

Finding a Manageable Body of Content: Seven Literacy Teacher Educators Explore the Constraints on What They Teach

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Teacher educators are engaged in a perpetual quest to squeeze as much as possible into preparation of new classroom literacy teachers. In response to increasing demands for preparing future teachers for modern classrooms, seven teacher educators tackled the question of what constitutes a manageable body of early literacy content in preservice coursework. Through retrospective analysis, they discovered common constraints among their institutions that influence their decision-making about when, what, and how much content to teach. These constraints include teacher educators' beliefs about teaching literacy methods, time and resource management issues, range of students' needs, and influences of local and national educational contexts. The findings are significant because they offer an initial naming of some of the constraints woven into the complex web of literacy instruction coursework that is offered to preservice teachers, which, in turn, will impact the professional development they receive as inservice teachers.

Literacy teacher educators are engaged in a perpetual quest to squeeze as much as possible into teacher preparation, particularly in this time of competing calls to develop knowledge or offer practical experience (Martin, Chase, Cahill, & Gregory, 2011; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006). Considering that dilemma, we, a cadre of teacher educators from colleges in the Northeastern United States, had the opportunity to study what influences our decision-making about what and how much of the declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge needed for effective literacy instruction can reasonably be included in literacy teacher education.

Our independent inquiry began as participants in a study conducted by early literacy instruction researchers Donna Scanlon, Kimberly Anderson, Virginia Goatley, and Lynn Gelzheiser at the Child Research and Study Center, University at Albany, SUNY. These researchers received a development project grant from the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education to transform a successful in-service teacher development program, entitled the *Interactive Strategies Approach* (ISA, Scanlon, Anderson & Sweeney, 2010) for use with pre-service teachers in their first language arts methods course. When we were invited to field test and perhaps modify the sixty hours of intensive early literacy professional development over five semesters, we were intrigued; we agreed, in theory at least, that the multifaceted information our colleagues so generously shared was important for classroom teachers and, thus, could be beneficial to our students.

Project materials included PowerPoint presentations, video clips, printed text, and suggestions for teaching activities and discussion questions. Materials were organized into modules designed so that we could choose the content we believed was most appropriate for our students. For example, most of us drew heavily from the phonological awareness module, followed by the alphabetic principle, strategic word learning, comprehension and general knowledge modules. Additionally, we collaborated with the researchers to prepare data collection forms to document our responses to the self-selected materials.

Our decisions about what, when, and with which materials we taught were totally independent of the researchers and each other. Yet when we tried to incorporate the material into our classes, we found ourselves in vigorous debate about how much of it we could, in fact, include. As we tried to figure out ways to pare our colleagues' rich resources into what one of us called a "manageable body of content," we noted how our discussion revealed many of the

constraints on our work, and that such ideas were largely absent from today's one-sided teacher education critiques.

In the following sections we explain our inquiry, and we describe the constraints we revealed to one another during our project. Finally, we discuss what such insights contribute to still developing notions of what to teach new teachers. (Discussion of the specific content and materials we used is beyond the scope of this paper).

The Current Climate of Our Work

At the dawn of this millennium, Hoffman and Pearson (2000) warned of projected changes to education that would influence literacy teacher education, including rising enrollments, increased proportion of children from poverty and second-language backgrounds, widespread teacher retirements, ongoing struggles with recruitment and retention of a diverse teaching force, and the rapidly evolving digital nature of literacy. They called for new research to develop pre-service teaching to address this changing environment, explaining:

Your grandmother's teacher was prepared to teach in a classroom very much like the one she attended as a student. The plan for preparation was quite straightforward. Your granddaughter's teacher will teach in a classroom quite different from the one she or he attended. There are few assumptions about that classroom of the future that we can use to extract a training model... Change, and rapid change, will characterize the next millennium. (p. 42)

