Appropriations of Practice in the Early Years of Teaching

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of teacher education programs on teachers' first years of literacy teaching by following nine graduates of a university-based teacher education program through their first three years of professional teaching. Findings from this longitudinal study highlight the ways the influence of the preparation program can be evident across the beginning years of literacy teaching, but the degree to which beginning teachers are able to appropriate these practices can be influenced by the tensions faced in their particular contexts. The study offers insight into ways to prepare preservice teachers for the initial years of literacy teaching.

Keywords: literacy teacher preparation, appropriation, longitudinal

In recent years, attacks on public schools, universities, and colleges of education have grown in frequency and fervor. Some of these attacks appear to be primarily political in nature (e.g., attacks on liberal elites), providing candidates with material for stump speeches with little need for substance. However, other recent developments have raised alarms in colleges of education. A number of states, including Florida, Arizona, and Oklahoma, have loosened requirements for teachers in their states (Balingit, 2022). Such moves are evidence of a belief by some that formal teacher preparation is not necessary, perhaps that learning to teach from one's experience as a K-12 student is sufficient (Lortie, 1975). In states such as Texas, state teacher certification requirements continue, but fewer teachers are being certified through traditional teacher education programs. In 2021, nearly half of all initial teaching certificates in Texas went to graduates of alternative programs (Texas Education Agency, 2023).

While the requirements for teacher certification, traditional or alternative, vary by state, the trend has been one of lowering requirements to make it easier to teach. The nationwide teacher shortage has only exacerbated this move to relax standards. The implied question (or perhaps accusation) is that teacher preparation does not matter. This is an issue that is relevant to all areas of certification, but is one particularly important for the preparation of literacy teachers in elementary classrooms. In order to counter attacks on the efficacy or necessity of high-quality literacy teacher preparation, research that demonstrates the influence of teacher preparation programs on the first years of teaching is essential. In this study, I examine the influence of a university-based teacher preparation program on the literacy teaching practices of nine beginning teachers across their first three years of teaching.

Research on Literacy Teacher Preparation

It has been over 60 years since the publication of one of the first systematic investigations of literacy teacher preparation programs (Austin & Morrison, 1961). Since that time, there has been a steady increase in research devoted to literacy teacher preparation (see Anders et al., 2000; Risko et al., 2008; CITE/ITEL, 2017), including research on the characteristics of quality reading programs (e.g., Harmon et al., 2001; Hoffman & Roller, 2001; Sailors et al., 2004) and the experiences of beginning teachers (e.g., Bainbridge & Macy, 2008; Beck et al., 2007; Kosnick & Beck, 2008; Scales et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2007). Although researchers have found that beginning teachers' literacy teaching practices in their first years of teaching can be influenced by their university programs (Clark et al., 2013; Grossman et al., 2000; Parsons et al., 2014), the influence of the preparation program can be difficult to measure in the first years of teaching.

One challenge to understanding the influence of teacher preparation programs is that the effects of the program can appear (and disappear) over time. Researchers have found that the influences of the teacher education program are sometimes not evident in the first year of teaching (Grossman et al., 2000), instead appearing in subsequent years. These influences can be hidden by the beginning teacher "acquiescing" (Smagorinsky et al., 2002) to the pressures of their new teaching context. The influence of the teacher education program might emerge only after the beginning teacher has found a way to resist or reject practices with which they disagree (Massey, 2004). Others have found that influences of the preparation program identified in the first year can wane over time (Deal & White, 2005; Grisham, 2000).

Another reason the influence of the teacher preparation program can appear nebulous is that it can be mediated by a number of factors. The context in which teachers begin their first years of professional teaching can be particularly influential on their early career practices and successes (Bickmore et al., 2005; Deal & White, 2005; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Grisham, 2000; Grossman et al., 2000; Massey, 2004). Similarly, the support system, the sense of community that the beginning teacher feels, or the relationship with one's coworkers can influence how the teacher responds to the challenges of the first years of teaching (Deal & White, 2005). The materials and curriculum of the school can also be a powerful influence on the way teachers are able to implement teaching practices they learned in their teacher education programs (Grossman et al., 2000; Massey, 2004).

Researchers have called on teacher preparation programs to adapt to the challenges beginning teachers face in their first years. Both Grossman et al. (2000) and Massey (2004) have called for teacher educators to integrate the kinds of packaged materials teachers find in schools into their teacher education programs in order to prepare teachers to use these materials flexibly. Other researchers have

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investigated the influence of professional judgment in teacher preparation on beginning teachers' ability to mediate the challenges of beginning teaching (Scales et al., 2018) and called for teacher education programs to support preservice teachers in aligning their practices with theory and practice (Caudle & Moran, 2012; Clark et al., 2013).

In spite of the challenges of understanding the influence of teacher education programs, researchers have found that programs have the potential to positively influence the literacy teaching practices of their graduates. These positive influences can be developed in a variety of ways, including through coursework and field experiences (Helfrich & Bean, 2011). Researchers have found that teacher preparation programs can have a positive influence on the beliefs (Deal & White, 2005; Grisham, 2000; Maloch et al., 2003), practices (Hoffman et al., 2005), and professional decision-making (Maloch et al., 2003; Scales et al., 2018) of beginning teachers. Teacher preparation programs can also support preservice teachers in developing a vision for literacy teaching that they can use early in their careers (Grossman et al., 2000; Parsons et al., 2014). Similarly, the preparation program can help beginning teachers learn to take criticism and develop knowledge of the curriculum, instruction (Clark et al., 2013), and practical and conceptual tools (Grossman et al., 2000).

