Examining Decision Making in Higher Education: A Study of Teacher Educators' Choices within Writing Methods Courses

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Abstract

Determining what to include in higher education courses can be complex. In teacher preparation, methods courses include both content and pedagogy instruction. Teacher educators often struggle to determine how to balance these aspects. Thus, this study examined the influences on teacher educators' instructional decision making. We focused on writing methods instructors because this content is often deprioritized in teacher preparation programs. The participants represented eight different institutions in one focal state. The results indicated that although the university context varied greatly, the lack of dedicated writing methods courses and challenges associated with field placements consistently shaped decision making. Similarly, participants shared overlapping responses related to decisions regarding designing the course content to address the needs of their students. Furthermore, teacher educators reported that the candidates themselves influenced instructional decision making. These findings and their implications are discussed.

Keywords: writing methods, preservice teachers, instruction, teacher education

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"Teaching is, essentially, a learned profession. A teacher is a member of a scholarly community" (Shulman, 1987, p. 9). If pK-12 teaching is a learned profession, it follows that teaching in the realm of higher education is also a learned profession. Nevertheless, like most in higher education, teacher educators have historically learned their trade with much variability and with little guidance (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). Unlike many of their higher education colleagues, however, teacher educators are tasked with teaching both content (subject area expertise and human development expertise) and pedagogy in their preparation of professionals.

Over time, the situation for teacher educators has become increasingly complex. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001), Response to Intervention, Race to the Top, progress monitoring, value-added teacher evaluation, and Common Core State Standards have left literacy teacher educators, for example, trying to fit as much as possible into methods courses (Kreutter et al., 2013; Stumbo & McWalters, 2011). The challenge is compounded by competing calls regarding what content to include and which pedagogies work best to support the development of candidates' literacy expertise (Martin, Chase, Cahill & Gregory, 2011). Despite calls for improved preparation of teacher candidates in writing instruction and more writing courses in all teacher preparation programs (National Commission for Writing, 2003), candidates still receive little instruction in writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014; Myers et al., 2016).

Without a framework or curriculum for writing methods instruction, teacher educators are often left on their own to make decisions. Thus, teacher candidates - who deserve to have equitable experiences with writing content and pedagogy - are likely to be leaving teacher preparation programs with a range of skills and competencies. This led us to wonder: In the absence of systematic training and induction into their practice, how do teacher educators make

decisions about their writing methods courses and teaching? And while this is a question particularly pertinent to writing methods instruction, it is also relevant for higher educators more generally, particularly those who are not inducted into their teaching in a systematic way.

Related Literature

Influences

Teacher educators choose from among different alternatives each time they plan and teach methods courses. Their decision making is complex, and research suggests several factors that influence decision making. First, coming from different backgrounds, teacher educators may recognize, understand, and emphasize different aspects of education (Kleickmann et al., 2012). These perspectives are anchored by the educators' views and their personal and professional understandings from experience (Hinchman & Lalik, 2000) which influences their instructional decision making (Prachagool, Nuangchalerm, Subramaniam, & Dostal, 2016).

Second, the context in which a teacher educator teaches influences, informs, and impacts decisions (Martin & Dismuke, 2015). The context can include the political, philosophical, and cultural context(s) of the teacher education program, the department, the school of education, the institution as a whole, or the broader communities. These contexts can often inspire collaboration or foster isolation. Some institutions of higher education value individual scholarship rather than the sharing of common goals and student outcomes. Thus, many instructors lack opportunities to engage with other teacher educators on the critical topic of teaching practices (Kluth & Straut, 2003) and connect individual contexts with broader understandings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In addition, research suggests that the decisions teacher educators make may differ based on their roles and responsibilities (Shulman, 1992) in those particular contexts. Just like classroom teachers, teacher educators enhance their decision making through professional

experiences, including peer observations, opportunities to work with various stakeholders, and opportunities to be engaged with research and policy.

