"It's a Big Mystery, Isn't It?"

Mitigating Placement Challenges with a Model of Student Teacher Placement Decision-Making

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how external forces, internal motivations and environmental conditions may influence school personnel when considering placement requests. Seidman's three-stage interview process was implemented to conduct semi-structured interviews with five principals and five teachers in a large, urban school district. Four findings emerge that illustrate how cooperating schools/candidates encounter polarities in placement decision-making, including how student teacher placement appears less stable with NCLB mandates. A placement decision-making model is presented, framed by Waters, Marzano & McNulty's theories of first- and second-order change perceptions. As student teachers are not "highly qualified," an oxymoron faces principals and teachers in placement decisions—"highly qualified" and "student teacher." The research expands upon how Zeichner's views of "disconnect" and "opposing forces" occur in actual placement decision-making, versus exclusively in field experience conduction itself. Four recommendations are outlined for teacher preparation programs to mitigate placement challenges.

"So overwhelming is the university's need for cooperating teachers that almost any warm body will do…." (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

NCATE requires that its accredited teacher education programs (TEPs) demonstrate how placements are not by default but, rather, by design; that is, the result of school-university mutual decision-making leading to high quality placements for pre-service teachers (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006). However, the number of placement requests coming from TEPs are not always matched by the number of receptive school sites or willing cooperating teachers (CTs) to accommodate all placement requests (Goodlad, 1994b; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sinclair, Dawson, & Thistleton-Martin, 2006; Zeichner, 2002).

To compound the placement dilemma, NCLB requires that classrooms be led by educators fulfilling the federal definition of "highly qualified" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, October). The resulting conundrum that this "highly qualified" requirement may pose to school administrators appears to have many layers: Principals must staff classrooms with teachers meeting federal qualification definitions; NCLB suggests that only highly qualified educators can raise achievement levels to those required by 2014; yet, in order to replace highly qualified teachers with new, incoming educators, student teachers (STs) require field placement in classrooms that must be turned over to the novice for a portion of the placement. Thus, as schools strive to meet AYP, with the long-term expectation that every child meet or exceed standards in tested subject areas by 2014 (United States Department of Education, 2002, October), mounting pressures may be impinging on school-university partnerships when candidates must complete student teaching internships to receive certification, as illustrated in Appendix A.

Connection to Literature

TEPs face challenges in the placement of pre-service teachers (Goddard, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sinclair, Dawson, & Thistleton-Martin, 2006; Smith, 2002). A plethora of literature clearly reveals how student teaching has evolved (Campoy, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Goodlad, 1991, 1994a; Holmes Group, 1990; Patterson, 1999); as well as the importance of the student teaching experience (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goodlad, 1997; Veal & Rikard, 1998). Developing literature describes STs positive impact on achievement (i.e., Fisher, Frey, & Farnan, 2004) along with STs high expectations of what they will do and gain in field experiences (Fives, Hamman, & Olivarez, 2007).

However, there is a dearth of literature reporting on placement approval processes (Tannehil & Goc-Karp, 1992) or what influences principal and CTs' decision-making when accepting or declining student teacher placements (Korinek, 1989; Sinclair, Dawson, & Thistleton-Martin, 2006). In fact, there are no known studies on placement decision-making processes used by K–12 educators in the U.S., especially since enactment of NCLB and its concomitant mandate that all classrooms be staffed with "highly qualified" teachers.

Objectives

This study explored influences on placement of STs by principals and CTs in cooperating schools. The overarching question (Creswell, 2003) (which framed four research questions that guided this study) was: What perceptions frame current, as well as future, placement decisions among principals and cooperating teachers? The study's sample included

five principals and five teachers representing "typical cases"[1] (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005) in a large, urban district that had numerous formal and informal partnerships with TEPs state-wide. Participants were pre-screened with a brief questionnaire to determine eligibility for participation.

