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Prologue 5

Problematizing core practices and approximations of practice (rehearsals) in teacher preparation

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Abstract: It is increasingly recognised that teaching involves more than transmission of knowledge and rather, is viewed as multi-dimensional, where the teacher occupies a number of different roles beyond that of subject expert or preparing students for standardized tests. Initial teacher preparation marks the first stage of an educators' professional journey and aims to prepare preservice teachers to become effective practitioners equipped with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will serve to meet the increasing demands of the profession. It is within this setting that preservice teachers engage with the complexities of the teaching profession. It is an intensive learning experience requiring preservice teachers to adopt the dual role of learner and teacher simultaneously. For more than a decade, teacher preparation scholars have called for a reconceptualization and reorganization of teacher preparation programs that focus more centrally on the practice of teaching. Practice-based teacher preparation provides preservice teachers with learning opportunities including the enactment of teaching – practice that is mediated and deliberate, therefore, supporting novices in learning how to use knowledge in action. One possible pedagogical enactment of this approach is a focus on core practices and approximations or rehearsals of practice. Teacher preparation programs that adopt these approaches must consider the pedagogies that enable their inclusion. This short prologue sets out to briefly describe and problematize the inclusion of core practices and approximations of practice (rehearsals) in teacher preparation. A brief introduction to practice-based teacher preparation and core practices is advanced by way of context. Next, the inclusion of core practices and approximations of practice in teacher preparation are problematized from three perspectives: selecting and agreeing a set of core practices; strategies and structures to support practice-based teacher preparation; and finally the need for a monitoring and evaluation strategy that captures systematic data regarding the implementation of a set of core practices. Some implications for future practice are considered.

Keywords: teacher preparation, practice-based teacher education, core practices, approximations of practice, teacher education reform

Sammendrag: Det er i økende grad anerkjent at undervisning innebærer mer enn kunnskapsoverføring, og heller betraktes som flerdimensjonal, der læreren inntar en rekke ulike roller utover det å være fagspesialist eller forberede elever til standardiserte tester. Lærerutdanningen markerer den første fasen av en lærers profesjonelle reise og har som mål å forberede studenter til å bli effektive utøvere utstyrt med den kunnskapen, ferdighetene og holdningene som vil tilfredstille de økende kravene i yrket. Det er innenfor denne rammen at studentene engasjerer seg i kompleksiteten i læreryrket. Det er en intensiv læringsopplevelse som krever at studentene inntar den doble rollen som både elev og lærer samtidig. I mer enn et tiår har forskere innen lærerutdanning etterlyst en nytenkning og reorganisering av lærerutdanningsprogrammer som fokuserer mer på undervisningspraksis. Praksisbasert lærerutdanning gir lærerstudenter læringsmuligheter, inkludert gjennomføring av undervisning – praksis som er formidlet og tilsiktet, og dermed støtter nybegynnere i å lære hvordan man bruker kunnskap i handling. En mulig pedagogisk gjennomføring av denne tilnærmingen er et fokus på kjernepraksiser og tilnærminger eller øvelser av praksis. Lærerutdanningsprogrammer som bruker disse tilnærmingene må vurdere pedagogikkene som muliggjør deres inkludering. Denne korte prologen har som mål å kort beskrive og problematisere inkluderingen av kjernepraksiser og tilnærminger av praksis (øvelser) i lærerutdanningen. En kort introduksjon til praksisbasert lærerutdanning og kjernepraksiser presenteres som kontekst. Deretter problematiseres inkluderingen av kjernepraksiser og tilnærminger av praksis i lærerutdanningen fra tre perspektiver: valg og enighet om et sett med kjernepraksiser; strategier og strukturer for å støtte praksisbasert lærerutdanning; og til slutt behovet for en observasjons- og evalueringsstrategi som fanger opp systematiske data angående implementeringen av et sett med kjernepraksiser. Noen implikasjoner for fremtidig praksis vurderes.