The contexts in which educators teach is also shaped by students. Seven teacher educators at different universities, in a study by Kreutter et al. (2013), recognized that they focused much of their decision making based on knowledge of their students. The teacher candidates at their institutions ranged in terms of level of education, SES, age, and race. Based on the specific needs of their students, the teacher educators deliberately chose content and taught in a way they thought their students could best absorb the information. A participant in that study shared, "You can't just walk in and teach the same course to everybody. You have to know your group and work accordingly" (p. 29).

Challenges

In many ways, all teacher education courses—all higher education courses—are constrained by time (Martin et al., 2011). Often, teacher educators report trying to squeeze as much as possible into every class, while at the same time fretting about what was left out (Kreutter et al., 2013). These decisions may feel overwhelming, because as Gulliksen and Hjardemaal (2016) note, it is often a struggle to balance what is practically possible to cover in one course. Teacher educators question if they should try to teach as many skills as possible, or instead teach general concepts and leave the learning of specific skills for later (Kennedy, 1987). An additional challenge, for teacher educators, is contrasting views presented by research in the field. For example, Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2005) believe it is imperative for candidates to understand the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of literacy development. Honan and Mitchell (2016) instead stress the need to prepare candidates with the skills, knowledge, and understanding required to work within the complex context of public schools. The Core Practices Consortium takes a somewhat different tack, focusing on the role of teacher education in

preparing candidates to engage in particular teaching practices that are demonstrable, attainable, important for high-quality teaching, and generally transcend content area (Core Practices Consortium, 2013).

An additional time constraint may be how much time candidates spend or do not spend in field experiences, including student teaching. Not only does this often impact the decisions instructors make in terms of assignments but also guides the types of discussions they have in class. Kreutter et al. (2013) found that she and her colleagues spent a lot of time scaffolding students' conceptual development with discussion and situated practice specifically through classroom simulations and field placements. Martin et al. (2011) encourages teacher educators to be cognizant of the attention or lack of attention they give to field placements. The decisions we make as teacher educators may also be informed by how much time we spend in the field (Snow & Martin, 2014).

Regardless of the influences or challenges involved in the process of decision making, each instructor makes decisions that privilege some types of information over others or one form of instruction or assessment over another. Martin et al. (2011) argue that in doing so, teacher educators inadvertently frame candidates' understandings of teacher practices.

Impact on Teacher Candidates

Research on teacher development indicates the decisions teacher educators make, in terms of providing learning experiences, affect change and growth for teacher candidates (Valencia, Place, Martin, & Grossman, 2006). Risko and colleagues (2008) found that methods courses in strong teacher education programs contributed to teacher candidates' understandings within and across particular subject areas. In other words, there is a coherence of strategies that candidates can transfer across topics and across content areas. In another study, Martin et al.

(2011) found that the quality of the methods courses impacted the candidates' ability to transfer and coordinate understandings to unique and uncertain contexts.

Further impacting K-12 teacher candidate development is the ability for teacher educators to unpack teaching and learning (Loughran, Korthagen, & Russell, 2008). Grossman et al. (2000) found the modeling of practical tools in literacy courses, coupled with opportunities for candidates to use these tools in a practicum, supported teachers' early instructional practices. Thus, the decisions the teacher educators made in that study regarding the content and the pedagogy of their methods courses impacted candidates' level of success in the classroom.

Some educators feel that the decisions they make in terms of what to include in methods courses should reflect the reality of today's schools (Kreutter et al., 2013). Others choose to try to balance practical information and teaching theory (Hinchman & Lalik, 2000), often with the goal of preparing candidates not only to teach in schools as they are but also to be equipped to improve schools. Regardless of the philosophy of the teacher education program, candidates must have opportunities to acquire knowledge throughout their training (Holloway, 2001) and their instructors must engage in ongoing reflection in order to provide the most comprehensive program possible (Korthegan, 2010).