Mode of Inquiry and Methods

In this phenomenological study, only principals and teachers who actually experienced both acceptance and rejection of STs were interviewed, to find the "essence" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of participants' "lived experiences" (Creswell, 1998). The setting was a large, urban district offering a range and number of schools (over 30 elementary, middle and high schools). Seidman's (2006) three-stage interview method was used, to facilitate participant "re-awakening" (Moustakas, 1994) via in-depth, semi-structured initial interviews of approximately 90 minutes, and second interviews of 45-60 minutes. This afforded participants an opportunity to describe their past, present and future placement decisions within three contexts: external forces, motivations, and environmental conditions. These three overarching categories, used to bind the study's data collection, (Miles & Huberman, 1994), emerged from a pilot study of this topic that was peer-reviewed prior to collection of data for this reported study.

Data Sources

The primary data source was the interview transcripts. Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after interviews were conducted, and coded using pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and *NVIVO7* software. Additionally, trustworthiness (Patton, 2003) of the study was established via the following procedures and data sources:

[1] A "typical case" was defined as having approved some (at least 2-3 since enactment of NCLB) but not all applications sent to principals and teachers for student teacher placement.

1. Participant review/signature approval on transcripts and member checking;

2. A researcher's reflexive journal, throughout data collection/analysis, to engage in "bracketing" and "research reflexivity" (Miles & Huberman, 1994);

3. Several follow-up questions, noted in the field notes and interview protocol, to produce "thick" (Geertz, 1973) descriptions.

Results

Coded data analysis reveals four influences in the ST placement decision-making experience: (1) multiple filtration steps; (2) professional obligation; (3) relinquishment & perplexity; and (4) desire to increase stability in candidate placement. Below are summaries of each finding, with quotations to offer a flavor of the responses.

Multiple Filtration Steps

"I just know I email (the principal) back and … next thing … you're getting a student teacher either calling you…or something but, yeah, no, I don't know. It's a big mystery isn't it?"

Multiple filtration steps guided initial placement decision-making. Participants described how all placement requests must originate from the district office, before principals could review them. Teachers typically received requests last; candidates rarely, if ever, were involved: *"I talked to my principal and he said, 'I'm just waiting for them to come from downtown.'…They don't come directly to the school first; then they ship them out…he gets them…. From that point, on they go!"*

Descriptions also highlighted how sub-filters were characterized by *ambiguity*. Participants struggled to describe any specific standards, except for tenure, that were used by

principals, or by teachers, to guide placement decisions: Said one regarding final selection: *"There's no set rhyme or reason…who gets one (candidate) or doesn't."*

Haphazardness also characterized this dimension of placement. Here, a number of "name-only" or "application-only" decisions were revealed: *"If it (placement request) comes through the central office…they just want to fill the need; the school is the place that has to make it happen. But if they (the school) don't have any commitment to that…[t]hey may say, 'Ah, we're not taking any more student teachers, I'm not sending that email on.'"* Additionally, only some candidates were actively screened: *"(It's) hit and miss because some of our teachers want to do a pre-interview before they make a decision and then others say, 'No, I'll take my chances.'"*

Professional Obligation

"At one point in time that was me…There were good people who picked me up and helped me out…It's a way to give back … in that altruistic way."

Professional obligation and a sense of commitment to renew the profession were prevalent influences in ST placement decisions. Many described their desire to re-create (or to re-vamp) their own cooperating teacher's mentorship: *"We needed somebody to agree to take us in their classroom… I think back to my experience…I had a wonderful experience, and it had everything to do with what…my Cooperating Teacher was willing to allow me to do."*

Conversely, a conundrum of obligation to candidates and to one's K-12 students emerged. Participants explicated how some candidates appeared underprepared for the actual classroom. Some chose to avert any potentially controversial situations with such candidates, by potentially declining the request vs. accepting the novice to help further with his/her

professional development: *"It's a responsibility to take on a student teacher, even the best one, and so to take on something that they feel is not a good match can turn that responsibility into a big responsibility, that can sometimes become a headache …."*

Relinquishment and Perplexity

"When they take on a student teacher, they are as the regular teacher; they're responsible for those students' learning and …teachers are very concerned…about, "I need to make sure I get a good one here because that student teacher has got to be able to deliver as well as I do or better."