Nøkkelord: lærerutdanning, praksisbasert lærerutdanning, kjernepraksiser, tilnærminger av praksis, reform av lærerutdanning

Practice-based teacher education

For more than a decade, teacher preparation scholars have called for a reconceptualisation and reorganisation of teacher preparation programmes to focus more centrally on the practice of teaching.

Practice-based teacher preparation ‘attempts to focus novices’ learning more directly on the work of teaching’ (Forzani, 2014, p. 357) and provides preservice teachers (PSTs) with the necessary knowledge and skills to significantly support and advance student learning (Hlas & Hlas, 2012, p. 76).

Practice-based teacher preparation reflects a number of approaches: inclusion of deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2002, 2006) facilitated by rehearsals of teaching (Kavangh & Danielson, 2020); engaging with video recordings of practice to enable review (Van Es & Sherin, 2008); teacher preparation coursework in K-12 schools to scaffold opportunities for novices to observe and enact practice (Von Esch & Kavanagh, 2018); and explicitly naming and teaching sets of core practices (Davis & Boerst, 2014).

Programmes that foreground deliberate and mediated practice stand in contrast to those where PSTs are taught about teaching and are expected to implement what they have learned in subsequent fieldwork through relatively unstructured practice (Ericsson, 2002, 2006; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

Previous research has advocated for practice-based teacher preparation that provides PSTs with learning opportunities, including the enactment of teaching (Forzani, 2014; Grossman et al., 2019; Jensen, 2020; McDonald et al., 2013). Therefore, it supports novices in learning how to use knowledge in action (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009a).

Sleep (2009) suggests that teacher preparation focused on practice provides a means to concentrate on what teachers do rather than what they know. Bailey and Taylor (2015, p. 111) offer further clarity in the conceptualisation of practice-based education, suggesting two trends: ‘the first centres around core practices of ambitious teaching and the second focuses on a range of pedagogical practices whereby novice teachers are engaged in representations, decompositions and approximations of practice’.

Consequently, research has begun to emerge which explores methods of focusing teachers’ preparation on ‘core’ practices of teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Forzani, 2014; McDonald et al., 2013).

The rationale for this ‘pivot to practice’ reflects sustained efforts to ensure that PSTs have the competence and capacity to teach independently, and effectively, in a classroom. Simultaneously, those in the field have also turned their attention to developing pedagogies that support and enable PSTs to use core practices. Grossman et al. (2009a) recommend three approaches to support understanding of the pedagogies of practice in professional education: representations, decompositions, and Approximations of Practice (AoPs).

Including pedagogical approaches that emphasise representations of practice provides PSTs with opportunities to engage with various ways practice can be presented, and what such representations make explicit and visible.

Therefore, the nature of these representations reflects choice, decision-making, and the resulting consequences. Engaging in decomposition of representations of practice provides PSTs with opportunities to review, deconstruct, and analyse practice into its constituent parts.

AoPs refer to opportunities for students ‘to engage in practices that are more or less proximal to the practices of a profession’ (Grossman et al., 2009b, p. 2058) and therefore provide opportunities for ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson, 2002, p. 21). AoPs provide novice teachers opportunities to rehearse or enact episodes of teaching, pause to engage with feedback from peers or tutors, and explicitly discuss instructional choices (Kavanagh et al., 2020; Lampert et al., 2013; Schutz et al., 2019).

It is important, therefore, that teacher preparation programmes consider and discern pedagogies that enable exploration of core practices. This is particularly relevant when set against a policy and legislative context where teacher preparation providers are mandated to include and reflect various competences and standards within their programmes.

Core practices

Prior research has explored ways of focusing teachers’ professional education on core practices of teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Davis & Boerst, 2014; Dinkelmann & Cuenca, 2020; Forzani, 2014; McDonald et al., 2013; Gotwals & Birmingham, 2016; Lampert, 2001; O’Flaherty et al., 2024; Windschitl et al., 2012).

Grossman (2018) defines core practices as ‘components of teaching that teachers enact to support learning. These components include instructional strategies and the subcomponents of strategies and moves. Core practices can include both general and content-specific practices’ (p. 184). Others have suggested that selecting a common set of core practices may provide a curricular framework for teacher preparation (Hlas & Hlas, 2012).

