



English Teaching: Practice & Critique

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Mandie B. Dunn, Jennifer VanDerHeide, Samantha Caughlan, Laura Northrop, Yuan Zhang, Sean Kelly, (2018) "Tensions in learning to teach English", English Teaching: Practice & Critique, Vol. 17 Issue: 1, pp.44-56, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-04-2017-0039>

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<https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-04-2017-0039>

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Tensions in learning to teach English

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to report findings from a study of preservice teacher (PST) beliefs about teaching English language arts (ELA).

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was administered to 56 preservice secondary ELA teachers at three universities to measure their beliefs about curriculum, authority and competition in schools. This study explores the beliefs of 17 of these PSTs who participated in an additional interview following up on six of the survey responses.

Findings – Although the survey forced a choice between various levels of agreeing and disagreeing, interview responses revealed that PSTs wrestled with tensions in what they believed about instructional and curricular choices. When describing situations that influenced their beliefs, they referenced situations from field placements, coursework and their own experiences as students. These tensions reflected the PSTs' internally conflicting beliefs across their perceived binaries of teaching English.

Originality/value – This study suggests that these beliefs are formed in part by experiences in teacher preparation programs, particularly in field placements. However, even though PSTs recognized their internally conflicting beliefs, they understood them and their subsequent actions as dichotomous, rather than on a continuum. This study has implications for teacher educators; by understanding PSTs' tendencies to understand their beliefs in binaries, teacher educators can provide reflective opportunities for PSTs to problematize these dichotomies and look for teaching identities and practices that are more nuanced.

Keywords Uncertainty, English teaching, Authority, Curriculum English, Teacher beliefs

Paper type Research paper

A common question in the field of English language arts (ELA) is how best to prepare ELA preservice teachers (hereafter PSTs) to teach (Rush and Scherff, 2011). This question is filled



with many sub-questions: what does the field of ELA believe new teachers should learn about teaching (Brass, 2014)? How do PSTs best learn to teach (Hallman and Burdick, 2011)? How should teacher preparation best teach teachers to teach (Grossman *et al.*, 2008)? In what context do teachers best learn to teach (Smagorinsky and Barnes, 2014)? Which sources – course instruction, field placements or their own schooling – most influence PST teaching practices and beliefs (Barnes and Smagorinsky, 2016)? Which is more influential on PST teaching – learning-specific practices or developing particular teaching dispositions, or some combination of the two (Grossman *et al.*, 2009)?

Because PSTs' underlying dispositions may influence their ability to carry out certain teaching routines, some research has been interested specifically in teachers' beliefs about how students learn, how teachers should teach and what should be taught (Woolfolk Hoy *et al.*, 2006). The study of teacher beliefs has been a focus of educational psychologists because these beliefs relate to teacher learning and classroom practice. For teacher educators wanting to train teachers to hold particular beliefs and act congruently with those beliefs, understanding what PSTs believe and how those beliefs change over the course of a teacher's career can impact how we train future and current teachers.

This paper is part of a larger study (Kelly *et al.*, in press) aiming to trace teachers' beliefs across their careers. In the overall study, we administered a survey (explained later in the article) to PSTs at three universities to learn more about their beliefs around teacher authority, curriculum and competition. To gain greater insight into the answers to the survey questions, we interviewed a subsample of PSTs and asked them to talk more about their responses to the survey items.

In these interviews, PSTs indicated that despite choosing agree or disagree in response to the survey questions, their current beliefs were at times nuanced, conflicting or filled with tension. As ELA teacher educators, we became interested in learning more about what tensions PSTs experience when naming their beliefs and what contexts might contribute to those tensions. Through our analysis, we aim to better understand how PSTs learn to be English teachers, how contexts influence their learning and what tensions PSTs engage with when prompted to name beliefs about particular curricular choices. Our study therefore focuses on the following question:

- Q1. What tensions do PSTs express as they explain their beliefs about teaching when prompted by curricular choices, and how do they experience these tensions?

Teacher beliefs and learning to teach

According to Pajares (1992, p. 309), the literature on teacher beliefs uses several terms to define the construct:

[...] attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few.