The complexity of the beginning years of teaching can make understanding the influence of the teacher preparation program a difficult endeavor. However, findings from extant research suggest longitudinal studies that follow beginning teachers from their teacher education programs through multiple years of professional teaching (e.g., Grossman et al., 2000; Scales et al., 2017) can offer insight into the influence of teacher education programs on literacy teaching. Additionally, understanding the influence of teacher education programs by focusing on practices taught in the teacher's preparation program can provide insight into how much of what is learned in the preparation program actually makes its way into the elementary classroom. Toward this end, this study investigates the influence of the teacher education program on the participants' first years of literacy teaching by following nine members of a university-based teacher education program through their first three years of inservice teaching.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I used sociocultural learning theory and, within this broader framework, the concept of appropriation (Grossman et al., 1999) to understand the process of learning to teach. Vygotsky (1980) conceptualized learning as a social process, rather than an individual one. The learner influences, and is influenced through interaction, collaboration, and negotiation with others. Instead of focusing on the individual, through a sociocultural perspective one considers how culture and social interactions influence learning. Individuals are not passive in learning;

each of them brings perspectives and experiences to interactions, allowing knowledge to be co-constructed. In addition to interactions with people, learning is mediated through the use of tools and signs. This mediation occurs within a culture, not as an abstract occurrence.

Within sociocultural theory, activity theory focuses on understanding phenomena, such as learning to teach, through systems of goal-oriented activity. Grossman et al. (1999) argue that activity theory can be a valuable tool for understanding teachers' professional development (i.e., learning), particularly through attention to the relationship between the cultural settings, tools, and identities. The authors highlight the concept of *appropriation*, which they define as, "the process through which a person adopts the pedagogical tools available for use in particular social environments (e.g., schools, preservice programs) and through this process internalizes ways of thinking endemic to specific cultural practices (e.g., using phonics to teach reading)" (p. 15). The process of appropriation is influenced by a variety of factors, including the beginning teacher's identity, previous experiences, goals, and interactions. Appropriation is not a matter of either/or, but rather a process that occurs along a continuum. Grossman et al. (1999) use five degrees of appropriation: 1. lack of appropriation, 2. appropriating a label, 3. appropriating surface features, 4. appropriating conceptual underpinnings, and 5. achieving mastery. The degree of appropriation is not the same thing as the degree of understanding. A teacher might understand a particular practice, but refuse to appropriate it for a variety of reasons. Appropriation, in the context of beginning teaching can serve as a useful concept for understanding the influence of teacher education programs on the literacy teaching of beginning teachers.

Method

For this study, nine teachers were followed from their university-based teacher preparation program through their first three years of inservice teaching. The study was guided by two research questions: 1) What literacy teaching practices from their preparation program are apparent as teachers move from their teacher preparation program into their first years of teaching?; and 2) What new literacy teaching practices or adaptations of practices from their teacher preparation program are apparent in their teaching?

Research Approach

In order to capture the complexity of the transition from a teacher preparation program to in-service teaching, I selected a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2013). In a multiple case study, each case is particularly significant in its relationship to other cases. These complex relationships can be studied within the larger collection of cases. In this study, each teacher's

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experiences, practices, contexts, and personalities interact to create a unique set of experiences, which are bound together by their experience as part of their university teacher preparation program. The study's longitudinal design accounts for temporal differences that are inherent in human perception, action, and change (Saldaña, 2003), and important based on findings from previous studies of literacy teacher preparation (e.g., Grossman et al., 2000).

Research Participants and Contexts

The participants in this study are nine teachers from a university-based teacher preparation program in the southwestern United States. The teachers were members of a cohort of preservice teachers pursuing their initial certification in elementary teaching (EC-6) with an English as a Second Language (ESL) supplement. Over the course of their first three years of inservice teaching, the nine participants taught in a total of 12 elementary schools (public, charter, and private) (Appendix A).

The participants in this study were enrolled in a teacher preparation program for initial EC-6 certification with an ESL supplement in a large public university in the southwestern United States. The three-semester program uses a cohort model, so preservice teachers attend the majority of their university courses with other members of their cohort throughout the three semesters. Each cohort has a coordinator who teaches some of the cohort's courses, communicates with the individuals who work with the preservice teachers in the field and in other courses (e.g., supervisors, mentor teachers), and supports the preservice teachers until graduation.

The preparation program to which the participants belonged was one of the eight university programs recognized for excellence in literacy teacher preparation and studied by the International Reading Association (2003). The IRA's Commission on Excellence in Reading Teacher Preparation found eight features that were characteristic of the recognized programs, including a focus on 1) content, 2) apprenticeship, 3) vision, 4) resources and mission, 5) personalized teaching, 6) autonomy, 7) community, and 8) assessment (Harmon et al., 2001). Although the IRA studies had been conducted over a decade before the participants of this study enrolled at the university, the cohort coordinator, Dr. Sullivan, was involved with the research and the development of the program, and had been a faculty member at the university for 40 years.

In a semi-structured interview conducted about the program for this study, Dr. Sullivan identified seven core activity structures and fourteen core dispositions that were important to the program (Table 1). These activity structures and dispositions were developed through course content and experiences across the participants' university program. For example, there were particular ways of engaging in read alouds (activity structure 1) that were part of the participants'

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preparation. In weekly literacy tutoring work, the preservice teachers supported young children through these core activity structures. The fourteen dispositions identified by Dr. Sullivan referred to areas in which certain behaviors were encouraged and developed. Katz and Raths (1985) defined a disposition as "an attributed characteristic of a teacher, one that summarizes the trend of a teacher's actions in particular contexts" (p. 301). Dispositions are not static and inherent to an individual's character, such as personality traits. They are characteristics that can be taught, molded, and developed over time. For example, preservice teachers in the cohort learned to approach assessment (disposition area 2) from an appreciative stance, rather than looking for what is wrong with the child. Each of the disposition areas, like the activity structures, was developed in coursework, field placements, and literacy tutoring across the three semesters of the program.