At almost the same time, literacy instruction in U.S. primary grades changed with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, yielding increased emphasis on phonics instruction and fluency (Gamse, Jacob, Horst, Boulay, & Unlu, 2008; USDE, 2002). Researchers reported that new teachers were minimally prepared to provide such instruction effectively, and that school district budgets constrained their ability to bridge new teachers' knowledge gaps (McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999-2000; McGill-Franzen, Lanford & Adams, 2002). The question of what pre-service teachers should be taught was answered with recommendations to teach the scientifically based reading instruction favored by Reading First (Moats & Foorman, 2003; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006). More recent Response to Intervention and Race to the Top initiatives, including tiered differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, value-added teacher evaluation, and Common Core State Standards, have

left literacy teacher educators with added information to include in methods classes (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010; Common Core State Standards, 2010; USDE, 2009; Stumbo & McWalters, 2010).

With adoption of the CCSS (2011), other scholars have encouraged teacher education to develop interactive, responsive pedagogy, using a wide range of teaching strategies that promote comprehension of various text genres. They also recommend that these opportunities should be followed with school district context-specific in-service (Korthegan, 2010; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Creators of the CCSS recognize that meeting these rigorous standards requires teachers who can prepare children for “life in a technological society” (p. 2) where skills in gathering, comprehending, evaluating, synthesizing, and reporting on information and ideas is critical (NY State CCSS for ELA and Literacy. Approved on January 10, 2011, p. 2).

Hoffman and Pearson (2000) noted that, in addition to knowledge and understanding, pre-service teachers must possess attitudes and dispositions for knowledge seeking that enables their continual growth. Korthegan (2010) added that an effective framework for teacher preparation also requires ongoing reflection regarding feelings, values, images, and other factors that stem from pre-service teachers’ personal educational experiences and field placement experiences. “We believe that one of the reasons that program impact is sometimes limited is that the role of gestalt and less rational information processing is often neglected” (Korthegan, 2001, p. 6). Thus, stimulating and guiding pre-service teachers’ thoughtful insight must be balanced with opportunities to acquire knowledge, a cycle that should continue with staff development and mentoring as pre-service teachers become practitioners (Holloway, 2001; Mandel, 2006).

Literature reviews yield contradictory and unsatisfying conclusions about how to do the preceding (Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Pearson, 2001; Risko, Roller, Cummins, Bean, Block, Anders, & Flood, 2008; Roskos, Vukelich, & Risko, 2001). Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) argue that simply increasing the amount of information presented to teacher candidates could be counterproductive because the knowledge needed includes content knowledge of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, knowledge of research-based instructional procedures, and procedural knowledge gained from experience. Reutzel, Dole, Read, Fawson, Herman, and Jones, (2011) explain:

It is one thing for teachers to know *that* their students need to learn about affixes [or any concept such as social justice]. It is something quite different to know *how*

to teach affixes [or social justice] to students. It is still another to know *when* and *where* this skill should be taught to students... Knowledge is a complex interaction among these three categories. (p. 188)

One can only conclude that we want new teachers to know as much as anyone can teach them, but without reaching the point of diminishing returns described by Snow and her colleagues (2005). This gives teacher educators an enormous but ill-defined task. Yet the perspectives of such individuals are largely missing from the discussion.

Our Inquiry

We are a subset of a larger group of literacy teacher educators who participated in the materials development study for five semesters. We joined the group because we were excited about sharing the researchers' professional development materials with each other and our students. All seven of us are white, middle-aged women with doctorates in literacy education, and each of us has many years of teaching experience in schools and higher education. We teach at small and medium-sized public and private institutions of higher education.

The researchers provided us project materials that included PowerPoint presentations, video clips, printed text, and suggestions for teaching activities and discussion questions. Materials were organized into modules designed so that we could choose the materials we believed were the best fit for students in introductory courses at our home universities. The researchers also facilitated our independent inquiry by hosting a research design and data collection meeting, arranging for a transcriber for our meeting recordings, sending us a CD ROM with our semester by semester and end of project survey responses, and including us in a national literacy symposium proposal. It is important to note that while the researchers encouraged this independent inquiry, they did not try to influence its outcome. The purpose of the concurrent host researchers' study was to identify in-service materials that seemed more important than others, materials that everyone could use. Their research reports suggest that we were probably helpful in giving them a sense of how decisions get made about what to include in the teaching of such courses. Moreover, their research suggested that we reached little consensus about what content could be removed from the 60 hours of inservice to fit into less than our 45 hours of class time (Anderson, et al, 2010).

