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# Personal, Professional and Contextual Circumstances of Student Teachers Who “Fail”: Setting a Course for Understanding Failure in Teacher Education

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Teacher preparation programs differ and represent various philosophical and pedagogical positions. Similar diversity exists among prospective teachers themselves and the schools and classroom settings into which they are placed to observe and develop their professional practice. The interactions of these characteristics, contexts, expectations, and orientations are important to the induction of prospective teachers, some of whom do not succeed in student teaching. Teacher educators have not articulated clear explanations of why some student teachers “fail” to demonstrate classroom competence at the conclusion of their teacher preparation.

In this paper, we develop preliminary indices of “failure” and present exploratory analyses of student teacher “failure” through the collective snapshots of individuals unable to fulfill either their personal and professional expectations and or those of their teacher preparation programs. We define the boundaries and scope of the work by delineating categories for understanding “failure” from our early observations of this phenomenon, describing the demographic and circumstantial evidence surrounding two groups of preservice teachers who did not meet the requirements for provisional teacher certification, making some preliminary conclusions about the matter of “failure,” and suggesting a course for future research and inquiry to add to the knowledge and understanding of this matter.

## Why Study “Failure”?

Teacher educators seldom talk about “failure” in their programs. In traditional undergraduate teacher preparation some failure is natural and expected prior to student teaching as faculty attempt to screen out potentially unsuccessful or unsuitable candidates for teaching: academically,

interpersonally, or vocationally. Little or no stigma attaches to the preservice teacher or the teacher preparation program at these interim junctures. However, after preservice teachers pass preliminary screenings and fall short of acceptable practice in student teaching, “failure” is unwelcome, unanticipated and often embarrassing. “Failure” is never a self-contained affair; it reflects on and involves the teacher preparation program, preservice teachers, the cooperating teachers and the host schools.

Teacher educators often identify the central and contributing problem associated with the “failure” in terms of what the particular preservice teacher could not accomplish in the period of practice. Sometimes the cooperating teacher is implicated as a contributing factor. Less frequently is responsibility attached to the teacher educator, the degree of congruity between the student teacher and the school placement conditions and demands, or the preparation program itself.

Examination of “failure” in student teaching has potential for developing insights into student teaching and the interaction between our practices and the characteristics of student teachers themselves (c.f., Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Rathbone & Pierce, 1989). Many see student teaching not only as the essential element of preparation, but as the culminating, capstone experience, the measure of success in teacher education (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Maxie, 1989; see, Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). Conversely, few consider the contexts and circumstances surrounding field experiences as central and integral components of preservice teacher preparation as major contributing factors in preservice teachers’ “failure” (see, Guyton & McIntyre, 1990).

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## Institutions' Views of Failure

Johnson and Yates (1982) reported that 15 percent of schools and colleges of education never fail student teachers, 50 percent failed less than one percent, and 15 percent failed one percent. Institutions have differing views of "failure," some implied, others formalized. "Failure" in student teaching is generally not part of teacher educators' vocabularies and not openly recognized as a regular outcome of student teaching. Institutions assign student teaching "failure" in two ways: a grade below the state's minimum requirements for certification, thus denying the potential teacher a certificate; a passing but low grade, accompanied by weak letters of recommendation from cooperating and supervising teachers, thus allowing the potential teacher to be certified but reducing chances for a desirable classroom teaching appointment or any school-related position at all.

Our experience concurs with the position of Johnson and Yates (1982), suggesting that few institutions actually assign failing grades to preservice teachers for the field components of their course work. Although the anecdotal records of the preservice teachers we examined document unsatisfactory student teaching performances, their transcripts most often carried grades of "no credit" or "withdrawn" for the experiences.

The two institutions in this study take different positions regarding student teaching placements and "failure." The mid-sized private institution considers that a grade of C or lower implies that the person has "failed." However, that situation rarely occurs as weak preservice teachers are typically removed *en medias res* from difficult placements and placed in more favorable circumstances to complete their practica. Placements are assigned on the basis of grade level requests, classroom teacher availability and, for undergraduates, prior field placement assignments. For example, if prior field experience placements have been in suburban schools, an urban student teaching practicum would be expected. Supervisors are university professors or former full-time teachers who must make a minimum of five visits to the school.

