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Sharing Stories and Learning to Lead: A Relational Mentoring Process Through Self-Portraiture

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The creation of a relational, co-mentoring community for aspiring school leaders during their certification program may allow these future leaders to participate in a peer-mentoring process wherein they engage one another in interdependence, experience reciprocal growth-fostering interactions, and tackle issues related to systemic power. The relational mentoring process creates a network of colleagues who understand the nature of the work of a principal candidate and who provide support and promote trust, knowing what they reveal will be held in confidence. This study focuses on two questions: How does the process of self-portraiture help principal candidates reflect on the kind of leader they want to become? How do principal candidates mentor one another through the self-portraiture process? The self-portrait is a form of auto-ethnography that the principal candidates write and share with one another as a part of the certification coursework.

Introduction

Learning to become a principal is not an easy task. Principals face numerous challenges in today's schools. These demands include closing the opportunity gap for ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse students (Au, 2011; DeShano da Silva, Huguley, Kakli, & Rao, 2007), equalizing inequitable funding (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Kozol, 2012), working in increasingly segregated schools (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), performing under high-stakes accountability (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Mintrop, 2012), educating students who increasingly are living in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016), and coping with a shortage of teachers prepared to work with today's diverse students (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008; Nieto, 2010).

Principals also are tasked with guiding and supporting the teachers and staff whom they lead. This involves ensuring that teachers understand the curriculum, deliver their lessons utilizing research-based best practices, engage their students with dynamic instruction, manage their classrooms effectively, and more. Such leadership is often considered instructional leadership (Fullan, 2014; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Hallinger, 2000, Marks & Printy, 2003). Helping teachers teach to the best of their ability is an important part of a principal's job; however, the job does not end there. Principals often find themselves supporting their staff and faculty in many other ways—getting to know the people on their team, listening when there is a problem, helping to celebrate noteworthy achievements, and raising morale, among many others. In other words, principals also act as *mentors*.

Just as there are many styles of leadership, there are many ways to mentor. In this paper, we focus on the developmental and relational nature of mentorship (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007). Attending to the relationships principals have with the teachers they lead, and ensuring that teachers feel emotionally as well as instructionally supported, is important to teacher success (Newcomer & Cowin 2018). This is important because many aspiring principals (and practicing

principals) may view their role as school leaders in ways that reflect a hierarchical or top-down approach to leadership. They often see themselves as the ultimate decision makers and act in ways that may be more authoritative (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013).

Although a great deal of work has focused on mentoring practices for practicing principals or how principals mentor once they occupy this leadership role, few studies investigate how *aspiring* principals learn to mentor others through their principal preparation program. Even fewer studies explore mentorship in principal preparation programs through a lens of relational mentorship. We frame our investigation around the overarching question of how principal candidates (PCs) learn to become not only instructional leaders, but also relational *mentors* to those they lead. Specifically, we ask: How does the process of self-portraiture help principal candidates reflect on the kind of leader they want to become? How do principal candidates mentor one another through the self-portraiture process? We address these questions by exploring the process of creating a mentoring community through developmental and relational mentorship within a principal preparation program. We focus on how mentorship is practiced through the act of creating, sharing, and reflecting upon self-portraits.

Review of the Relevant Literature

Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2006) define leadership mentoring as “the formal and informal social construction of professional performance expectations developed through purposeful interactions between aspiring and practicing principals in the context of authentic practice” (p. 276). There are many different ways principals may be mentored:

- Recruitment—the act of tapping a promising teacher on the shoulder;
- Socialization—a way to induct novice principals into the profession;
- Support—the act of lending help and guidance;
- Professional development—a way to support principals in their continued growth once on the job; and
- Reciprocal learning—the mutual guidance and mentorship of one another (Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012, pp. 127-130).

These different types of mentorship may be formal or informal. Some research has found that informal mentorship is preferred by new school leaders (Ragins & Cotton, 1999) and presents greater benefits to the mentees (Kramer, 2010).

Qualities of Successful Mentoring Programs

One core quality of a successful mentoring program is opportunity for professional development that “involves the social construction of professional-practice expectations through mentoring, peer sharing and critique, and systematic induction” (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 471). Hence, opportunities to share and receive feedback are important. Novice principals need well-trained mentors (Weingartner, 2009; Young, Sheets, & Knight, 2005). Weingartner (2009) emphasizes that new principals need to be able to discuss questions, raise issues, and share concerns with a more experienced peer. Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) suggest that *all* principals, regardless of the stage of their career, value the opportunity to ask for help or to confidentially share concerns.

Foundational perspectives on mentoring (see Allen & Eby, 2010; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007) are supported by global perspectives on transformative mentoring across contexts, communities, and cultures (see Kochan & Pascarelli, 2003; McMahan & Fritzberg, 2003) and

mentoring supports personal and transformational growth (see Kochan & Pascarelli, 2003; Zhao & Reed, 2003). Other vitally important components necessary in establishing the mentoring community are self-evaluation of one's inner biases (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016) and communication styles and skills (Alessandra & O'Connor, 2011, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003) that are transparent and trust-building among mentors and protégés (Combs, Harris, & Edmonson, 2015; Tschannen-Moran, 2007, 2014) and which focus on reciprocal learning and inquiry-based communication skills (Zachary & Fischler, 2014). Development and use of reflective practices (Arredondo-Rucinski, 2005; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Rodgers, 2002) are taught to deepen evaluation of one's practice and to set goals for continuous development within the context of the internship seminar and coursework.

