charts and Implicit Association Tests resulted in increased awareness of self for educators, increased cultural competence and use of culturally responsive teaching, decreased classroom student behaviors, and increased perspectives of respect in the classroom (Ateh & Ryan, 2023).

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review focused on defining teacher identity, the subdomains of teacher identity, and critical self reflection. It provided examples of teacher identity conflict and drew correlations between teacher identity development and critical self reflection. A scenario was then presented to illustrate what conflict identity may look like for beginning educators. This served as a backdrop to apply the critical self reflection tools identified in the literature.

The following chapter will outline how I intend to answer my research question: *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?* I present a project outline of a professional development opportunity for educators based in a critical self reflection framework. I provide a rationale from this framework, as well as provide a timeline, setting, audience, and assessment for my professional development course.

**CHAPTER THREE**

**Introduction**

In the process of writing my literature review, I have learned just how detrimental educators' understanding of their identity is, both internally and in its relation to student identity. This experience also made me realize that the current resources available to educators surrounding identity development are sparse, despite their importance. This led me back to my research question: *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?* In response, I have created a professional development workshop that provides educators with the opportunity to engage in critical self reflection exercises. The goal of this workshop is to provide teachers with resources, backed by research from my literature review, to process identity conflict both now and in the future. Subsequence sections will provide information regarding audience, setting, timeline, and data collection for this project.

*Rationale*

Critical self reflection (Gorski & Dalton, 2019; Finlay, 2008; Gupta, 2021) serves as the framework for this professional development project. In critical self reflection, an individual reflects on ideas and outcomes through a lens of social justice, exploring positions of oppression and power. This leads to both personal growth and reconstruction of educational institutions. Importantly, this framework creates opportunities for teachers to overcome identity conflict by engaging in reflective practices through self examination.

Adult learning theory, particularly the work of Malcom Knowles, will also serve as a framework for this project. There are two foundational principles to adult learning;

that learners must be active participants and the learning process should be built on the backgrounds, needs, and needs of professional development participants (Knowles, 1992). Furthermore, effective educator professional development contains the following key elements: is content focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, uses models of effective practice, provides coaching and expert support, offers feedback and support, and is of sustained duration (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). Whenever possible, these key elements have been put at the forefront of the professional development project, with particular focus on collaboration, active learning, sustained duration, feedback and support.

**Project Description**

This project is a professional development course for elementary school teachers in Minnesota. This course will take place online, synchronously, for one hour every other week for a total of four synchronous sessions over eight weeks. The objective of this professional development course is to provide elementary educators with tools and strategies to engage in critical self reflection. This course will serve as a brave space for teachers to dialogue, deeply explore their own identity and work through identity conflict. This course is eight weeks in length and offered through a virtual format.

*Session One*

Participants engage in a greeting, share, and community building activity to begin forming a brave space community. Each of the subsequent sessions will also begin with a greeting, share, and community building exercise. The course facilitator defines a brave space and the course participants work together to create community agreements to adhere to during their time together. The course facilitator will lead educators in a

discussion and definition of teacher identity, before modeling how to fill out a teacher identity chart. Participants then fill out a pre-course assessment form and then the session ends with a reflection practice, as will each session thereafter.

### Session Two

In session two, participants will continue to engage in identity work by completing an identity chart for themselves and for their students. They then answer reflection questions to gain a deeper understanding of their own identities, both as educators and in relation to their students. Participants will first be given time to reflect alone before dialoguing about their findings in the brave space community.

### Session Three

Session three will begin with a review of session two's identity chart lesson and allow participants to share any further inquiries or discoveries. The facilitator then introduces implicit bias as the next area of focus and provides some examples from their own practice for participants. To further develop skills of meaningfully engaging in critical self reflection, participants will analyze a model implicit bias test before completing their own.

### Session Four

For the final session, participants will bring the results of three implicit bias tests completed in the last session for discussion and reflection. The bulk of this session is spent in discussion of bias and connecting the various exercises throughout the course. Participants will complete a final reflection form and finish with a closing activity for the last session of this course.