Here, participants revealed how relinquishment of instructional control has strong influence in ST placement decisions. Some approvals were guided by desire and need for classroom assistance, a *second pair of hands: "We have a … higher student to staff ratio than many other buildings in the district, so by bringing in (student teacher) folks…you lower that ratio a little bit."*

Conversely, *high-stakes testing/accountability* appeared as a condition that potentially decreases or eradicates placement approvals. Participants revealed how some candidates face rejection, due to high-stakes testing pressure: *"If it was during FMSAT (pseudonym) time and I knew that student teacher was going to have a direct impact on my kids' FMSAT scores, I would be very choosy, without a doubt. I would be extremely choosy…and it's really sad that this is what has happened…that I have to worry about training a teacher because my test scores…might be lower."* Principals further illustrated how high-stakes pressure deters some faculty (esp. Math or English) altogether: *"I know I can't approach my English teachers... they know what they need to do in order to get the kids prepared for the next level…and doing that preparation with a student teacher can be hard, or just too much."* Others described how

candidates were apprised of explicit conformities/directives if placed in their classroom: "*My pressure's the test … especially when it comes to this No Child Left Behind law. I'm accountable. So, if I say, 'This is the material' then…that's the material. I tell them, 'I like the creativity part. Don't get me wrong, but there's certain things that have to be taught.' "*

Desire to Increase Stability

"This is like a marriage…sharing my classroom and my children with another student teacher so I really think it's nice to actually have the opportunity to get your feet wet in working with that person, (to) see if it's something that you can do."

With a shift to future time, participants described *desire to increase placement stability,* forecasting ways to improve upon placement. Speculation over how to increase stability included universities improving cooperating teacher training; support and incentives (*"Having a student teacher is like what, $2 an hour?"*); further developing candidate readiness and dispositions (*"to fit…in our diverse environment");* and boosting screening measures (*"I mean we don't really basically know each other from Adam; and you're putting two people together").* Variance with field experience models (i.e. avoiding state testing periods; "chunking" traditionally-longer internships; and "extending" placements: *"Doing their pre-student teaching practicum…followed by their student teaching"* also were suggested frequently.

Descriptions further included how *gaps between placement and mandates* might lessen approvals over time. Again, AYP and concomitant high-stakes tests appeared to be conditions that have import—typically negative—on these participants' willingness to approve future placements: *"Stakes are becoming so high that teachers are losing their*

perspective, and…if you're afraid of what your test scores are going to be…you are less apt to have a student teacher and I don't think you'd …get an asterisk next to your scores that say, 'Had student teacher for 16 weeks.'"

Relevance

"My perception is universities…certainly struggle to get good placements ...So maybe beggars can't be choosers….."

This study resulted in the discovery of common, underlying essences (Moustakas, 1994) that comprise the placement decision-making experience for participants: multiple and dynamic levels of policy, involvement and autonomy that are perceived as imposed upon or subject to further influence by the decision-maker. Figure 1 illustrates:

