To Avoid or Grapple with Tensions? Preservice Teachers Learning to Teach Literacy for Social Justice

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TO AVOID OR GRAPPLE WITH TENSIONS?

Student teaching has long been recognized as both the most impactful and the most fraught aspect of preservice teachers’ (PSTs’) preparation (Clift & Brady, 2005). Learning to teach in a cooperating teacher’s (CT’s) classroom, where personal and pedagogical differences are often at play, is frequently challenging – and sometimes contentious (Valencia et al., 2009). Within student teaching, learning to teach literacy for social justice in urban, high-poverty schools contributes additional layers of complexity due to the multifaceted nature of literacy and the restrictive policies around elementary literacy instruction that tend to be more prevalent in urban, high-poverty schools serving minoritized youth (Milner, 2013). Yet, little is currently known about the process of learning to teach literacy to minoritized youth and how various contextual factors at play during student teaching – such as the policy conditions in classrooms, university coursework, teacher educators, and so forth – interact to shape PSTs’ learning in urban, high-poverty schools (Anderson & Stillman, 2013b). Similarly, relatively little is known about how teacher educators can optimally facilitate PSTs’ learning in these contexts.

In this nested case study of three PSTs enrolled in a social justice-oriented teacher education program (TEP), I explored how interacting personal and environmental factors shaped their learning about literacy teaching while student teaching in urban, high-poverty schools. Despite many similar experiences and contexts, PSTs left student teaching with different learnings based on the unique interplay of specific factors within their placements. Findings suggest that when PSTs avoided tensions between the TEP and student teaching placements – as opposed to grappling with them – their learning toward TEP goals was constrained.

**Literature Review**

Limited research currently exists that explores how various factors shape the development of PSTs’ literacy instruction for minoritized youth in the context of urban, high-
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poverty schools. Studies on teachers’ development of literacy pedagogy often are not situated in urban, high-poverty schools (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Smagorinsky et al., 2013; Valencia et al., 2009), while research on learning to teach in and for urban, high-poverty schools often is not focused on literacy (Anderson & Stillman, 2011; Picower, 2011; Stillman & Anderson, 2016). Given the importance of context in learning to teach literacy (Smagorinsky, 2018) and the contextual features that tend to be more prominent in urban, high-poverty schools than other settings (e.g., scripted curriculum, excessive test preparation), it is imperative to explore PSTs’ learning around literacy teaching in these contexts.

Studies that do focus on PSTs learning to teach literacy in urban, high-poverty schools demonstrate the nuance, complexity, and tensions involved in facilitating PST learning and call for additional research that further explores these topics in order to inform literacy teacher education (Ahmed, 2019, 2020; Behizadeh et al., 2021; Lazar, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2020). For example, Lazar (2018) found that there was wide variation amongst PSTs in terms of the university-promoted literacy pedagogical practices they observed and enacted in their practicum placements, with notably few reported instances of observing culturally responsive teaching. Relatedly, Behizadeh et al. (2021) explored opportunities and constraints surrounding one PST’s enactment of critical pedagogy while student teaching in an urban middle school and found that scripted curriculum and the PST’s mentor teacher acted as barriers to enacting critical pedagogy, noting also that the literacy methods course fell short of providing sufficient contextualized examples to serve as models of critical pedagogy. Rodriguez et al. (2020) also found “missed opportunities” within literacy methods courses where assignments intended to support social justice literacy teaching, as PSTs did not evidence robust social justice practices on these
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assessments. Clearly, there is room for improvement in literacy teacher education for social justice in urban, high-poverty schools.

Many scholars call for targeted teacher educator mediation in support of PSTs’ learning to teach literacy in the complex settings of urban, high-poverty schools serving minoritized youth (Ahmed, 2019, 2020; Anderson & Stillman, 2013a; Lazar, 2018; Stillman & Anderson, 2016). Specifically, studies show the importance of teacher educator mediation that meets the unique needs of individual PSTs and their contexts (Ahmed, 2020; Stillman & Anderson, 2016). The complexity involved in learning to teach literacy and the contextual factors found in urban, high-poverty schools serving minoritized youth require more research that unpacks how and why various factors shape PSTs’ learning and how teacher educators can optimally facilitate PSTs’ learning as they aim to teach literacy for social justice and equity in culturally responsive and sustaining ways (Anderson & Stillman, 2013b).