It is clear from the research highlighted above that instructor decision making is complex and that there is not yet agreement on how best to engage in teacher education. The current study sheds light on the dilemmas of selecting what to include in methods instruction by examining what influences teacher educators' decision making in writing methods courses.

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of our study, we focused on how the content and pedagogy, the candidates, and the context influenced the decision making of elementary writing methods instructors. We framed our analysis in the work on teacher professional knowledge (Shulman,

1987). First, teachers need to have a deep understanding of what is to be learned by students. In the case of elementary writing methods instruction, that content might include the writing process, the elements of writer's craft, and writing assessment. Instructors also need to know how teacher candidates learn, including making the content relevant and engaging.

Second, teachers need to understand who their students are, their background knowledge and experiences, and how they learn. Elementary writing methods instructors must understand their students' experiences with, and knowledge about, writing and writing instruction, including what coursework they have already engaged in and what role writing plays in their lives. These instructors can also be aware of any discomfort or anxiety that students may have around language arts.

Third, teachers need to understand the context in which they are teaching and how to adapt their instruction in order to meet the needs of their students within that context. For elementary writing methods instructors, this may mean being able to contextualize writing methods within a teacher preparation program and understanding the broader political context around writing instruction. These aspects of Shulman's theoretical framework support our research question: In the absence of systematic training and induction into their practice, how do teacher educators make decisions about their courses and teaching?

Methods

We used survey (Babbie, 1990), interview (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), and observation methodology to investigate the ways teacher preparation programs in one focal state prepare their elementary teachers to teach writing. The research team began by developing and piloting a 30-item electronic survey designed to provide information about demographics, a description of teacher preparation coursework, and information about the instructional strategies utilized by writing methods educators. We piloted the survey and used expert feedback to modify

the format and hone the questions.

The survey began by asking questions specific to the literacy program each instructor taught in such as how many literacy courses are required of candidates, how many hours of class time is devoted to writing methods instruction, how much ownership they feel they have over the course. Then the survey questions shifted to the contexts in which candidates are placed for field experiences and thus asked questions like what are the writing programs the schools/school divisions tend to use in the schools where their candidates tend to teach, and approximately how many hours are devoted to writing instruction each week. The third section of the survey delved into the instructors' specific teaching practices, asking for a brief outline the key assignments for the course and an approximate of what percentage of class time across the semester they used for the following activities: lectures, whole-class discussions, demonstrations (live or video), small group discussions, small group tasks/projects, presentations by students, preparing for and/or taking exams, and other. Additional questions included: What do you feel works particularly well in your course? and What more would you like to know in order to inform your practice?

The survey link was sent to a total of 40 elementary writing methods instructors at the 35 institutions that offer teacher preparation programs in the focal state. Seventeen participants responded, representing thirteen of the institutions and a 43% response rate. This is a typical return rate for online surveys (Jackson, 2009). Out of the thirteen institutions, 54% were public and 46% private. Of the seventeen participants from the survey, 88% were female and 12% male, and 94% had a terminal degree.

Researchers charted and presented quantitative survey element data in tables and graphs. A research team read and coded qualitative survey responses, then submitted the data to a second team for verification of coding and themes, filtering for teacher educator decision-making

practices. Based on the survey results, eight of the seventeen instructors agreed to be interviewed and observed as part of phase two. See Table 1 for participant information.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	University	Location	Dedicated Writing Methods Course
Dr. Darrow	Public	Urban	No
Dr. Everett	Private	Rural	No
Dr. Church	Public	Suburban	No
Dr. Cole	Private	Rural	No
Dr. Avell	Public	Rural	No
Dr. Combs	Public	urban	Yes
Dr. Schoon	Public	urban	Yes
Dr. Oakes	Public	Rural	No

The 45-minute interviews used a semi-structured interview protocol (Schensul et al., 1999) and asked the instructors to share information such as if there were researchers or curriculum developers who influenced or impacted their teacher education practice. In addition, there were questions that specifically asked them to expand on their survey responses such as: In the survey, you indicated that _____ works particularly well in your course. Tell me more about that. In the survey, you indicated that _____ is something you'd like to learn more about or work on in your teaching practice. Tell me more about that.