Table 1
Core Literacy Activity Structures & Dispositions

Core Literacy Activity Structures	Core Disposition Areas
Read Aloud	Relationships (kids and families and communities)
Language Experience	Text Environment (generating texts and importance of Local Texts)
Workshop (reading/writing)	Assessment Tools for Teaching
Guided Reading	Appreciative Lenses
Word/Sentence Work	Reflection (and coaching)
Poetry/Joke	Critical (against the grain teaching)
"Small i/Big I" Inquiry	Integrated Language Arts and Content
	Development and "Disability"
	Multilingualism (and language support)

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Cultural Responsiveness (asset based; resource based)

Identity Work (readers, writers, teachers)

Tools – strategies – noticing naming and growing

Co-construction of Meaning (with responses, leadership in discussions, in dialogue)

Expansive Lenses for what counts as reading and writing (multi-modal; local and community literacy spaces)

Data Collection

Data collection for this study occurred over four and a half years, from fall 2014 to spring 2018 (Table 2). Data focused on the participants were collected during the preservice teachers' time in their university program and across the three years after graduation. Data organization and analysis were facilitated by the use of qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti.

The data from the participants' teacher education program include on-line reading responses, course assignments, and reflections from university courses, as well as lesson plans, observations, and reflections of tutoring work with elementary students over the three semesters of their teacher preparation program (Hoffman et al., 2018b). Data from participants' inservice teaching include semi-structured interviews with each participant, conducted each semester after graduation, and in-person observations of teaching in each of the nine focal participants' classrooms during their third year of professional teaching. As part of these observations, field notes and audio recordings of the focal participants' teaching during literacy instruction time, and an analysis of the classroom text environment using the TEX-IN3 instrument (Hoffman et al., 2004) were collected. Six visits, typically lasting for one hour, were conducted during the fall 2017 semester in eight of the participants' classrooms and four visits were made to one participant's classroom.

Data focused on the university program (program data) were collected during the spring 2017 semester. These data included one semi-structured interview with the cohort coordinator, which focused on core activity structures and dispositions that were considered important in the participants' cohort and program.

Table 2
Data Sources

Data source	Description	Collected
Preservice Data		
Course assignments	Includes reports, papers, projects, and analyses conducted in all literacy courses taken by the participants - Most course assignments were archived on the cohort website.	September 2014 - May 2015
On-line reading responses	Each week, the participants responded to articles and chapters read as part of their coursework on a threaded discussion board. Participants commenting on parts of the reading that surprised, impacted, or confused them and commented on what peers in the cohort wrote in their responses.	September 2014 - May 2015
Tutoring lesson plans, observations, and reflections	As part of multiple literacy methods courses, participants submitted lesson plans before tutoring work and wrote reflections within 24 hours following the tutoring work. Course instructors and teaching assistants reviewed and responded to lesson plans and reflections, and observed the participants during their tutoring work.	September 2014 - May 2015
Other data	Additional data were available for some of the participants. These data include evaluations of the participants by their mentor teachers and university supervisors collected during the first semester of field experiences. Additionally, data from tutoring studies and coaching and mentoring studies for some of the participants were available.	September 2014 - May 2015
Inservice Data		

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Semistructured interviews	Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the nine participants during the summer and each semester between summer 2015 and spring 2018. Interviews, which generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were conducted face-to-face or over the phone, and were audio recorded.	summer 2015 - spring 2018
Observations	During the fall of 2017, each of the participants was observed six times during her literacy teaching time (with the exception of one participant who was only observed four times). The six visits included five regular observations and one visit focused on the classroom text environment (see following item for description). For observations, field notes and audio recordings were collected, with a particular focus on the activity structures and dispositions apparent in the participants' literacy instruction. Profiles created during the initial phase of analysis were used to focus observations for each participant.	Fall 2017
TEX-IN3	The TEX-IN3 (Hoffman et al., 2005), involves observations, categorization, and analysis of the text around the classroom (posters, books, papers, etc.); observations of students in the classroom using and interacting with text; and interviews with students (three per classroom) and the classroom teacher about the text in the classroom. The TEX-IN3 was conducted in each of the participant's classrooms in the fall of her third year of teaching.	Fall 2017
Program data		

University and college website	Descriptions of the university's teacher education program design and mission published on the university's college of education website.	spring 2017
Cohort tutoring website	The cohort used a website dedicated to particular approaches to literacy tutoring. The site included examples of teachers tutoring children, descriptions of particular activity structures (e.g., read alouds), and comment sections in which members of the cohort could discuss the content in threaded responses.	spring 2017
Course syllabi and materials	Syllabi and course materials (e.g., Powerpoints) available from the cohort's website	spring 2017
Interview with cohort coordinator	One semistructured interview with the cohort coordinator was focused on the core activity structures and dispositions that were a primary focus of the cohort.	spring 2017

Data Analysis
Data analysis occurred in three phases.

Phase 1
The initial phase, which began in spring 2017, was focused on understanding the cohort's programmatic context and the development of participants' initial profiles. The context, including the core programmatic activity structures and dispositions, served as a reference point for the initial analysis of the participant data. The preservice teacher data contained evidence as to the degree to which each of the participants appropriated the programmatic practices during the three semesters of their university program. Grossman et al.'s (1999) five levels of appropriation were used as a lens to support this analysis. The data sources for each participant were coded using the core activity structures and dispositions. After all of the preservice teacher data were analyzed, an initial profile was created for each of the nine participants.