Examples of core practices include: leading a classroom discussion (Hlas & Hlas, 2012), the use of video as a prompt for decomposing practice (Ball, 2013), eliciting student thinking (Grossman et al., 2009a; Janssen, Westbroek & Doyle, 2014), anticipating student misconceptions and errors during planning (Ball & Forzani, 2010), facilitating whole-class discussions (Lampert, 2001), redirecting off-task behaviour (Grossman, 2018), and modelling (McDonald et al., 2013).

When selecting core practices for inclusion in teacher preparation, they are linked to student outcomes of interest, used frequently in teaching and learning, research-informed and evidence-based, implemented broadly across the curriculum, and transferable to novices (Forzani, 2014; Grossman et al., 2009a; McDonald et al., 2013).

A number of issues need consideration to support PSTs’ development of core practices. Firstly, there needs to be an explicit focus on an agreed set of core practices across foundation and methods courses, and clinical sites of practice. This necessitates collaborative planning and the ability to identify pedagogical approaches that align with different areas in teacher preparation.

Teacher educators must therefore embrace a role of responsibility and accountability, and be willing ‘to legitimate the language of professional responsibility by self-consciously choosing to articulate understandings of what prospective teachers need’ (Solbrekke & Sugrue, 2014, p. 19), what this looks like in teacher preparation, and how PSTs can be supported in achieving these outcomes.

Second, strategies and structures to support practice-based teacher preparation require attention and collaborative planning.

Finally, a monitoring and evaluation plan must be developed that captures systematic data regarding the enactment of core practices, the supporting pedagogies used, and the learning environments – meanings and lexicon that are imbued across various representations, decompositions, and enactments.

Each of these shall be elaborated below.

Considerations and Implications for Future Practice

Selecting and supporting inclusion of core practices

A significant challenge for any programme is selecting and agreeing a set of core practices for inclusion in teacher preparation (O’Flaherty & Beal, 2018; O’Flaherty et al., 2024), avoiding reductionist approaches. It may prove challenging to reach a consensus with regards to what practices are included (Cohen, 2015).

McDonald et al. (2013, p. 379) suggest this may be mitigated by establishing stronger relationships between research on teaching and the work of teacher preparation:

Bridging research and the practice of teacher education has the potential to help the field: (a) articulate a common language for specifying practice, which would facilitate the field’s ability to engage in collective activity; (b) identify and specify common pedagogies in teacher education; and (c) address the perennial and persistent divides among university courses and between university course work and clinical experiences.

While achieving consensus across all teacher preparation providers is not the primary objective, it is important that there is some agreement on the core practices of the beginning professional, informed by the particular national or state context, and the continuum of teacher education (Muñiz-Rodríguez et al., 2017).

Therefore, selection and inclusion of core practices in teacher preparation should be framed by a clear understanding of teaching that is transparent to all stakeholders, and serves the needs of the beginning professional. Additionally, there should be supporting evidence justifying the inclusion of these practices.

Given that initial teacher preparation constitutes only a brief period within a teacher’s overall career trajectory, it is essential to select a limited number of practices to strategically incorporate across the curriculum. Windschitl et al. (2012, p. 885) advocate that core practices ‘should be few in number to reflect priorities of equitable and effective teaching, and to allow significant time for novices to develop and receive feedback on approximations of each of these practices’ (p. 883).

While practitioners in the field exercise caution when it comes to prescribing a specific set of core practices, McDonald et al. (2013, p. 381) argue that we should be wary of letting ‘a thousand flowers bloom’. Instead, they propose reaching a consensus on a set of criteria for identifying, labelling, and choosing core practices.

Grobart and Zepp (2024, p. 3) suggest selecting core practices to embed in teacher preparation that reflect ‘prioritisation’, and promotion of deeper learning of the particular practices. Markelz et al. (2021) proffer an individualised approach, which may involve a reduced number of faculty reflecting a number of core practices included in their coursework, if there is limited interest and opportunity for wider implementation.