Mentoring may also be viewed as a reciprocal learning process wherein growth is fostered for both the mentor and mentee (Young et al., 2005). Positive outcomes include support, empathy, counseling, sharing of ideas, problem solving, professional development, greater confidence, reflection, and social networking (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). Similarly, co-mentoring is defined by Mullen (2005) as "individuals or groups [who] proactively engage in reciprocal teaching and learning and transform power structures to honor egalitarianism" (p. 25). Kochan and Trimble (2000) underscore that co-mentoring includes "elements of collaboration, shared decision making, and systems thinking" (p. 20)

Searby (2014) presents a helpful framework for examining the "mentoring mindset" of a protégé which mentors can use to focus their mentoring practices and conversations. The five indicators Searby (2014) suggest are "takes initiative," "learning orientation," "skillful and organized," "relational," and "reflective" (p. 264). Protégés can also use the framework to self-evaluate their skills regarding a mentoring relationship and work to be more open to the potential benefits.

Mentorship for Aspiring Principals

Daresh (2004) suggests that mentorship is key to creating effective school leaders. Yet, mentorship is often conceptualized as a partnership between the university and the school district, though PCs are mentored through their internships and clinical experiences. However, sometimes these formal mentoring experiences do not lead to authentic mentorship. For example, Reyes (2003) found that out of 28 pre-service principals, only five viewed their immediate supervising principal as a mentor. She also noted that the female African-American PCs in her study reported not feeling adequately supported by their appointed mentors. Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengston (2012) point out that such findings underscore the need to redesign mentoring programs to better address the needs of all leaders. They also suggest that preparation programs should consider faculty-student mentorship as an important part of the curriculum.

Still, few studies have examined mentorship processes and practices within the university classroom. As one example, Mansfield, Welton, Lee, and Young (2010) examined the lived experiences of female graduate students in educational leadership programs in order to better understand the challenges and opportunities they faced. They found that organizational constraints, personal and familial sacrifice, struggles with identity, and experiences of mentoring arose as key themes shared by these students, and concluded that their findings suggested the need for mentoring programs for female students, in particular, within educational leadership.

Using Narrative as a Tool for Inquiry

Stories or narratives have long been found to be a powerful tool for teaching and learning as well as understanding human experience. Stories, and investigating those stories, help us make sense of experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain it this way: “Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience . . . Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20). Narrative inquiry is based on the idea that life is a series of “lived stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 44) and that telling those stories is a natural way for people to think about and understand their lives. Narrative researchers collect those stories and write about them. By studying our individual experiences in the world, narrative inquiry allows us to “seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for [our]selves and others” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006, p. 42). Similarly, Huber, Caine, Huber, and Steeves (2013) suggest that through “attending to and acting on experience by co-inquiring with people who interact in and with classrooms, schools, or in other contexts into living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories of experience” (p. 213), narrative inquiry offers tremendous potential for transforming pedagogy in education.

Theoretical Framework

We frame our study in developmental and relational mentoring perspectives (see Cowin et al., 2016; Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) as well as with mentoring research which supports the rationale for the development of mentoring programs for aspiring school leaders (Searby, 2010, 2014). Relational mentoring (Fletcher & Ragins, 2007) seeks to expand the definition of mentoring from the traditional perspective of a one-direction, hierarchical approach where an older, more seasoned mentor helps a less experienced protégé, to one that seeks to understand the “full range of processes, mechanisms, and outcomes of developing relationships” (p. 374) for both protégés and mentors. Fletcher and Ragins (2007) who draw on Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) as a lens when examining mentoring relationships, explain “high-quality mentoring” as “an interdependent and generative developmental relationship that promotes mutual growth, learning and development within the career context” (p. 374).

Citing the work of Miller (1976, 1984), Miller and Striver (1997), and Surrey (1985), Fletcher and Ragins (2007), explain how relational mentoring challenges a traditional Western concept of the “self” in which personal development comes with the ability to separate oneself from others, “moving from dependence to independence” (p. 378). They explain that an RCT view of the “self” is not an independent self, but an interdependent self-in-relation with a “two-directional flow of mutual influence” (p. 378). Whether mentor or protégé, being able to express one’s feelings and not having to worry about keeping aspects of one’s feelings hidden can be liberating, lightening stress which is often experienced as physical and/or emotional exhaustion.

A second tenet of RCT explained by Fletcher and Ragins (2007) is growth-fostering interactions. A growth-fostering interaction is an experience that moves the participants from a position of mutual authenticity (“bringing one’s authentic self to the interaction”), to mutual empathy (“whereby one can hold on to one’s self but also experience the other’s reality”), and then to mutual empowerment (“whereby each person is in some way influenced or affected by the other, so that something new is created”) (p. 383). For example, being able to tell the details of an incident and expressing one’s feelings in the moment without editing what one is saying due to fears that the listener will judge. Having the listener attentively listen and use a questioning or inquiry-based approach allows the speaker to vent emotionally and potentially begin to reflect on

the incident in new ways. The listener may be changed in these “mentoring episodes,” which act as a growth-fostering experience for both speaker and listener.

Fletcher and Ragins (2007) tackle systemic power as the third tenet of RCT. Again, the work of Miller (1976) is referenced, closely examining the concepts of independence and achievement. Miller (1976) reframes the concept of individual achievement as a myth because he concludes that everything we do and accomplish is in relation to others. For example, focusing on power dynamics and gender, Fletcher and Ragins (2007) remind us “mentoring theory has origins in the experience of White male professionals in the Western world, it reflects the attributes, values, life experiences, and gender role expectations” (p. 390). Therefore, traditional views of mentoring may not align with the needs of women and those from culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse backgrounds and may add a layer of tension for those who are not White males. Fletcher and Ragins (2007) also suggest we examine systemic power dynamics at play in mentoring relationships from the societal “legacies of patriarchal laws, slavery, and homophobic secrecy” (p. 391). We have combined the tenets of RCT with the idea of examining how both the protégé and mentor begin the relationship from a developmental perspective. Please see Figure 1 below for a visual synthesis of this mentoring framework.