We therefore acknowledge that we oversimplify a complex term in our use of the one word – beliefs – to collapse knowledge, assumptions and dispositions about teaching. However, in this study, we focus on responses PSTs gave when presented with curricular and instructional choices undergirded by many of the terms above simultaneously. We are not interested in parsing out opinions from theories from attitudes in these responses; therefore, we will simply use “beliefs” to refer to a construct that might encompass many shades of the word. Teacher beliefs are an important aspect of research on teacher learning because they

are a filter through which teachers make reasoned decisions in the classroom (Fang, 1996). The clash of belief and practice may be a big reason educational reform is so difficult (Woolfolk Hoy *et al.*, 2006). Because beliefs inform practice and practice informs beliefs (Clark and Peterson, 1986), it is important to consider how PSTs form beliefs.

Teacher beliefs from experiences in multiple contexts

According to Richardson (1996), teachers' beliefs stem from three areas:

- (1) personal experiences and lived experiences outside of school;
- (2) experiences with schooling and instruction, such as one's experiences as a student or as a classroom teacher; and
- (3) experiences with formal knowledge, such as disciplinary learning and teacher education programs.

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) suggest that beliefs stem from lived experiences in these settings, and these lived experiences become the stories teachers tell and stories that influence their instructional and curricular decisions.

Research in English education has further explored how lived experiences in these multiple contexts influence beliefs of English teachers. Grossman's (1990) study of novice English teachers indicated that teachers' more recent experiences in college literature classrooms could impact their beliefs about teaching literature and that preservice education could continue to moderate those beliefs. Smagorinsky and Barnes (2014) suggested that PSTs learn to teach English from beliefs based on a variety of observational contexts. Their findings show that observations during field experiences can influence teachers' beliefs and that not all of these experiences reinforce traditional beliefs about teaching. In a more recent extension of this study, Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) found that prior to student teaching, PSTs attributed their learning to teach to several contexts, such as the communities in which they taught, field placements, courses and professors at the university outside of their teacher preparation program, and other PSTs. These studies suggest that teacher preparation, including field placements and observations and coursework, does matter in PSTs' development of beliefs about teaching.

Tensions in teacher beliefs

Because PSTs' beliefs are formed on the basis of experiences and relationships in a variety of contexts, they are often complex and contradictory. (Smagorinsky and Barnes, 2014; Sturtevant, 1996). Beliefs about teaching literacy in ELA classrooms are also complex because the field of ELA comprises multiple paradigms (Labaree, 2000; Macaluso *et al.*, 2016) such as digital literacy, critical literacy, literacy as skills, rhetorical studies and exploring the literary canon.

Some ELA studies have documented tensions that mark English teaching because of both the conflictual nature of settings (Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2008; Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2013; Fecho *et al.*, 2004) and the ongoing development of teaching beliefs (Britzman, 2003). Other scholars have corroborated the idea that PSTs navigate the push and pull of the ongoing discourses that have authority in the educational world (Macaluso *et al.*, 2016; Hallman, 2015; Gere *et al.*, 1992). Agee (1998, p. 115) suggested that the presence of conflicting discourses means that learning to teach is a "complex process" that includes "resistance, dissonance, questioning, and reflection". Alsup (2006) found that a variety of discourses pervaded PSTs' reflections on their learning to teach and that these teachers wrestled with the most learning when they engaged in what she termed *borderland discourses*, discourses

in which two identity strands came together. Finally, [Hong et al. \(2016, p. 2\)](#) wrote that teachers' stories about teaching moments "are filled with tension – forces pulling in opposite directions that, on the surface, seem bent on outdoing each other". Yet, [Hong et al. \(2016, p. 14\)](#) argued that tensions are "inevitable in our lives" and serve to open up questions and new inquiries. These studies suggest that tensions resulting from encountering competing beliefs about teaching can provide productive learning for PSTs.

Method

This study of tensions in PSTs' beliefs draws from a larger study on PSTs' beliefs in which we administered surveys to 56 preservice English teachers at three universities: a large state university in the Midwest, a private Catholic school in the Midwest and a large state university in the Mid-Atlantic. The survey measured PSTs' beliefs about curriculum, authority and competition in schools, informed by [Metz's \(1978\)](#) continuum of teacher perspectives on authority from developmental (student-centered) to incorporative (teacher-centered). In Metz's typology, the incorporative approach is characterized by efficient and orderly coverage of teacher-led content. In contrast, the developmental perspective first emphasizes student interest, concentration and effort in the context of often self-directed, if not maximally efficient or orderly, activity. In addition to Metz' typology, the survey items referenced are related to beliefs about competition in the classroom and traditional knowledge, dimensions of [Connell et al.'s \(1982\)](#) "hegemonic curriculum". Further, several items pertained specifically to expressions of authority in classroom discourse ([Langer, 2011](#)).