The other institution, a large regional university, also awards letter grades for student teaching. It is easier to "fail" at this institution

because remedial decisions or administrative actions are slower in forthcoming because of the numbers of preservice teachers to be supervised. Some individuals struggle through their initial school placement and "fail" at the end of the practicum with rare opportunity for alternative placements. Placements are generally assigned according to availability and proximity. University supervisors are more likely to be doctoral students than university professors.

## "Failure" in the Research Literature

Scholars cite numerous factors contributing to the "failure" of student teachers. In this brief review we have organized the origins of problems and difficulties associated with "failure" into three clusters: personal, professional, and contextual circumstances. We also describe an obvious weakness in the research literature on the topic.

### *Personal Perceptions of Self as Teacher and Patterns of Past Performance*

A first group of factors relates to preservice teachers' development of a sense of self-as-teacher: role conflict or the discrepancy between the idealized role and the role demanded by the reality of the teaching situation (Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Schwab, 1989); role ambiguity associated with little sense of how they want to act or, conversely, how they do not want to act in the classroom (Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Schwab, 1989); and, personality traits not conducive to optimal teaching and classroom leadership (Knowles, 1992; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Riner & Jones, 1990).

Patterns of past performance and personal histories suggest a subset of factors contributing to individuals' inability to successfully master classroom teaching: inconsistent levels of participation and performance in university course work (Pape & Dickens, 1990); an unwillingness to ask for help (Pape & Dickens, 1990); a lack of time and resource management associated with role overload (Goodman, 1987; Pape & Dickens, 1990; Schwab, 1989); physical or mental dysfunction (Riner & Jones, 1990); and, previous difficulties in educational settings (Knowles, 1988). As with the previous clusters of factors, these are evident to

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some extent in the experience of beginning teachers.

### **Professional Knowledge of Curriculum and Instruction**

A second cluster of factors relates to curriculum and instructional matters, the area given the greatest attention in the relatively scant research. Emphases include *reality shock* (Gaede, 1978) as experienced when student teachers initially confront classroom realities (Knowles, 1992; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Schwab, 1989); lack of practical training (Schwab, 1989); lack of instructional skills (Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Pape & Dickens, 1990); inability to implement appropriate classroom management strategies (Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Pape & Dickens, 1990); inability to select and relate goals to objectives (Pape & Dickens, 1990); lack of awareness of available procedures, routines, and alternatives (Pape & Dickens, 1990); problems with developing evaluation procedures and setting criteria for self or student performance (Pape & Dickens, 1990); inadequate image of students' characteristics and abilities (Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Pape & Dickens, 1990); and discipline problems (Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; Martin, 1988; Pape & Dickens, 1990).

### **Contextual Influences**

Contextual factors make up the third group: isolation and lack of collegiality (Schwab, 1989) and inappropriate or inaccessible immediate role models, as in the cooperating teacher (Knowles, 1988; Knowles & Hoefler, 1989; Knowles & Sudzina, 1991); in addition, lack of understanding of the institutional culture of schools (Knowles & Sudzina, 1991) as associated with one or a combination of setting (rural, urban and inner city, or suburban); orientation (public or private); philosophy (traditional or non traditional); mismatch of grade level placement with preparation (Knowles & Sudzina, 1991); and, lack of confidence when dealing with the cognitive and social maturity levels of students (Knowles & Sudzina, 1991).

### **A Major Weakness in the Literature**

A major weakness in the literature on "failure" is the lack of attention to collective programmatic actions and the consequences of particular preservice teacher education practices within institutions. It is clear, from our reading of the literature and from recollections of personal experiences with "failed" preservice teachers, that accountability for problems associated with their "failure" rests partially on decisions about field experiences often excluding serious consideration of school contexts, and preservice teachers' backgrounds, philosophies, and predispositions and those of their cooperating teachers.

### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

From our analysis of the pertinent literature and interpretations of early informal observations, we concluded that preservice teachers who "failed" during student teaching displayed weaknesses or inadequacies that, if and when they could be determined, would provide insights into the subsequent events surrounding their particular circumstances of "failure."

To guide our research we generated a list of factors we believed significant for understanding the failure phenomenon: personal history-based characteristics (patterns of social interactions and personality, academic history, knowledge of self as teacher); proficiency at expected teaching and professional practices (scope of content area knowledge, curriculum and planning skills, classroom management and discipline); and, externally imposed factors (personal circumstances and student teaching contexts). This taxonomy (see, Knowles & Sudzina, 1991, 1992) aided in decisions about data to collect. The categories provided the focus for the kinds of questions we asked as we reviewed records of each individual.

We gathered the data primarily at two university sites although a third site contributed to one of the case studies and to our general framing of the study. We examined documents from official and unofficial preservice teachers' records in these preservice teacher education programs from 1980 through 1990. We focused on the records of individuals who either failed student teaching or were not recommended for certification. We found little

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consistency in the quality or quantity of the records available from the different institutions.

From the official records we first developed demographic profiles of the students who "failed" during student teaching. In this process we collected data on characteristics and circumstances: age, gender, marital status, grade point average, admission date, outcomes of admission interviews, academic majors and minors, placement school and classroom, student teaching subject(s), course work load, other employment during the period, and, other relevant data.

We then constructed "collective circumstances" surrounding the "failure" experiences of the prospective teachers by summarizing formal documentation such as formative and summative evaluations, narrative accounts of remediation efforts and circumstances of "failure," brief notations by supervisors, and, where available, pertinent information about family circumstances, extra school employment, and official letters to and from the student teachers themselves. We then systematically analyzed the reconstructed records using simple descriptive statistics and content analysis techniques.

### **Personal Characteristics and Contextual Conditions Surrounding "Failure"**

The demographic profiles and selective and collective circumstances we present are based on pertinent data. We present cases, observations, and discussions to illuminate the people involved and particular, related issues facing the respective institutions.

#### ***Demographic Profiles and Personal Characteristics at a Large, Regional Public University***

Of the nineteen preservice teachers whose records of "failure" were available, four were in the elementary or early childhood programs and 15 in secondary or middle school prospective teacher programs. There were two groups of "failed" preservice teachers: 10 who withdrew voluntarily or at the request of the university immediately before the end of student teaching and 9 "failed" by their evaluators. Those who withdrew had an average age of 28 (median, 26) years and those who persisted until "failure" had an average age of 32 (median,

32) years, revealing, when compared to the average age of the total preservice teacher body, an over representation of older preservice teachers in both groups.

We found the gender differences between the two groups of "failed" preservice teachers interesting. The group that withdrew before completing their practicum included nine men and one woman; the group that completed the practicum and "failed," four men and five women. Men were over represented by those who "failed" and, within the particular contexts, were about twice as likely to "fail" as women.

There are several possible explanations for these differences. The younger male prospective teachers may have recognized their limitations and withdrawn rather than "fail" or may give up or become discouraged sooner; older men and women students of teaching may be more tenacious, *sticking it out* and, subsequently, "failing." The latter case may be because of a number of reasons: older preservice teachers may perceive they have fewer alternatives for employment or further education, are more likely to be married or have significant others and have less time available for lesson preparation and other activities associated with student teaching, and, may get discouraged less easily and be more optimistic about their chances of eventual success.

Many of the prospective teachers were older than traditional preservice teachers and had varied life and work experiences, yet they were only in their late 20s to early 30s. Some of them had tried several occupations, seemingly on a trial basis; student teaching may have been nothing more than trying another career. Despite the older age and expected maturity of older prospective teachers, many of their self statements did not present clear conceptions of teaching or of their futures or commitment to professional development and the profession of teaching.