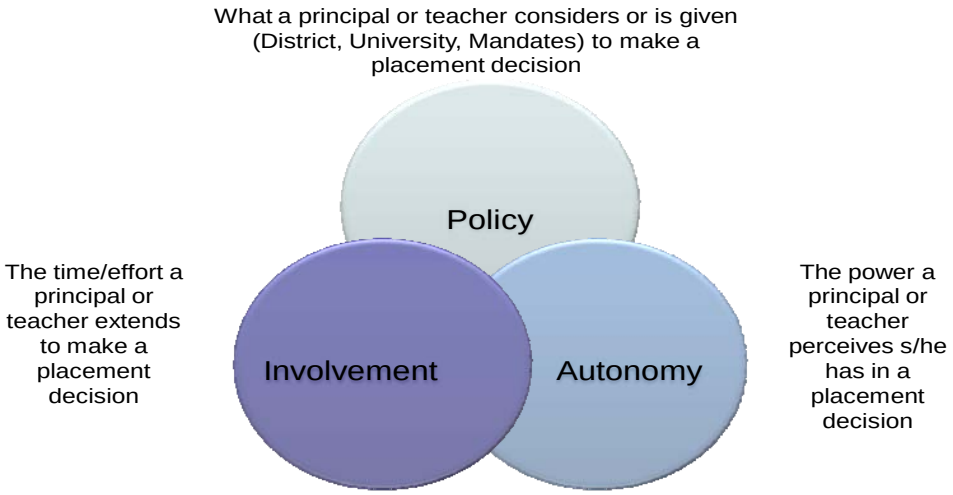

Figure 1. The Underlying Essence of the Placement Decision

This placement study also results in a proposed placement decision-making model that illustrates the interconnectedness of these underlying essences to placement approvals. The model is framed by the research of Waters, Marzano, & McNulty (2004) that outlines change focus as well as first and second order change perceptions.

Specifically, this study highlights for TEPs how some school personnel may perceive placement decisions as a positive or negative “change focus," and as “first order” or “second order” change (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Decision-makers appear more likely to perceive a positive “change focus” when they identified or focused on ST placement as a "school and classroom practice…most likely to have a positive impact on student achievement in their school” (p. 7). If/when a positive change focus emerged; there was increased likelihood that ST placement consequently was perceived as a "first-order" change.[2] In this study, such positive impact on placement approvals appeared to occur more so when participants perceived that they were within, and not outside of, decision-making boundaries. Thus, first-order change perception may emerge when participants perceive that they have, or could have, at least some policy input, involvement and/or autonomy in a placement approval. Examples of this include how screening interviews were added by principals or CTs; when participants strongly considered a placement so as to "pay back" the profession; and when STs were perceived as improving student-teacher ratios. In Figure 2, the areas where placement decision-making essences overlap illustrates how positive change focus and, hence, first-order change perceptions may emerge. In such cases, decision-makers are more likely to approve placement requests—especially when all essentials converge:

[2] As Waters, et.al., asserts, "first-order" change perceptions enter into decision-making when a proposed or enacted change is perceived as (a) consistent with values and norms; (b) creating advantages for stakeholders; or (c) one that can be implemented with existing resources/knowledge.