The survey consisted of 24 statements about teaching to which PSTs responded with absolutely agree, strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree or absolutely disagree. Below are three of the statements to provide some context:

- (1) Students learn best when they have a great deal of choice over classroom materials and assignments.
- (2) Students should study classic texts in depth, even if they struggle with the language.
- (3) No matter how good a teacher is at presenting information, students will not really learn it until they have a chance to use it in interaction with other learners.

To obtain additional insight into the survey items, we conducted in-person interviews with a subsample of 17 respondents, representing all three universities. The interview teams at two universities were minimally familiar with respondents from departmental activities, while respondents at the third university had not previously met the interviewers. Because this study draws on data from three institutions, at the coding stage, researchers were familiar with at most one-third of the respondents. In each interview, participants re-answered six randomly selected survey questions using pencil and paper and then responded verbally to a series of questions about what they were thinking as they answered the items. See [Appendix](#) for the interview protocol.

Most of the questions elicited claims followed by explanation, as well as an evaluation of the relevance and wording of the questions. However, when asked *were you thinking of any particular teaching and learning experiences when you answered this question?*, PSTs commonly responded with a story from their experience. Because we agree with [Clandinin and Connelly \(1996\)](#) that teachers form and re-form their teaching beliefs through stories, we chose to look more closely at these experiences.

We first identified “particular teaching and learning experiences” that the PSTs drew on to provide evidence and warrants for their beliefs. Most of them were in response to the question above, but sometimes, the PSTs provided stories without prompting while explaining why they agreed or disagreed with a particular statement. Building on previous studies on the impact of teacher education and other contexts on teaching beliefs and practices, we initially asked the following questions when analyzing these teaching and learning experiences:

- Q1. What contexts do PSTs reference when supporting their beliefs?
- Q2. Do these contexts provide positive (what to do) or negative (what not to do) models of how to teach?

To answer these questions, two authors collaboratively coded (Saldaña, 2016; Smagorinsky, 2008) each story. We first coded the experiences by source, i.e. the context in which it took place, and the following sources accounted for all of the experiences shared: experience as a student, teacher preparation coursework, and teaching placements. We had expected that they might reference others’ learning experiences, such as experiences from friends or family members, but they did not, and they also did not draw on any examples from media. When they referenced teaching and learning experiences, they drew on experiences they had lived through themselves, choosing to tell their own stories rather than the stories of others.

We then coded each of these experiences according to whether its impact was positive (experience taught them what to do) or negative (experience taught them what not to do). However, we found that 26 per cent of the experiences did not fit into either category because PSTs were uncertain or had mixed or ambiguous feelings about the impact of particular experiences on their beliefs. These stories intrigued us, and in reading more closely, we noticed that PSTs often expressed tensions when sharing these experiences. This interest led us to our research question for this study:

- RQ1. What tensions do PSTs express as they explain their beliefs about teaching when prompted by curricular choices, and how do they experience these tensions?

To explore this question, we first identified all experiences in which PSTs expressed tension, when there was a pull between two opposing positions. Because the survey explicitly asks PSTs whether they found the wording of a particular question confusing, we were able to eliminate tensions resulting from wording and focus only on tensions prompted by the curricular and instructional choices presented in the questions.

Stories were coded as containing expressions of tension when:

- the PST went back and forth between two different answers or explanations in response to a question (typically signaled with markers such as *but*, *at the same time* and *it depends*);
- a participant stated outright that they were unsure of their answer or explanation (typically signaled with markers such as *unsure* and *I don’t know*); or
- a participant stated a belief that contradicted the experience they shared to explain that belief.

