



**Practical Knowledge and Teacher  
Reflection From a Practice-Based  
Literacy Teacher Education Program  
in the First Years  
A Longitudinal Study**

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**Abstract**

This longitudinal study explores how one university's practice-based teacher preparation program prepared literacy teachers to develop practical knowledge for teaching and how that knowledge was tested and adapted in the first years of teaching. To understand change, we identified and analyzed points of tension, challenge, or dissonance in the first years, within and across activity systems. We draw on a cross-case analysis and examples from two single cases to explain our assertions that trying on models of practice and developing reflective routines allowed teachers to make strategic choices to accommodate and resist particular practices in their school contexts. Implications include designing practicum ex-

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periences to include opportunities to reflect on tensions between activity systems from University practical experiences through the first years.

### **Introduction**

Traditional teacher education programs are currently challenged by faster, cheaper, and easier ways to become a teacher. In our city in Texas, there is a large billboard on the interstate as you enter the city that reads, “Want to teach? When can you start?”<sup>1</sup> Traditional teacher education programs, as part of an undergraduate or postbaccalaureate degree program, are more expensive and require more course and practicum hours. Why would a teacher choose this route? Our study argues that the power of the practical knowledge constructed in one preservice teacher education program makes a difference in terms of how teachers are prepared to enact reflective routines in the first years of teaching. We provide an in-depth examination of a case of one group of teacher candidates in one teacher education program located in the southwestern United States. We engage in the study of our own program to explore (a) how one program’s features, including practice-based experiences, the learning community context, and opportunities for coherence across program experiences, support preservice teachers’ development of practical knowledge for literacy teaching; (b) the resulting beginning teachers’ practical knowledge of literacy teaching; and (c) how that knowledge was challenged and adapted within the first years of teaching.

Reports of research on teacher learning often do not include a careful analysis of the role of practice in teacher education. The Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States (2010) concluded that “systematic data are needed on the nature and content of the coursework and other experiences that constitute teacher preparation in reading” (p. 118). Over the past decade, similar calls have been made in the field of teacher education to grow our understandings of program processes—details of the courses and associated practicum experiences, including how experiences build on one another (Feiman-Nemser, 2008; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001; Zeichner, 2005). In addition, the practice-based experiences of teacher preparation are often studied in isolation from one another rather than as part of a larger context for teacher preparation (for an exception, see Sailors, Keehn, Harmon, & Martinez, 2005). Our intent is to respond to the critiques of research on methods courses and field experiences including a too-narrow focus on singular experiences; a lack of attention to the dynamics and relationships between researchers, instructors, and students; and a disconnect between course work and practicum (Clift & Brady, 2005).

Our second focus is to study teacher practices within practice-based experiences. A study of teacher education programs in literacy in the United States sponsored by the International Reading Association (IRA) identified, by reviewing program syllabi and interviewing faculty, that practice-based experiences across programs

of excellence share some commonalities (Sailors et al., 2005). These include requirements for students to engage in ongoing reflection on student observations and on their own teaching, carefully sequenced field experiences with related course work, scaffolding by like-minded mentor teachers and close supervision by faculty, opportunities to teach in a variety of contexts (e.g., with different size groupings, ages, grade levels, populations, developmental literacy levels), and experiences tutoring one-on-one with a struggling reader. Our own teacher education program was among these programs of excellence studied as part of the IRA Commission on Excellence in Reading Teacher Preparation (Hoffman et al., 2005). Risko, Roller, Cumins, Bean, and Collins (2008), in another review of research on teacher preparation in literacy, argued that, too often, it is clear that practice-based experiences have an impact on teachers' beliefs but that evidence is not provided about the impact of experiences on teachers' *practices*. In undertaking this follow-up study of our program, we hope to understand more deeply how our practice-based experiences are enacted and influence teachers.

In a review of studies from 2003 to 2016 that addressed practical knowledge as it is constructed through literacy practicum experiences, we found 33 articles that explored the literacy practicum as a site of such knowledge construction. In most of these studies, the tutorials mostly share these program processes: Tutorials are situated in a school, although some take place in community settings; are offered concurrently with literacy courses; are focused primarily on reading, although some are focused on writing; are organized to create a balance of structure in the experiences, on one hand, and spaces for tutors to construct a curriculum that is responsive to students, on the other; include expectations for reflection on experiences; and are observed personally (face-to-face) by teacher education faculty in the tutoring experience. Many of these researchers were studying their own programs (e.g., Auhl & Daniel, 2014; Lazar, 2007). These studies addressed the immediate outcomes for preservice teachers, and a few also looked at long-term outcomes. Of the immediate outcomes, many studies found that preservice teachers learned about literacy pedagogy and assessment through these experiences, became more confident about their abilities (Hart & King, 2007; Mosley & Zoch, 2012; Worthy & Patterson, 2001), and, in many cases, affirmed their commitment to being a teacher (Cobb, 2005; Fang & Ashley, 2004).<sup>2</sup> This study extends the work of these literacy scholars who have engaged in study of their own program efforts, leading to substantial contributions to the research literature.