In line with autoethnographic research procedures (Chang, 2008), the data sources for our collaborative inquiry (Lee & Smagorinsky, 1999) included the written feedback notes that we generated semester-by-semester on forms provided by the authors of the revised materials as well as transcribed audio recordings of three days of post-project oral and written dialogue. We orchestrated the post-project dialogue to explore in more detail four broad issues that we identified on our feedback forms as constraints. These included our beliefs about how to teach methods classes, time and resource management, our students' needs, and larger educational contexts.

We discussed each constraint in turn, using a fixed set of procedures to ensure that we identified our own issues before we discussed similarities and differences among us. To do this, we first engaged in ten minutes of private writing. Then, we identified and read aloud significant phrases from this writing. We wrote for five additional minutes after we'd heard each other's phrases and before we identified and read aloud additional selected phrases. We followed our text renderings with a group discussion. We spent several hours writing about and discussing each of the constraints in this fashion to ensure that we understood our perspectives toward each one.

We note that we do not use our names in the findings that follow. Instead we call ourselves a more generic name, teacher educators, which we abbreviate with TE. Among the larger educational contexts of our work are the teacher education programs and institutions that employ us. These settings both afford and constrain our methods teaching in ways that are seldom talked about because of risks involved on all sides. In order to avoid embarrassing our colleagues and ourselves, we decided to keep our discussion at a generalized level that will be more recognizable to others.

Constraints

Our Beliefs about Teaching Literacy Methods

Our beliefs about how people learn to teach literacy were a very important constraint on our decision-making. Although we operationalized this in different ways specific to our program contexts, we shared a Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978) view that young children learn literacy most effectively in communities within which knowledgeable others provide models and scaffold situated practice. We concurred that this approach was evident in the resources we were

asked to consider and modify (Cambourne, 1995; Ellis, Edwards, & Smagorinsky, 2010; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

Our beliefs about literacy teacher education were similarly Vygotskian. The resource materials we were given provided us with useful lecture notes, classroom videos, and exercises, but we also talked a lot about facilitating pre-service teachers' learning in communities, sharing information, modeling, discussion, collaborative reflection, and, often, situated practice. This resulted in our shared desire to provide pre-service teachers with a wide variety of strategies, materials, and approaches to teaching because, as one TE remarked, "In order to be constructivists, they need something to construct with."

We also demonstrated our Vygotskian orientation when we discussed the need for instruction within learners' "zone of proximal development." (ZPD). That ZPD is the area between what learners (i.e. pre-service teachers) already know and what they can achieve with educational support. This sometimes meant following students' conversational leads rather than sticking to our lecture notes. For example, during conversations with her graduate literacy students, one TE was able to assess a gap in phonics knowledge. One day she mentioned the term "schwa" whereupon students wondered, "Is that that funny upside-down letter?" Instead of bemoaning the students' lack of knowledge, this TE adjusted her teaching to students' needs, offering guided teaching. These students were ready to learn about schwas because they had an opportunity to link the concept to what they already knew and, with the TE's assistance, they would discover the usefulness of knowing about schwas. This TE commented,

Maybe they weren't ready for it, as you suggest, [but] they were now at a point where they could attach it somewhere. They could attach it. They could do the worldview, the teacher view, the whole, you know, put those together. They desperately needed it. Because I think if you're not ready to attach it, it just goes in one ear and out the other. Even if you put all of it in your pre-service course because you know it's all-important, it's not going to get integrated.