As such, given the importance of literacy learning, the history of inadequate literacy instruction for minoritized youth, and the specific contextual factors often found in urban, high-poverty schools, I investigated the development of PSTs’ perspectives on literacy teaching and learning and the development of their literacy instructional practice while enrolled in a social justice-oriented TEP and student teaching in urban, high-poverty schools. Here, I report on the following research questions that examined the various influences on PSTs’ development:

1) What factors mediate the development of PSTs’ literacy perspectives and instructional practice during student teaching, and in what ways?

2) How did PSTs’ approaches to tensions during student teaching impact their development of literacy perspectives and instructional practice?

Theoretical Framework
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Several prominent literature reviews over the past twenty-plus years have argued for taking a holistic, ecological approach to studying PSTs’ learning given the impact environments, people, and interactions among contextual features play in learning to teach (Anderson & Stillman, 2013b; Clift & Brady, 2005; Roth & Lee, 2007; Wideen et al., 1998). Since I investigated factors that mediated PSTs’ learning about literacy over time and across contexts, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) – part of the family of social, cultural, and historical learning theories that emphasize the importance of context and culture in learning – anchored this project. CHAT uses “activity systems” as its unit of analysis, which highlight the mutually constitutive relationship of learners and environmental elements; often, learners are situated within interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001), as shown for this study in Figure 1. In activity systems, the learners, or “subjects,” are in dialectical relationships with environmental factors such as the rules or norms of a setting, other community members, the division of labor amongst community members, and mediating artifacts – or tools used to regulate behavior. The “object” is conceived as the overarching purpose of learning and activity (Engeström, 1999).

In this study, PSTs were learners situated within (and straddling between) the interacting activity systems of their social justice-oriented TEP and their student teaching placements in urban, high-poverty schools. Community members from the TEP included teacher educators and peers, while those from student teaching included CTs and elementary students. TEP-based mediating artifacts involved course texts and assignments; mediating artifacts from student teaching included literacy curriculum and classroom texts. The TEP’s object was for PSTs to teach literacy in social justice-oriented, sociocultural, and culturally responsive ways; the object of PSTs’ student teaching placements was to become acculturated into the schools’ instructional practices. As these two objects were often at odds, a mutually formed third object was not
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negotiated, as discussed in more detail subsequently. Rather, outcomes varied based on the unique interplay between PSTs and their environments – and specifically, on how these interacting contextual factors led PSTs either to grapple with or avoid activity system tensions.

**Figure 1.** Visual representation of PSTs’ interacting activity systems, based on the diagram introduced by Engeström (2001, p. 136).

From a CHAT perspective, contradictions and tensions are expected and inherent within and between activity systems; in fact, “equilibrium is an exception” (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 8). Not only are tensions existent, but also are considered catalysts for learning and innovation (Engeström, 2001). Though myriad tensions often exist in the context of student teaching, they are not always optimized for PSTs’ learning (Ahmed, 2020; Valencia et al., 2009). Findings from this study suggest that when PSTs in similar situations approached tensions differently, those that avoided tensions between activity systems missed opportunities for expansive learning.

**Methodology**

To investigate factors mediating PSTs’ learning, I conducted a qualitative nested case study (Stake, 1995) of three PSTs enrolled in the same social justice-oriented TEP over one academic year: Emily, Megan, and Molly (all names of people and places are pseudonyms).
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Study Context

This study took place in an urban metropolis in the western United States. The two-year Master’s degree TEP at the University of the West Coast (UWC) had a social justice orientation, explicitly aiming to prepare teachers to teach for social justice and equity in “low-income, urban schools” (TEP Handbook). TEP curriculum included specialized courses on teaching in urban schools, focusing on structural dimensions of inequity and teacher activism (TEP Handbook). The two literacy-specific courses – Elementary Literacy Methods and Critical Media Literacy – reflected others in the program as they promoted sociocultural, culturally responsive, and critical teaching approaches (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). For example, literacy courses emphasized having students work collaboratively, utilizing texts reflecting a range of identities, and questioning the content and creation of texts.