We then conducted a second round of coding to explore what the PSTs’ tensions were about. We inductively coded (Thomas, 2006) the stories for the content of the experience (i.e. what are they tense about?), determining codes such as classroom management, the literary canon, technology and differentiating instruction. After noticing that the tensions are typically related to the PSTs’ perception of a dichotomy related to these codes, we

re-grouped these codes into four larger categories that represented four primary dichotomies the PSTs perceived. We report the full set of dichotomies and explore them further in the Findings section.

Findings

Out of 30 experiences coded as containing expressions of tension, we found 19 where PSTs moved back and forth between two answers, 9 where they stated they were unsure about how to respond and 2 where their stated belief did not align with the experience they shared to explain their belief.

We also found that the PSTs' beliefs reflected three dichotomous tensions:

- (1) tension between individual student and whole class;
- (2) tension between teacher's and students' responsibility for learning; and
- (3) tension between progressive teaching and constraints.

Tension between individual student and whole class

One tension PSTs identified was between serving the needs of individual students and serving the needs of the whole class. One context in which the PSTs experienced this tension was when considering differentiating lessons for different students, such as students with special needs or students requiring advanced instruction. One PST responded that she strongly disagreed with the following statement:

In today's economy, it is especially important to identify the very bright students early on, so that they can be given challenging instructional content, even if this means other students may miss out on some opportunities for enrichment.

Although she strongly disagreed, her explanation was not without tensions, as she called it a "hard question. It is actually hard and I'm not sure of my answer". She believed differentiating instruction was important but also said:

Then you have the reality of the fact that you are in a classroom with 30 students. Um, and in my special education class I have to make up 10, you know, separate lesson plans for one lesson. If I did that 30 times over, for the bright students, and then, thinking about how what opportunities can I give the bright students [. . .].

In this response, the PST explained the difficulty in accommodating lessons for students with special needs. When moving to exploring the possibility of differentiating for what she termed "bright" students, she became stuck and was unable to complete her thought for how to accomplish that work.

Another way that PSTs experienced tension between the individual and the whole group was in considering how much attention to give one student who is disrupting the learning process rather than focusing on students who may seem more ready to learn. In the response below, the PST explains why he answered that he strongly disagreed with the statement:

If a teacher is going to make the best use of their time and energy, it makes sense for them to concentrate the most on students who show a great deal of interest in school.

There was a kid, I had about five kids in a group. I was tea-, tutoring reading, and he just, was disruptive. And he was, you could definitely tell he was angry because he didn't want to read, like he can't read at all. And so he would just like distract the other girls, call their names, pick on them, pull their hair. And I was like, you know what, I'm going to tell you I'm tired of this, and

you're in charge of your own learning. Like I'm not here to babysit you. And so I just let him go to sleep while I taught the other kids. That was more effective.

This PST felt being pulled between committing time to helping the “disruptive” student or spending time helping the rest of the group. He chose to let the one student sleep and deemed that decision “more effective”. In this case, the PST sought to resolve the tension by making a decision to meet the needs of the majority. Despite this shared experience from his practice, he explained further that he strongly disagreed with the statement because of guilt:

Cause I, I could've helped that kid I feel like. I shouldn't have given up on him. But I was just like. You know what [. . .] and I feel like no, no child deserves that, like you should still continue to try. So I, I'll always remember that kid, remember like how I just gave up on them. So it's like, oh, that wasn't the right thing to do.

It is important to note that all the narratives the PST's referenced in this category took place in teaching placement classrooms. PSTs did not experience this tension as students themselves, likely because they were not the teacher and could not feel the weight of balancing so many students need at once. This tension is perhaps not noticed during one's apprenticeship of observation and is felt during teaching experiences.

Tension between teachers and students' responsibility for learning

The next tension focused on the interplay between the teacher's responsibility to teach and students' responsibility to learn. Mostly, this tension was rooted in issues of classroom management, particularly when the PSTs felt that student behavior impeded their ability to teach. Consider two experiences shared by different PSTs:

First PST: And I have two or three students who are frequently disengaged. Um, and partly I believe it's because they are just, they are 9th graders, and they've decided they don't want to like English even though we've talked about it, and I know they can get the material. But um, I, so I, I get sidetracked to a point where I'm making sure that they have everything they need. But if they choose not to pick up that material, then I know it's not because they don't know, it's they have chosen that, that they are just not going to do it.