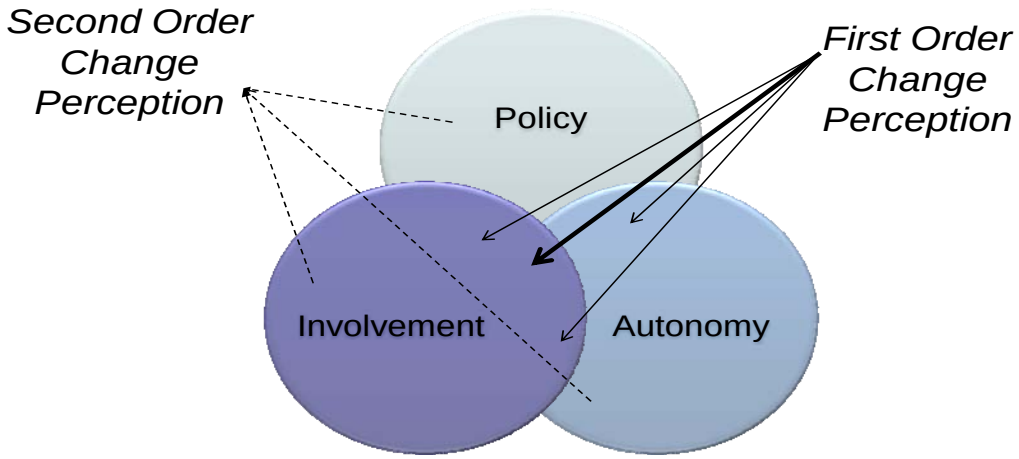

Figure 2. Proposed Placement Decision-Making Model

Conversely, this study also illustrates how some perceived ST placement as a negative "change focus;" that is, as a “problem facing schools” (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004, p. 11). As Waters, et al., identifies, this focus may result in "second order change” perceptions.[3] In this study, this potentially negative impact on placements appeared to occur more so when participants perceived that they were outside of, and not within, decision-making boundaries. Thus, second-order change perceptions may emerge when participants perceive that they have, or later may have, little/no policy input, involvement and/or autonomy in a placement decision. Examples here include when the central office randomly delivered e-mailed placement requests to buildings, merely to "fill a need,"; when participants speculated that potential problems—"headaches"—could emerge with a poorly-matched candidate; and when

[3] As Waters, et.al.,asserts, second-order change is characterized by perceptions that the change (a) does not make anything patently better; (b) requires new approaches/learning; or (c) conflicts with prevailing values/norms.

testing mandates imbued the decision-maker's perceptions of and commitment to instructional outcomes. In Figure 2, isolated spaces in the placement decision-making model illustrate how, when decision-makers perceive little or no influence on policy input, involvement and/or autonomy, second-order change perceptions may emerge. These and other second-order change perceptions in placement decisions appear more likely to lead to ST denials.

Thus, this research supports and expands upon Zeichner's views of "disconnect" (2002) along with "opposing forces" (1980) illustrating how principals, CTs and ST candidates may face polarities—in the actual placement decision-making experience—and not exclusively in field experience conduction itself. As illustrated in a proposed placement decision-making pyramid (Figure 3), while CTs and principals in this study perceive the placement decision as a professional obligation to advance the learning of a ST novice, they also consider their K-12 students' learning needs in their "change focus." The first tier of the proposed placement decision-making pyramid illustrates how principals and CTs initially may approach placement decisions, relative to change focus. This first tier also potentially forebodes how placement decisions may be characterized by additional, compounding levels that may impact placement approvals.

The second tier in Figure 3 illustrates how compounding “opposing forces” or “disconnect" may emerge in placement decisions. Specifically, participants described a polarization or inner conflict to (a) “give somebody a chance,” to “pay back” the profession—ultimately, to have “teaching impact” (Adams, Hutchinson, & Martray, 1980; Buhler, 1956) or; (b) to focus on a “primary correlate” (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2004) known to improve instructional practice (i.e., achievement and student test scores). Consequently, this