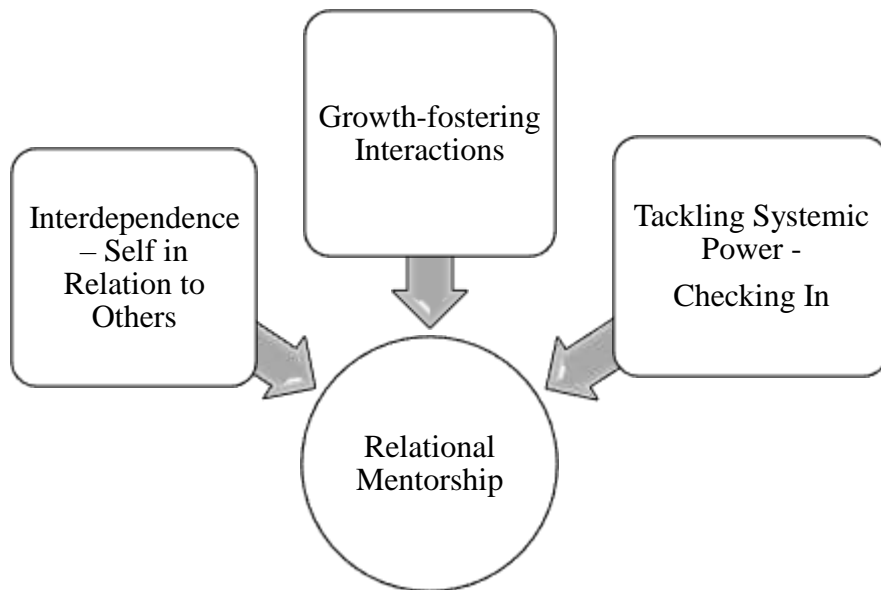


Figure 1. A Relational Model of Mentorship Based on Fletcher and Ragins (2007)

Methods

In this qualitative case study, we utilize the methods of portraiture. Portraiture is used to capture stories and “the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural contexts, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 24). Portraitists search for refrains, metaphors, and themes that seem important to organizational continuity and coherence.

Portraiture focuses on goodness and deep authenticity of human experiences or organizational cultures (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This stance acknowledges that those sharing personal histories are the “best authorities on their own experiences” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 141). The portraitist is encouraged to resist the “preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies” (p. 141) that often occurs in social science. This is not an

idealized, dichotomous view of good versus bad, but “assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9).

Study Participants, Data Sources, and Analysis

Data were collected during the spring of 2018 and include weekly observations of university classes, researcher reflective notes, and student work. In this study, we focused specifically on the PCs’ self-portraits, the PCs’ written self-reflections of the self-portraiture process, and Dr. Cowin’s (the class instructor and co-author) observations and impressions. While 17 PCs participated in the spring 2018 certification course, three of these PCs, in particular, were selected as focal participants of this study. Although each self-portrait provided opportunities to learn about the process, due to space constraints and in order to more fully develop our analysis, three self-portraits were selected as the focus of this paper. We believe these self-portraits exemplify well all three facets of the process because they inspired an especially robust discussion of the issues they raised and lent themselves to deep reflection amongst all of the principal candidates in the course.

As Cowin reflected on her teaching and mentoring, she shared her experiences with the other researcher and co-author, Newcomer. These additional notes were recorded in what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call the “Impressionistic Record” (p. 188). The Impressionistic Record includes researchers’ ongoing observations, insights, reflections, interpretations, and points to ponder. We gleaned many additional insights through this collaborative analytical process. For example, Cowin did not audio or video record her classes, but made many handwritten notes each week about what transpired, in addition to her strong recollections of what students shared and said during class. She was also able to draw upon the many text messages, emails, and phone calls she continues to receive from the PCs. The researcher’s voice is integral to creating the portrait, and these personal observations, recollections, and conversations with the PCs became part of the study’s Impressionistic Record, helping both authors to connect the self-portraiture process to the group’s collective learning, and to the PCs’ trajectories moving forward.

We searched for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, and themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seemed important to organizational continuity and coherence that were present in the portraits and mentoring process (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). We sought to integrate the PCs’ comments and experiences with Cowin’s observations, interactions, and discussions with the participants. As such, each author independently read the PCs’ self-portraits numerous times. We began inductively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), noting key ideas, resonant metaphors, and themes within each self-portrait. For example, a PC wrote that “students and staff are always more complex than they first appear.” Complexity, as a key idea in this portrait, stood out to each author. Likewise, the importance of empathy stood out in another PC’s self-portrait, when she wrote, “I can now more empathetically attend to someone else’s needs, having been lost myself.” These ideas of complexity and empathy became codes that we shared in our discussions. Together, we also looked across the portraits for key ideas that were repeated and used these to create larger themes that seemed to address our research questions.

Researcher Positionalities and Context of the Study

Cowin is a White educator who served 14 years as an elementary teacher (two years as a bilingual Kindergarten teacher) and 16 years as an elementary and middle school principal. Currently, she is a clinical associate professor of educational leadership, focusing on leadership

and mentorship practices. She leads the principal preparation program on her campus. Newcomer is a White, bilingual educator who has taught across a range of contexts, including in a family literacy program and as a K-8 Spanish/English dual language teacher. At present, she serves as an assistant professor of literacy education. Although housed in separate departments (Educational Leadership and Teaching and Learning, respectively), both focus on culturally sustaining, socially just practices for teachers and school leaders (Newcomer & Cowin, 2018) and currently work together on how the use of personal stories may support educators in learning about culturally sustaining, socially just educational practices.