The observations were conducted during a class period of the instructors choosing. Since some of the classes lasted 3 hours and others lasted 1.5 hours, the time of each observation per participant varied. The observation protocol was divided into four constructs: relationships (interactions with and among students), context (set up of the classroom, aspects of cultural competence), physical artifacts (what the instructor brings/uses to facilitate teaching) and content (connections to prior learning, goals, activities, assessment). The researchers took observational notes in the second column and in the third column added comments or questions.

All interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis. Data analysis of the interviews and observations occurred in three phases, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations of data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions.

Findings

This study examined what influenced writing methods teacher educators' instructional decision making. For the purposes of this paper, using Shulman's (1987) facets of teacher professional knowledge, we focus on teacher educators' decisions related to the university context, course content and pedagogy, and their teacher candidates.

Context

The results from the survey, interviews, and observations indicated that teacher educators often made decisions regarding what to include in their writing methods courses based on challenges stemming from their context. These contextual challenges varied across participants but two themes emerged during analysis: a lack of courses specifically focused on writing methods instruction and the varied amount and quality of time candidates spent in schools seeing and/or teaching writing. In the survey, every instructor indicated that time is an issue—time for TCs to practice the skills they are learning and time for the instructors to teach them those skills.

No dedicated writing methods course.

Only 38% of the survey respondents' institutions offered a specific course that focused on writing methods, despite the fact that on average most universities required candidates to take three or more literacy courses. Teacher educators who did not teach a stand-alone writing methods course revealed that they spent anywhere from one class session to 50% of a literacy course on writing. Furthermore, in every program, respondents reported that writing was prioritized the same as reading (35%) or less than reading (65%). No respondents indicated that writing instruction was prioritized more than reading. While 8 of the 17 respondents reported

that they were very satisfied with the course that included writing methods instruction, 9 of the 17 reported that they were only somewhat satisfied or minimally satisfied with the course.

The interview participants described how challenging it was to not have an entire course dedicated to writing methods. For example, Dr. Darrow (all names are pseudonyms) described her course as "a jack of all trades," because it had several foci within a short timeframe. She felt, "we are only scraping the tip of the iceberg," and she added, "Writing is taught badly because I don't think teachers get enough writing instruction and pedagogy in their teacher prep programs." Dr. Darrow would like a 12-week writing methods course so she could go into detail about what writing looks like in K-6 classrooms, be able to share different approaches, and delve more into writing theories and practices.

Dr. Everett made the decision to turn the challenge of not enough time to teach writing using specially chosen texts. She explained that since there is not enough time to read all of the books she would ideally have candidates read, and because the methods courses bring together students interested in different things, she uses literature circles. Dr. Everett said, "So if they're interested in learning about early childhood, I have them read books by Katie Wood Ray. If they are interested in ESL (English as a second language), I have them read a book about writers' workshop in multicultural settings." During the observation in Dr. Everett's class, near the start of class, the candidates met in literature circle groups during which she gave them time to discuss their plan for their book presentations the following week. Since she feels the candidates also need practice and learn more about teaching with technology, Dr. Everett requires them to use various forms of technology to present.

Field placements.