Phase 2

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Prior to the observations, the individual semistructured interviews that had been conducted each semester since the summer of 2015 and the nine initial profiles were used to plan the observations. As the participants were observed, the new data were compared to the participants' initial profiles, which guided subsequent observations. The second phase of analysis was an ongoing and recursive process during the fall 2017 academic semester.

Phase 3

After the fall 2017 semester, data for each of the participants collected during visits to their classrooms were compared to their initial profiles. Next, as suggested by Stake (2013), analysis consisted of moving from each particular case to the larger group (i.e., cohort). This recursive process provided a balance between a rich description of each case and an understanding of the phenomenon of the transition into professional teaching. The findings from this analysis are shared in the following section through two focal cases.

Findings

The findings for this study are shared through the cases of Callie and Layla. I selected these participants because they offer a range of experiences that illustrate some of the ways in which the larger group of teachers transitioned from their university programs into professional teaching.

Callie: Appropriation and Strategic Acquiescence in Early Teaching

Callie's first years of teaching offer an example of a relatively successful transition into the first years of professional teaching and clear instances of appropriation from her program. One of three students in her university cohort who self-identified as Asian or Asian-American, Callie left her program feeling prepared and excited to begin her professional teaching career.

> I felt very confident going into teaching. I felt that everything I needed to learn was learnt and that I was ready to go. It felt like I had the skills and had this positive outlook on teaching. I was ready to take on the world and help shape these young learners.

Callie's first year of professional teaching was a kindergarten position at Walnut Elementary, which was located near her university program in a community that was racially diverse and economically underserved. There, she noted the school required "lots of testing, and even testing that is not required by the district anymore." At the end of her first year, Callie moved with her fiancé to a city approximately 200 miles away. There she took a second-grade position at Tallow

Elementary, where she taught her second and third years. Callie noted that while the school was ethnically diverse, Tallow Elementary was located in an economically privileged community, which was quite different from Walnut Elementary.

Callie pointed out some of the ways her preparation program had prepared her for her work during her first year, particularly her work in tutoring and the use of a posterboard that served as a space for capturing the work preservice teachers and students did in tutoring:

> [Tutoring] really helped. That board that we worked on is basically the mini classroom that would essentially become the actual classroom, you know, the reading strategies that the class would come up with, the word work that could be centers or that part of guided reading where you work on that.

She also referred to her work in her field placement as a helpful guide during her first year:

> My guide was from all the things that [my mentor teacher] and I did, I just pulled from that. I had some resources she shared with me. And because I did on-line portfolios I referred back to those pictures, for some of the things I didn't remember, so I would just go back to the timeline where I started the beginning of the school year with her. And I would just look and I could see all of the things that we did together and it would come back.

Evidence of program in early teaching

There were a variety of ways in which Callie's literacy teaching in her first three years reflected practices from her university program. One example of this is Callie's approach to read alouds. Callie selected books for a variety of purposes, just as she had in her university program. In both contexts, Callie used read alouds to teach her students about social issues, such as her choice as a second semester preservice teacher to read a book about overcoming failure with her tutoring student or a book about making friends out of enemies with her students at Tallow. She also focused on the quality of the illustrations in both contexts and considered how the artwork in the books would engage her students. This focus of selecting texts that would engage her students was also something she considered in terms of the books' content. In her inservice teaching she chose books that she believed would connect to her students' interests, experiences, and worlds. This was a practice she relied on throughout her time in her university program.

> It seems to me that when we use books that are somehow connected to the interests and lives of our students, they show a greater interest and share

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more thoughts. I think that our students form trusting relationships with us when we keep them in mind when selecting material to present to them.

Read alouds in Callie's first three years of professional teaching also resembled those of her preparation program in terms of form. In both contexts she used think alouds to model her thinking for her students. As a student she wrote that she found think alouds "extremely important for all grade levels" and "would love to model these strategies" in her own classroom. I observed Callie using think alouds during my visits to her classroom as a way of modeling her thinking and to point out particular features of the books she read. She also adapted the structure of the read aloud to fit the purpose for which it was intended. During one observation, she selected two books in which the illustrations provided the reader with clues about what would happen on the next page. Instead of reading both books completely, she explained to her students that she was only going to read part of the books in order to focus on what the author and illustrator had done in the books. This was similar to times in Callie's program when she had strategically decided not to read the entire book with her tutoring students. Callie sometimes made this decision in the moment, but other times she deliberately planned to only read a portion of the book. This example of Callie reading two books to point out the way the illustrations were used also exemplifies another common aspect of Callie's read alouds: an expansive view of reading. In Callie's classroom, reading was not limited to decoding text. Callie also guided students in making meaning from (i.e. reading) the illustrations, just as she had done in her work with students in her university program.

One final way in which read alouds in Callie's inservice teaching resembled those of her preservice teaching was in terms of discussion. Read alouds in Callie's classroom took place in a sea of talk, just as they had in her program. In both contexts, Callie used read alouds to get students talking and provided opportunities for them to share their thoughts, opinions, concerns, and questions. She used turn-and-talks and other strategies to promote discussion in her classroom. As a preservice teacher, Callie said, "I would love to show my students that I value them and what they have to say." As a professional teacher, Callie demonstrated this commitment to valuing her students through providing space for discussion in her read alouds.

Another example of Callie's program in her early teaching was her approach to providing choice as readers and writers (see programmatic dispositions). In her program, she wrote explicitly about the topic:

Choice is an important component for writers and the freedom to write about topics that are central to them creates a situation where they are respected for their unique ideas. I want to ensure that my students are given

choice in their writing projects and that they are encouraged to write about ideas that are important to them.