The principal certification program at our university draws graduate students who already possess a Master’s degree and graduate students who pursue a Master’s while taking principal certification courses. The certification program is completed over two academic years. Students completing a Master’s degree take an additional year of coursework. There are six required didactic courses in the Principal Certification Program. For the past five years, Cowin has taught four of the six certification courses with the PCs, serving as their professor, program advisor, liaison between the university’s program and the school districts where the candidates complete their principal internships, and as their mentor. The course sequence is aligned in the following manner with most students beginning the program in the fall semester.

Table 1
Course Sequence for Principal Certification

Term	Course Title	Course Title	Mentoring Community Component
Fall semester 1	Leadership Development Seminar	Principal Internship and Seminar	1, 2, & 3
Spring semester 1	Leading School Improvement	Principal Internship and Seminar	1, 2, & 3
Summer semester	School Law	School Finance	
Fall semester 2	Instructional and Curricular Leadership	Principal Internship and Seminar	1, 2, & 3
Spring semester 2	Community Engagement and Communications	Principal Internship and Seminar	1, 2, 3 & 4

There are four components used to establish the mentoring community across the program. The first three components are introduced in the first course (Leadership Development Seminar) and are subsequently revisited in each semester. The first component involves students getting to know one another through small group activities, whole group discussions, and establishing group agreements. Frameworks integrated from the work of Gibbs (2006) and Palmer (2011) help to establish group agreements that the PCs will use to work together. The second component entails devoting time to teach, develop, and participate in a formalized written reflective practice.

Reflective practices and sharing critical feedback deepen self-evaluation and facilitate goal-setting for continuous growth and development throughout the ongoing Internship Seminar courses that are completed each fall or spring semester. Establishing confidentiality and trust through partner; small and whole group activities and discussions; and studying literature on trust development comprises the third component. The main features of the fourth component consist of the writing and presenting of each PC's auto-ethnography, called the self-portrait. Each of the first three components is key to creating a community of mentorship with the PCs. Without this foundational work, the writing and sharing of the deeply personal stories that are part of the self-portraiture process would not be possible. Since the self-portraiture process is the main focus of this study, we describe more about that process below. For a much more detailed discussion of the first three components see Cowin (2018).

The self-portrait assignment, developed by Cowin (2018), is based on the qualitative methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Cowin teaches about portraiture methodology and during class reads aloud her own self-portrait and other self-portraits that former PCs have given her permission to share. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the building blocks of portraiture as focusing on context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole, with portraiture seeking “to combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor” (p. 3). The self-portraits the PCs write are “designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences” (p. 3).

After a PC has written and presented her/his self-portrait, the PC asks for feedback from the other PCs. The discussion can highlight similarities of experiences between PCs, or demonstrate vast differences, but this conversation often results in PCs sharing vulnerable parts of their lives with each other. After presenting their self-portrait, each PC writes a reflection on the process, connecting their learning to potential areas of growth in their leadership practice.

Limitations

A limitation of our study is the small number of participants. Future studies are planned that utilize a larger pool of PCs that will contain a wider cross-section of backgrounds and histories. In addition, there is a perennial concern of hindsight bias that occurs in all studies based upon the recall of participants. During the process of recalling and interpreting the Impressionistic Record, there could be inaccuracies in recall as memories can be partial or faulty (Cooper, Newbower, Long, & McPeck, 1978). Throughout the self-portraiture process, the researchers mitigated this issue through the triangulation of the written self-portraits, the discussions, and the reflections.

Findings

Each PC wrote, presented, and reflected upon her/his self-portrait as one of the culminating assignments for the certification program. One purpose of the self-portraiture process is to help PCs identify their core values as leaders. The writing prompt for the self-portrait assignment asks the PCs to think about a story of leadership that has an emotive or epiphanic experience connecting home, school, and community. While the PCs discuss ideas for their self-portraits, Cowin listens, asks questions, and makes comments when invited. Due to space constraints, and the length of each self-portrait and reflection, selected snippets of focal participants' self-portraits are shared here. All the names used are pseudonyms.

Eva's Self-Portrait: "A Touch of Purple"

Eva is a Latina woman with a ready smile, who works in the same school district where she went to school. Her position is with the school district's public engagement and communication department. Besides keeping the district's multimedia information up to date, she creates opportunities for community members to visit local schools and spend the entire day with a student ambassador in a program called VIP Days. An excerpt from Eva's self-portrait follows:

Volleyball was my passion, I loved playing and challenging myself to do better. One of the reasons why is because I didn't have the opportunity to play club volleyball or play all year due to not having the funds to pay for it. All my teammates played in club volleyball and would always encourage me to join, but that was something I wasn't able to do. My senior year of high school our team decided to purchase purple Adidas to match our school colors. I had the intention to purchase the shoes but it would just take me a little longer. One day right before the game the assistant coach, Ms. Johnson, called me into the locker room and showed me the purple Adidas and said, 'I ordered a pair of shoes for myself but they were too small, have you bought yours yet? You can have mine.' I was surprised, felt a bit embarrassed but appreciative. The shoes were my size and I knew she had bought the shoes for me, but she didn't want to make me feel uncomfortable. At first, I didn't know what to say or if I should keep the shoes. I thanked Ms. Johnson for her gift with such a big smile on my face. I was so excited that I felt like crying. I gave her a tight hug and thanked her for her generosity. I stepped out of the locker room with my new pair of purple Adidas and played the game. To this day I still have the shoes. (Eva, self-portrait, 2018)

After Eva shared her self-portrait, she and her classmates discussed key ideas that were raised for them, such as what it means as school leaders to address issues of poverty and how to support students who live in poverty. Another PC commented on her own similar experiences of poverty as a school-aged child. This influenced her current work with a church and food bank which provide weekend emergency food supplies for students. This conversation sparked other PCs wanting to know more about her work with this church and the local food bank to learn how they might follow her lead at their schools (Cowin, Impressionistic Record, 2018).