Finally, our study addresses how teachers adapt their practices to the complex contexts of teaching they enter after they leave our program (Fairbanks et al., 2009). Teacher educators have long understood that the transition from a university program into classroom teaching is rife with competing philosophies and expectations, yielding a teacher who knows the tensions of being pulled in conflicting directions (Cuban, 1993). As new teachers enter schools, their understandings of teaching will be tested (e.g., Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Grossman et al., 2000; Smago-

rinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). Given the dilemmas of this transition, researchers in literacy teacher education have called for more longitudinal work (Maloch et al., 2003; Risko et al., 2008), and a small but growing body of research has begun to examine literacy teachers' transitions from preparation programs into the first years of teaching (Deal & White, 2005; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Gallagher, Woloshyn, & Elliott, 2009; Grisham, 2000; Hoffman et al., 2005; Massey, 2004; Morgan, Timmons, & Shaheen, 2006; White, Sturtevant, & Dunlap, 2003). The two longitudinal studies of tutoring (Gallagher et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2006) found that the tutorial experience affected the preservice teachers' beliefs about teaching and allowed the preservice teachers to draw connections between their tutoring experience and future teaching in the classroom, and additionally to recognize the complexity of teaching a class full of individuals that vary in instructional needs.

By looking longitudinally over time and across contexts from a university-based program into beginning teaching, we examine the relationship between the practice-based experiences of a teacher education program and the constructed practices of literacy teaching—how preservice teachers adapt their practical knowledge for teaching (e.g., Elbaz, 1981). We ask: What are the ways in which the practice-based experiences provided in a preservice program lead to preservice teachers' practical knowledge of literacy teaching? And how do preservice teachers negotiate tensions between their practical knowledge of literacy teaching and the new models of teaching they encounter during their first years?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Practical Knowledge in Teacher Education Programs***

We are guided by the framework of *practical knowledge*, a term proposed by Elbaz (1981) to center researchers' focus on teacher thought and decision making (see also Shulman, 1986). Elbaz (1981) wrote that practical knowledge includes a body of knowledge that might be uncovered to understand the work that a teacher does in the classroom and curriculum:

the broad range of knowledge which guides their work—knowledge of subject matter; of classroom organization and instructional techniques; of the structuring of learning experiences and curriculum content; of students' needs, abilities, and interests; of the social framework of the school and its surrounding community; and of their own strengths and shortcomings as teachers. (p. 47)

Elbaz proposed that we think about teaching as practice—the ways that particular kinds of knowledge get enacted.

Connelly and Clandinin (1985) extended this work by offering the framework of *personal practical knowledge*. They described this knowledge as personal in the sense that it grows out of circumstances, actions, and undergoings that have affective meaning for the individual (cf. Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwillger, 1990).

This personal practical knowledge includes convictions that may be conscious or unconscious as well as situated knowledge used to shape practice in particular settings (i.e., classrooms). In this study, our focus is on the construction of personal practical knowledge for teaching that happens in practicum experiences and the ways in which a teacher then has access to this knowledge across contexts. The personal practical knowledge that a teacher constructs is akin to a teacher's vision for teaching that might extend beyond methods or ways of teaching.

One way to conceptualize this vision is through the framework of thoughtfully adaptive teaching—how teachers draw on knowledge and strategies to be thoughtfully adaptive to the qualities of learners and contexts (Duffy, Miller, Parsons, & Meloth, 2009; Fairbanks et al., 2009; Parsons, 2012). For example, in Elbaz's (1981) case study, she found that a participant's practical knowledge was actively constructed, "dynamic, firmly grounded in [her] inner and outer experience, and open to change" (p. 67). Often, personal practical knowledge is articulated when a teacher is faced with a challenge or tension in his or her teaching (Golombek, 1998). Whether these models are aligned or in tension with practical knowledge, they tend to shape the practical knowledge of the thoughtfully adaptive teacher. Fairbanks et al. (2009) wrote, "Successful teachers must recognize that virtually every situation is different, must see multiple perspectives and imagine multiple possibilities, and must apply professional knowledge differentially" (p. 162). It is this adaptation, on which we focus in this study, that potentially leads to persistence, perseverance, and agency for the teacher across contexts (Fairbanks et al., 2009; Flores & Day, 2006).

### **Activity Theory, Tensions, and Expansive Learning**

Our analysis of our second research question—how do preservice teachers negotiate tensions between their practical knowledge of literacy teaching and new models of teaching they encounter during their first years?—is guided by activity theory (Engeström, 1999), a way of understanding how practices are shaped by "object-oriented activity"—an interaction between "subject, object, motivation, action, goals, socio-historical context, and the consequences of activity" (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 21). Activity theory helps us to understand how practical and personal practical knowledge might be challenged as activity systems shift from the preservice program to the first years of teaching. Teachers, along a developmental path from preservice into induction, move in and out of multiple activity systems and therefore encounter tensions. Yamagata-Lynch explained, "These tensions arise when the conditions of an activity put the subject in contradictory situations that can preclude achieving the object or nature of the subject's participation in activity while trying to achieve the object" (p. 23). For example, in being a tutor in a practicum, the preservice teacher engages in the work of planning for and engaging in instruction using particular models of practice, such as guided reading.

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Inside of that experience as a tutor, he or she may find tensions between his or her planned work and his or her student's expectations, or perhaps tensions between what is important to him or her as a teacher and what his or her instructor thinks is important. These tensions result in learning when they are engaged within a community that recognizes and values them. Tensions also arise between activity systems: As that same teacher moves into his or her student teaching, he or she has another context, another set of participants, goals, and roles, to think about as he or she plans for guided reading. We view expansive learning as what happens when preservice teachers encounter tensions within the contexts where they are enacting models of practice within and across activity systems (Engeström, 2001).

### **Methodology**

Guided by the assumptions of interpretive, constructivist research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and using qualitative research techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), this longitudinal study followed preservice teachers across three semesters of a university preparation program into their first consecutive 2 years of teaching. We endeavored to ensure trustworthiness through prolonged engagement with participants, purposive sampling, triangulation of sources and of methods (i.e., observation, interviews, videos, artifacts), member checking, and exploring discrepant cases.