Another contextual challenge that shaped teacher educators' decision making was the quality and the amount of time candidates spent in schools. The survey results showed that on

average the teacher educators estimated that 3.6 hours per week were devoted to writing instruction in the schools where candidates were placed for practicum. The types of writing programs used in the schools varied, including Being a Writer, 6 Traits, Writing Workshop, Write Bright, and the 4 square writing approach. Some of the survey respondents did not know which programs were used, or reported that the schools had no formal writing program. Just 44% of instructors reported that candidates had opportunities to observe writing instruction in schools. Many of the teacher educators wrote comments explaining that although their candidates spent time in schools, how much writing they saw depended on the practicum placement. One survey respondent wrote: *Some teachers are doing a wonderful job teaching writing and embedding it across the school day - so candidates see a lot of writing. Just down the hall at the same school, a candidate might see writing one day a week.*

In interviews, the teacher educators provided more depth about how field placements shaped their decision making. For example, at her university, Dr. Everett's candidates teach two lessons in the schools, "but we don't make it mandatory that it's a writing lesson because, sadly, our students aren't seeing classes where there is a writing workshop structure in the class." To combat this, Dr. Everett often showed short video clips, which she did during an observation. On one particular day, she used a 10-minute video of a teacher using reading/writing workshop in her class. Afterwards, she engaged the candidates in a rich discussion about the practices evident in the video. Dr. Everett made the decision to talk about Writing Workshop and show examples because, as she said, "we know (Writing Workshop) works and have seen it work, they just don't see it in the local schools."

Although Dr. Church teaches in a different part of the state, she faces some of the same challenges as Dr. Everett. In her experience, the practicing teachers with whom candidates are placed are often told by administrators that writing is, "not tested, so don't worry about it." Dr.

Church stated, "As passionate as we are in teaching it, if they're not seeing it, it's hard for them to actually conceptualize where it fits in the day and how to do it." Thus, Dr. Church made the decision to have candidates visit a few *particular* teachers who are implementing the teaching techniques she wants them to observe. Other teacher educators, like Drs. Cole and Avell, decided to include specific assignments to be completed during field experiences so even if the cooperating teacher did not focus on writing, candidates could still experience designing and teaching a writing lesson.

Dr. Combs, whose students are not in practicum classrooms during the course, chose to spend class time examining components of writing assessments used in local schools. She went on to say, "I do have a list of local teachers who are willing for students to come in and I've had a few students take advantage of that over the semester, not as many as I would like, but a few."

Like Dr. Combs, Dr. Schoon does not have a field placement associated with her course. She said, "It's so frustrating not to be able to have them trying it out with real students." One of the decisions Dr. Schoon made as a result of her candidates not being in the field was to have them teach the part of their lessons to a small group of their peers during class. "At least they're having to get the words out … even it if it's not an entirely authentic situation," she said.

Whether or not their candidates had opportunities to observe writing instruction in their field placements, the teacher educators in this study created spaces in their courses for the candidates to see or experience writing instruction. How that looked differed from instructor to instructor; nevertheless, across the instructors, decisions to include strong models were intentional.

Content and Pedagogy

Many of the teacher educators described piecing together their course, since there is not a specific curriculum or common approach to writing methods instruction. This led to varied

decisions about what content to include in the courses as well as their pedagogy. In describing their own philosophy of writing methods instruction, six of the 17 respondents indicated that the most important goal is that candidates identify as writers themselves, while 11 of the 17 respondents prioritized the development of pedagogical skills.

Designing the course content.

When survey respondents were asked to share two to four objectives for the stand-alone writing methods course or the course that housed writing methods instruction, the objectives ranged from understanding phonemic awareness, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension to planning lessons that would facilitate that learning. Some objectives included specific mention of oral communication, literature, writing, research, children's literature, word study, and even content area literacy. In other words, the range of content was very broad. The most-cited goals for the courses were that candidates would learn to lesson plan for writing instruction (53% of respondents mentioned this), assess writing (29% of respondents), demonstrate an understanding of writing standards (24% of respondents), and understand the theory behind writing instruction (24% of respondents). When asked how much ownership they had over the course, 94% of the survey respondents reported that they had a lot of ownership. On average, the respondents' satisfaction with the course was a 3.38 out of 4 (SD=0.62). Feelings of ownership and satisfaction did not, however, mean that the teacher educators found designing the course easy.