As part of the TEP’s social justice mission, PSTs student taught in urban, high-poverty schools serving minoritized youth. For their first student teaching placements, participants taught in Central City Unified School District (CCUSD), with Megan and Molly at the same school. For their second placements, Megan taught in another CCUSD school, while Emily and Molly student taught in the same school in a neighboring urban district, Southern City Unified School District (SCUSC). Some features of their placements were the same, such as the adherence to a scripted literacy program in their first placements, while other aspects varied, such as classrooms consisting of beginning emergent bilingual or English-only students. Table 1 shows demographic features of PSTs’ placement schools.
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Table 1

Summary of Demographic Information* of Participants’ Student Teaching Placements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and District</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Groups</th>
<th>English Learners</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged Students</th>
<th>Standardized State Exams Passing Rates</th>
<th>PSTs’ Placements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Downtown Elementary CCUSD</td>
<td>96% Latino</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>46% ELA 51% Math</td>
<td>Molly: 1st Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humboldt Street Elementary CCUSD</td>
<td>100% Latino</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>39% ELA 58% Math</td>
<td>Emily: 2nd Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knox Avenue Elementary SCUSD</td>
<td>75% Latino 22% African American</td>
<td>25% 81%</td>
<td></td>
<td>72% ELA 87% Math</td>
<td>Molly: 4th Grade  Emily: 5th Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noreste Middle School, CCUSD</td>
<td>92% Latino 5% Asian</td>
<td>30% 75%</td>
<td></td>
<td>41% ELA 46% Math</td>
<td>Megan: 6th Grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This table utilizes terminology used by the school systems.

Participants

Emily, Megan, and Molly were monolingual white women in their early twenties who grew up in upper middle- or upper-class suburban neighborhoods. In these ways, they demographically reflected the majority of elementary teacher candidates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Despite demographic similarities, they came to UWC’s TEP from different personal, educational, and work histories. Emily grew up loving reading and writing and pursued this passion during and after college as an English major and magazine editor. Emily advocated for LGBTQ rights and prided herself on analyzing everything critically. Megan, a self-described “perfectionist,” grew up in a wealthy community, though her family’s financial
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situation changed abruptly when her father died. She worked full-time to put herself through community college before transferring to UWC to study anthropology. Molly “always wanted to be a teacher,” and reminisced about teaching her dolls as a child. Molly loved all things Disney and studied English and education at UWC for her undergraduate degree.

Teacher Educators

The two university-based teacher educators charged with facilitating PSTs’ literacy and field-based learning were Jessica and Tim, in their ninth and seventh years at the TEP, respectively. Jessica taught the Elementary Literacy Methods course. She wrestled with the disconnect between TEP-promoted literacy pedagogy and instruction in elementary classrooms in surrounding districts, saying, “I feel tremendous responsibility to talk…about what they’re seeing in the field, but then I feel like what I do is just tell them that what they’re seeing…is not good for kids.” Tim taught the Critical Media Literacy course and served as participants’ faculty advisor, supervising student teaching and facilitating the Student Teaching Seminar. Tim loved UWC’s TEP, though he struggled with wanting to push PSTs more while remaining supportive. Participants’ CTs, classroom-based teacher educators, had been teaching between eleven and twenty-seven years; all had supervised student teachers before and had spent their careers in one urban district. Most of them closely followed district policies surrounding literacy instruction.

Researcher Positionality

I was not affiliated with UWC or its TEP beyond this investigation. I therefore did not evaluate PSTs, though I provided support when requested. I am an upper middle-class white woman and former elementary teacher who is committed to equity and social justice. As such, I had some similarities with PSTs, which likely helped me empathize with their learning process.

Data Collection
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Case study data sources included interviews, observations, and documents, collected over time and across contexts (Stake, 1995). I conducted three 60-120-minute, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants in the fall, winter, and spring to capture change (or lack thereof) over time. To further inform and triangulate self-reported data, I conducted 60-90-minute interviews with eight teacher educators: Jessica, Tim, and each participant’s two CTs.

Observations occurred within the TEP and in PSTs’ student teaching placements. I observed the weekly class meetings of the TEP Elementary Literacy Methods, Critical Media Literacy, and Student Teaching Seminar courses. In the field, I observed PSTs teach 3-5 literacy lessons in each of their two student teaching placements; most lessons were 45 minutes. Relevant documents included syllabi, PowerPoint presentations, and class handouts. I collected PSTs’ course assignments, student teaching lesson plans, their edTPAs, and culminating TEP portfolios. To gain perspective on the TEP more broadly, I analyzed its website and handbook.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I utilized the “constant comparative method” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), an ongoing, iterative process involving several coding cycles. First, I imported deductive codes from CHAT. For example, I coded for data relating to learners, or PSTs and their personal experiences; data referring to mediating artifacts in the TEP and classrooms, such as lesson plan templates and mandated curriculum; data addressing community members, such as TEP instructors and CTs; and so forth. Second, I engaged in inductive “open coding” within these macro codes to allow patterns to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Next, I combined, eliminated, and reorganized initial codes to increase clarity both across and within individual codes. For example, there was considerable overlap between my initial inductive codes of connections, funds of knowledge, prior knowledge, and relevance related to teaching perspectives; I later
combined these codes into one code, *relevance-connections*. Throughout coding, I wrote analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013) to support sensemaking and theme identification.