Later, in her written self-reflection regarding the experience of writing and sharing her self-portrait, Eva wrote: "My self-portrait allowed me to reflect on the many struggles students face" and "I want to be able to make a difference by helping others and make impactful memories" (Eva, self-portrait reflection, 2018). For Eva, her lived, real-life understandings of the realities of financial hardship gave her and the others in her group insight into how students who experience similar financial circumstances and poverty have particular needs that leaders must consider.

Nick's Self-Portrait: "My Childhood Home, School, and Community"

Nick, who is White, grew up in an educator family where his father was a teacher and then later the principal of the high school he attended. Nick has a reserved manner but his love for his students is clear in his thoughtful, hard work. He has taught in elementary and middle schools for over 10 years and is currently serving as a Dean of Students and middle school teacher. Nick struggled to find a topic to write about. He and Cowin met to discuss some possible topics before he decided upon an entry point for his self-portrait. Cowin encouraged Nick to tell a story that meant something to him as a future leader. Eventually, Nick decided to write about the moment

he saw his father reveal his leadership stance as the principal of their high school and within the community at large.

In the introduction of his self-portrait he stated, “Most people have a story or two that sticks out to them about their childhood experiences with going to school. For educators, some of these stories are the motivation for why they chose to enter the education field” (Nick, self-portrait, 2018). The Sunday following the tragic event of the horrific mass shooting at Columbine High School, Nick’s family was at church. As the service concluded, he remembers the moment like this:

I remember my dad standing up and walking to the front of the congregation. I remember being extremely puzzled. He had not been asked to approach the front of the church and people did not seem to expect his presence. I don’t ever recall him speaking to a church congregation. I remember his whispering something to the pastor and then him taking the microphone behind the podium. He stood for a moment to gain his thoughts and then quietly began to speak. I don’t recall the words he used, but he conveyed a message about his role as a principal and the love he has for his students and staff. He expressed that the safety of every person in the building was his main priority and that the Columbine tragedy had greatly affected him. I remember tears streaming down his face as he opened his heart to the congregation. This moment had a profound impact on me. I realized how much my dad loved his school and community. I realized how important of a job being a principal was and how much of a presence a principal has on an entire community. As I move forward with my career in education, I see a lot of similarities between myself and my father. Like him, I do not always easily share my feelings. I am not always easy to read. I find myself often wondering ‘What would dad do?’ as I reflect on my administrative course work. What I want to make sure I do, is always make sure that I make an effort to give as much joy and love to the people I impact each day as they give to me. (Nick, self-portrait, 2018)

After Nick shared his self-portrait, one PC commented about how important the role of a principal is, especially in a small, rural community where the school is at the center of so much of the town’s life. This discussion took place shortly after the tragic school shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018. The PCs continued to talk about how community members want to hear from the principal about school safety and how school safety is a complex and current concern for all the PCs (Cowin, Impressionistic Record, 2018).

Later, when Nick wrote his self-reflection of his self-portrait, he was able to articulate what was most important to him in becoming a leader. He called these core values his “three takeaways.” He wrote: “1) build a relationship with every student and staff member in the school, 2) be present in the community, and 3) make decisions on core beliefs and stick with them” (Nick, self-portrait reflection, 2018).

Bella’s Self-Portrait: “My Self-Portrait”

Bella is a White woman with a friendly, outgoing personality and communication style. She served for over 13 years as an elementary teacher as well as an elementary school librarian and technology specialist. She was excited about coming back to graduate school after many years and was always prepared for class, dedicating 100 percent to her coursework. She lives in the rural community where she serves, and cares deeply about her school and community.

Bella wrote about an experience with a fifth-grade student who was withdrawn in class and was not completing his academic work. Bella's self-portrait expressed how she looked for ways to engage the student and form a relationship with him in the journaling process she uses to encourage writing development:

My eyes rest on one student who seems to be mimicking hard work, but his pencil isn't scratching the paper. His eyes dart around the room, then his head is down, hunched over his work, but not producing results. I breathe a deep sigh. This is now the billionth time I will attempt to encourage a better work ethic from this young man.... I work my way towards sweet Mateo. He showed so much promise in September, but his scores continue to plummet.... He likes soccer and is very proud of his mom and brother. As I glance back through the journal pages, I notice that his writing has become more generic and shorter.... The clock is ticking. Conferences are approaching.... I meet [the] family at the door, welcoming them.... Once we covered the regular business Another deep breath and a giant leap of courage plunge me into the unknown conversation of inquiry and concern.... I am wanting the best for Mateo.... he becomes emotional and quiet. He has been asked what he thinks about when he is at school and not completing his work. Mateo shakes his head, like it is a concept too big to say out-loud (sic). His trembling and tears elicit comforting gestures from his mom. Through hiccups and staggering words, he [tells me he] is thinking about missing his dad. Being a single parent myself, I am immediately torn for my young charge. I assumed Mateo still had access to visitation. That is when I learned that his dad had died.... (Bella, self-portrait, 2018)

Bella was drawn to the story about Mateo through her work as a PC as well as through her coursework, which focused on how to develop two-way communication between students and their families and school personnel. Cowin asked Bella questions about the types of two-way communication that were used at her school and encouraged her to assess how a school leader might have made it possible for Mateo or his family to share his story regarding his father's death sooner. This ongoing dialogue and inquiry between Cowin and Bella helped Bella to consider various aspects of this story, and in doing so, hear more deeply not only her concerns about why this had happened but ponder how to lead change and action to address the concern (Cowin, *Impressionistic Record*, 2018).