During Callie's first year at Walnut Elementary, her school did not use a writer's workshop approach to teaching writing. Callie explained:

> At my school, we don't necessarily do writer's workshop. My principal was an instructional specialist at the school before she became principal and then our instructional specialist really focuses in on our writing. And so everyday there's a topic to write. I feel like it's very disconnected from, it's not very personal to [the students].

In spite of her administrator's directive, Callie explained that she chose to provide her students choice in what they would write about, instead of giving them writing prompts. She said, "I just did it. I didn't tell anyone I was going to do it. I'm just doing it. So if anyone asks me about it I'm just going to tell them." Callie described the way her students reacted with enthusiasm and surprise when Callie provided choice in their writing. She defended her decision by pointing to her role as the teacher.

> I came in [to the first year] kind of shy but it's my classroom. I'm the expert in my classroom and I know what's best for them. I'm the leader in there. I'm the instructor in there. And so whatever is best for them…I can see what's best for them. They do better when given choice.

Callie's disposition of providing choice was also evident in her third year. At Tallow, most of the teachers used a system of corresponding colors and text levels to match each student with books on a particular level.

> They pick their own books. Some of the books are from the library. I don't tell them what to pick. I let them choose. Because the school goes by these tape things. They'll tape them up on the box. And the kids are used to having these colored tapes on the boxes and are like, 'oh okay I can only pick black books or purple books.' Just pick books that are right for you and that you'll enjoy.

This is not to say that Callie always allowed students to choose their own text or that she did not experience a tension with the issue of choice in text selection. In her second year, Callie expressed discomfort with choosing leveled texts for her students in their work in guided reading groups, however she explained that she used leveled texts with her students to provide a balance.

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> I'm choosing the leveled text for them. My justification for that is that I can choose these books for you but we read for like 10 minutes. And then I allow you time to read with a partner and you get to choose your own book so you can pick books that you really like. So, I still agree and believe that kids should be allowed to choose books that they really like.

Callie's Adaptations of Practices

For the most part, Callie's practices resembled those of her university program, in spite of contexts that might have suggested she abandon them (e.g., mandating writing prompts in her first school). However, at Tallow, all teachers were required to do an explicit spelling and grammar program. In her university program Callie had been critical of scripted programs. In an on-line reading response, she wrote the following:

> As a future teacher, I would hope to gain the support of my principal in order to teach against the grain and I could do this by keep data/proof for everything. It was strange that Chicago was praised by Time Magazine for their scripted lesson plans. How do these type [sic] of lessons work when students' learning becomes unpredictable? What if what they are learning takes them somewhere else other than the following day's lesson plan?

When I asked Callie about the programs, she pointed out that the activities were short and did not prevent her from teaching in the way she believed she should overall. In other words, she found these to be minimally disruptive.

Connection to the Cohort

Callie's case provides clear examples of the ways some teachers in the cohort continued practices from their university program in their first years of literacy teaching. All of the teachers in the study claimed to continue to draw upon the practices they learned in their cohort. Oftentimes, the teachers were able to implement these practices with few obstacles, as Callie did with her approach to read alouds. However, Callie's decision to provide choice in her approach to writing and reading forced her to resist school policies. Other teachers in the cohort were confronted with expectations or policies that they resisted, either outwardly or furtively.

Callie's acquiescence to the scripted program at Tallow was a similar response to the acquiescence of others in the cohort to policies and/or practices of their schools. Importantly, Callie's acquiescence was strategic in that it simultaneously allowed her to comply with the school's mandate, but it did not significantly interfere with her approach to teaching. Some teachers in Callie's

cohort acquiesced, but spoke about their compliance as being temporary (i.e., planning to resist at a later time). Callie's acquiescence, though particular to her context, is indicative of the kind of acquiescence that was seen across the cohort. It was not a rejection of practices or principles from their university program, but instead an indication of a broader, more long-term vision of teaching.

Callie's case also offers evidence that a preparation program can make its way into a teacher's practice even if it does not align with the school's way of operating. The example of providing choice in Callie's writing instruction during her first year is one example of this. Even though her school principal mandated the teachers to use writing prompts, Callie resisted the practice in favor of a practice more aligned with her view of literacy teaching. It is unclear whether Callie's confidence in herself as the teacher was the impetus for resisting, or whether the act of resisting was an act that helped to give her confidence. Of course, it is quite possible these occurrences had reciprocal effects, with each influencing the other. The fact that Callie was able to resist some of the practices she disagreed with is notable. Many beginning teachers experience less success in resisting practices that conflict with their views.

Layla: Succumbing to the Overwhelming Tensions of Testing and Accountability

Not all of the members of the cohort experienced the smooth transition that Callie did. Some of the teachers encountered tensions that threatened to overwhelm them. One of these teachers was Layla. In spite of leaving her program feeling hopeful and confident, Layla faced a series of tensions in her first three years that she was unable to resolve, leading her to leave the teaching profession.

In her university program, Layla wrote about her desire to teach that began as a child. "I have wanted to teach since I was little. I know that a lot of people say that, but it's true. I didn't really start developing my "why" until I got older and had more experience with school." Although Layla did not recognize why she wanted to be a teacher, she explained that a middle school teacher, Mr. Stuart, supported her during a particularly difficult time in her life. She recalled, "He valued my thoughts and feelings, and to this day he has such a huge impact on my memory of school. This experience with [Mr. Stuart] started shaping my views of how teachers should be." Layla highlighted Mr. Stuart's caring approach as one that she envisioned for her own teaching, contrasting his approach to teaching with approaches that are focused on testing or limited to the acquisition of knowledge.