Four instructors noted in the surveys that they, themselves, did not have the connections with schools that they would like to have. Being new to the state, Dr. Schoon spent time in local classrooms to better understand the current state of writing instruction in K-6 schools before designing the course. One of Dr. Schoon's goals was to embed more writing into the language arts course. Dr. Schoon said the content of her course was also influenced by the need to include information about working with English learners because, "that's not currently included in any

other course in our program." Similar to Dr. Darrow, the course that Dr. Schoon taught was expected to cover more than writing.

Since Dr. Avell currently teaches at a university that does not have a writing methods course, she had to make decisions about how much writing to include in an "intermediate grade level general literacy course." During the observation, the researchers saw how Dr. Avell incorporated having the candidates write as part of a mentor text mini lesson. First, she had candidates do a quick write about something they were an expert in. She listed some examples such as baking, motocross, photography, fostering animals, and scuba diving. "While you're writing I will also be writing, because as teachers we want to model that we are writers." Then as a class, they "mined" the mentor text *A Black Hole is Not a Black Hole,* looking closely at the nonfiction text to find examples of strong sentences. After identifying certain sentences that stood out to them, like starting with a hook or a question or using onomatopoeia, the candidates revised their own writing using one of the sentence styles from the mentor text. Although the purpose of this part of class was to introduce the idea of mentor texts to the candidates, Dr. Avell decided to incorporate time for the candidates to write as part of the lesson.

Choosing pedagogies.

On the survey, the participants were asked to sort a list of activities based on how much course time those activities comprised. The respondents reported that small group discussions, tasks or projects take up the most time followed by demonstrations (live or video), whole class discussions, presentations by students, lecture, and exam preparation/other. Specifically, 16 of the 17 respondents reported using small group work (discussion, tasks, or projects) as one of the top three ways class time was used. Fifteen of 17 respondents reported demonstrations as one of the top three ways time was spent. Nine and eight respondents, respectively, reported lectures and class discussion comprised the most class time. When asked what works well in the course,

several of the respondents specifically mentioned modeling writing pedagogy through videos of teaching and live demonstrations, students' role play (i.e. practice taking on the role of a teacher/student), as well as examining and critiquing existing curricula and teaching strategies. Every instructor shared that hands-on, active learning seemed to work well for their TCs.

Through the interviews, the researchers got a better understanding of how the teacher educators made decisions about pedagogy. Dr. Darrow said, "I try as much as possible to bring in the tools that I would use as a teacher or that I would like them to use in a classroom." During an observation this was seen when Dr. Darrow gave candidates time to look through various personal narrative picture books. She wanted them to think of a prewriting strategy and a quick writing suggestion that could be used with the text as a springboard for their student's own writing of personal narratives. After working in small groups, the candidates shared out a summary of their book and how they might use it as a mentor text.

Several of the instructors, including Drs. Schoon, Avell, and Combs, reported employing similar types of instruction such as having candidates conduct writing conferences where one first acts like the teacher and the other is the student before switching roles. Dr. Combs shared, "More active things I find effective." During an observation in Dr. Combs' class, it was clear that she valued candidates being engaged. During one part of the three-hour class she had them stand in a circle and read aloud a favorite part of Alice Walker's *The Other Dancer*. Combs engaged the candidates in this activity in order to show them one way they could help their future students get more comfortable reading aloud so they can eventually transition to reading their own writing aloud.

Content and pedagogy clearly drove many of the decisions the teacher educators made related to how to teach writing. The instructors chose what and how they taught based on what

they thought would be most effective. Their own experiences, coupled with the constraints and affordances of the context, shaped those decisions. So, too, did their particular candidates.

Candidates

The open-ended survey responses as well as the interviews revealed teacher educators made decisions specific to writing instruction based on teacher candidates' writing identities and proficiencies as writers. Depending on the context, some instructors voiced varying levels of concern regarding candidates' comfort with and preparation for the content of writing instruction.