**Table 1**  
***Literacy Specialization Program***

<i>Semester</i>	<i>Courses</i>	<i>Practice-based experiences</i>	<i>Contact hours/week</i>
1	Reading Assessment and Development	Observation in pre-K/kindergarten	3
	Community Literacy	Literacy tutoring of first/second-grade student	3
		Literacy tutoring of adult English learners	3
2	Methods of Teaching Reading	Literacy tutoring of two first/second-grade students	16
		Observation in first- to fifth-grade classroom	16
3	Methods of Teaching Language Arts	Literacy tutoring of small group in fourth-grade (2 weeks)	8
		Student teaching in first- to fifth-grade classrooms (12 weeks)	32

### **Program Context**

We studied an undergraduate teacher education program at a large southwestern university in the United States that leads to certification to teach elementary school children (early childhood through Grade 6) in all subjects. Our program is called a literacy specialization program because practice-based experiences are tied to the content of their literacy courses and include tutoring elementary children, tutoring adult English language learners, and observing/teaching in elementary-grade classrooms (see an overview of practice-based experiences and course work in Table 1). Preservice teachers also spend substantial time planning lessons, developing materials, and reflecting. All lesson plans are given feedback by faculty who directly observe tutorial practicum experiences. Through practice-based experiences, we provide a strong connection between what our students do inside of classrooms and what they do in the rest of their teacher education program (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 1996).

Our program focused on the following frameworks for literacy teaching: literacy as a set of social practices that are learned within communities (Barton, 2007), the relationship of reading the word and the world (Freire, 1995), multiliteracies and critical literacy (New London Group, 1996), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2001), and “appreciative” as opposed to “deficit” views of teaching and learning (Johnston, 2004). Across courses and instructors in the program, we held in common the beliefs that learning is socially constructed (Bruner, 1986) and occurs as novices experience changing participation structures and problem spaces when they enter new communities of practice (Kolb, 1984; Lave, 1996) and reflect on their actions (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983).

### **Participants**

Of the 19 preservice teachers enrolled in the cohort, 17 volunteered to participate in our research. All were middle-class White women, and all (except one) were in their early 20s. Upon completion of the university program, 6 of the 17 participants were offered employment within a 100-mile radius of the university for prekindergarten to Grade 4 positions. Owing to their proximity to the university, these six teachers were selected as focal participants, and we remained in regular contact with them through their first 2 years of teaching, also conducting analyses of each of their cases. In our work for this article, we chose data from Abby’s and Colleen’s (pseudonyms) cases to explain the themes to be discussed, although we could have chosen any of the six participants, who were representative of program participants and, more generally, participants in studies of literacy teacher preparation in practical experiences.

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### **Data Collection**

Table 2 outlines the five phases of our research over a period of 2.5 years. In this article, we highlight and report on findings drawn from Phases 3–5. We collected individual interviews with preservice teachers just as they were finishing our program and preparing for new teaching jobs (Phase 3) to capture each teacher’s reflection on her journey becoming a literacy teacher, her course work and practice-based experiences, and what she planned to do in her literacy teaching. We triangulated our analysis of these interviews with data sources gathered during the program, including artifacts from course assignments, tutoring, and student teaching. We also collected data during the first year of teaching (Phase 4). We invited the original cohort back to the university (both in the fall and spring) for half-day group interviews to reflect on both the highs and lows of their first year and to reflect back on the influence of the cohort and program. These group interviews were designed to be both informative for us but also instructive and reflective for the preservice teachers. In the second year of teaching (Phase 5), we conducted individual interviews again to member check findings from previous interviews and to ask questions about shifts in what they envisioned and enacted in their literacy teaching, moments of tension or challenge when trying to enact practices of literacy teaching, and examples of new literacy teaching practices.

**Table 2**  
**Phases of Longitudinal Data Collection**

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Practice-based experience</i>	<i>Data sources</i>
1	Preservice program: Semesters 1 and 2	Tutoring	Course reading responses; course assignments; reflections on video cases; tutoring lesson plans; tutoring reflections; pre/post tutoring surveys; field notes
2	Preservice program: Semester 3	Student teaching	Course reading responses; course assignments; videos of classroom teaching; university supervisor assessments; small-group interviews
3	Postprogram	n/a	Individual interviews with focal teachers
4	First-year teaching	Classroom teaching	Group interview (fall) Group interview (spring)
5	Second-year teaching	Classroom teaching	Individual interviews with focal teachers



**Data Analysis**

We used the constant-comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze the data inductively for patterns in how teachers developed practical knowledge for literacy teaching. One strand of analysis focused on identifying how our program’s practice-based experiences shaped teachers’ development of practical knowledge. This analysis began with the coding of six focal participant interview transcripts (Phase 3). We coded first to identify how each of the practice-based contexts influenced practice (Table 1). Two practice-based experiences (activity systems) with the most influence on teachers’ practical knowledge were tutoring and student teaching. Thus we selected those contexts for more in-depth analysis, coding in the interviews all mentions of tutoring and student teaching–related events that were identified as influential. We sorted

**Table 3**  
**Program Feature 1: Developing Practical Knowledge**

	<i>Examples</i>
Enacted by teachers in preservice program	
Bringing theory into practice	Making teaching culturally relevant Enacting literacy pedagogy (e.g., guided reading) Teaching for social justice Integrating instruction Managing student behavior Building community
Designing instruction for individual learners	Identifying learners’ strengths and interests Drawing on students’ home experiences Individualizing text choice Building a caring relationship
Modeling instruction after expert practitioners	Cooperating teachers Instructors/teaching assistants Online tutoring videos Other classroom teachers
Enacted by teachers in first years	
Drawing on practical knowledge from preservice practice-based experience	Classroom conversation Teaching for social justice Integrated instruction Authentic literature Book clubs Individualizing text selection Emergent writing instruction
New models from new school contexts	Scripted curriculum and instruction Standardized assessment Rewards-based behavior management Homogeneous grouping

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these events into categories of activity (e.g., making teaching culturally relevant, building community) and then compiled these categories into broader, emergent themes (Table 3). We then cross-referenced the students' interviews against the other data sources (e.g., reading responses, videos of student teaching) to further explore how engaging in practice-based experiences led participants to develop practical knowledge.