As a preservice teacher, Layla experienced success in her courses and field placements, maintaining a 4.0 GPA throughout the program and receiving positive feedback from her supervisors. One area in which she received particular attention from her supervisors was in the way she connected with her students. Both her mentor teachers and her university supervisors noted Layla's skill and focus on

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building relationships with students. Layla left her program enthusiastic and confident: "I think that the rewards of teaching will be endless. They will exist in those small moments that will push me to keep working hard…I will have so many rewards as I teach, and I'm so excited."

Layla worked at two schools during her first three years of professional teaching: James Elementary and Mobile Elementary. James Elementary served an economically underserved community that was both racially and linguistically diverse. Layla described her principal at James as someone with a strong personality, passionate about her work, an advocate for her kids, and very focused on testing. Layla spoke appreciatively about her team and her mentor teacher. In particular, Layla sought input from her mentor teacher about how to "balance my kind of teaching with what my principal wants me to do."

Layla left James Elementary after her first year. Her second school, Mobile Elementary, differed in terms of the demographic makeup of the students enrolled there. Over half of the students were White and the community was wealthier than the community served by her previous school. When she moved, Layla anticipated Mobile Elementary would be less focused on testing than James Elementary had been, which she claimed to be her primary reason for leaving James Elementary. She was disappointed to find out this was not the case. In her first semester at Mobile, she said, "the district, the entire ISD itself is obsessed with testing. They want to be the best and have the highest numbers." Layla's new position was in fourth grade, just as it had been at James, but at Mobile Elementary she only taught language arts and social studies. Layla stayed at Mobile after her second year, however midway through her third year of inservice teaching, Layla took a leave of absence and ultimately decided to leave the teaching profession.

Evidence of program in early teaching

Layla made efforts to integrate practices from her program into her early teaching. This is apparent in her inclusion of poetry in her literacy teaching as well as in guided reading. Even so, there were considerable adaptations to both activity structures which reflected a distinctly different approach to teaching than what Layla had practiced and advocated in her university program.

Poetry was one area in which Layla described being influenced by her university program. Over three semesters in her program, Layla began every tutoring session with a poem. She sometimes used the poems as a simple and fun warm-up to their work together. Other times, she engaged in short discussions about elements of poetry, linked the poems to other work they were doing, or integrated her students' interests, experiences, or cultural and linguistic backgrounds into the poetry warm-up. The poetry warm-ups offered opportunities to engage in language play, discuss vocabulary, create themes that linked the read aloud with other work

being done in tutoring, or include the child's interest in the literacy work they were doing.

In her third year, I observed Layla using poetry in her literacy teaching on two of my visits to her classroom. One aspect of Layla's approach to poetry I recognized was her integration of multilingualism. In her university program, Layla had started "Spanish Tuesdays" with one of her students who spoke Spanish as a first language. Layla and her student took turns reading the poems in different languages and discussing the words across the semester, as Layla used the experience to position her student as the expert. Although Layla self-identified as Hispanic, she claimed a limited ability to communicate in Spanish. On one of my first visits to her classroom during her third year, Layla read a poem that was written in both English and Spanish. Layla's rationale for using a bilingual poem was that it offered opportunities for students to connect to the poem and to bring multilingualism into her classroom.

Aside from the similarities of integrating multiple languages, Layla's approach to poetry in her inservice teaching was considerably different from her approach during her university program. One clear difference in her inservice poetry teaching was the clear connection to testing. On one visit, after Layla read a poem with the class, she told the students to visit different areas of the room with a clipboard and a worksheet to identify sensory language in different poems. The worksheets were designed to support students in preparing for state exam questions related to poetry. During both of the times I observed Layla use poetry in her teaching, she used the projector to connect the poems to elements that would be tested using vocabulary lists and multiple choice questions. This adaptation of Layla's approach to poetry aligns with Layla's comments about the way testing affected the way she taught everything in the classroom.

Another area in which Layla described being influenced by her program was in guided reading. In her second year, she explained, "I think that my training at [my university] with guided reading really has helped me feel confident in my ability to do guided reading groups." Even so, she acknowledged moving away from the activity structure she learned in her program due to testing and "the structure of the schools."

In her university program, Layla's approach to guided reading involved learning about her students' strengths through listening, observing, and using a variety of assessment data. Over the course of her program, she learned to build on what her student was doing right, rather than focusing on deficits. Layla often provided choice in her selection of texts and flexibility in what she and her student discussed in guided reading. Although Layla planned to focus on certain areas of her students' reading development, this was generally something that she allowed to emerge naturally, rather than forcing. For example, Layla often looked for strategies her students used as they read and pointed out those strategies to her

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students, something she referred to *noticing and naming*. Her approach after graduation was quite different. Layla explained the structure she used:

> I pull the kids based off of their DRAs and that's how I put them into their groups and I teach them at their instructional level. And so [my partner teacher and I] create our lesson plans, we're both doing the exact same small group lesson plans as well for guided reading and we focus on one or two [curriculum standards] and just we go through a book. Each day is a different chapter and different focus, maybe the first day we read, if we're reading a nonfiction text we're focusing on text structure. And then the next day it could be author's purpose. And so, we try and fit as many [standards] as we can into one text and dig really deep. I pull each group for about 25 minutes.

This was a much more structured approach to guided reading, and aligned more closely to testing. Instead of basing her teaching off of her students' strengths, Layla and her colleague determined which areas of focus they would teach each day.

Layla also described how her use of labels during guided reading groups had changed from her time as a preservice teacher.

> I already came in just having a better understanding of you know, miscues and understanding those and talking to kids about how they read. But I think that because of the structure of the schools it's hard not to do the whole, "oh my *below* kids, my *on-level* kids, my *high* kids." I've caught myself labeling like that, which is against what we originally learned in class so I think for the most part I don't really [do it the same].