Each of us spoke at one time or another of scaffolding students' conceptual development with discussion and situated practice (e.g. in classroom simulations or field placements) rather than expecting that lectures in the resource materials could give students all that they needed. For example, in the written feedback to a module on strategic word learning, one TE noted, "This

topic is being presented to entry level teacher candidates. Presenting this as a lecture is not sufficient. Further learning occurs with practice, reflection, inquiry, and relearning.”

Another TE shared the following anecdote, providing evidence of her Vygotskian view regarding the importance of class discussion to students’ construction of new insights about teaching:

I mentioned yesterday about my students’ discussion of “lahg,” versus “log”, specifically how to say that. I remember with one class, before I showed the video, I said, “Now, you’re going to hear a little bit of a different regional dialect here and I want to see if you can pick it out.” Instead of telling them what they were going to hear, I wanted to see what they would identify. So, that was, of course, the word that came up and there was a little chit-chat about it. And then one student raised her hand, “You know, there really is something to this regional dialect thing.” And they said, “Dr. X, you would never be able to teach short vowels in Ontario, because their pronunciation is so, you know.” And I thought, “You know, fine. You’ve got it. You’ve got the concept down.”

The TE scaffolded students’ developing understanding about dealing with dialect diversity through guiding their discovery of “this regional dialect thing” rather than simply telling them that dialect matters in literacy instruction. Instruction in sound/letter correspondences needs to be tempered with sensitivity to regional pronunciations. Children can learn to read words as they pronounce them. She encouraged her community of learners to discuss the implications of dialect, thus providing potential for growth through social interaction.

Time and Resource Management

Concerns about time constraints were universal in our group, limiting the amount of the new resources we could integrate into our courses. A TE reported, “I selected what I could address in a manner that would allow them [pre-service teachers] to process and understand.” Another TE talked about a need to maintain “room for conversation . . . and opportunities for the PSTs [pre-service teachers] to practice things that they are going to do in schools later on.”

Everyone in our group appreciated the extensive quantity of the resources with which we were provided and the fact that these were originally designed to provide 60 hours of professional development for experienced teachers. Each of us received various drafts of packet

after packet of well-designed graphic organizers, effective PowerPoint slides, class exercises, discussion questions, free readings, video clips, as well as a laptop so that we could easily use the materials in our teaching despite the varying technology resources available where we taught. We agreed that all of the resources were important, and, as a TE noted, “It was great to have someone organize significant amounts of information with video examples.” We also appreciated that we could also use these materials selectively as long as we noted what we used and how we adapted it for our students.

Despite the fact that we had difficulty during our revision discussions with agreeing to cut any of the content, a TE queried during our post-project discussions, “How much can we really include in 37.5 hours of class time?” We all reported trying to squeeze as much as we could into every class, even as we pondered what we were leaving out from what we used to do. One TE wondered,

What if this isn’t the most important part of teaching beginning teachers how to teach, and what did I give up that I used to do well in order to squeeze out the time to include more detail about these different aspects of emergent literacy?

In some cases, our commitment to the project meant that “covering” the content contained on the slides seemed to overshadow Vygotskian principles; we ended up lecturing and, possibly, cognitively overloading students more than we intended. As a TE explained,

I can remember one particular class; there were a couple slides and I said, “I really want you to get these and we got to the end and the whole class turned around and looked at me and went, “Phew!”... I thought, “...Okay, we got through it, but what did they get out of this?”

Another TE worried explicitly about not having time for the discussion that students would need to explore and refine their understandings with one another:

I know part of what I gave up was encouraging some of the broader discussions, the theory discussions that used to happen more in class. I was just trying to make them think and discuss and come up with their own ideas instead of, “Read this; do this. Read this; do this.” And move them away from the right answer response – learning to take a test. So, I feel like I gave up some of that type of thing, which I always felt helped to make them to become more independent thinkers.

Having opportunities to discuss, practice, and reflect on the content emerged as chief concerns as we negotiated which materials to use in the time available.

Our Students' Needs

A most important influence on our decisions about how to use the resources made available to us was related to the differences in our student populations. We spent much time talking about what we thought our own students needed from the materials and about how this differed across the contexts of our teaching. Our job as project participants involved us in figuring out how the materials could be “woven in effectively — and differentially — into a curriculum for pre-service teachers,” as a TE suggested.

