

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

## Research partnerships as transformational learning experiences: Reflection on a research partnership

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A common partnership between faculty and students in post-secondary education is that of researcher as a primary investigator (PI) and research assistant (RA). In this reflective essay, we examine an unconventional research partnership between Allison, a PI, and Bailey, an RA. Our experiences as PI and RA prompted us to reflect upon our learning partnership. We asked: In what ways might the role of RA be transformative (Mezirow, 1994) in teacher education for both researcher and student when it is approached through partnership? This partnership is unique because of its relational approach, where the PI and the RA collaborated in making decisions about the direction of the RA work. The RA's perspective offered a different viewpoint on the research focus through which the researcher aimed to gain insights. This approach altered the dynamics of the research partnership, which evolved along the lines of both partners acting as equal contributors and co-learners through the research process. In this paper, we reflect on our consequential learning. Specifically, we focus on the learning that occurred when Bailey self-directed RA work on the topics of radical imagination, restorative justice, and appreciative inquiry, as well as the insights Allison gained through Bailey's work. We use "I" in our respective sections and "we" and "our" in our collective writing, and we also refer to ourselves in the third person for clarity when needed.

## ESTABLISHING A PARTNERSHIP

### Setting the context of our partnership

Our partnership experience occurred at a small, rural university in eastern Canada where Allison is a professor in the Faculty of Education and Bailey, at the time of the partnership, was a Bachelor of Education student in second year. The study, for which Bailey was an RA, employed an appreciative inquiry process to explore the stories school leaders draw on in their approaches to leadership in schools. Bailey came into the education program having completed a Bachelor of Philosophy in interdisciplinary leadership, a course of study through which she was challenged to deliberate on ideas, learn from diverse perspectives, and view leadership through lenses of equity, power, and justice. Having taught Bailey in one of the required foundation courses of that program, Allison was inspired to learn from Bailey how she would interpret literature and make connections to the research and the possible directions she might identify from the study on which Bailey's work would build. Bailey's RA work broadened the original study context by exploring ways of researching that might include voices of students, for whom education systems

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exist, and families, who are directly implicated in their children's school experiences and about whom many decisions are made by the school leaders. By exploring the ideas of restorative justice practices and radical imagination, Bailey expanded how we might think about the stories that impacted the school leaders in their decision making, and the ways we might begin to engage in re-storying with those school leaders.

### **Reimagining research assistants as partners**

The role of RA is one for which there is no exact description or definition. Students are hired as RAs to support a research project. Conventional PI/RA relationships involve the RA carrying out tasks determined by the PI, with RAs typically working alongside PIs to carry out research in contexts from laboratory experiments to interviews with participants (Whiteside et al., 2007). Thus, the PI/RA relationship can range from PI as supervisor and overseer to one where the PI acts as a mentor and then again to a relationship where the PI and RA act as co-investigators in the work (Bruce & Stoodley, 2013). The benefits of supervisory PI/RA relationships are well established: the RA engages in work through which they will gain valuable research skills, and the PI benefits from the relief provided by the RA as they complete tasks requiring less research experience. In such supervisory structures, there is little contributive balance, as the PI determines the work and research agenda, and the RA follows their directives. Recently, literature related to engaging in research partnerships with students has emerged as experiences of PIs and RAs have been investigated and reflected upon (Bruce & Stoodley, 2013; Brew & Peseta, 2009; Cook-Sather, 2016). Through PI/RA partnerships, research is made more robust by contributions from both PI and RA. These contemporary descriptions of PI/RA research partnerships inspired our partnership.

In our PI/RA partnership, Bailey determined the direction of her work by following threads of her explorations. In response, Allison had opportunities to learn from Bailey's work, which offered a perspective on the literature about restorative practices and radical imagination, informed by Bailey's leadership studies background. Allison was also curious about how Bailey's research directions might root her learning in teacher education. Bailey hoped to gain experience in professional research spaces as well as to explore deeply the ways that her teacher identity was interwoven with the Bachelor of Education program, other lived experiences, and Allison's current work.

To nurture the partnership and learn from each other, we shared a co-constructed Google Doc where Bailey responded to the literature she was exploring. Allison could engage with Bailey's writing, respond, and make connections as well. Allison was careful not to direct Bailey's investigations, but rather to encourage Bailey to follow where the research was taking her, what was drawing her interest, and where she felt she needed to dig deeper to broaden the scope of the study. As part of her meaning-making process, Bailey wrote about ideas that were salient and resonated for her. She shared backstories of how ideas were interwoven into her own stories of learning, prompting her to think about her emerging role as a teacher. Ideas from her literature search also surfaced and informed her work in the teacher education classes in which she was enrolled.

In response to Bailey's writing, Allison explored the ideas Bailey engaged with and considered them both as a researcher and as a teacher educator. Bailey's reflections offered Allison new perspectives on the study and possible directions to explore. We met regularly to

discuss Bailey's findings and connections and to collaborate about possible further directions. This dance with ideas continued throughout the academic year.