A second strand of analysis considered the relationship between the resulting beginning teachers' practical knowledge of literacy teaching and how that knowledge was challenged and adapted in beginning teaching. This analysis focused on interview data collected during teachers' first 2 years of teaching (November 2009, April 2010, November 2010). Transcribed interviews were coded to identify patterns and emergent themes. We also inspected interviews for points of tension, challenge, or dissonance in the first years—instances of tension within and across activity systems. We focused on those tensions in which beginning teachers took an action, expressed a desire to take an action, planned to take an action, or regretted not taking an action. We coded moments of tension by area (e.g., literacy teaching, time), source of tension (e.g., students, norms of school), response to the tension (e.g., accommodation, resistance), and actions to mitigate the tension (e.g., negotiating with authority). For two focal students (Colleen and Abby), we looked back at data from within the program (e.g., transcripts from tutoring and student teaching, lesson plans) and coded how they were learning to manage tensions within the program to identify patterns and changes in negotiating tension over time.

## **Results**

Our findings were consistent in terms of the importance of the practice-based experiences (tutorials, internships, and student teaching) in shaping the practical knowledge of teachers in the area of literacy. We identified ways in which these practicum experiences were influential on preservice teacher learning: opportunities to (a) struggle and succeed with what Grossman (2011) called “approximations” of practice—the engagement with the moment-to-moment “interactive aspects of practice” (p. 2840) that is part of learning to teach, (b) reflect (independently) on these approximations, and (c) engage regularly with their peers and with the faculty in sorting out the meaning of the experiences and next steps. Their practical knowledge came to reflect the practices they were “approximating,” and they developed reflective routines to continue to refine these practices.

We next describe how (a) developing practical knowledge and (b) developing routines to reflect on practice were enacted over time from preservice years into beginning teaching. After providing an overview of findings (across six focal participants) in an area, we follow with a more in-depth look at data related to one teacher's development. We chose data for reporting that seemed to most clearly represent the broader themes for the group.

**Program Process 1: Developing Practical Knowledge**

**Group overview.** Teachers developed practical knowledge by approximating the models of practices espoused by the program, for example, literature-based instruction, dialogic classroom conversations, read-alouds, and guided reading, drawing from a variety of sources, including readings, course instructors, and online models of tutoring. The ways in which teachers approximated models of practice fell into three categories during their preservice years (Table 3): bringing theory into practice (e.g., trying strategies from course readings in tutoring and student teaching settings), designing instruction for individual learners, and modeling instruction after expert practitioners (e.g., course instructors, online video cases of tutoring, cooperating teachers).

Transitioning into student teaching, teachers approximated both student-centered models (e.g., literature circles, inquiry units, genre studies) and more prescriptive models related to efficiency (e.g., standardized testing, prescriptive curriculum, fixed schedules), the latter being required to a greater or lesser degree for compliance with the accountability-based norms of the schools where they were placed in their practicum. Even as they approximated multiple (and competing) models of instruction in their practice-based experiences, preservice teachers emerged from our program espousing ideas about teaching literacy that reflected the student-centered models they studied at the university but also ideas that were uniquely their own—their own personal practical knowledge for teaching literacy (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985).

Beginning teachers enacted their personal practical knowledge (see bottom of Table 3) as they transitioned into full-time positions teaching elementary grades in racially diverse, low-income communities. From our analysis of our focus group interviews, we documented these patterns: All teachers focused on student-centered ways of teaching literacy, such as getting to know their students, assessing individual needs, and often responding through well-chosen uses of literacy (e.g., literature circles, genre studies), and even when they experienced tensions between these practices and the practices valued in their schools, their talk indicated confidence in their practical knowledge. Teachers talked about the new models that were more oriented toward efficiency in curricular mandates (e.g., scripted programs, test preparation) and behavior management (e.g., token economies). Despite pressures of restrictive curricular mandates in their schools—tensions between activity systems of student-centered and efficiency-based practices—teachers persisted in their attempts to draw on these student-centered practices.

Although we might interpret their activity as shifting toward an activity system that privileges efficiency and accountability, we found contrasting evidence that partial victories—maintaining practices despite pressures—led to learning: In many cases, teachers began integrating student-centered practices more often and with more fidelity to their vision. Over the course of their first years teaching,

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teachers grew in confidence as they learned local norms. Having gained both trust and confidence, teachers in their second years began to take more risks in bringing their practical knowledge into their classrooms and inviting other colleagues to try those practices, too. We provide data to illustrate these patterns, drawing on data collected from one participant, Colleen, focused on how she developed practical knowledge for teaching literacy through our program and adapted her practices into her first years of teaching.