The nature of pre-service teachers in programs represented by the TEs participating in this study varied dramatically. Some were graduate students and others were undergraduates. Some were from high SES while others were from working class backgrounds. Some groups were racially diverse while others were more homogeneous. Some students commuted long distances (even internationally) while others were from nearby local communities. Some students were expected to participate in intensive field experiences while engaged in the methods course while others were not. Some students were gradually exposed to the material over a six-credit course while others were intensely exposed within a three-credit one. We argued that the interaction of various programmatic contexts influenced students' responsiveness to the material.

Comments from one TE, whose pre-service teachers were graduate students, reflected the concern expressed in our title:

We grappled with finding a manageable body of content that they can absorb, because this was their first literacy course, ...but they had no background in teaching, no background in education, no experience in school other than as a student themselves. What do I provide for appropriate schema, so that in the next course, they can add to what they know? They're only going to take two courses in literacy.

It became clear that our decisions about what, when, and how we used the materials in our teaching depended significantly on how we viewed the students in our particular programs and within particular classes. A TE explained, “Many of my responses [to modules] are impacted

by the prior knowledge of my pre-service teachers. Composition of classes is different each semester.” Another TE noted,

I think that my graduate students had more insights and what was more exciting was when they would come in and say, “I used this, or I saw this today,” or “Look at this [workbook] material; it’s not right. I know that it shouldn’t be used this way.”

As a TE noted, “There was a very wide range in the schema and the experiences of the students, so that made a big difference in the way things were organized, presented, and used.” Another TE explained how she thought about meeting the needs of students who commuted daily or non-traditional ones who came to school full-time for only two days a week before returning to full time jobs and families.

Every semester, I get 14, 16, or 18 students in my class and they’re not all the same. Some of them come with backgrounds and experience because they have kids at home. Some of them come because they’ve been aides in the classroom. Some of them have never touched a kid before; they have no idea. Some of them are afraid of being in an urban school with 94% minority and some of them live in that kind of situation. So, it’s kind of different, and every one of them needs something different.

Depending on the pre-service teachers’ background and focus, they held different values for the information that was presented. A TE explained, “[Some] people in early childhood think they don’t need to know anything about literacy because they’re working with little kids.” Our group talked about how we would emphasize developmentally appropriate practice that focused on stimulating engagement in literacy activities and behaviors in ways that are meaningful and playful for young children in response to this generalization.

We recognized the importance of knowing our students and teaching what could best be absorbed. “You can’t just walk in and teach the same course to everybody. You have to know your group and work accordingly.” A TE noted, “[The Program] is important, but my... undergraduates were more nervous about writing lesson plans, classroom management, and their own “coolness factor” with the youngsters than they were in delving into the content.” Another TE added,

Some of us work in institutions that strive to meet the needs of non-traditional pre-service teachers in graduate programs. These students complete certification requirements within a brief time span, creating especially unique demands on program design and course delivery. All of us felt some limitations regarding the amount of information our students could absorb.

Considering our pre-service teachers as a group, we agreed with the TE's statement—and much of the literature on literacy teacher education described earlier—that, “It’s a mistake to think they [pre-service teachers] have to emerge from their first methods course knowing everything there is to know about teaching [literacy]” Another TE concluded that what pre-service teachers need to know is, “There are [many] tools. There are [many] strategies. There are [many] ways.” Discussions also centered on developing pre-service teachers’ dispositions as lifelong professional learners who continue to seek information on practice. We concluded that the materials had a lot to offer in terms of content, but when and how in the education of teachers is it best to provide such information was an open question.