After Bella read her self-portrait, her classmates began asking her questions. For example, one PC remarked, "How could the principal not know?" While Bella did not state it directly, her written comments seemed to imply that better communication was needed between leadership and families at her school, when she wrote, "If there were a true sense of family engagement how could the school not know Mateo's story—my students are much more than a data point!" (Bella, self-portrait presentation, March 28, 2018). Bella also seemed to suggest that she herself did not feel comfortable sharing her feelings with her principal, noting that she could not talk to her principal about her acute concern for Mateo during his parent-teacher conference. This exacerbated her feelings of anxiety since, as she explained to the group, she was already anticipating a difficult conversation with Mateo and his mother because Mateo was not doing his work (Cowin, *Impressionistic Record*, 2018).

The class discussion that ensued was animated as students grappled with many aspects of what Bella had shared. There were implications about the role that racism may have played in terms of who counts and does not count. One PC wondered, "Why didn't the mother go to the school to tell someone?" Another PC responded that maybe it was because she had to work, she did not

speak a lot of English, and there was a language barrier. A third PC asked, “If you do not speak the language of the school, how do you say something so emotional in a second language?” and then added, “What if you don’t feel welcome in a school, why would you even go to the school?” Other questions posed by the various PCs included “When the school district serves a majority population where the dominant language is not English, why are translation services not widely advertised and available in this language?” and “How can we be sure our families know they are welcome to come to school and talk with us anytime but especially during times like this?” (Cowin, *Impressionistic Record*, 2018). As the discussion continued Bella returned to her self-portrait and reread this section:

Why do I fight so hard to see beneath the exterior output of a student’s academic work? Because my students are much more than a standard or a data point of learning. They are people. They are MY people.... I can’t help but think of my own four children waiting for me at home...” (Bella, self-portrait, 2018)

The conversation went deep and the PCs drew upon key course concepts and readings focused on communication and family engagement as they processed Bella’s self-portrait together.

In her self-portrait reflection, Bella wrote:

I’m reminded of the importance of looking beneath the initial veneer of a person’s presentation of themselves. We all carry hidden scars and unseen experiences which help shape us as a person. I wrote about the impact the death of a parent had on a student’s ability to concentrate and perform in school. This information was not given to me, but rather I had to develop a relationship and explore the reason behind the inattentive behavior and family dynamics. Students and staff are always more complex than they first appear. As a future administrator, I commit myself to establishing meaningful relationships with my students and staff so I can best support their academic and professional growth. (Bella, self-portrait reflection, 2018)

We turn now to a discussion of the ways in which the self-portraiture process led to new understandings of leadership and fostered a shared process of mentorship amongst the group.

Discussion

Engaging in the self-portraiture process provided the PCs with an opportunity for mentorship—both through their work with Cowin and by sharing this work with one another. The PCs often tell Cowin that through the process of thinking about the story they want to tell, writing this story, and then formally presenting it to their classmates and receiving their feedback, they learn important lessons about leadership. This process has multiple steps and unfolds over time with guidance from Cowin and with support from within the cohort. To frame our discussion, we return to our two research questions.

How Does the Self-portraiture Process Support PCs in Reflecting Upon the Kind of Leader They Want to Be?

In our study, we found that writing, presenting, discussing, and reflecting upon their self-portraits helped PCs to identify the core values that they wished to enact in their own leadership. For Eva, her self-portrait, “A Touch of Purple,” opened her eyes to a deeper understanding of the realities of students who, like herself, experience financial hardships which can separate them from their school-age peers. Nick concluded that, like his father, he wanted to build relationships, be present in the community, and use his core values to make decisions as a leader.

Bella realized that creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment, where all families could feel comfortable sharing important events, including personal tragedy, was one of her core values.

This aspect of the self-portraiture process aligns with Davis and Darling-Hammond's (2012) suggestion that effective leadership preparation programs should include features focusing on values and on collaborating and working as a team on real-life situations, citing "clear focus and values about leadership and learning around which the program is coherently organized [and] cohort groups that create opportunities for collaboration and teamwork in practice-oriented situations" (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012, p. 25). This finding also aligns with the first tenet in Fletcher and Ragins's (2007) framework for relational mentoring. The process of writing the self-portrait facilitated an opportunity to reflect upon a key moment in which PCs were affected profoundly through their interactions with another. This helped them to realize the influence they in turn could have on others, exemplifying self-in-relation to others.

How Do PCs Mentor One Another Through the Self-Portraiture Process?

The self-portraiture process provided the PCs with an opportunity to practice important skills of relational mentorship—to listen, confide, trust, and learn from one another. They were able to share difficult and emotionally charged moments from their personal and professional pasts and how they grew from those moments. The foundational work they had done together in terms of getting to know one another, establishing norms, and learning to become "critical friends" helped them learn important mentorship skills. By sharing these moments, the PCs grew in their understandings of what it means to be a leader. Such interactions exemplify the kind of growth-fostering interactions that Fletcher and Ragins (2007) describe as crucial to relational mentorship. Presenting their self-portraits afforded each PC an opportunity to share the details of an incident and their feelings without fear of judgment. Likewise, those in the audience listened actively, asked questions, and helped the presenter to think about the story in a new way. These are the kinds of "mentoring episodes" described by Fletcher and Ragins (2007).