Moreover, it is crucial that methods and pedagogy courses/modules scaffold the practices selected for inclusion, thus requiring targeted teacher preparation pedagogies specifically designed to equip PSTs with these practices.

Some authors query what gets excluded implicitly or explicitly when teacher preparation turns towards practice (Kennedy, 2016; Zeichner, 2012). Philip et al. (2018), amongst others (Anderson, 2019; Horn & Kane, 2019; Philip, 2019; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019; Stillman & Beltramo, 2019), question the explicit commitment to social justice education evident in practice-based teacher preparation.

Equally, some core practices may be difficult to observe through field/coursework observations. For example, collaboration among professionals may be difficult to observe. Grobart and Zepp (2024, p. 5) offer a number of suggestions to support making this practice ‘more visible, PSTs ‘could share about and reflect on the co-planning process in their written reflection and in the subsequent triad meeting with their field supervisor and mentor teacher ... Additionally, PSTs could submit artefacts aligned with each core practice area’. This would enable field supervisors the opportunity to regularly and explicitly discuss the critical role less visible core practices play in high-quality instruction, and student engagement (Grobart & Zepp, 2024).

Strategies and structures to support practice-based teacher preparation

The structure of teacher preparation programmes in higher education is frequently fragmented, thus inculcating PSTs into a cumulative rather than recursive model of learning to teach (Hammerness et al., 2005). Many teacher preparation programmes are organised into foundation courses, methods courses, and clinical practice. PSTs frequently take courses that are organised by separate academic units, rather than pursuing a course of study that is conceptually integrated.

This fragmentation can lead to challenges for the inclusion of core practices – for example, a lack of opportunities for teacher educators to collaborate across areas of specialism, a disconnect between theoretical knowledge and teachers’ practical work in classrooms, and a relegation of issues pertaining to the practices of teaching to particular courses/modules rather than integrating them throughout teacher preparation programmes. This positioning of knowledge and content potentially places, either implicitly or explicitly, the focus of learning to teach on the conceptual foundations of teaching, rather than practices new teachers may need to enact when they begin teaching – practice is, therefore, not at the core of the curriculum (McDonald et al., 2013).

The historical divides between the foundational, methodological, and clinical components within teacher preparation programmes warrant careful consideration. These divisions can result in assumptions about roles and purposes, underscoring the importance of fostering communication and collaboration across various sites of practice. While foundation courses traditionally provide the conceptual tools to support PSTs to frame and interpret practice, they may not include solutions for negotiating the practical dilemmas that arise. Methods courses tend to focus on supporting PSTs to develop strategies and instructional practices for the classroom (Grossman et al., 2009a). The higher education setting is often removed from sites of professional practice, thus accentuating the perceived theory–practice divide.

It is imperative, therefore, for teacher educators to carefully consider the interplay between various sites of learning during teacher preparation, the relationship between theory and practice, and the broader context of professional competences and standards. Including a set of core practices in an integrated, cyclical, and incremental manner can be beneficial (Mathews et al., 2023).

Equally, we must acknowledge that eliciting a shared definition of core practices is not in and of itself sufficient for enactment. Including core practices in teacher preparation requires a scaffolded approach with opportunities for application, feedback, and reflection (Windschitl et al., 2019). Kavanagh and Danielson (2020) suggest that we need to consider and explore variations in how teacher educators teach about different elements/practices of teaching – the lexicon used, and the meanings imbued.

One approach to mitigate these challenges is to develop a common language that reflects consideration of the enactment of pedagogy, where a set of pedagogies are identified and mapped onto different areas of content across sites of practice (McDonald et al., 2013). Careful planning is essential to identify, explore, and investigate core practices across multiple sites. There are challenges in attempting to connect the sites of practice. Ledger and Fischetti (2020) highlight the need for knowledgeable mentors who can support the development of core practices and link theory and practice.

These considerations have significant implications for how teacher educators effectively navigate school–university partnerships and collaborate with teachers to ensure that sites of practice work in tandem to support PSTs. If executed successfully, PSTs could be systematically guided to implement core practices with students during their placements (Grossman et al., 2009a; McDonald et al., 2013). This approach would enable them to focus on specific aspects of their practice at different stages in a well-structured manner.