### **Allison's perspective**

As a PI new to working with a student researcher, I did not feel comfortable with a conventional approach to supervision. My teaching has been guided by a belief that students are capable and competent and that there is much to learn from them. Bailey focusing and directing her investigations presented me with an opportunity to learn from what she uncovered, guided by her worldview and experience. Reflection in partnership also offered a different dimension of perspective than reflection in isolation. As Bailey made connections to what was important for her as a pre-service teacher, I was prompted to think about how the ideas she was identifying were important in teacher education.

This experience of the PI/RA relationship challenged the way student-teacher relationships had been characterized for me and positioned me as a co-learner rather than as a participant in a hierarchical relationship as might be traditionally enacted. Reflecting on what Bailey was learning afforded me a very different experience than might have unfolded if I were reflecting on what I *thought* I was teaching Bailey. Initiating a learning partnership with Bailey simultaneously sparked excitement and apprehension—excitement about the prospect of learning from and with Bailey and apprehension that my partnership approach might be seen as irresponsible or overly permissive and that I might be viewed as not guiding Bailey as I should. Intellectually, I knew it was a good way for us to work together; yet, I still felt a sense of risk that if senior faculty became aware of our approach, their response might be negative.

### **Bailey's perspective**

As a student new to the experience of taking on an RA role, I worked alongside Allison to inform how my learning was taken up. This experience felt uncertain in comparison to teacher/student relationships I had to compare with. I really enjoyed being told how and what was expected of me. To begin by exploring my own wishes, expectations, and wonderings laid the groundwork of curiosity I feel was rooted in our work together. Interweaving my experiences as a research assistant, pre-service teacher, and student, I consolidated this learning and reflected on how these roles deepened my learning in discussion with Allison. I did not feel the constraints of a set of tasks but rather felt like a partner to share, set goals, and explore the literature from a personal and emerging professional stance. With the freedom woven into this PI/RA relationship, I was able to deeply explore the ideas that were most pervasive, interesting, and relevant for me as I engaged with and responded to the research data. The PI/RA relationship itself prompted me to reflect about the ways that being a student researcher shaped my learning and determined how I conducted work as a research assistant. The work provided an opportunity to make deep connections between the topics I investigated and my experiences in elementary classrooms as a student teacher and to think forward to my future teaching practice. It was inspiring to feel like my multitude of identities and interests were not separate spheres of exploration, but rather a single curiosity that informed the connections I made and that continuously shifted depending on what learning was resonating with me.

## THEORIES THAT GUIDED US

### **Our understanding of transformative learning**

To situate our learning through this partnership, we drew on Mezirow's (1994) transformative learning theory. Having undergone many iterative revisions, transformative learning theory rests in the connection between learning and reflection on how one's self is impacted by learning (Kitchenham, 2008). Drawing from both Mezirow (1994) and Kitchenham (2008), we describe transformative learning as an understanding that as learners engage with new information, they also engage in a process of evaluating their previously held ideas and understandings, contributing to their evolving worldview. Reflection is an essential element of transformative learning in teacher education, as learners go beyond surface engagements with ideas and consider how those ideas might be woven into their growing understandings of teaching. For us, the transformative nature of this partnership helped us both consider our previously held ideas about research partnerships and how teacher education might be enhanced with personally directed learning.

### **Leaning into inquiry through reflection**

Richardson and St. Pierre (2018) describe writing as a method of inquiry and a way for the writer to "learn about themselves and their research topic" (p. 818). Engaging in a process of reflection, or "through the mirror writing" (Bolton, 2010, p. 3), allows the researcher to challenge "assumptions, ideological illusions, damaging social and cultural biases, inequalities, and [question] personal behaviours which perhaps silence the voices of others or otherwise marginalize them" (Bolton, 2010, p. 4). Inquiring into our learning through reflection provided opportunities for us to make sense of our partnership experiences and come to deeper understandings of the affordances a partnership between researcher and student might offer.

## LEARNING THROUGH OUR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

### **Bailey's reflection**

Taking up the work of an RA, I was initially mapping onto expectations that those around me held about how PI/RA relationships operate. Beginning this role and even after discussions with Allison about her beliefs about relationships, I still felt an external pressure to "perform" or create what Allison would like to see. Because of my personal experiences as a young student, I had to unlearn and relearn what professor/student dynamics could look, sound, and feel like. This PI/RA partnership held the potential to allow me to follow my own intuitions, passions, and provocations with the support of Allison. Over time, that restricted feeling shifted as I began to listen to what really inspired, resonated, and moved me as a learner and shared these concepts with Allison.