### Setting and Audience

The setting for this professional development workshop is an online format offered to elementary school educators in northern Minnesota. There are a few reasons for this. The first is that as a teacher in northern Minnesota, my ability to provide this professional development opportunity in an in-person format is limited. Schools in my area of the state are very small and very spread out. Teachers would have to travel a long distance to attend, or alternatively, the professional development would only be available to the 12 elementary school teachers in my building. Offering this workshop virtually allows more individuals to attend and is more convenient for teachers wishing to gain this experience.

### *Timeline and Assessment*

Participants in this professional development opportunity will engage in various self assessments throughout the course to contemplate their identities and build skills for critical self reflection. Additionally, participants will complete pre and post course surveys. The purpose of the pre course survey is for facilitators to determine the demographics of participants and their understanding of key terminology for the course. Facilitators will then use this information to ensure course content is relevant and accessible to all parties. The post course survey serves as an additional reflection tool and assists facilitators in improving the course for future participants.

This professional development course was created over two semesters, or about six months. In the first semester, the project paper was written. This included a literature review that served as a base for the professional development course and a rationale for the importance of providing this opportunity to educators. The second semester involved revision of the project paper and creation of the project itself, including but not limited to

professional development session agendas, presentations, course assessments and participant resources.

The initial professional development course will take place in the fall of 2024. Using feedback from participants, I plan to revise my course in the spring and summer of 2025, then continue to provide a revised professional development course in the fall of 2025 and spring of 2026. The timing of this professional development offering is deliberate, and this course will only be offered during the school year. A large aspect of this professional development is working through challenges with peers and being able to process the disequilibrium of current identity conflict, as well thinking about identity in terms of the system one is a part of. It is important for educators to think about their identity and positionality while directly working in their school community.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a summary of the goals of my professional development course, its audience, setting, rationale, timeline and assessment. With critical self reflection as a framework, participants in this professional development opportunity engaged in critical self reflection practices to gain a better understanding of their own identities, identity conflict, and positionality. Participants gained these skills over an eight week virtual course with four synchronous sessions. Participants also completed pre and post course surveys as assessment tools for both their own development and facilitators to improve the course for future parties.

In chapter four, I reflect on my project as a whole and consider how I have grown as a researcher. This includes revisiting my research question, *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?* I will also

determine implications and limitations for this project, as well as suggestions for future

research.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I reflect on my own experiences as a writer and researcher through this capstone journey as I explore my research question, *How can educators engage in critical self reflection to overcome conflicts in their teacher identity?* I consider my literature review and the sources most vital to the creation of my capstone project. I then explore the limitations and implications of my capstone project, including suggestions for future research and possible next steps in my own learning.

**Reflection**

While working through this capstone project, I experienced a tremendous level of teacher identity conflict, an irony that has not been lost on me. Over the course of this capstone journey, I moved from living at the center of one of the biggest cities in America to living in rural northern Minnesota. I went from teaching in a diverse urban school district of over 10,000 K-6 students to teaching in a K-12, one building school district with less than 300 students. This extreme change in school environments made this research come to life in a new and deeply personal way, and its importance is more recognizable to me than ever.

The process of creating this capstone paper and project helped me to recognize that I am not alone in feeling these clashes in identity, and understanding this is fundamentally necessary for growth as an educator. While the process of writing this paper was not always easy, it made me feel empowered to create a change and contribute to public scholarship in a meaningful way. There seems to be an unsaid assumption that scholars need to be of a certain pedigree, or at least, that was always how I felt. This

experience led me to realize that I may never feel 'worthy' of completing this level of academic work. Instead, what matters is the intentionality behind the work, the dedication to being a thorough, impartial researcher and consistently revisiting the writing to revise through the guidance of trusted collaborators. For myself, I have needed to learn to manage my time more effectively and accept help that I previously would not have allowed myself to have. This level of writing is truly not possible without the support of peer reviewers and proofreaders. It is a collaborative effort that requires patience, vulnerability, and determination.