**Findings**

Considering findings from a CHAT perspective afforded the opportunity to uncover the unique interplay between personal and environmental factors during student teaching. I highlight findings that demonstrate how and why PSTs – oftentimes in very similar situations – had discrepant learning outcomes. Additionally, circumventing activity system tensions led to missed opportunities for expansive learning.

**Divergent Responses to Policy Mandates Lead to Generative Tensions (or Not)**

The policy-based mediating artifacts of a mandated literacy curriculum, MacMillan/McGraw-Hill’s *Treasures* (2011), and a teaching performance assessment required for certification, edTPA, were important factors in PSTs’ first student teaching placements. Due to conflicting instructional approaches, *Treasures* prevented PSTs from enacting much of their university-based learning, while edTPA increased PSTs’ stress and workload. Even though PSTs shared similar perspectives on these mediating artifacts, they responded to them differently based on other activity system factors, leading to divergent learning opportunities.

PSTs were critical of *Treasures*. They predominantly complained about the anthology texts, which were the cornerstone of each week’s literacy instruction. Megan mentioned the texts were often irrelevant to students, commenting, “*Treasures*…can…be so boring. It is really cool when stories…talk about something with which the students can relate, but that doesn’t happen every week.” While Megan saw potential in some texts, Molly and Emily were wholeheartedly critical. Molly shared, “[The students] hate those anthology stories, they’re miserable,” while Emily said, “[S]ome of [the stories] are ridiculous…and boring, and the kids hate them.” In line
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with these complaints, PSTs desired to use different texts to teach the content. They shared: “[I]t would be easy to look at those lessons on teaching certain concepts and use an outside reading book” (Megan), and, “[You can] hit every single standard… [using] a different book” (Emily), and “I want to…find really cool books that [students will] find interesting and engaging…[and] use that to teach the same standards” (Molly). The notions of disliking Treasures and wanting to teach different texts were prevalent across interactions with PSTs.

PSTs’ similar perspectives on Treasures and ideas for changes likely reflected their similar experiences in the TEP. In the Literacy Methods course, Jessica often talked about how Treasures did not meet all students’ needs. In one class, for example, she asked, “What to do when you have Treasures…and your learners aren’t ready to read the grade-level text?... How can you scaffold their reading…?” Throughout the course, Jessica emphasized the power of “a great book” and culturally responsive texts. Jessica also modeled how to incorporate additional literacy instruction, like read alouds, into a Treasures-based classroom (Ahmed, 2019).

Given their shared experiences and similar perspectives, it would be understandable to predict that all participants would deviate from Treasures if given the opportunity. However, only Emily and Molly taught outside Treasures during their first placements, when they were teaching the three required lessons for edTPA. In line with their stated perspectives and ideas, they brought in different books to teach the standards from Treasures, utilizing edTPA as an “excuse” to negotiate with their CTs about how they wanted to teach those lessons, thus altering their placements’ rules and division of labor (Ahmed, 2023). However, Megan did not leverage edTPA in this way, despite expressing similar desires and ideas about teaching literacy.

Though many conditions were similar, CHAT supported seeing how the unique interplay between activity system components led Megan to make different decisions. First, Megan
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identified herself as a “rule follower” who “like[s] to do things by the book,” so her personal
tendencies likely played a role in her decision-making. Second, Megan greatly revered her CT,
saying, “Mrs. Davis was the perfect [cooperating] teacher for me…I don’t think I could have
asked for a better first teaching experience,” which likely also contributed to not wanting to
disrupt her classroom norms (Ahmed, 2020). Third, Megan was somewhat less critical of
*Treasures* than Emily and Molly, likely due in part to her CT’s relatively positive perspective on
*Treasures*. Megan’s individual tendencies and her strong CT bond were mediating factors that
interacted with edTPA and *Treasures*, leading to a different outcome.