Beginning with the radical imagination and branching out to explore concepts of appreciative inquiry and social justice in education, I felt as though these topics were all around me now that I was digging into the literature. Reflecting, I wrote:

A quote that captures the essence of my progressions of thinking was from my time delving into literature around the radical imagination: "Anti-oppressive politics . . .

require a shift in what we imagine to be a distraction (Khasnabish & Haiven, 2014, p. 192). The radical imagination asked me to reimagine what a community of educators can do when we all see the inherent value of each student and act from this place in times of equilibrium and especially in times of disequilibrium. Although semester three intertwined my courses with my teaching experiences, there was not one clear-cut way forward. I have a list of questions that provoke me to reflect and imagine what an educator who aligns with my values would do and how they might respond, but the water remains murky. When has accountability turned to punishment? How can I provide care and understanding while also upholding high expectations? How do I ensure I am seeing the students for who they are?

In this space, I see confusion. Khasnabish and Haiven (2014) say that “If we are to assess the life of the radical imagination, we need to pay closer attention to the dissonance and the noise, the confusion and the contradiction, the joys and sorrows of the mess” (p. 239). This quote was a reminder for me that my philosophical shifts align with my moral beliefs about kids. That these beliefs inform my actions and my practices, and that these actions determine the relationships I have with students. It also reminded me that teaching is messy.

In many ways, I feel as though my work as a research assistant allowed me to dig deeply into new concepts that grounded and rooted me in my own teacher identity. During the 2 years I spent in the Bachelor of Education program, a significant concept was both constructing and uncovering my personal beliefs about teaching, learning, and kids. I feel as though the role of RA furthered my sense of self as an educator. I see the ways these concepts and quotes grounded me in my daily experiences as an emerging educator and the many stories that had contributed to my teacher identity.

My hope is that other pre-service teachers who take on student research opportunities can feel empowered by a PI/RA relationship that supports the unique experiences and reflection they are seeking. I hope others feel inspired to take up these opportunities knowing they are entering a relationship of curiosity, co-construction, and the belief that both partners are learning through this process. I hope it is from this place of authentic conversations, projects, and expectations that other research assistant roles become more about interweaving stories and experiences between the RA and PI.

### **Allison’s reflection**

This was a significant learning experience for me. I found myself challenged by the notions of how I understood conventional PI/RA relationships. I also realized that my natural tendency as a learner was to replicate what I know and have seen in situations; the beginning place of new learning is from what we previously knew. That said, I didn’t want to take up the PI role by directing and telling; I wanted it to be a co-construction of meaning. I was fortunate that Bailey accepted the invitation to be the RA for this project because there was a relationship prior to the work, and I knew her propensity to question and connect. This knowledge may have contributed to my confidence to step outside what I believed were norms of working with student RAs and

open the door of partnership in which Bailey directed her learning. However, I still found myself questioning if what I was doing was “right”; in the newness of this role, I felt deskilled.

The belief that our students have much to teach us is one that I have claimed whether working with kindergarten children or adults. It is also one that I advocate with pre-service teachers. Confronting my discomfort about engaging in an RA partnership through a supervisory role was conflicting for me in that, despite my belief in student capacity, there was a tension that I had to address; if we were to co-construct in a meaningful way, I had to let go of control and open the space for Bailey to actively connect and sense-make so that together we could co-construct meaning from the research.

My hope is that through reading about my experiences of learning as a partner in a PI/RA relationship, others might also feel emboldened to challenge conventions and be open to inviting students to authentically co-construct meaning and learn alongside their students as partners. While partnerships challenge narratives about PI/RA relationships and the nature of the work PIs and RAs do together, learning with and from our students is an experience to enthusiastically step into. Working as partners affords both researchers and students opportunities for significant growth and a rewarding learning experience.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

T. S. Eliot (1942) challenged us to “to arrive where we started, And know the place for the first time” (loc. 366). To us, knowing the place for the first time is akin to experiencing transformational learning—developing a new perspective on things we had previously experienced, such as PI/RA relationships. Entering partnership with students affronts common institutional ways of being as it challenges long-held hierarchical rules of engagement: teachers know, and students learn, research is done by researchers, and research assistants perform tasks that are less important to the research agenda (Cook-Sather, 2016). Such challenges require us to rethink how we see ourselves, how we understand learning, and who we value in the learning process. Student perspectives offer researchers novel ways of seeing things, through different lenses, situated in new learning. Opportunities for students to direct their learning within research work opens them to learning that connects to their world and to contribute to new ways of knowing and understanding. Such partnerships are transformative in that they allow both researchers and students to challenge previous understandings and broaden their knowing in response to learning with and from each other.

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**Bailey Chitty** is a classroom teacher and graduate from St. Francis University's Bachelor of Education program, where she focused in elementary education. Coming into education with a Bachelor of Philosophy (University of New Brunswick), Bailey approaches learning as multidisciplinary and creates classroom spaces where students' voices are honoured.

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