The self-portraiture process allows a safe and confidential space to explore such deeply personal issues. This has been identified as a key feature of successful mentorship (Weingartner, 2009). As time together passes in safety and with others who understand the work of leading, a community grows. As the community grows and understanding and trust develop, conversations deepen, and mutual mentoring among group members takes place.

The questions or comments that are made during the group's discussion after each individual's presentation of their self-portrait often provide the PCs with insights that they had not considered before. Moreover, the very act of reading or talking about the self-portrait gives PCs a deep airing of their own stories that some PCs describe as cathartic. On several occasions, PCs have been overcome by emotion while reading or discussing their self-portrait and asked Cowin to continue reading the self-portrait for them. Many PCs have similar feelings about the self-portraiture process and have underscored that it is the deep bonds within the PC community that allows them to bring up other concerns and seek advice from other PCs. They share that without this type of mentoring community they would likely have kept their concerns hidden. Their ability to be open and honest, seek input, and have a place to talk and listen in a deepened manner is where the mentoring community comes alive.

One implication of these findings is that the self-portraiture process provides a powerful opportunity for future school principals to develop deeper self-awareness of what they have

valued most in the leaders who have influenced them in their own journeys toward leadership. Moreover, they recognize how these core values will guide their future work as school leaders. A second implication of these findings is that this process supports PCs not only in being mentored but in learning to mentor others. This promises to help them become relational mentors in the future to those they will lead. Therefore, leadership preparation program faculty may want to consider incorporating the self-portraiture process or similar opportunities for PCs to engage in such activities in order to reflect on their core values.

Concluding Thoughts and Future Work

Many PCs in our certification program report that although this mentoring community was formed while they were graduate students, the community continues to provide support as they begin new roles as school leaders because they have a ready-made group to continue to reach out to for additional co-mentoring. Because several former PCs, now in new school leadership roles, are continuing to meet, we believe the group process can offer support for novice school leaders as well as PCs to continue to explore how to lead as culturally responsive, socially just leaders. For example, Nick, the PC who wrote about his father's expression of grief and action following the Columbine school shooting tragedy, called Cowin in preparing for an upcoming interview for an assistant principal position. He shared that he planned to use the three key ideas from his self-portrait in his interview answers. His focus on building relationships, being present in the community, and using his core values to make decisions resonated in how he answered the interview questions. Upon hearing that he had been selected for the position, Nick again called Cowin, saying that the ideas from his self-portrait would be the foundation for how he approached his new position. One way he planned to begin building relationships on his campus was to set up listening sessions in order to get to know his new staff, students, their families, and key community stakeholders (Cowin, *Impressionistic Record*, 2019).

Current and former PCs (now novice school leaders) report to Cowin that having a ready-made community of like-minded leaders with whom they have established deep trust, who will hold confidentially (especially in the world of politically charged small school districts), and who know components of their personal leadership journeys, makes it is easier to share the burdens, difficulties, and successes of learning to lead, and to not feel so alone. The tenets of RCT which relational mentoring draws upon leaves open the possibility for co-mentoring groups to focus on interdependent self-in-relation, growth-fostering interactions, and how systemic power may affect mentoring relationships and practices.

We believe our ongoing investigation into establishing strong mentorship communities within the principal preparation program could serve as a roadmap for others leading principal preparation programs. From the vantage point of reflecting upon our own university's principal preparation program's goals, we have observed that while the focus on instructional leadership is central to our preparation work, it seems that principals must also be "social and political" leaders (Trujillo, 2016). We concur with Trujillo's (2016) assessment that we must "invest heavily in re-invigorating" the democratic capacity of our public institutions (p. 218). We hope reporting our work will encourage others to try our processes and enter into dialogue about their results so we can continue to refine the work of creating a mentoring community for aspiring leaders that focuses not only on instructional leadership preparation, but also on social and political leadership. Within our mentoring community, aspiring leaders complete broad and thoughtful study and deep self-evaluation that leads to self-discovery, reflection on practice, and actionable and evaluative goal setting as culturally responsive and socially just leaders.

Continuing to work to refine the mentoring community established in each group of PCs through coursework and activities that explore the PC's development as a socially just, culturally responsive leader, is the work ahead. We invite others into this work with us.

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APPENDIX

The Self-portrait Assignment Created and developed by Kathleen M. Cowin

1. The self-portrait assignment has multiple parts.
2. First, I teach about portraiture methodology using a PowerPoint presentation referring to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) book *The Art and Science of Portraiture* and then I share an autobiographical story from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) book *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* (pp. xiii-xv). The students have learned a formalized process for reflection which I developed and which is used as part of the assignment. Students study the reflective process, practice writing reflections on their principal internship work, and receive feedback on their written reflections weekly in classes and as a part of the monthly principal internship seminar (see Arredondo-Rucinski, 2005; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Rodgers, 2002).
3. Then I read an example of a self-portrait I have written as well as excerpts from self-portraits other students have granted me permission to share with future students (respecting their wishes as to whether or not to include their name).
4. Next, I review the assignment overview handouts:
 - the written self-portrait assignment and rubric,
 - the self-portrait presentation (the presentation is by invitation and is not part of the student's grade for the course),
 - the self-portrait reflection
5. The students are then assigned to read the examples of other students' self-portraits that are available on the electronic classroom platform and are asked to come to class prepared to discuss possible ideas for their own self-portrait with fellow students in small groups.
6. At the next class, students share their ideas for their self-portraits in small groups and then we have a whole class share out about the small group discussions and discuss any remaining questions.
7. Then during the next week, students post their draft self-portraits to the classroom electronic platform for my review and feedback.
8. After the students review my feedback they write a finalized self-portrait and consider the part or parts of their self-portrait that they may share in class for the self-portrait presentations.