Second PST: Um, I said I disagree, and I didn't put like strongly disagree 'cause I'm kind of in the middle, because I think, to an extent, you should focus on the kids that are going to put forth effort, but at the same time, I think if you do that, the kids that need a push are gonna, just be left out completely. Um, but I also think that, I've been learning a lot about this that, with my pre-student teaching, if you baby a student too much, who does need an extra push, like if you, almost do the work for them, then they're just gonna be dependent on you. So I've been learning that sometimes the best thing you can do is not help, and kind of let them fail, um, which sounds really horrible. But I think it's true. Like you can't baby them through, they need to get the grades, the bad grades, and face those repercussions. But I think as a teacher, you should, you shouldn't, there should be an in between there, like you shouldn't completely do one.

There are similarities in these PSTs' stories even though they are learning to teach at teacher preparation programs in different US states. Although the question was intended to inquire into PSTs' views on constructivist education, both PSTs focused on student behavior. Both are experiencing students who are not participating in lessons in the way they want. Both seem to feel pulled between making sure that students get what they need and making sure that students put forth their own effort in learning.

The second PST pushes on the binary nature of the Likert-style question, noting that there should be “an in between” answer. He still goes back and forth between needing to give students a push and being concerned that pushing students could end up “baby”[ing]

them to the point of them being too “dependent”. At the same time, he expresses that he is “in the middle” and that teachers “shouldn’t completely do one”.

Across the interviews, stories expressing tension around holding students accountable for learning versus holding the teacher accountable were only told in the context of teaching placements. Placements likely mark the first time that they experience planning and enacting a lesson in which some students resist, causing them to ask themselves whether it is their responsibility to help students learn or students’ responsibility to want to learn.

Tension between progressive teaching and constraints

Another tension PSTs experienced was in wanting to teach using more progressive methods – such as using more student-centered approaches to teaching or new technologies or literatures – and experiencing the constraints of teaching within particular schools and communities.

Discussion-oriented teaching. At times, the PSTs were uncertain about the balance between lecture-based methods and discussion-oriented methods; typically, these tensions stemmed from their experiences as students where they learned from lecture.

And well, I do agree that methods-based learning and role playing and interacting with other people is a great way to learn. Sometimes I get a lot from lecture. Sometimes when the teacher is actually telling me exactly what they wanna tell me, I can get a lot of information from that. I really like that. So, I think that is where I will take that.

PSTs tended to agree with the efficacy of the discussion-based approaches that they were learning in their methods courses, but they also drew on their own learning experiences to warrant the potential efficacy of the lecture.

PSTs also experienced tension in wanting to enact more progressive teaching methods but worrying what others might think. One PST explained:

I’ve definitely seen my mentor teachers, um, do a few lessons that kind of seem like controlled chaos. I mean, if somebody walk in maybe like, whoa, what’s going on in here. Um, why is everyone of their seat and moving around and doing all this stuff. But I feel like kids get a lot out of it and they are certainly a lot more alert and engaged, than they are with some of the slower stuff.

Even though this PST was not the teacher enacting this lesson, she still experiences the feeling of potentially being watched by “somebody”, nervous that the “controlled chaos” will be perceived negatively. Her worry echoes the panopticon (Bushnell, 2003), or an ongoing fear of what others might think of her teaching choices. PSTs might feel this tension before they are even the primary teacher in the room. It seems possible that this tension might have ongoing influence on how PSTs choose to implement practices they learn in their teacher preparation programs.

Teaching outside canonical literature. PSTs also felt tension between the literature they wanted to teach and the reaction they expected from the communities in which they taught. Whether their expectations of parents and community were accurate, these expectations constrained the literature they felt comfortable bringing into their classrooms. One PST explained:

But I would love it if my students read that someday. But of course, it comes back to the community of, oh man, you don’t want to overturn the apple cart here because some parents are gonna get upset about it, and we couldn’t do that because, you know, which I find annoying. I want my kids to know the real stuff. I want my kids to actually relate stuff [...] because you know, *Perks of Being a Wallflower* has to deal with suicide, sex abuse, homosexuality, bullying, all

that stuff, all those fun buzz words that everyone is afraid of. And I just wish my students would read that book too just because it's such a real life that they need to be exposed to it.