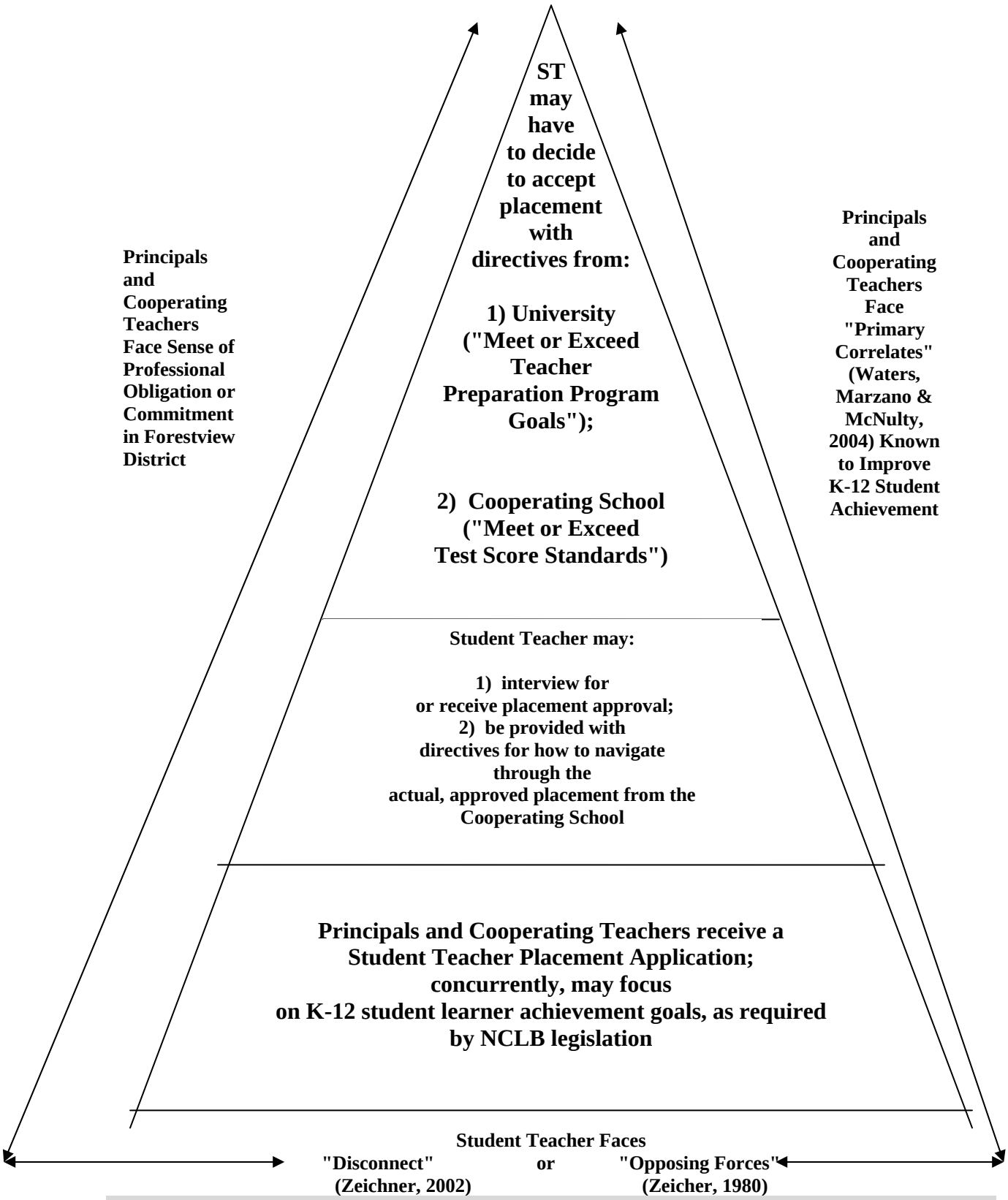

Figure 3. Placement Decision-Making Pyramid

may cause decision-makers some consternation when determining whether or not to relinquish instructional control to a novice. To resolve this potential polarity, principals and CTs may provide directives to STs that (a) may align with “primary correlates” known to boost K–12 achievement (i.e., high-stakes test scores); (b) possibly may not align with objectives in the ST’s TEP.

And as illustrated in the third tier, this polarity may lead some STs to the apex of a placement decision, where some may find themselves caught in the crux of a very complex, second-order change dilemma. Here, STs may experience what Zeichner describes as “opposing forces” (1980); that is, STs having to reflect more of the attitudes and behaviors of school personnel vs. her own attitudes and behaviors. At this critical juncture in a field experience, Zeichner suggests that STs no longer may know whether to use the theories and philosophies, methodologies and strategies as presented in their TEP—or to simply do what they are told by the school—a “disconnect” that may leave STs alone to resolve. However, this paper illustrates how STs may face this polarity much earlier than in the actual field experience—in the actual placement decision-making process itself.

Recommendations

"Until we have won this battle, high quality student teaching placements will continue to be a matter of good fortune rather than the norm" (Zeichner, 2002).