Candidates' identities as writers.

Some teacher educators made comments about the importance of candidates' writing identities in the survey when describing their philosophy of teaching writing. For example, one respondent wrote: *We must help our candidates see themselves as writers and value writing as a process if we hope that they will make time to teach writing effectively in their future classrooms.*

One way the instructors made decisions related to supporting candidates' identities as writers was getting them involved in the writing process. On the survey, participants wrote statements such as: *I believe it's important for students to experience writing themselves and think about their own experiences with writing* and *I have the candidates experience what it is like to be writers and take a piece through writer's workshop.* Numerous participants shared that they have candidates write in various genres and keep a writer's notebook or journal.

The interviews and observations also showed evidence of teacher educator decision making specific to supporting candidates' identities as writers. Dr. Everett said, "Having the experience of doing their own writing, you can't replace that. because if you don't take the time to do that then it's not going to work." Dr. Everett, who teaches a combined social studies and language arts methods course, still makes the decision to build in time for candidates to write.

"Writing every day is important in elementary schools," said Dr. Oakes. Thus, she encourages her candidates to also write throughout the week. During an observation in Dr. Oakes classroom, her passion for having candidates develop as writers themselves was seen by her choice to start class with a quick write, asking them to think back to when they were younger and to describe their most prized possession.

Candidates' proficiency as writers.

In the surveys, two instructors indicated that their TCs' skill levels presented a challenge. Beyond that, in interviews, many of the teacher educators spoke about candidates' trepidation around writing and how that shaped their decision making. Dr. Cole shared "I find that a lot of candidates are afraid of writing, and they don't know how to teach it." Other teacher educators described how they worked to create developmentally appropriate presentations of the content and used pedagogies they hoped candidates would use in future teaching. For example, Dr. Combs decided to place candidates in writing groups so they had opportunities to practice doing self-evaluations, and getting and giving feedback on writing. This is important, according to Dr. Combs, because college students typically revise as they write. Slowing the process down, "like we want them to do with elementary school students in the classroom," is key to successful teaching. During an observation in Dr. Combs class, candidates were given 40 minutes to work with their writing teams. As the candidates listened to each person's personal narrative, they wrote questions, then they took turns sharing "a glow and a grow." Dr. Combs clearly valued supporting candidates' proficiency as writers by deciding to devote that much class time to this activity.

Dr. Oakes indicated that although her candidates are required to take a college-level writing course, many of them still struggle with writing. As a result, she decided to incorporate assignments intended to develop her candidates' confidence as writers, such as having them go

through the writing process, step-by-step, while creating a personal narrative. During the observation, Dr. Oakes supported the candidates' vocabulary development. The previous week, she had asked them to look for unfamiliar words in their readings. In class, as they discussed the words, Dr. Oakes asked them to identify where they would put the words on their "continuum of word knowledge— never heard it before to totally got this." The candidates then determined where the words fit on their individual continuum. Dr. Oakes said, "If they're going to teach kids to be word conscious, they have to be word conscious themselves." Dr. Oakes made decisions to try to build the candidates knowledge of literacy as she taught them how to teach it.

Discussion

This data shows that the university context, course content and pedagogy, and the teacher candidates' characteristics all influenced teacher educators' decision-making regarding planning and instruction in a professional preparation program. We focused on elementary writing methods, since it is a particularly neglected area of teacher preparation and teacher educator preparation (Graham et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2016). Although the university context varied greatly across the state, from large public research institutions to small private teaching colleges, the lack of dedicated writing methods courses and challenges associated with field placements remained consistent. Similarly, participants shared overlapping responses in terms of decisions related to course content and pedagogy; specifically, they faced challenges associated with designing the course content to include more writing and choosing pedagogies to best prepare candidates to teach writing. Finally, teacher educators across the state reported that the qualities and characteristics of the candidates themselves influenced instructional decision making.