This description of her work in guided reading was similar to what I observed during my visits to her classroom. During one observation, Layla discussed *context clues* and *schema* with a small group. The focus of the day's work had been predetermined and there was no mention of what the students already knew or were already doing as readers. The texts were preselected, based on the students' instructional levels, rather than on students' interests, as Layla had done in her program. As with poetry, Layla's appropriation of guided reading from her university program was minimal and appeared to be highly influenced by her focus on testing and structure.

Connection to the Cohort

Layla's experience in her first three years was similar in various ways to the experiences of some of her university cohort peers. Layla's early years of teaching were filled with tensions, particularly tensions related to testing. Although some of her peers, such as Callie, were able to find ways to resolve the tensions of testing and policies that conflicted with their views of teaching, Layla and others in the cohort were not. Her experience is an example of tensions that ultimately overwhelmed her ability to enact her vision of teaching and led her to abandon the teaching profession altogether. For some of the teachers in the cohort, the challenges of testing led the participants to move grade levels (to a grade that did not require state-mandated tests) or schools (to schools that did not face high levels of pressure to perform on state-mandated tests). In interviews with the cohort participants, some of the teachers described frustration that their attempts to resist practices with which they disagreed were unsuccessful.

There was clear evidence of Layla's university program on her teaching, but this evidence tended to be merely a facade. Layla's use of poetry and guided reading did not resemble the activity structures that Layla had learned and practiced in her teaching. Both were heavily influenced by testing, or at the very least, on Layla's perception that she had to focus on testing.

Layla's approach to literacy teaching had moved from a focus on students' interests and strengths to a focus on predetermined content. This was similarly observed with some of Layla's peers who moved away from a more responsive approach found in their university program. Some of Layla's cohort peers also described pressure from peers or administrators to adopt standardized approaches that adhered to those of their district, school, or grade level team. Such pressure was particularly notable in schools that were economically underserved and for teachers in grade levels that were required to take a high-stakes test. This theme will be discussed more in the next section.

The powerful influence of testing and the support of scripted programs: Cross-Case Themes

Every teacher in the study reported drawing upon what she had learned during her teacher preparation program across the first three years of teaching. Teachers pointed to the influence of the tutoring experiences, their mentor teachers, the discussions with peers, and the readings from across the three semesters. However, as evidenced by the cases of Callie and Layla, the differences between how much of these practices made it into their professional practice were considerable.

Across their three years of teaching, some participants found themselves in teaching contexts in which they reported feeling pressure that they attributed to high-stakes testing. The participants sometimes described their school or district as being very focused on testing. This was particularly true for schools in

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economically underserved communities. Additionally, some teachers in the cohort taught in *testing grades*, or grade levels in which they were directly responsible for preparing their students for one of the state's high-stakes tests (i.e., third, fourth, or fifth grade). If a participant taught in a school focused on testing *and* a testing grade, she generally reported experiencing more pressure than cohort participants who were not teaching in such a context. Table 3 shows the participants' contexts for each of the three years broken down by these two contextual factors: Testing-focused school/ district and testing grade. In the table, the nine teachers are divided into two groups, which I have labeled as *high-pressure contexts, medium-pressure contexts,* and *low-pressure contexts*. A high-pressure context is one in which the participant is teaching in both a testing grade and in a testing-focused school/ district. A low-pressure context is one in which none of these conditions is present. At times, these contexts were powerful influences on whether or not the participants were able to resist practices with which they disagreed and/or draw on practices from their university program. High-pressure contexts were capable of overwhelming participants, leading to abandoning practices from their university program and adopting practices and materials from the school or district. In these instances, participants often reported negative feelings about the misalignment between their teaching vision and current practices.

Table 3

Testing Pressure of Teaching Context by Participant

Participant	Inservice Year	Testing focus school/ district	Testing grade	High pressure/ low pressure context
Layla	1	√	√	High
	2	√	√	High
	3	√	√	High
Liz	1	√	√	High
	2	√	√	High
	3	√	√	High
Kat	1	√	√	High
	2	√		Medium
	3	√		Medium
Corie	1	√	√	High
	2	√		Medium
	3	√		Medium
Jasmine	1		√	Medium
	2		√	Medium
	3		√	Medium
Meagan	1	√		Medium
	2	√		Medium
	3	√		Medium
Callie	1	√		Medium
	2			low
	3			low
Simone	1			low
	2			low
	3			low
Riley	1			low
	2			low
	3			low

This is not to say the context determined the teacher's success or autonomy. Some participants in high-pressure contexts drew upon resources available to them

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to resist the pressures of testing. For example, some of the teachers taught at the same school where they had received many of their teacher education classes and field experiences. These teachers were able to draw on the resources they had developed in their program, including the network of colleagues they knew at the school, to ameliorate the tensions from the high-pressure context.

It is also notable that even in contexts in which participants reported very little pressure from testing, there were clear instances of participants moving away from practices learned in their university program. This included using scripted programs for phonics instruction and relying on leveling systems that limited student choice in what they could read. Such deviations from the approaches learned in their cohort were not caused by the external pressures of testing and accountability, but rather by a need for structure. For some of the beginning teachers, such systems provided them with a way to maintain a sense of order as they focused on other aspects of their teaching. The teachers that reported using scripted phonics programs noted that the programs were not aligned with what they learned in their university programs, but they explained that the programs were just a small part of their curriculum and allowed them to focus on other aspects of their teaching.