**Revisiting the Literature**

It was Mockler's (2011) definition of teacher identity that really helped to propel this project into action. Mockler divided teacher identity into three domains; the personal, professional, and political, explaining that each of these domains were dynamic and intertwined. It is further explained that as these domains evolve, conflict can ensue. While I experienced my own teacher identity conflict, I was reminded that identity conflict among educators is not uncommon, and is in fact a vital aspect of growing professionally (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2016). Schools and districts act as key mediators for identity formation that could greatly contribute to or inhibit educator's abilities to reform. While self reflection on teacher identity can be done alone, reflection is exponentially more powerful among a trusted group of colleagues (Buchanan, 2020). The work of these key researchers were utilized to create the definition of teacher identity and identity conflict shared with participants in the professional development portion of the capstone project.

In addition to developing key terms for the course, collaboration with trusted peers is an essential component of self reflection and teacher identity. Medina (2020) introduced me to the concept of a brave space, a community that is committed to growth, vulnerability, and dialogue. This source led to additional research for the capstone project surrounding brave spaces and how to create these environments in adult learning communities.

When thinking of how to engage participants in critical self reflection within the shared brave space, Ateh & Ryan (2023) exercises to engage pre teacher candidates in self reflection to promote cultural competency was one source of ideas for engaging activities in the professional development course. These pre teacher candidates participated in a plethora of exercises, including identity charts, respect matrixes, implicit association tests, and weekly reflection journals (Ateh & Ryan, 2023). The findings and ideas of this study were utilized to determine what ideas were appropriate for the professional development course.

**Limitations**

Critical self reflection has become an increasingly discussed and researched topic in the field of education. I have strived to include the most up to date information and use the most inclusive terms, while recognizing this is a quickly evolving world and these details may soon become obsolete. I urge readers to take this into consideration as a limitation to this project and cross examine with more recent sources if necessary.

Another possible limitation of this capstone project is the online format of the professional development course. The online format may create some disconnect between participants and lead to challenges in creating a brave space community. Because this

professional development was created with rural educators in mind, a virtual course felt

the most accessible and appropriate format for a small group of educators spread across a

very large geographic space. This work could easily be adapted for an in-person

professional development for an urban community or at a larger school district.

**Implications**

While this paper and subsequent project were created with northern Minnesota

elementary school teachers as the main audience, the findings of this work have far

reaching implications. Critical self reflection and identity are vital not only to many sects

of education, but to fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology as well. It can

be utilized as a starting point for similar professional development opportunities catered

to other specialized education groups or related fields. The research frequently concluded

a lack of spaces for educators to engage in critical self reflection with colleagues. I hope

this work encourages more opportunities and spaces for dialogue for teachers that are

desperately missing.

Interest in critical self reflection has grown both in educational research and in

society as a whole. The findings of this project support continued research on critical self

reflection within education, specifically for educators. Possible areas of research could

include best practices for facilitators, more research into the effectiveness of brave

spaces, and strategies to support educators through challenges of identity conflict.

A possible next step for my own learning would be to expand this professional

development course to a semester-long learning opportunity. This could provide for more

authentic relationship building amongst participants as they work through active concerns

in their classroom and identity. This professional development opportunity could also

evolve into a brave space community for a school community instead of a professional development to serve as a more continuous learning environment and form of support. As the research evolves surrounding this topic, I am too committed to evolving the professional development course to continue to meet the needs of educators.

**Conclusion**

This capstone journey taught me to accept feedback and assistance that I have not previously been able to accept as a writer, researcher, and learner. This concluding chapter revisited my literature review and identified several key sources that led to the creation of a professional development project before exploring possible limitations and implications of this capstone paper. Throughout this project, I have undoubtedly learned deeply about my own educator identity and become committed to creating brave spaces for educators to engage in critical self reflection. I look forward to the continued research of these important areas of education.

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