A few prospective teachers indicated that they did not know what else to do with their degrees and felt pressed to pursue teaching as the only likely avenue of employment. Some realized on entering classrooms and schools that they were ill-suited for classroom teaching. They faced the dilemma of much time invested in teacher education and no workable avenue through which to see that professional preparation through. Because of

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family responsibilities, a few married preservice teachers indicated that they felt compelled to keep trying despite the poor fit or mismatches of abilities.

### **At a Mid-Sized Private University**

We examined the records of three female undergraduate elementary and three graduate secondary preservice teachers who experienced unsatisfactory student teaching placements within a two year period. The average age of the undergraduate students was 21 years old; two were transfer students from other institutions. The graduate preservice teachers who had unsuccessful experiences had several things in common: they were all considerably older than their peers (mean age, 43, compared to low 30s), all possessed master's degrees, and all were teaching on a substitute or part-time basis in urban institutions with large multicultural populations. They had chosen teaching after unsuccessful attempts to parlay their previous graduate degrees into successful careers.

The three undergraduate women were nonassertive and shy; all failed to meet their energetic cooperating teachers' expectations in the classroom. One of them, who came to the university as a freshman, was an excellent student; the two transferees proved to be marginal students. The three graduate students had difficulties with interpersonal communication although they all possessed strong academic records on paper.

### **Contextual Conditions and Collective Circumstances at a Large, Regional Public University**

Circumstances and problems precipitating and leading directly to the "failure" of student teachers at the large, regional public university were primarily classroom-based. These problems were similar to those that teacher educators perceive most preservice teachers experience: classroom management (most frequently cited), communication issues, organizational difficulties, and, for a few individuals, family and personal dilemmas.

For example, Kenneth, 30 years-old at entry to the program, was rated *moderately highly* by interviewing faculty members prior to admittance. While the interviewers recognized his varied experiences and interest in children, one of them noted that his *verbal efforts were not too effective* and

rated him *low* on verbal communication. The letters of recommendation pointed to a potentially good teacher, one letter even suggested that *his personality was his outstanding feature*. Another letter, however, was more cautious: *While Kenneth involves himself in classroom discussion, he seemed only to communicate well on a one to one basis*. On entry to the program he maintained B grades, slightly below the mean for his peers in the program. There were no other major pointers to his difficulties mentioned in the records, except that he worked in the evenings and planned to do so through student teaching.

Kenneth rated low on all criteria for formal and informal evaluations of his performance in the classroom. Enthusiasm was not evident in his teaching and no testing or reviewing ever took place in his classroom. He seemed afraid to engage students. In addition, he was unable to manage the class and completely misinterpreted his own lack of progress. Considering his very few successful lessons as the norm, he thought *he was doing fine*. Kenneth's case illustrates the interrelatedness of the problems, of which an inability to effectively communicate with groups of students was central.

Robert, a successful 38 year-old salesman and father of six children, displayed well-developed interpersonal skills when he had a captive audience. When unruly students no longer paid attention to his enthusiastic renderings of great literature and his professorial-like pontifications, he retreated from them and displayed all the characteristics of a person with very low self-esteem and an inability to communicate. In effect, he became inarticulate.

Another factor pervasive in the records was lack of lesson preparation, evidenced by the unrealistic expectations most of the prospective teachers had about classroom teaching. Almost all the cooperating teachers and university evaluator reports had comments like the following: *naive about teaching, poor preparation, disorganized, poor classroom control*. In many cases the pressure of working another job (in one case, two jobs) in addition to family responsibilities proved too great. Most preservice teachers clearly did not anticipate the lengthy period of daily and weekly preparation required to teach large groups of students. Having made little preparation for lessons in advance, the prospective teachers were, in effect, *flying by the seat of their pants*, and impromptu performances quickly

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led to serious breakdowns in classroom management.

Several of the older preservice teachers had serious difficulties with the school contexts in which they were placed. This was especially so among the men who thought they were entering teaching *to save the kids and the world*. For example, Mike, an experienced writer and sometime columnist, had serious difficulties with the philosophy of the cooperating teacher and of the school. He made efforts to contradict some of the stated perspectives of the cooperating teacher and subversively thwart her actions, thinking that he was doing the *morally correct thing*. While this was an extreme case, serious discontinuities between cooperating teachers and preservice teachers may have put the prospective new teachers at serious disadvantages which went uncorrected.