**Colleen.** Colleen entered our teacher education program with a degree in fine arts, aspirations to become a writer, and a desire to encourage reading for her young daughter. Explicitly in her Vision Statement (an assigned essay) and implicitly through her course work (e.g., lesson plans, reflections, videos of teaching), coding of lesson plans, reflections, and other artifacts illustrated that Colleen's personal practical knowledge for teaching centered on these three beliefs about her role as a teacher: (a) she would be a co-learner with her students; (b) she would honor her students' ideas, contributions, and interests; and (c) literacy and learning would lead students to understand multiple perspectives. For example, Colleen wrote in her Vision Statement (December 13, 2008),

I want students to know, because of the way our room is a "mirror and a window" into their minds, that their culture, feelings, thoughts, and creations are treasured here. It's important that my classroom be a place for students to be themselves, and have room to explore who they are becoming. For this purpose, I will create spaces for my students to honor each other and the work they've done.

Ultimately, her continuing enactment of this program feature contributed to her becoming a literacy leader in her school by her second year.

**Colleen trying on models in preservice years.** Colleen valued opportunities to try on models of practice in tutoring and student teaching. Being a co-learner emerged in her work with Isabella, a first-grade English language learner, in a tutoring practicum. While watching video cases of more experienced teachers who modeled these teaching practices (see Hoffman et al., 2009), Colleen appreciated the language choices of the teacher as they positioned her as a co-learner. Then, she wrote of Isabella,

I love non-fiction books (especially with good art) and would love to move into a place where we (Isabella and I) could do some history digging on a topic that we both have prior knowledge to contribute. I think it would be a nice arena in which to idea build and swap thoughts on life. (Reflection, February 16, 2008)

Colleen was developing practical knowledge of what it meant to teach literacy as a co-learner. Colleen noticed and named this practice, then used this model to envision her own future teaching. In keeping with the tutor's dialogic model, Colleen predicted how she and Isabella might similarly put their different worldviews into conversation.

In her transition from tutoring one child to student teaching in a diverse fourth-grade classroom, Colleen continued to envision practices that honored students' ideas, contributions, and interests as co-learners. For example, she planned and taught an inquiry unit on Texas history, providing the whole class with literature and opportunities for building conversation. In planning, Colleen looked first at what curriculum and testing standards she needed to accommodate ("I had to set up first what [test] stuff needed to be covered . . . it's mandatory. And then I would go back and fit in stories I wanted to use for literature"; Transcript, April 1, 2009). Here she began to experience what it means to adapt practices from one activity system to another that has more constraints (Fairbanks et al., 2009) but perhaps was not yet experiencing tensions between activity systems as strongly as she would in her first years of teaching.

Colleen's inquiry unit focused on multiple perspectives on a historical event—the Battle of the Alamo. One day, a student brought an article about the Alamo from home and interrupted her small-group teaching. We watched Colleen stop what she was doing and review the article, which happened to include mention of the conflicts between Texan and Mexican accounts of Davy Crockett's death. Then, she called the entire class to attention for a moment to highlight this important contribution to their inquiry and talk about what the ideas might do for everyone's thinking ("John brought up something. . . . He found an article. Let me read it to you"; Transcript, April 23, 2009). In this instance, she practiced a technique from the program, reading the text while stopping intermittently to voice what she was understanding, once again positioning herself as a co-learner ("So something I just learned from reading this is that there are a lot of different viewpoints and a lot of different legends"; Wilhelm, 2008). Students came to question whether information written in diaries should be assumed as historical fact as a result of this moment. In keeping with Colleen's beliefs that her literacy teaching should lead to an understanding of multiple perspectives, her students continued to critically question competing versions of Battle of the Alamo stories and to consider the representation of the perspectives of nondominant groups in the Texas history curriculum.

As evidenced here, and repeatedly through her student teaching, Colleen's practical knowledge of literacy teaching continued to develop as she practiced transitioning her beliefs about co-learning, honoring students, and the importance of multiple perspectives from tutoring into a full classroom setting. Though she needed to concede to instructional mandates (e.g., curricular standards and testing), she also found ways to continue to enact the literacy frameworks and pedagogies she had envisioned.

*Colleen's practical knowledge expands in her first years.* Teaching fourth grade in a predominantly Hispanic, low-income neighborhood in her first 2 years of teaching, Colleen more intensely encountered the pressures of standardization and accountability. Colleen reported the introduction of new models of literacy

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teaching that included test preparation, which did not lead to “real learning,” as she described in an interview (November 17, 2010), as well as a mandated daily schedule. The school administrators would “want to walk in and see that I’m doing exactly what I’m supposed to be doing—which has taken me months to master being on track with that. But you know, that feels successful to me” (Interview, August 25, 2009). Colleen’s need to stay on the mandated daily schedule signaled a valuing of campus community and was a demonstration of her competency to administrators in her first years, but also was in tension with her practical knowledge of literacy teaching, following students’ leads, and learning alongside their inquiries.

Meanwhile, Colleen continued to enact her practical knowledge of literacy teaching that came from her preservice program. Though she had practiced individualizing her text selections for Isabella in tutoring, and was oriented toward texts that represented a range of perspectives, Colleen found once again she needed to see how her models applied to a new context:

I wanted to bring in a book that I loved, like *The Color of My Words* [Joseph, 2001] and that’s so important. I have 15 boys and five girls and that [book] wasn’t going to fly, so I had to readjust. . . . I had to change everything I thought about words and books and what I like. So I read *Joey Pigza Swallows the Key* [Gantos, 2011] and they loved it. It was like bringing in a bunch of boys gross stuff. (Interview, October 24, 2010)

Just as she had been willing to abandon her instructional plan in student teaching (when John interrupted her with the Alamo article), Colleen again demonstrated her willingness to diverge from her own plans to follow her students’ interests. Encountering tension between her values (“words and books and what I like”) and her students’ interests, she chose to follow their lead. Here Colleen recognized that to stay true to her vision, she had to adjust her ideas about book selection. She learned that a good book choice is a negotiation between her students and her own values.