Consequently, this paper prepares TEPs to address challenges as identified in NCATEs *"Field Experiences"* accreditation rubrics, specific to placement practices. As multiple *Area Three* standards as required by NCATE reveal, teacher education no longer is viewed as teacher "training" so much as it focuses on students’ learning that takes place in K-12 classrooms (Marchant, Schoenfeldt, & Powell, 2003). Final analysis of what participants

shared in this study, especially in the second phase of data collection, brings forward numerous ways for TEPS to mitigate potential placement challenges. Specifically, TEPs that suspect similar "opposing force" placement decisions within their partnerships/placement sites should strive to do the following with principals and cooperating teachers: *Increase Autonomy; Increase Policy Awareness; Increase Involvement;* and *Reduce Appropriate "Disconnects" that Negatively Impact Placement.* Table 1 illustrates specific ways for TEPs to enact these recommendations.

Conclusion

TEPs face compounding complexities and challenges in ST placement. This research explores the placement decision-making experience of five principals and five CTs and finds that placement decisions have four significant influences. The paper also illustrates how ST placement may be perceived either as "first-" or "second-order change." A model is presented in this paper, to illustrate how school personnel may negotiate a decision to approve or to decline ST placements. This study expands upon how Zeichner's views of "opposing forces" and "disconnect" no longer manifest exclusively in the actual field experience itself. Rather, STs may have to appease specific people and policies in the placement decision-making process itself—paying heed to "meet or exceed"—to secure a placement that, ultimately, may be somewhat or vastly different than what is hoped for by the TEP. The study therefore underscores need for TEPs to act upon any "change focus" perceptions that may significantly influence ST placement within or outside of school-university partnerships.

INCREASING AUTONOMY
• Exploration of placement rejections • Collection of anecdotal evidence of filtration protocols in cooperating schools • Partnership discussions/focus groups with district offices and principals, especially to uncover perceived reasons or need for candidate placement • Inclusion of teachers as an earlier point of contact in the placement decision • Encourage candidates to establish relationships with cooperating schools early in their preparation programs

INCREASING POLICY AWARENESS
• Engage stakeholders in establishment of clear policies and procedures to guide candidate placement • Focus efforts on the closing of gaps in placement decisions created by policy ambiguity • Reduce, and eventually eliminate, haphazard placement practices (i.e. placement of by application- or name-only approvals) • Focus long-term efforts on the attainment of placement policies in a written agreement signed by cooperating school and teacher preparation program • Provide clear handbooks, evaluation instruments and policies that guide ST selection/approval, to accompany any existing field experience handbooks that articulate post-placement guidelines

INCREASING INVOLVEMENT
• Initiate school-university partnership discussions that explore more personalized systems of placement, with emphasis on incremental phasing-in of new models • Experiment with varying models of less traditional placement (i.e. "Extended" placements) • Consider reversing the sequence of placement requests (i.e., schools send lists of interested teachers to universities versus placement applications going first to schools) • Appoint faculty vs. adjunct supervisors to remediate issues arising from unsuccessful placements • Re-examine incentives (i.e. stipends, tuition waivers) provided to cooperating school personnel

REDUCING OVERALL "DISCONNECT"
• Distribute open-ended surveys to poll principals and teachers regarding overall candidate performance and "reality readiness," including candidate knowledge and skills pertaining to standardized test instruction • Conduct curriculum articulation meetings with cooperating schools, to close any observable disconnects in candidate readiness (esp. in areas of classroom management, diversity, and standardized achievement test preparation) • Explore and act on any human or financial resource shortcomings in the field experience office that jeopardizes the arrangement of high quality placements • Provide time and resources to NCLB-related issues impacting placement, including the "highly qualified" definition and AYP modifications for classrooms where candidates are placed