### ***At a Mid-Sized Private University***

The cases of the younger, unsuccessful preservice teachers were similar. Female elementary education majors with shy or retiring personalities, they were all at risk of "failing" because they were unable to assert themselves in their classrooms. While most preservice teachers adapt and persevere in their placements, these three were unable to adjust to their classroom situations and meet stringent teacher expectations. All had cooperating teachers whom other professionals saw as excellent practitioners and teacher role models. However, these cooperating teachers did not view these preservice teachers as *teacher material* and did not mentor them. These young women needed nurturing mentors, different grade level placements, and alternative school settings to ultimately succeed in student teaching.

The university supervisor removed Marisela from her initial urban placement after several unsatisfactory evaluations. A petite Asian-American, and a graduate of private parochial education, Marisela had a vision of schooling very different from the circumstances in which she was placed to student teach. Her lack of understanding of the urban school culture and the personal, social and academic needs of worldly-wise fifth graders in a local public school overwhelmed her. She was unable to assert herself, take control of the classroom or interpret content knowledge for these students. Marisela's cooperating teacher believed

that a competent student teacher should be able to teach *any* elementary group of students at *any* grade level and did not go out of her way to assist her. Marisela failed miserably.

In a second, suburban placement with much younger conforming first graders who reminded her of own schooling experiences, Marisela thrived. She delighted both her students and her cooperating teacher with her creativity and competence in designing multiple hands-on and story-telling activities. This cooperating teacher described Marisela as *one of the best student teachers* she had ever supervised. For Marisela, multiple placements spelled success.

All three of the graduate preservice teachers were stunned by evaluations of their inadequacies in their practica. Because they had all recently taught as substitute teachers or a part-time instructors they thought that teaching was something that they both knew how to do and could do. That they all possessed master's degrees and had not been able to attain employment in their initial areas of expertise suggests that they turned to teaching after exhausting other possibilities. As mid-life career changers they were in the precarious position of needing to succeed and struggling to change deeply ingrained interpersonal and behavioral characteristics neither sufficient nor desirable in a permanent teacher.

Dianah, for example, was admitted to the graduate program for teacher certification based on her academic record and three letters of recommendation. Once in the program, she displayed interpersonal skills best described as abrasive and manipulative. She did not trust the criteria by which preservice teachers were certified to be in her best interests and regularly sought to have rules bent for her purposes. Her *pushy posture created ripples wherever she went*.

Dianah's student teaching placement was split between a vocational and an alternative school in a secondary urban setting. At her request, she was placed in two specific classrooms, one of which had a job opening. Although her university supervising teacher wrote a great deal about Dianah's *need to actively work with groups and with students on specific practical applications*, Dianah persisted in tutoring one-on-one and writing generalized lesson plans that *lacked specific objectives, activities and developmental sequence*.

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Frustrated with Dianah's lack of responsiveness to specific suggestions for improvement and by the lack of input from her cooperating teachers who appeared to yield to Dianah, the university supervisor extended the practicum until Dianah mastered and demonstrated appropriate skills. At the conclusion of the practicum, Dianah's cooperating teachers deemed her teaching *satisfactory* and recommended that she receive an A, while her university supervisor gave her a B, a grade Dianah bitterly contested. This unpleasant incident suggests that additional criteria, such as interpersonal communication skills and prior educational experiences, may need to be taken into consideration in admitting and mentoring some mid-career candidates for initial teacher certification.

### Summary and Conclusions

Age and gender distinction appear relevant in the "failed" student teachers at the two institutions. Older male elementary and secondary preservice teachers were over represented in the large public institution. At the private institution, the "failed" undergraduate preservice teachers tended to be young women, while "failed" graduate preservice teachers were older individuals making mid-career changes. The student teachers in the smaller institution who at first "failed" were given additional opportunities to successfully complete their practica; all eventually attained certification.