What we found across institutions and instructors, was intentionality in decision making. Instructors considered the affordances and constraints of their contexts and candidates and worked to incorporate what they knew from their own backgrounds in order best to prepare their

candidates to teach writing. Furthermore, across instructors, we found that they were doing their decision making and planning in relative isolation. This is consistent with the literature on teacher educators (Swennen & Bates, 2010). Although our participants sought out resources, including rare opportunities to convene with other literacy scholars (at conferences like the State Reading Association) and writing teachers (like the Writer's Project), those opportunities were rare. A lack of access to other teacher educators, in particular, meant that they made decisions in a vacuum. We build on the work of Martin and Dismuke (2015) in considering communities of practice of writing methods' teacher educators as a way to be continually responsive to contexts and candidates. We look to Patton and Parker (2017) for next steps regarding how to initiate and sustain such communities.

There are several limitations of the current study, including the small sample of teacher educators from one focal state. Expanding data collection to include teacher educators from a larger geographic area would add to the richness of our understanding about decision making not only in writing methods courses but also in other content areas. Furthermore, expanding data collection to higher educators more generally - both in academic and professional preparation programs - can help us to understand how instructors make decisions in the absence of guidance.

Implications

Regardless of the specific challenges that the teacher educators in this study faced, they tackled them alone. Beyond the factors that influence individual instructors' practice, membership in groups that support each other's development can influence decision making. Communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998) can be formal, like professional organizations, or informal, like small groups of colleagues meeting. Regardless of the size, these communities have shared goals, resources, and a common vocabulary. Having opportunities to discuss and debate pedagogical choices allows for more purposeful and informed choices. What we found in

this study is that our participants, overall, were making decisions without access to robust – or often any – communities of practice. On the contrary, most decisions were made individually and without discussion or support from within or beyond the institution. This is, unfortunately, not unusual for teacher educators (Swennen & Bates, 2010).

It is important to be aware of the way challenges impact decisions. We know that decision making is challenging to process in the moment and requires reflection. Without a community of practice, it is difficult to individually reflect on the impact of context, content/pedagogy, and candidates. Moreover, it is challenging to look across institutions to see the bigger picture of how, as sister institutions, we are preparing future professionals.

While we do not suggest a specific curriculum that should be adhered to for preparing elementary teachers to teach writing, we do suggest that teacher educators and other instructors in professional preparation programs should have access to communities where they can share ideas, reflect on their practice, and articulate their values (Patton & Parker, 2017). The contexts and clients we have described are dynamic and shifting, and communities of practice are able to support improvement that mirrors that dynamism. Researchers have suggested that these communities are marked by dialogue, reflection, communication, and mutual respect (Tannehill, Parker, Tindall, Moody, & MacPhail, 2015) and that communities provide, "a way for both the individual and the collective to engage in continual improvement of practices" (Martin & Dismuke, 2015, p. 5).

Ongoing conversations that honor instructors' professional decision making, the constraints of their particular contexts, and the dynamic nature of teacher education itself will assist in helping decisions be more informed. Furthermore, these communities can offer support and encourage instructors to think more deeply as they problematize their practices (Martin & Dismuke, 2015). Finally, we believe that communities of practice have the potential to form the

basis for collective action to challenge the lack of prioritization of writing methods, about which the majority of our participants described at least some feelings of discontent.

Conclusion

We return to Shulman's words as we reflect on the fact that higher education more generally and teacher education specifically is a learned profession. It is clear from this study that although teacher educators are resourceful and caring, the lack of communities of practice through which to provide and receive support and continually evolve work has led to what is likely unnecessary labor and perhaps a lack of continuous growth. Although differences in contexts, content, and candidates will always exist, having spaces in which to explore a range of resources, strategies, and practices would be an invaluable asset for elementary writing teacher educators as well as others who teach in higher education.

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