Emily and Molly’s decision to teach outside of *Treasures* for their edTPA lessons also
reflected the interaction of multiple activity system components. As mentioned, Emily prided
herself on her criticality and love of literature. She was the most incensed about the literature in
*Treasures*, as she had envisioned herself sharing her love of reading with students. Emily’s
relationship with her CT was cordial, and Emily considered both positive and negative aspects of
apprenticing with her, reflecting, “She’s the best and worst [cooperating] teacher I’ve ever had
because she’s my only [cooperating] teacher.” Emily’s passion for literature and her more neutral
relationship with her CT likely contributed to her attempting to teach in more TEP-promoted
ways, taking advantage of abandoning the *Treasures* script when the opportunity arose.

Molly felt the most unsatisfied in her first placement. Molly was disappointed that she
did not “click” with her CT, sharing, “I’m very warm and fuzzy and she’s…distant and very
stern.” She was more upset by her CT’s lack of professional support. Molly said she would either
receive cursory or no feedback on her lessons; she was very frustrated by the minimal feedback
and by *Treasures*. It was unsurprising, then, that Molly felt relieved that she could use edTPA to
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circumvent her CT’s established classroom rules and division of labor by taking more initiative over the format and content of those lessons.

The unique interplay of activity system components led to notably different outcomes for PSTs in their first student-teaching placements where scripted curriculum dominated literacy instruction. While Emily and Molly had some – albeit limited – opportunity to practice enacting TEP-promoted literacy pedagogy that aligned with their perspectives (Ahmed, 2023), Megan had none. Megan, therefore, moved closer to CCUSD’s object of becoming enculturated into existing pedagogical practices, thereby perpetuating the status quo. Though Emily and Molly’s experience teaching outside *Treasures* was brief, they began to see what it might look like to teach in ways that aligned with their perspectives and TEP-promoted pedagogy.

Emily and Molly’s willingness to change the norms of their placement classrooms and shift the division of labor led to activity system disruptions. These tensions have the potential to lead to expansive learning within activity systems (Engeström, 2001), as was the case with Emily and Molly having an opportunity to engage in literacy instruction that was more aligned with their perspectives and TEP-promoted pedagogy. According to activity theory, tensions lead to learning and growth (Engeström, 2001), so when Megan continued to follow the “rules” and division of labor in her CT’s classroom and not take advantage of the potential afforded by the mediating artifact of edTPA, her learning and growth was not expanded.

**Conflicting Reactions to School Practices: Seeing Tensions (or Not)**

Participants also evidenced different reactions to school practices, again despite having similar experiences. One notable instance where this occurred was between Emily and Molly’s reactions to a school’s tracking practices. For their second student-teaching placements, Emily and Molly were in the same school; both were in “accelerated track” upper elementary
classrooms. Their CTs voiced commitments to equity and neither utilized the district-mandated literacy program. Both PSTs had more opportunities to teach in TEP-promoted ways in these placements. Despite their similar placements, Emily and Molly left with different conclusions.

Emily was outraged by the school’s tracking policies. She noticed her students received special privileges while children in “underachieving” classes had “kids punching each other” and teachers who “screamed.” She lamented, “[T]he way that grouping is done is devastating.” Molly, however, revealed a different perspective. During a whole-class conversation in Tim’s Critical Media Literacy course, another student teacher in the school spoke about how, in her “intervention” class, “everything is copied” from the teacher; “there’s no sense of [students] having a voice.” When a peer asked if the school engaged in tracking, the PST responded, “Yes,” angrily adding, “If you ask me, it’s really f’ed up.” To this, Molly retorted, somewhat defensively, “But hey, it works for the GATE [gifted and talented] kids.” Several peers gave Molly confused glances, and I noticed someone roll their eyes; others ignored her and continued discussing the inequities. Throughout this conversation, most of the PSTs, along with Tim, expressed sadness and outrage about the school’s tracking; no one echoed Molly’s sentiments.

Given their exposure to the same anti-tracking content in the TEP and very similarly situated student teaching placements, why did Emily and Molly come to such different conclusions?