It appears that teaching pre-service teachers is distinctly different from providing in-service to practicing teachers as had been the original audience for use of the materials. We theorized that such teachers had knowledge of students and skill in managing classrooms that allowed them to see applications for the resources’ instructional ideas. Several of us experimented, using the materials with in-service graduate students to test this idea even though it was not part of the project. A TE noted, “I saw that it works better with more mature and experienced individuals, like literacy coaches. That came out in a number of their [the coaches] statements.” For example one graduate student blurted out in class,

Oh, my God! That’s what letter name stages really mean. I never knew. We’ve been using this program for years, and I could never figure that out, even though we have to say this child is at this stage, given these activities. I know my colleagues don’t know this!

Larger Educational Contexts

As well as student variables previously discussed, the larger educational contexts also influenced our decision-making about how to use the materials in our classes. Acknowledging that the “Culture of today’s classroom is increasingly diverse,” in one TE’s words, each of our

teacher education programs strove to produce candidates who would be able to deliver many types of instruction to meet children's diverse needs in today's mandate-driven school culture. Within the larger educational context teachers will need to know all the possible needs of the students they will be teaching for the proper use of any materials they will be using.

A TE pointed out that more information is needed on specific teaching strategies to help students from poverty, working class backgrounds, or other under-resourced families toward literacy achievement. Noting that this project was built upon a successful in-service project in a high poverty school district, we discussed how we might use resources to explore such issues. For example, a TE remarked,

It would be good to include new videos in which we can include teachers with different backgrounds. Also, pre-service and in-service teachers need to think about the bigger ideas of organization, use of multicultural books, [and] "ways with words" when speaking with children.

Our group also talked about wanting schools to appreciate that higher education institutions are educating teachers as lifelong professional learners who continue to seek information on practice through further course work and staff development opportunities. We recognized that pre-service teachers need to be taught that one program can't meet the needs of all the students in any classroom and that there are multiple ways to construct meaning. Instead, they need a repertoire of instructional strategies so that they can tailor their instruction to address the diverse needs of their own students.

Student satisfaction with our instruction is also integral to ensuring adequate student enrollment and, thus, our tenure. Tuition-driven institutions, as all of ours were, are always quite concerned with student retention, and this certainly motivated our desire to evolve our practice, refining the content and delivery of our courses. Even though most of us teach in traditional undergraduate pre-service teacher education programs, some of us work in institutions that strive to meet the needs of busy non-traditional pre-service teachers in graduate programs. We worried about the amount of information our students could absorb, and felt that, when we tried to share what students saw as too much information, many of our course evaluations suffered. For example, a TE reported, "My course evaluations were worse than they ever were." Another TE recalled, "Actually, you know, I didn't make a comment about that, but when we started with this, boy, did they plummet." As we gained more experience making decisions about what and

how materials might be used in our classrooms, we found ways to share the resources in ways our students found more appealing.

Yet school districts hiring our students within our respective geographic regions would sometimes make specific requests that we prepare them to use particular programs or commercial approaches. A TE reported,

In an attempt to gain the approval of the school district superintendent, a dean at one institution urged childhood education faculty to train students in the use of scripted materials the district had adopted. The department faculty commendably stood its ground decrying the request, and saying, “We don’t teach programs; we teach teachers.”

Another significant aspect of the larger context that influenced the resources we decided to bring into our methods classes had to do with the intact reward systems in place for us to keep our jobs in higher education. This context tells college professors what and how to teach to generate solid course evaluations, balancing the varying scholarship, teaching and service requirements specific to each of our home institutions. We agreed that if we “lost” students altogether because they thought our lectures were too theoretical, detailed, or “boring,” then we, too, would be responsible for sending under-prepared teachers into classrooms with our children.

Conclusions

Our inquiry helped us identify important constraints that shaped our ability to use important new information sources in our pre-service methods classes. Our retrospective provides insights regarding how we made choices about how, when, and what content should and could be taught in pre-service literacy education courses, choices that could each be investigated further to understand their impact on learners in classrooms. In addition, with a constant appreciation for the continuous evolution of national and state educational mandates (i.e. Race to the Top and CCSS), we realized that our methods courses must reflect the in-the moment reality in today’s schools.