In the larger institution, the students in this study had evidently lower overall GPAs than those of their cohorts; their low results on standardized tests were indicative of potential problems. In both settings, poor interpersonal skills, inability to respond adequately to pupils' needs, weak interpretation of content, and inadequate planning and organizational skills were cited in the records of many of these preservice teachers. Cooperating teachers and university supervisors both saw poor classroom management as the obvious weakness.

The records did not address substantially the contextual circumstances in which these "failed" student teachers found themselves. The records suggested that many were poorly placed in their initial grade level placements and school settings. The placements were often very different from those which the individuals expected. Preservice teachers' internalized visions of class-

rooms, based on prior experiences and the programmatic emphases and experiences immediately prior to the period of practice, often did not constructively match classroom realities and tasks.

Mismatches with school placements indicated by serious and dysfunctional difficulties and conflicts associated with cooperating teachers' styles, methods, and philosophies, proved fatal to some preservice teachers. Weak or even negative interactions between preservice teachers and students affected other individuals. Inappropriate grade level placements, supposedly too high or too low, were problematic for some elementary preservice teachers.

Perhaps the phenomenon of student teacher "failure" can be reduced to mismatch of models among the key players and contexts, that is, between the student teacher and previous school experiences and expectations as they influence internal images of good teaching; the teacher education program; and, the cooperating teacher and school community. None of these factors singly explain "failure" but, taken in context and together, they provide pictures of emerging patterns of the antecedents of "failure": at a personal level, issues and factors are identified through the observation of dispositions and attributes of preservice teachers and the monitoring of their academic performance; at a program level, factors are evident in the results and impact of course work and practicum experiences, and the models presented in preservice teacher preparation; and, at a field placement or school context level, factors are influenced by the settings and styles of the cooperating schools and teachers, including the influences of supervisors and other mentors. Clearly, particular institutions, teacher preparation programs, and placements meet some preservice teachers' needs better than others.

### Rethinking Models of Practice

Others have explored the pitfalls and advantages of student teaching (e.g., Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1986) and have questioned its value and assumptions about its structure. We are unconvinced that it well serves the preparation of all individuals. We noted several cases where the context, duration, focus, and intensity of the experience was most mis-educative. Further, student teaching is traditionally thought of as a capstone experience, a view which needs to be broadened

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and integrated to include other experiences important in the process of learning to teach. To have one's prospective professional success rest on *one* summative experience is not ultimately helpful for the development of exemplary practices.

Notions of prospective teachers being guided by only one cooperating teacher through singular placements could give way to multiple placements over shorter durations and over the entire course of one's preparation program. This seems particularly appropriate in light of the need for teacher trainees to acquire the skills to teach in many different educational contexts and situations. We suggest several other modifications to current teacher preparation practices: more selective admission criteria; more personalized and appropriate career guidance; early remedial activities or direct exit counseling; enhanced, more intensive supervision of student teachers; and more selective placements with cooperating teachers in appropriate contexts (Knowles & Sudzina, 1991; 1992).

From this limited sample, we infer that some older graduate students are more at risk to "fail" student teaching than traditional undergraduate preservice teachers. Thus we suggest that preservice program screening should include not only high academic standards but interpersonal criteria as well. The conventional year-long initial certification program for non-traditional prospective teachers is inadequate for some of them who would benefit from multiple field placement experiences prior to student teaching to assist in understanding the culture of schools as well as the intellectual and social needs of school-aged children. This is especially critical for mid-career changers, many of whom have not been in elementary or secondary classrooms for more than a decade. Closer supervision, early and intensive opportunities for remediation and counseling, and appropriate grade level settings and placements are critical for preservice teachers who are potentially weak performers. Allowing individuals to fail because of professional negligence in offering support, supervision and compatible school placements is unethical.

Finally, the scant attention to the matter of "failure" in the research literature verifies the need for more research on the matter. In particular, the profession needs understandings about the antecedents of "failure," and ways to remedy the various

situations. This particular study has been productive and has provided translucent windows to our own practices, but we have barely scratched the surface.

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