Although the PST wants to teach controversial literature and justifies the benefits, she worries she would “overturn the apple cart”. Tensions surrounding choices about canonical or adolescent literature was an area where the PSTs did at times reference their experiences as students. They shared examples of times they read nontraditional literature in class. Sometimes, this experience was described positively; other times, they referenced the experience as not “practical” for their own learning or future teaching.

Preservice teachers resisting the binary nature of the question

While we found that PSTs consistently described these three dichotomous tensions (tension between the individual student and whole class, tension between teachers and students' responsibility for learning and tension between progressive teaching and constraints), some PSTs expressed resistance to the binary nature of the survey questions themselves, showing some discomfort with thinking in dichotomous ways. We recognize that the nature of agree/disagree surveys may have encouraged PSTs to engage in binary thinking because they were required to take a particular stance.

Still, across 30 responses, we coded 6 responses as expressing resistance to taking a binary stance. For example, responding to the prompt “teachers need to publicly acknowledge students who are doing exemplary work”, one PST responded:

I said agree, but I did pause for a minute. And then I think it depends on the students in question. If it is a student who, well there're several different kinds of students, um I would take pause on. So if it's an extremely shy student that needs the encouragement. Definitely I would, I would publicly look at how awesome, like the details, like what, what the process she went through or he went through. Um, he, they definitely put in the effort they needed to on this project and I'm proud of them for that. I would have no problem doing that. Um, and also it depends on the tone of voice you use. I don't want to be, well, someone is doing the correct thing, thank you, like that, sarcastic “cause that can be really, really bad, um, for a classroom”. But I also believe that there are students who do exemplary work, but they aren't really trying. So they give you an A, an A paper, but they bl [. . .], you know they blew it off until the last minute, and they're not even really all that proud of it. I would not feel the need to be like, you get this awesome paper (laugh). I, I don't know. I think it once again it depends on the student, and then it depends on the work, and if you know they can be better. So, yeah.

The PST agrees with the statement, but his expanded response does not really take one stance over the other. Instead, he makes an argument that his answer really depends on the situation and the student. While this answer is less about taking a middle-ground view point and more about accounting for context, the student still resists taking a strong stance.

Another PST points out explicitly that they do not want to answer in a binary way. The PST responds that they agree with the prompt “no matter how good a teacher is at presenting information, students will not really learn it until they have a chance to use it in the interaction with other learners”, but qualifies the answer, noting that the “stereotypical like pre-1960s teacher” is not the best way to teach students but that in an upper-level English class they took in college, it was “seminar style” and “often I would have an idea that maybe I would want to write a paper on”. Because the student is moving back and forth, the interviewer states, “so, you put agree on this statement” and the PST gives this response:

Just because I hate to make blank statement. I think there's some stuff that you can get a pretty good hand on by yourself. And this may have to, I mean you may not know it, talking about math. Um, but you know, I feel like learning the quadratic equation, or long division, you know it helps to have a study [. . .].

Her response trails off, and we are not entirely sure what she is getting at. However, her declaration that “I hate to make a blank statement” shows that the tension she expresses is brought about because she is having to make a decision one way or another, when in fact the answer depends on the circumstances.

Discussion

Our findings are optimistic in showing the potential for teacher education and practice-based learning to shape and expand teacher beliefs. PSTs in this study draw from a variety of experiences when forming beliefs about teaching, confirming previous research (Grossman, 1990; Smagorinsky and Barnes, 2014; Barnes and Smagorinsky, 2016). This study also extends prior work establishing that English teachers experience tension as a result of competing paradigms (Macaluso *et al.*, 2016) or stakeholders (Smagorinsky *et al.*, 2008) by pointing to particular classroom scenarios in which PSTs indicated that they were unsure of how they would proceed with teaching decisions. PSTs in this study revealed how pulls between the needs of the whole class or individual, the teacher or students’ responsibility for learning, and progressive teaching methods and restraints resulted in tensions for them. These particular tensions could serve as entry points for teacher educators to discuss with PSTs how they can acknowledge and address these tensions. This move would both acknowledge the complexity of teaching and encourage PSTs to think about how their beliefs about issues of authority, curriculum, and competition play out in their explanations for curricular decisions they make or hypothesize they would make, thus bridging conversations about beliefs with practice without oversimplifying or reducing down the real choices teachers face in classrooms.