Having earned the trust of her school community and having demonstrated the quality of her teaching, by her second year, Colleen was already taking on leadership positions in her school. Colleen sought out like-minded colleagues, including a teammate and a strong mentor (a former program graduate) and the local chapter of the National Writing Project, to build ongoing literacy conversations with her administrator, coach, and peers. Her activity systems for teaching became more aligned, but she also had refined her visions and practices. She led professional development in writing on her campus and expressed that, over time, she felt more and more confident in taking risks. Looking back on her first year, she explained that back then, “[I] didn’t want to speak up or rock the boat. This year I’m jumping out of the boat, and I want to be a pirate!” (Interview, November 17, 2010).

#### **Program Process 2: Developing Reflective Routines**

**Group overview.** Across data sources from preservice through first years, we found that the program supported preservice teachers in developing reflective routines

in their literacy teaching. The ways in which they utilized reflective routines fell into three categories (Table 4). Preservice teachers reflected by examining tensions within their activity systems, for example, conflicts between what they believed or had heard to be best for students and the practices of the classrooms and schools where they worked. Through examining these tensions, preservice teachers developed an increasingly broad and strategic range of practices for navigating tensions. Additionally, they reflected in depth and routinely. Their reflections throughout the program were enacted orally and in writing, multiple times per week, online and offline, formally and informally, and always for a real audience of peers and instructors who would respond. They also reflected by envisioning future practice and contexts in which they would enact their practical knowledge, where they would have agency in making their own instructional choices. These reflective practices are those of responsive, thoughtful, and strategic practitioners.

Faced with models of teaching in activity systems that were often in tension with the activity system of the university program, teachers became increasingly

**Table 4**  
**Program Feature 2: Developing Reflective Routines**

	<i>Examples</i>
Enacted by teachers in preservice program	
Reflecting in depth and routinely	Engaging in trial and error Writing in response to practice experiences Reflecting across multiple contexts Oral and written feedback from instructors
Examining dissonance	Between theory and practice Between competing visions of practice (university vs. schools) Between contexts for literacy teaching (tutoring vs. student teaching)
Envisioning future practice	Journaling to think about future students Watching videos of own teaching to identify changes for future practice
Enacted by teachers in first years	
Seeking supportive communities for reflection	Reflecting with school colleagues Reflecting with nonschool colleagues Reflecting with preservice cohort
Examining dissonance	Complying with school's vision Questioning school's vision Accommodating school's vision Resisting school's vision
Envisioning future practice	Planning collaboration with mentor Planning collaboration with preservice cohort Planning to take risks next year

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strategic in adapting their instruction so that they could technically comply with instructional mandates. Teachers tended to respond to some mandates with resistance in the area of literacy because they felt more confident. In their new schools, teachers found that official spaces for reflection (e.g., having an assigned mentor) seemed to be surveillance of them as new teachers. They responded by seeking out spaces for reflective dialogue, both by finding like-minded colleagues in their schools (where possible) and meeting and continuing to read professional books with their university cohort colleagues. Although teachers lamented that they could not enact their knowledge and beliefs about literacy teaching fully in their first years, they celebrated partial victories and envisioned a future in which they would collaborate more and take more risks. The following data collected from one participant, Abby, focused on how she learned within the program to enact reflective routines and how that helped her to thoughtfully adapt and reenvision narrow instructional mandates in her first years teaching.

**Abby.** In an assigned statement of her vision in the preservice program, Abby articulated her personal vision as “love” and then went on to explain that this kind of love was about pointing students “to their greater good”:

Love is patient. I will honor my students by allowing them to make mistakes. We’ll talk about mistakes as opportunities to learn. . . . Love is a revealer of self. And love unconditionally accepts. My room will be a space for students that reflects who they are, showing that they are valued and important to me, and to each other. . . . Love is not self-seeking. I will always choose to do what’s best for my students. I will walk alongside them as a learner, friend, and teacher and ask that they walk alongside me in the same manner. . . . And I know they will all leave marks that will shape and make more specific my vision of love. (Vision Statement, December 13, 2008)

As she moved through different practice-based experiences in our program and beginning teaching, Abby’s vision of literacy teaching developed toward (a) seeing literacy teaching and learning as a process (“Love is patient”), (b) honoring students’ own inquiries and decisions (“Love unconditionally accepts”), and (c) learning in and through strong relationships with others (“Love is not self-seeking”). Abby’s reflective routines in her program and in her beginning teaching supported her in negotiating tensions around restrictive curricular norms in her first years while still maintaining her own vision of literacy teaching and, in this way, allowed her to develop practical knowledge of teaching (Elbaz, 1981).

**Abby developing reflective routines in preservice years.** In her tutoring context, Abby followed the lead of Markey, an “extremely inquiry driven” first grader (Reflection, February 21, 2008). One day, in response to Markey’s request that she bring a read-aloud about “real animals, not fake ones,” Abby planned a lesson that included a funny warm-up poem about real versus imaginary animals, an informa-



tion book about animals, and an animal-themed joke. Abby reflected in writing on her successes and challenges in this lesson:

I wish we could have had about 30 more minutes to spend time in our vocabulary book and on our *Get to Know You* books. I also don't feel like I did enough with the poem. However, the "Wild Babies" book went so well! We only got through two of the baby animals, but it was perfect. Because he dialogues so much throughout the text I think it's more academically appropriate to approach him with smaller bits of text that we can thoroughly discuss bits that interest him. We decided that we would want to read a page out of the wild babies book in every session. (Reflection, February 7, 2008)

Abby identified tensions in this passage related to time, components of her literacy lesson, building conversation around text, and individualizing text selection, the most common areas of tension across Abby's first semester of tutoring.