Viewing their experiences through a CHAT lens draws attention to the unique interplay between various activity system components. Emily’s views aligned with the TEP’s “anti-tracking” philosophy based on the inequitable learning opportunities tracking perpetuates for low-income students of color, especially (Oakes, 2005). Emily appeared to be influenced by the TEP’s teachings as well as her self-identified tendency to be “critical of everything.” When she saw her students receiving special privileges, for instance, she questioned why and concluded
that her students were no more deserving than others. Critical questioning and reflecting came naturally to Emily, leading her to take a measured and nuanced view of her learning experiences and the pedagogical practices across her student teaching placements.

Molly, meanwhile, left her first student teaching placement feeling demoralized. She was disappointed that she never bonded with her first CT and was very frustrated with the literacy instruction, saying she only “learned what not to do.” Molly’s second placement, with a strong, equity-oriented CT and opportunities to teach literacy in TEP-promoted ways, made her feel “reinvigorated” about teaching. The disparity between her two placements likely contributed to Molly wanting to focus on the positive aspects of her second placement, even though a pro-tracking stance went against the TEP’s teachings. Additionally, Molly tended to be “less critically inclined” (per Tim), so her personality also played a role in her binary perspectives on her student teaching placements and, in turn, her positive interpretation of the second placement’s tracking practices. Many aspects of Emily and Molly’s interacting activity systems were very similar, yet the unique interaction of activity system components, particularly different ways Emily and Molly approached tensions while student teaching, led to divergent outcomes.

**Discussion**

Emily, Megan, and Molly had many similar experiences while learning to teach literacy. They attended the same social justice-oriented TEP, taking the same courses. They student taught in the same urban, high-poverty districts, sometimes in the same school. These similar contexts led to some similar outcomes, such as their perspectives on mandated curriculum. Yet, despite many contextual similarities, PSTs’ perspectives and instruction diverged uniquely.

On the one hand, it is unsurprising that different people have different experiences in the same places. Indeed, CHAT emphasizes that individuals’ unique life histories shape the contexts
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in which they are situated and influence how contexts impact them (Engeström, 2001). On the other hand, when considering PSTs’ field-based learning, this individuality is oftentimes overlooked. Much research – and programmatic effort – centers on what makes a school a good place to learn (Cooper & Nesmith, 2013; Ronfeldt, 2012, 2015) or what makes a CT a good mentor (Clarke et al., 2014; Hoffman et al., 2015; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). Fewer studies focus on the fit between PSTs and CTs or schools and the implications on individual PSTs’ learning, including PSTs’ learning across placements (Ahmed, 2020; Anderson & Stillman, 2011; Stillman & Anderson, 2016). This study’s findings reinforce the crucial nature of considering individuals when intentionally mediating PSTs’ field-based learning.

Student teaching is often rife with contradictions, and Emily, Megan, and Molly’s experiences were no different. Scholars have long addressed student teaching tensions, with some positing that they can be productive for PST learning, particularly if mediated effectively by teacher educators (Ahmed, 2020; Stillman & Anderson, 2016). Indeed, a CHAT lens focuses on how learning is generated by tensions within and between activity systems (Engeström, 2001); this is how new cultural tools are developed and how learners appropriate existing cultural tools, adapting and modifying them to make them their own (Wertsch, 1991).

In the data presented here, Megan, in her first placement, and Molly, in her second, avoided potentially generative tensions while student teaching, thereby constraining their opportunities for expansive learning towards the TEP object. When Megan chose to follow the scripted curriculum for her edTPA lessons, she maintained the status quo in her CT’s classroom and avoided potential tensions that might have disrupted the classroom norms and paved the way for different learning opportunities. Thus, Megan’s learning toward TEP goals and her own perspectives on quality literacy instruction was constrained. Given these conditions, a literacy
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teacher educator might consider how to re-mediate the interacting activity systems to further Megan’s learning toward the TEP object – or, towards a mutually negotiated third object.

One potentially generative entry point might have been to intentionally introduce a mediating artifact in the form of a TEP assignment to complete during student teaching. For instance, an assignment for a literacy methods course could be to create lesson and/or unit plans that requires integrating aspects of the mandated curriculum with pedagogical principles learned in the TEP. The planning of these lessons would necessitate PSTs grappling with the inherent tensions between scripted curriculum and TEP-promoted sociocultural and critical literacy pedagogy, likely making some concessions and compromises throughout the process. A teacher educator could support PSTs with this assignment in multiple ways, such as by modeling creating their own plans (Ahmed, 2019), providing opportunities to workshop their ideas in class, and giving feedback on PSTs’ plans. The assignment could also include teaching one or more of the lessons and reflecting on the experience, providing PSTs with the opportunity to practice enacting hybrid lessons that included elements of the mandated curriculum and TEP-promoted literacy pedagogy. A teacher educator could also support PSTs’ post-teaching reflections and provide feedback on the lesson if able to observe or watch it on video.