The Self-portrait Assignment

An Approach to Writing a Self-portrait

1. Tell me a story about an emotive/epiphanic experience you had in which home, school, and community *intersected*.

- The story should include the following components of the portraiture methodology: *context, voice, and relationship*.
- As your story comes to an *end*, *reflect* on what you have written.
- As you reflect, are there any *emergent themes* that surface for you about the experience?
- Add this reflection to your self-portrait.

2. Then reread your entire self-portrait and see the beauty of new learnings from this *aesthetic whole*.

Your self-portrait may offer you new strengths, competencies, and/or insights into your leadership style and stance for creating home, school, and community partnerships with all the stakeholders with whom you work.

Self-portrait Construction Do's

1. Keep your self-portrait long enough to tell the story, but not overladen with detail; suggested length is less than 10 double-spaced pages.

2. Be sure to include details related to *context, voice, and relationship* in your story.

3. Then, *reflect* on your story by using these formalized reflection steps:

a) The story you have told is the “*experience*” component of the reflection process, so now move on to the reflection component ...

b) Make some *observations and analysis* about your story, then ...

d) Consider how you might *re-conceptualize* your story... (What might you do next time? What might you change if you could? Are there things that happened that you want to remember to do exactly in the same way or maybe much differently?)

d) Finally, to *experiment* for next time: write a brief list of at least three things you might do differently or the same next time if this same story were to come around again.. This is your list for next time . . . What do you want to remember?

4. Use graduate level writing conventions.

5. Apply 6th edition APA formatting. Also: a) use a cover page, see syllabus for example, b) use a title for your paper that is centered on line one on the first page of text (do not bold the title of your paper), c) paginate your paper in the upper right-hand corner (*hint*: the first page of text is page 2, d) use one inch margins all around each page of text, e) use 12-point Arial font please instead of Times New Roman, f) staple your paper in the upper left corner, g) complete a self-assessment and paper clip it to your self-portrait assignment

References to portraiture methodology are from:
 Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J. H. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

See attached rubric. You will also turn in a self-scored rubric.

Name _____ Class # _____

Rubric for the Written Self-portrait Assignment

Component	Exemplary	Meets Standard	Below Standard*
Points awarded	100 – 94 points	93 – 84 points	83 points or less
Story told using Portraiture methodology	Context, voice and relationship components are clearly presented and emergent themes are noted	Context, voice and relationship components were present	Not all 3 components of portraiture were used: context, voice &/or relationship
Reflection using formalized format	Reflection uses formal format including observation & analysis, re-conceptualization, and experiment. A clearly prioritized list to do “next time” is included in the experiment section	Reflection uses formal format including observation & analysis, re-conceptualization, and experiment	Reflection is missing one or more of the components of the formal format
Paper length	Maximum 10 double-spaced pages		
Writing conventions	Fewer than 3 writing convention errors	Not more than 5 writing convention errors	More than 5 writing convention errors
Apply APA Formatting	APA formatting applied; All required components a – g completed	Some required components were missing and/or APA formatting not applied	

**Please see instructor privately for further direction.*

Written self-portrait = 100 points
 Please see comments in the body of your paper.

Self-portrait Presentations

1. The presentation of your self-portrait is by invitation. You may use our group agreement—the right to pass. If you plan not to participate in the presentations, please let me know before class begins via email. If you choose not to present your self-portrait you will still need to participate in the written reflection process focusing on what you learned from listening to others present.
2. For this activity please assign cooperative learning roles of timekeeper and gatekeeper only.
3. Remember, share only what you feel comfortable sharing.
4. At the conclusion of your self-portrait presentation discuss the following:
 - a) How does your self-portrait help expand your leadership stance about communication?
 - b) How does your self-portrait help expand your leadership stance about engaging key stakeholders in your organization (i.e., parents/guardians, community businesses, community non-profits, faith-based organizations, governmental agencies, others)?
 - c) Describe any connections of home, school, & community in your self-portrait.
 - d) Describe any synergy among the descriptors you use.
 - e) Your questions are the most important questions. Do not feel limited in your discussion by the previous questions/prompts. You may develop your own questions or prompts and then discuss them.
5. Complete a brief written reflection on your self-portrait presentation (3 x 5 card) and turn in to the green folder. On your notecard, please do the following:

***Please add your name & class number**
Side 1) Leadership stance gleanings from **your** presentation
Side 2) Leadership stance gleanings from **others'** presentations
6. Turn in your paper version of your self-portrait & self-scored rubric to the “green turn-in” folder.
7. Be sure you have uploaded your self-portrait (*only*) to the **assignment board** on Blackboard by the end of the week. The assignment board version is for my records only.
8. Consider the possibility of presenting your self-portrait at an upcoming opportunity at the annual conference of the Washington Educational Research Association.

Self-portrait Reflection

Name _____

Class # _____

a) How does your self-portrait help expand your leadership stance about communication?

b) How does your self-portrait help expand your leadership stance about engaging key stakeholders in your organization (i.e., parents/guardians, community businesses, community non-profits, faith-based organizations, governmental agencies, others)?

c) Describe any connections of home, school, & community in your self-portrait ... Please continue on the other side if needed