In response to tensions within the activity system of the university program, Abby's practice was to develop reflective routines to examine points of tension and envision future practice. For example, to manage tension in relation to the fixed amount of time for tutoring, Abby reached out to her instructor to explain that she wanted "to make it a point to slow things down," so their *Get to Know You* book would "be his creation, not my hurried urging" (Reflection, February 18, 2008). As she engaged in reflective routines, Abby's vision for teaching developed into personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985) that guided her teaching decisions.

Reflective routines continued to be useful to Abby as she transitioned into student teaching in a third-grade classroom. Abby was challenged to practice the literacy pedagogies she valued in tutoring within a full classroom of learners, within institutional norms and constraints (e.g., task completion, mandated schedules). For example, in an integrated social studies and literature unit she planned around *The City of Ember* (DuPrau, 2004), Abby's class resisted her best laid plans to have shared dialogue around this text. As she explained, "They almost felt like, 'I want to own this. I want to read this book. Let me read it on my own'" (Interview, August 13, 2009). Although it was a struggle to manage talk on the carpet, especially because the students wanted to read independently, Abby was not yet willing to concede her instructional plans for this text as an integral part of an unfolding unit on environmental conservation.

Much like in her tutoring experience, Abby made sense of this tension through reflection. In an interview with her university colleagues, Abby explained that she approached the conflict in phases of problem solving, including changing seating from the carpet to tables, allowing more choices in seating, and engaging the class in brainstorming solutions (Interview, April 2009). We saw one of these phases in an observation of a read-aloud lesson during this unit when she made repeated attempts (e.g., redirecting, repeating direction), talked to students about the purpose of listening and building on each other's ideas, and tried sometimes taking the role of leader and sometimes taking the role of co-learner. Abby was finally able to re-

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solve the problem by negotiating with her “arch enemy” to win his support, which resulted in her winning the support of the rest of the class (Interview, August 13, 2009). Working through tension by drawing on the strength of relationships was something Abby had practiced in tutoring and also something she valued in the caring approach of her cooperating teacher, whom Abby described as investing in relationships in the classroom (Interview, August 13, 2009). In student teaching, as in tutoring, Abby envisioned literacy teaching as a process of engaging her students’ interests and building strong relationships, which she could manage through reflective action.

***Developing reflective routines in beginning teaching.*** In her first years, Abby’s reflective routines sustained her vision for teaching. In a tighter-than-usual job market, Abby accepted a position teaching science and social studies on a departmentalized third-grade team. Although her vision had focused on knowing each learner through experiences with literacy, she agreed to teach science and social studies to three different classes of third graders who rotated in and out of her room. Abby encountered tension as she tried on models of teaching oriented toward efficiency and accountability in her new position, including required sequences for instruction, curriculum segregated by discipline, and a color card system used to standardize behavior management across her department.

Abby responded to tension during beginning teaching in similar ways as during our program. She initiated reflective routines, making her habitual turn toward the strengths of her relationships. Although Abby recognized that this context was “not quite what I had envisioned” as her mentor and team held competing visions for teaching and management, she stayed focused on building trust by appreciating the strengths of her mentor and her team, “seasoned and wonderful teachers” whose “alternative perspective” and advice she valued for the ways in which it “pushes up against my ideologies and values” (Interview, Reflection, April 24, 2010). Meanwhile, she continued to meet with five of her university cohort colleagues to be “reminded of why I teach and not just challenged in what I teach” (Reflection, November 14, 2009).

As she gained more trust in her school, Abby increasingly explored opportunities to open dialogue (“Our visions differ a little bit . . . so it’s hard. I will try to communicate some of my issues”; Interview, April 24, 2010). She began to approach her principal for permission when she wanted to diverge from the prescribed curriculum (much like she had approached her instructor for this kind of permission in tutoring), and these conversations mediated the tensions she felt within the activity system of the school. Having “built that trust between us,” Abby felt that she could find reflective spaces with her team, however cautiously. In her second year, she began to collaborate with a new science teacher and an instructional coach, who was inspired by the ways Abby was finding to teach literacy in the content areas. Abby continued to think about ways literacy teaching could be incorporated into her classroom but acknowledged

that this was not always possible and sometimes meant putting some of her ideas “by the wayside for now” (Interview, November 16, 2010) to learn within this new activity system. She chose to return to her departmentalized position in her second year in part because teaching in a content area not yet subject to standardized testing allowed her to “fly under the radar” (Interview, November 16, 2010).

We found that in her reflective responses to tension in her new school, Abby was able to sustain what was foundational in her vision for teaching and learning. When Abby first encountered tension in the area of classroom management around her team’s publicly punitive system of changing color cards for undesirable behaviors, Abby’s early responses were to reflect by questioning but to continue to comply. However, by her second year, Abby was more confident in strategically adapting the color card system to be more in accordance with the needs of her students and her own vision for teaching:

We’ll use it as a reflection tool, but I’m not going to sit there and change kids’ colors for things that are out of their control sometimes, like bringing things back signed. I know that’s hard for some kids and parents are working two jobs. (Interview, November 16, 2010)

Thus Abby’s vision for teaching, though it was recontextualized, continued to develop and persist through reflection. At the same time as she worked to build more reflective spaces with her school colleagues, Abby taught her students that they, too, could strategically negotiate tension and systems of accountability and efficiency—by building on the strengths of their communities and opening up spaces for shared conversation.