Table 1. Mitigating Actual or Potential ST Placement Challenges

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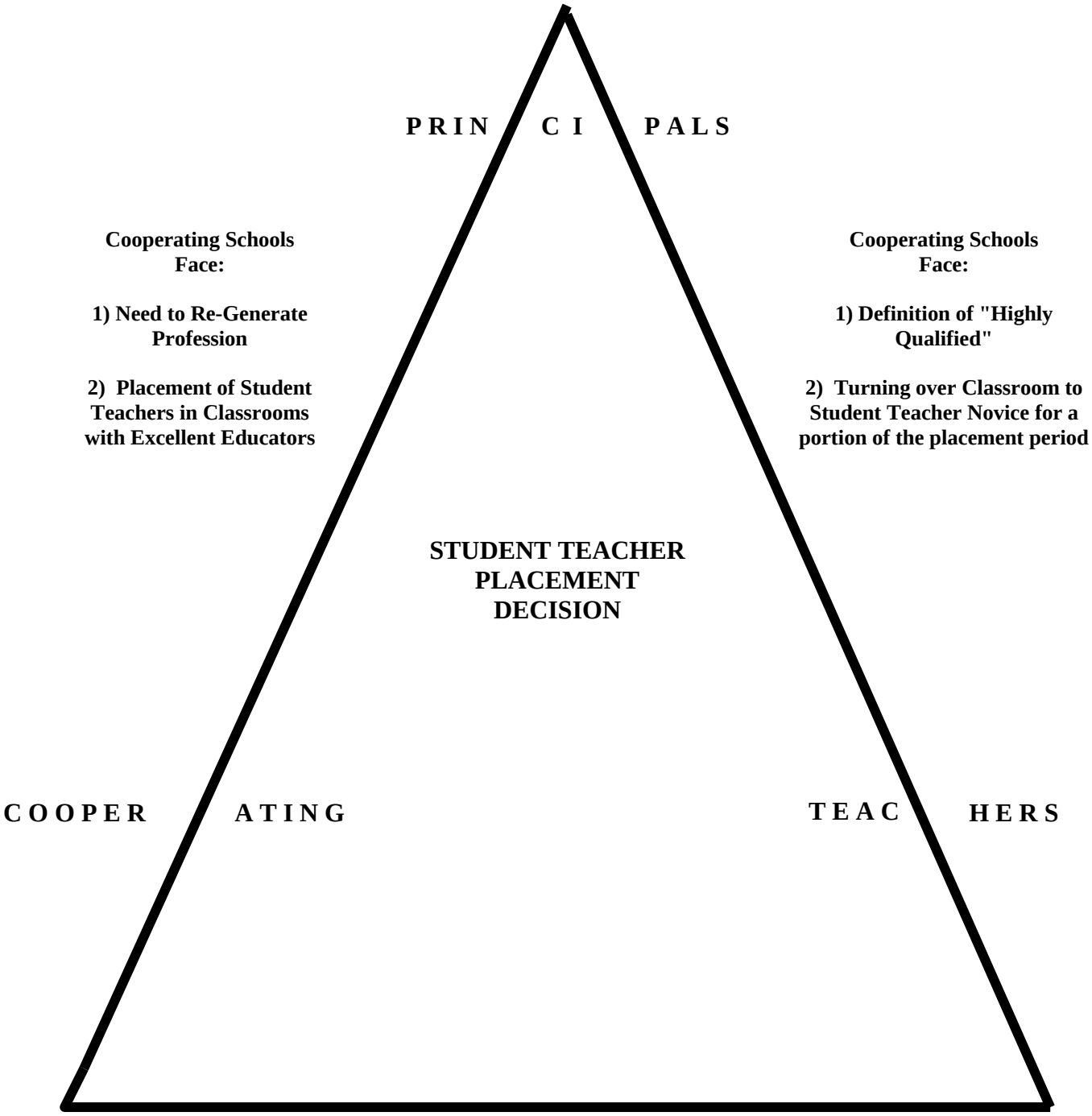

Appendix A. PLACEMENT REQUESTS:
An Oxymoron Facing Cooperating Schools