Grobart and Zepp (2024, p. 4) developed a seven-step model to support the inclusion of core practices in teacher preparation across sites of learning. Steps include: 1) review the link between core practices and professional standards, 2) align core practice with course work, 3) pre-assessment (PSTs self-assess with regards to their understanding of the practice and perceived competence to implement), 4) develop scaffolded supports (plan monthly activities aligned with focal standards and core practices), 5) observe fieldwork (providing feedback on the implemented practice), 6) reflective practice, and 7) evaluation (practice usage, strengths, and areas for improvement).

Monitoring and evaluation of approaches

There remains a paucity of evidence evaluating the inclusion of core practices in teacher preparation programmes. A number of studies question whether core practices included in teacher preparation are making their way into classrooms (APA, 2014; Aslan & Zhu, 2016; O’Flaherty & Beal, 2018; Ping et al., 2009). Gathering evidence as to the effectiveness of including core practices in teacher preparation must be prioritised.

In order to examine the inclusion of a set of core practices, and the supporting pedagogies used, we need to explore the learning environments – the lexicon and meanings imbued across representations, decompositions, and enactments. Conducting baseline assessments enables teacher educators to explore which core practices are being taught, and how they are being taught in coursework (Markelz et al., 2021). When exploring practice, one must question what aspects of practice are visible and invisible. Representations of practice provide opportunities to reflect upon and investigate practice.

In the decomposition phase, we must be mindful that PSTs may not yet have a deep knowledge and understanding of the constituent parts of practice. Grossman et al. (2009b, p. 2075) suggest that ‘the ability to decompose practice depends on the existence of a language and structure for describing practice... a grammar of practice.’ Decomposition of practice enables facets of the practice to become more visible, as PSTs observe and participate in the feedback process with peers and teacher educators.

It is, however, important that we do not assume that all teacher educators have a well-developed, disciplinary understanding of the practice or constituent parts of that practice under investigation. It is important that we plan for, and focus on, building knowledge and understanding of these practices for both PSTs and teacher educators. This has implications for professional development for those involved.

The inclusion of AoPs and rehearsals during campus-based elements of teacher preparation can provide learning opportunities that are absent in the practicum, allowing PSTs greater freedom to experiment and reflect. It is also important that we explore the pedagogical approaches that teacher educators use to facilitate PSTs’ enactment of core practices. Teacher educators need time and space to engage in professional dialogue to explore their rationale for inclusion of such pedagogical approaches, thus facilitating a developing

understanding of core practices. McDonald et al. (2013, p. 381) suggest that 'such a dialog requires researchers and practitioners to be mutually engaged to wrestle with the choices they have made and the ways in which those choices influence teacher learning and development. Variation in core practices within and across content areas offers rich opportunities to grapple with ways of parsing practice that support learning'. Therefore, engagement in professional dialogue, peer observations, critical reflection, and gathering systematic evidence as to the effectiveness of core practices need to become essential components of exploring and evaluating teacher preparation programmes.

In conclusion, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of core practices and AoPs. Grossman et al. (2009b, p. 2090) suggest they have the potential to 'distort the features of practice in various ways, either by allowing students to focus on one primary component or by encouraging students to experiment with its features, they risk representing too narrow a view of what the work entails'. Therefore, educators must consider how we can facilitate the integration of core practices and AoPs so that they are more reflective of the needs of the novice teacher, and the demands of the professional role.

This challenge consolidates the need for educators to plan and map opportunities for practice across various courses (foundations, methods), and sites of professional learning (campus and clinical practice). Providing opportunities for PSTs to analyse and reflect upon their rehearsal/practice supports them to chart their professional development, pose problems, problematise theory and practice, and challenge common routines (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). If this work is to gain traction, the integration of core practices and the supporting pedagogical approaches need to be embraced across programme curricula and sites of learning – thus repudiating the view that teaching cannot be specified or taught.

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