Therefore, we do not suggest that the goal of teacher education should be to weed out these tensions or to make PSTs to be more definitive in their beliefs. Indeed, some scholars have argued that tensions can provide a productive teaching space. For example, Fecho *et al.* (2005) argue that learning to teach should include “wobble”, or a provocation for the learner to consider a new idea or question an old idea. Instead, we suggest that teacher education should consider how best to make use of these tensions for teacher learning. We also suggest that because these tensions are likely inevitable and can serve as productive spaces for inquiry, teacher education should consider how to make clear to PSTs that the purpose of exploring their beliefs on these topics is not to come to easy or pat answers but rather to understand how tensions inherent in teaching beliefs and decisions play out in their practice.

Finally, our findings suggest that while PSTs’ explanations of their teaching were often filled with tension, many of them sought to resolve the tension by choosing or suggesting a binary action. Some of these all or nothing choices may have been elicited by the survey questions used to structure the interview, which were themselves worded strongly, a disadvantage common to agree/disagree items (Fowler, 2009). Yet, the interview format gave respondents the opportunity for extensive deliberation, so binary resolution was not a foregone conclusion. PSTs still often chose an action at one end of the binary or another, such as teaching all canonical literature or choosing to let a disruptive student sleep. There are myriad creative options that teachers can choose that lie between ignoring a disruptive student and ignoring all others, for example, but for a beginning teacher who is wrestling with what they believe, acting from an uncertain belief may make it too difficult to find an option between an either/or choice. Some PSTs did resist the binary, choosing to give answers that stated that the action they would take really depended on the situation or the students or the context. Still, across all of the responses, tension seems inherent in the decisions PSTs must make. Therefore, our findings suggest that teacher education should

seek to help PSTs to make sense of these tensions and work to help PSTs see possibilities for nuanced action in response to tensions in teaching decisions.

Regardless of why PSTs draw on teaching placement experiences more often, it is important for teacher educators to both make teaching placement experiences part of teacher education coursework and for teacher educators to consider the role that tensions in practice should play in teacher education courses. In what ways can teacher education courses make space for exploring the complexity and nuance inherent in teacher decision-making? In what ways can teacher education courses make space for exploring the specific dichotomies identified by PSTs in this study as being tension-filled?

It is also important to note what the PSTs were not feeling tensions about, such as issues of equity and diversity. While some of this absence may be due to the focus of the interview questions for the larger study (authority, curriculum and competition), the students' preparation programs were foregrounding these issues in their teacher preparation courses. We do not in any way suggest that teacher preparation programs focus less on issues of equity – in fact, we believe the opposite. However, it is worth considering the extent to which teacher preparation courses adequately also address the on-the-ground decisions PSTs face, many of which we have shown to not have easy answers. Teacher preparation must consider the extent to which teacher beliefs or dispositions are portrayed as absolute musts, when in reality, the decision is often much more complex to make. For example, teacher education courses should certainly encourage students to include a diverse range of literature and should also attend to the tensions that arise in teaching contexts for teachers choosing to incorporate these texts, which may, as our participant noted, “upset the apple cart”. Teacher education courses must equip PSTs with skills to make decisions about how to take action in these moments of tension and how to take actions that do not manifest as “all or nothing” curricular and instructional decisions. We are suggesting that teacher education aiming to teach PSTs to teach English should consider the interplay of underlying dispositions and practice. When teacher education remains concerned only with dispositions, there is no way of knowing how that belief will manifest when teachers are faced with the curricular decisions such as the ones they faced in the interview in this study.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Interview protocol

Present the survey questions and ask the interviewee to mark their answer directly on the page. For each survey question, ask the following questions:

- What do you think this question is getting at?
- Do you think this is an issue real teachers in real classrooms have to encounter?
- If you selected absolutely agree or strongly agree, why do you agree with that statement?
- If you selected absolutely disagree or strongly disagree, why do you disagree with that statement?
- Have you had any teaching or learning experiences, in particular, that inform your answer to this question?
- If you were unsure of your answer, why do you think you had some difficulty answering this question?
- Was there anything about this question (wording, vocabulary and implied situation) that you felt was confusing or unclear?

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