This type of assignment would be introducing a potentially productive tension (Stillman, 2011) into the activity systems, leading to not only expansive learning for PSTs but also the collective involved in student teaching. For instance, planning and teaching hybrid lessons would disrupt classroom norms around literacy teaching as PSTs shifted from adhering to the curriculum’s script, which would also alter the division of labor between PSTs and CTs as the planning process changed. This could open new learning possibilities for community members, such as elementary students who would engage with a different type of literacy instruction and
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CTs who might see new teaching possibilities. Bringing PSTs’ reflections back to the TEP has the potential to shape and re-shape other PSTs’ learning, as they hear from peers about their experiences while a teacher educator facilitates discussions. This assignment would also likely have been beneficial for Emily and Molly. While they gained some practice enacting TEP-promoted literacy pedagogy, they bypassed the potentially productive tension (Stillman, 2011) of attempting to reconcile Treasures and TEP-promoted literacy pedagogy by simply ignoring Treasures. They likely would not be able to do this regularly as full-time teachers, so leaning into the tension of adapting the scripted curriculum would have likely furthered their learning.

Also consider Molly and her statement supporting tracking, which is problematic from the perspective of the social justice-oriented TEP. Her positive view about tracking was shaped by several activity system components and their interactions across her placements, particularly how she conceived of her first placement in almost exclusively negative terms and her second placement very positively. To challenge Molly’s conclusion about tracking, one option might include re-mediation of the settings where she was learning to teach by providing counterevidence to her claim. Specifically, if Molly were able to have a subsequent placement in a classroom committed to flexible, heterogeneous grouping where she could observe its advantages for all students (including but not limited to those labeled “gifted”), she may have formed a different opinion about tracking that was more in line with TEP-promoted, and research-supported, notions about tracking’s inequities (Oakes, 2005).

If another placement was not possible for Molly, teacher educators could mediate and challenge her assumption about tracking’s benefits in other ways. For example, a teacher educator could design an assignment that necessitated grouping students heterogeneously for a series of literacy lessons, so even within the “accelerated” class, Molly could see that all students
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have strengths and areas for growth, and grouping students heterogeneously allows students to support one another. Again, this type of assignment would likely be supportive to many PSTs who might only see homogenous groupings in their placements. Providing class time to reflect on the lessons and groupings, facilitated by a teacher educator, would also likely be beneficial.

Lastly, a teacher educator might leverage the activity system community. This began to occur in Tim’s class when Molly made the comment; other PSTs continued talking about inequities in the school’s tracking practices, providing different, evidence-based opinions that challenged Molly’s claim. Perhaps in the moment, Tim could have asked questions that supported PSTs’ reflections, such as asking PSTs in heterogeneously grouped classes to share their experiences, or asking the group to reflect on Molly’s statement. He might have said, for instance, “Let’s say tracking does ‘work’ for students labeled ‘gifted.’ Is it still a practice you’d put in place? Why or why not?” Or, “How can we make heterogeneous grouping work in classrooms?” He could have prompted PSTs to recall research they had read demonstrating not only the inequity of tracking but also the lack of benefits for “high-achieving” students (Oakes, 2005), again introducing a counterpoint to Molly’s claim while relying on the PST community to engage with these notions. In these ways, a teacher educator could have intentionally introduced tensions to Molly’s conclusion – through changing the setting, introducing a new mediating artifact, and/or leveraging community members – which may have expanded Molly’s learning.

Conclusion

Facilitating PSTs’ learning about literacy teaching during student teaching is a complex endeavor. Using a CHAT lens to think about expanding PSTs’ learning can be helpful because it accounts for complexity and is focused on collective learning and taking action towards new learning. From a CHAT perspective, tensions generate new learning; findings from this study
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suggest that when PSTs avoided student-teaching tensions, their learning was constrained. As such, implications from this study include the potential power of teacher educators intentionally and strategically re-mediating the activity systems to expand PSTs’ learning, potentially introducing new, generative tensions and supporting PSTs to grapple with them productively.

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