By sharing characteristics of our pre-service teachers and our institutions, we were able to develop an understanding of how very different backgrounds and circumstances impact participation in such classes. Forces outside our classrooms (i.e. tenure, school district requests, and the new CCSS) and the power of each on what we teach also emerged as worthy of further

investigation. In some ways our disagreements about what we'd include highlight a fundamental problem in teacher education, which is that those who hire teachers want them to know as much as possible about everything without delineating the minimum they would expect from a novice.

Insights about these influences can also help us address or disrupt them. Our professional knowledge and the contexts in which we teach inform our instruction in pre-service literacy methods classes. The resources used for this project caused us to reconsider course content; we thought about what needed to be emphasized or presented differently. It also made us examine developmentally appropriate presentation in the context of knowledge and procedural competencies that effective teachers need — a balance recognized by new requirements for clinically rich fieldwork before student teaching. Even though we appreciated the information in each of the instructional modules, our lived teaching experience caused us to question what we could teach in the limited time available. We spent a significant amount of time at meetings and in reflection trying to decide how to teach responsively as we determined how to use the resources offered to us. We continue to appreciate access to the newest versions of the materials, and we look forward to the results of ongoing inquiry into their use as a help to our decision-making.

Our inquiry brings into sharper focus the dilemma of selecting what to include in methods instruction beyond the materials selection activities that occurred in this project. We continue to argue against the “knowing more and teaching better” debate described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) as we struggle with the question of precisely what content is essential. It's not enough to say all teachers, as a minimum, have to know something if it doesn't tell us how to help them develop this knowledge in an effective way. Our inquiry is significant because it offers an initial naming of some influences woven into the complex web of literacy instruction coursework that is offered to pre-service teachers. When teachers state, “We should have learned this when we were undergraduates,” we now realize that we should invite teachers to engage in conversations that will enable them to not only understand the complexities of pre-service literacy instruction but also how their post-graduate experiences assisted them in gaining more in-depth knowledge about early literacy instruction.

Other aspects of our situated practice did not enter our polite conversations even though they also are integral to our day-to-day enactments. The fact that we are females in higher education settings, that some argue continue to be permeated with discourses of masculinities,

certainly has something to do with the ways we express our expertise and organize our classes (Ng, 1993). That we are white, in contexts within which most of our students are white and will end up teaching in schools where eventually they will be in the minority, is also a situation that bears further examination (Rosenberg, 1997). That we are all of an age that privileges print literacies is problematic in our increasingly multimodal, global society (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). All such aspects of literacy teacher educator identity could be explored in more detail.

In the end, we wished there were more research to help us with our decision-making about which details to include in our design of our pre-service methods courses. Within a political context that is assailing teacher preparation from all sides (Powell, 2008), it would be especially helpful for additional research that addresses such questions as: In what ways might content included in teacher preparation programs ensure pre-service teachers' ability to assimilate and accommodate research-tested principles of child development, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociological and pedagogical practice? What are suitable expectations for new teachers' knowledge base? What are appropriate expectations for school districts' ongoing staff development? What are best methods for developing the various kinds of knowledge and experiences needed for effective literacy instruction, given the various backgrounds our students bring with them to our classrooms? How should we address or ameliorate the contexts that constrain our work? How will CCSS and similar mandates affect student learning, pre-service preparation, and professional development for teachers?

At a minimum, all such constraints merit consideration by forces involved in prescribing content of pre-service literacy teacher education (e.g. Race to the Top, 2009, the Common Core State Standards, 2011, and/or mandates requiring increased clinical experiences for pre-service teachers). The myriad of constraints with which we grappled suggest that it's not a question of whether teacher education holds value for pre-service teachers; it is more about how much and under what conditions it should be provided. In mining our decision-making experiences autoethnographically (Chang, 2008), the length of our own professional development process helped us mindfully and critically reflect backward on actions inspired by our professional beliefs as well as forward toward present influences (i.e. CCSS) impacting education and teacher preparation. We believe we have taken a small step toward identifying and understanding the influences on literacy teacher education in new ways.

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