## **Discussion**

Across the practice-based experiences in our program, preservice teachers were constructing practical knowledge and internalizing reflective routines, in part by reflecting on tensions and how to move forward. The established reflective routines allowed preservice teachers to prepare for some of the tensions they felt between their practical knowledge of literacy teaching and the situations they would have to negotiate in their first years teaching. These negotiations contributed to learning and to thoughtfully adaptive teaching (Duffy et al., 2009; Fairbanks et al., 2009; Parsons, 2012).

Abby and Colleen moved in and between different activity systems for teaching, from their preservice program to their first years. As they encountered tensions between their professional knowledge and new models of teaching, the process of reflection was particularly important. Tensions came from the school institution and colleagues (“Our visions differ a little bit . . . so it’s hard”; Abby, Interview, April 24, 2010) or, as in Colleen’s case, from students. For both Abby and Colleen, reflecting on tensions involved consideration of the emotional, social, moral, and spiritual dimensions of teaching for them as individuals. The models of teaching they encountered in their

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course work and in their teaching contexts were evaluated and enacted through the individual commitments they brought to their work. Activity systems, when they come into contact with one another, often cause tensions that show up in practice. For example, Abby, to be a part of her community in her first teaching job, may have had to move outside of the activity system she brought to the classroom.

In many ways, these findings echo other longitudinal research on the messy transition that students make from teacher education programs into new teaching contexts. Like other researchers, we found that our students' practical knowledge did not go away, but at times, their beliefs were in fact more progressive than their daily practice (Grisham, 2000). Our students' responses to transitions and tension on a continuum were similar to what Smagorinsky et al. (2002) described as "learning to dance the acquiescence, accommodation, resistance waltz" (p. 211) in beginning teaching. While our study underscores these findings that beginning teachers negotiate tension by working both against and within the norms for schooling, we build on these findings by showing how they learned to do so within the university program—specifically, through opportunities to construct practical knowledge from models of practice introduced in their program and opportunities to construct reflective routines within a community of fellow educators.

The struggles, contradictions, and disruptions experienced in the first years of teaching can be overwhelming to new teachers and, in the absence of preparation on how to engage in reflective practices, lead them to abandon the preservice preparation and succumb to context and conform. Our data suggest that the struggles experienced within the preservice program supported teachers in negotiating tensions in the first years. We can understand their learning to address tensions through Engeström's (2001) construct of expansive learning in the context of multiple activity systems that lead to tensions. Equipped with the reflective routines nurtured in the preservice program, these teachers were able to grow from their experiences and challenges. Gaining membership into a new community required that our teachers make strategic (and often ethically complicated) decisions. However, it was their ability to know when to accommodate with the norms of their school communities and when to resist in their first year that was a surprising finding of our research. Eventually, in their second year, this gave them the freedom to enact models of practice that were more closely aligned to the models they tried on in their teacher education program. They creatively worked against and within school norms (Cochran-Smith, 2008) in an effort to align their practices and beliefs.

### **Limitations**

We were able to collect a wealth of data but not able to investigate every feature of the program that may have impacted our students. We attended only to processes that seemed to have the largest influence on our teachers' development of practical knowledge. Furthermore, we recognize that future longitudinal studies in preservice

teacher education might usefully include classroom data to show effects on student outcomes and data collected from administrators and colleagues, particularly given increasing demands among educational policy makers for this kind of evidence of new teacher effectiveness.

## **Implications**

We continue to articulate the design program experiences that lead our students to construct practical knowledge, encounter productive tensions in their work, and align their practices with that knowledge. We offer the following next steps for teacher educators, researchers, and policy makers. Knowing that the experiences of our program helped students negotiate tensions and the tough ethical dilemmas they faced, we see the need in our program to increase the amount of conversation and explicit instruction around strategic approaches to tensions and struggles in teaching. Our findings resonate with the recommendations of Grossman (2011) and Grossman and McDonald (2008) regarding the critical role of authentic approximations—guided experiences enacting various dimensions of teaching literacy—as part of preservice teacher education programs. Beach and Pearson (1998) argued from their study of preservice teachers for the importance of engaging in problem-solving strategies when grappling with conflicts and tension as the basis for interrogating and revising their personal theories of teaching. Our study guides us to create more authentic opportunities, within approximations of practices, for problem posing and solving.

Our study also suggests the importance of engaging with teachers in the first years in similar ways—examining new models of practice, the opportunities for expansive learning that new activity systems offer, and opportunities to revise practical knowledge. These opportunities were harder to locate inside of their first year teaching. The work of Flores and Day (2006) suggested that applying the kinds of critical analysis skills gained in a preservice program to the analysis of contexts in the first years of teaching can lead to the development of stable professional identities. Some promising options might include inquiry as part of a master's program during the first years of teaching (e.g., Freedman & Appleman, 2009) or pathways into alumni and other professional networks (e.g., Quartz, 2003). In addition, beginning teachers could be involved in research as coresearchers, thus providing ongoing opportunities for reflection and support (e.g., Deal & White, 2005).

Taken together and not in isolation, studies like ours that focus on the tensions that arise when teachers encounter new contexts have greater potential in influencing teacher education policy (Zeichner, 2010). Furthermore, in light of recent proposed federal policies for teacher education, there is a growing need for longitudinal research that looks at student outcomes inside of program graduates' classrooms (Clift & Brady, 2005). Just as our program graduates will be challenged by competing ideas about what counts as effective teaching, our practical knowledge

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of preparing teachers will be challenged by competing ideas about what counts as evidence and quality in programs.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.texas teachers.org/>

<sup>2</sup> A more complete review can be accessed at <https://cite.edb.utexas.edu/synthesis/tutoring/>

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