Discussion and Implications

It is clear that the participants in this study were influenced by their teacher education program. Not only did the participants speak about the ways in which the program prepared them for professional teaching, there was evidence of the influence of the program in their literacy teaching practices. Even in the most restrictive environments, the teachers continued to draw on what they learned in their teacher education program to teach literacy. Evidence that what teachers learn in their university program can lie dormant across the first years of professional teaching suggests that teacher preparation programs should consider their long-term influence on their university students. This can mean preparing preservice teachers for roles as leaders who can "practice toward the possible" (Hoffman et al., 2018a). In other words, teacher education programs must consider how they can prepare preservice teachers to create classrooms that children deserve, rather than simply preparing tomorrow's teachers to teach in classrooms as they currently are.

Of course, teachers need time to effect change in their schools and classrooms. If colleges of education do not attend to the needs of first-year teachers and the challenges they face, many will not stay in the profession long enough to realize their vision of teaching. Beginning teachers need practical tools they can use to resolve the early-career challenges they face. These tools might include strategies that support adapting curricular materials, building community with

school colleagues, deciding when and how to resist policies contrary to their beliefs, or resolving tensions related to testing and accountability systems.

It is a near certainty that beginning teachers will find themselves teaching in ways that conflict with their vision of teaching or in ways contrary to their university programs. This can be a source of tension for beginning teachers (see Smagorinsky et al., 2002). As seen in this study, some teachers adopted scripted programs, in spite of it being something they recognized as contrary to what they learned in their teacher education program, and something they themselves expressed discomfort in doing. Their expressed need for structure necessitated this change in practice, but it put them in a potentially problematic position. Through a dichotomous view, a teacher could consider their options to be, either abandon their vision of teaching (or that of their program) or reject any and all practices contrary to these visions. However, a more pragmatic approach might be to consider the many ways that such practices can be adopted and adapted without abandoning these core visions of teaching. Teacher education programs can support preservice teachers in considering such situations through practical scenarios, either from the preservice teachers' field experiences or real-world examples. Such scenarios could offer opportunities to consider core aspects of the practices and how they align with or conflict with the teacher's vision.

Finally, the influence of testing and accountability cannot be ignored. The experiences of the participants across the three years suggest there are ways of alleviating some of the tensions of testing, but under some conditions the pressure on the beginning teacher can overwhelm them. In some cases, the beginning teacher can decide to acquiesce temporarily or acquiesce in areas that the teacher does not consider to be major deviations from their teaching vision. This strategic acquiescence, as seen in the case of Callie, can allow the beginning teacher to bend, rather, than break. If the teacher cannot find such ways of resolving these tensions, they might be faced with the decision to openly resist their school or district administrators or abandon their vision of teaching. As seen in the case of Layla, abandoning one's vision of teaching can endanger their longevity in the classroom.

In order to support their graduates, teacher education programs should guide teachers in finding a beginning teaching position that will provide sufficient support and minimize the tensions experienced in the first years. Many of the teachers in this study began teaching in a testing grade (5/9), a testing-focused school or district (5/9), or both (4/9) (Table 3). Although there was a move away from these high-pressure contexts over the first three years, it begs the question as to whether there were other opportunities for the beginning teachers that would not involve being immediately thrown into the world of high-stakes testing. This is not to say beginning teachers should not teach in grade levels or schools that are under pressure to perform on high-stakes tests. However, beginning teachers should recognize that the compounding pressure of both contexts (testing grade and testing

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school) might be too much in the early years. Teacher education programs can counsel preservice teachers to consider these factors when applying for jobs and to advocate for themselves from the beginning.

Conclusion

This study provides further evidence that teacher preparation programs can have an observable influence on the literacy teaching practices of elementary teachers in their first years of professional teaching. Even so, it offers a warning that beginning teachers face a variety of challenges that can threaten to overwhelm them if they lack adequate support. This suggests the need for more support for preserice teachers, rather than the lowering of teaching requirements that has been trending in recent years. Teacher education programs can support preservice teachers by providing tools that they can use in the beginning years to adapt to their particular teaching contexts, especially contexts where teachers experience the pressures of high-stakes testing. In order to reject attacks on teacher education, and the problematic trend of lowering of standards for teacher preparation, teacher education programs must continue to adjust to the changing educational landscape and find new ways to prepare preservice teachers for the challenges that they will face as beginning teachers. In doing so, teacher education programs will offer beginning teachers ways to experience success both in their early years and in the long term.

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Appendix A

Participant Teaching Contexts Across Three Years

Participant	Inservice - Year 1	Inservice - Year 2	Inservice - Year 3
Kat	4th grade; Self-contained Jarrell Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Jarrell Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Lake Elementary (public)
Jasmine	5th grade; Self-contained Richton Elementary (public)	5th grade; Self-contained Richton Elementary (public)	5th grade; Self-contained Richton Elementary (public)
Callie	Kindergarten; Self-contained Walnut Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Tallow Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Tallow Elementary (public)
Corie	3rd grade; (math/science)/ 5th grade; Self-contained Sweetland Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Sweetland Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Sweetland Elementary (public)
Liz	3rd grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)	3rd grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)	4th grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)
Layla	4th grade; Self-contained James Elementary (public)	4th grade (Rdg/SS) Mobile Elementary (public)	4th grade (Rdg/ELA/SS) Mobile Elementary (public)
Meagan	1st grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)	1st grade; Self-contained Highland Elementary (public)

| Riley | K/1 split (ELA/SS) Trekker Elementary (charter) | 1st grade (ELA/SS) Trekker Elementary (charter) | 1st grade (ELA/SS) Trekker Elementary (charter) |
| Simone | 5th grade; (ELA) St. Steven (private) | 1st, 2nd , 3rd; Self-contained Rose Montessori (charter) | 1st, 2nd , 3rd; Self-contained Rose Montessori (charter) |

The names of all participants and schools have been replaced with pseudonyms.