



# Exploring contextual factors shaping teacher collaborative learning in a paired-placement



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The study examined contextual factors shaping teacher learning in paired-placement.
- Multi-layered forces were found to shape teacher collaborative learning.
- Factors deriving from immediate and broader contexts influenced teacher learning.
- Vygotskian tradition was effective in revealing the complexity of the context.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines contextual factors shaping teacher learning in a paired-placement teaching practicum in Vietnam. The study draws on third generation activity theory and Vygotsky's concepts of mediation and genetic method to conceptualise 'context' and how context shapes learning. Multi-layered forces were found to shape the pre-service teachers' learning to teach in their paired-placement. These forces include the teachers' prior experience, the shift to unconventional teaching, the teacher education programmatic features, and other sociocultural aspects. Beyond reporting the contextual factors influencing teacher learning, the study offers a novel approach to conceptualising and contextualising teacher learning in such collaborative settings.

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## 1. Background and introduction

Current research worldwide continues highlighting the significance of teacher professional experience, also known as teacher placement, in initial teacher education (ITE) programs and the need to reform ITE (see e.g., Bullock & Russell, 2010; Le Cornu, 2016). Drawing on the survey data from over 1000 preservice teachers' (hereafter 'PSTs' or simply 'teachers') in the United States, Ronfeldt and Reinger (2012) found that whilst the duration of teacher placement bears little effect, the quality of teacher placement has "significant and positive effects" on teacher outcomes (p. 1091). Much ITE reform has indeed been intended to improve the quality

of teacher placement (Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell, & Hansen, 2008; Ronfeldt & Reinger, 2012), through the introduction of innovative approaches to teacher placement, rather than simply extending its duration.

Traditionally, a PST is typically placed individually in a classroom under the supervision of a cooperating teacher. This form of single-placement has been found to present multiple difficulties for PSTs (Bullough et al., 2003), who often experience isolation due to a lack of support and lack of knowledge about their students. Often individually-placed PSTs must focus on survival rather than learning (Bullough et al., 2003; Westheimer, 2008). Bullock and Russell (2010) argue that this apprenticeship model of teacher placement is "inherently limited" (p. 91).

Alternative professional experience models, especially those inspired by collaborative learning, have been developed (Baeten & Simons, 2014) to partly address the growing need for reform. These include paired-placements (Cross & Dunn, 2016; Lang, Neal,

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Karvouni, & Chandler, 2015; Rodgers & Jenkins, 2010; Sorensen, 2014). Within the present study, the term ‘paired-placement’ refers to the model where PSTs work together in pairs “in the same classroom, receiving joint mentoring, while sharing the timetable and collaborating in planning, teaching, and assessing pupils’ work” (Carter, 2004, in King, 2006, p. 371).

Emerging studies on paired-placements highlight multiple benefits for teacher and student learning (e.g., Bullough, Egan, & Nokes, 2010; Heidorn, Jenkins, Harvey, & Mosier, 2011; Lang et al., 2015), whilst also revealing the tensions and challenges resulting from being placed with a peer (Dang, 2013; Gardiner & Robinson, 2011; Nokes et al., 2008). Research also acknowledges the role of context in the success (or not) of paired-placements (e.g., Manouchehri, 2002; Vickery, Sharrock, Hurst, & Broadbridge, 2011). An in-depth understanding of the context of teacher learning in paired-placements can help to reveal the shaping forces of teacher learning in this context, and inform successful implementation of paired-placement models.

Notably, paired-placement research has mainly focused on micro-meso levels of interactions between partners in paired-placements and within ITE programs and school-university links. Systematic research focusing on the broader meso-macro context is missing in the paired-placement research to date. Few extant research, however, alludes to the influence of a broader meso-macro context on the success of this model. For instance, Lang et al.’s recent study (2015) suggests in the limitations of their study that cultural and structural challenges, beyond the ITE program and school context, play a part in the uptake of the paired-placement model among the PSTs in Australia. While the role of the macro-level context in PSTs’ professional experience in general ITE has been well documented (see e.g., Knoblauch & Hoy, 2008; Le Cornu, 2016; Nuttall, Brennan, Zipin, Tuinamuana, & Cameron, 2013; Phan & Locke, 2015), it is not the case with paired-placement research.

Nascent research in second language teacher education (SLTE), the academic discipline of the paired-placement under examination in this study, has explored collaborative models such as peer mentoring and co-teaching (e.g., Johnston, 2009; Nguyen & Hudson, 2012). Although paired-placement is gaining popularity in general ITE as discussed, this has yet to become the case in SLTE. The literature shows that second language teacher learning is a complex developmental process (Johnson, 1996; Le Cornu, 2005) influenced by multiple factors. Prior elements include teachers’ previous language learning experiences (Feryok, 2012; Schultz, 2003; Vélez-Rendón, 2006), their prior beliefs of language learning and teaching (Chan, Tan, & Khoo, 2007), and early teaching experience (Borg, 2009). Another prominent theme is contextual factors (Burns & Richards, 2009; Schultz, 2003), including the effects of school institutional context and broader educational, socio-cultural-economic-political context on English teacher development (Dang & Marginson, 2013; Xu, 2013).

Although context is acknowledged as shaping teacher learning, in both SLTE and paired-placement research, context at the meso-macro levels is often understood as “backdrop” rather than “interlocutor” of teacher learning, to borrow Freeman’s (2002, p. 5) words. As in SLTE research (see Cross, 2010), in paired-placement research, context has yet to be specifically and adequately addressed in terms of its impact on teacher learning. The notion of context has often been defined on the basis of “researchers’ subjective, arbitrary judgements rather than a sound theory of what context is and how it affects practice” (Cross, 2006, p. 69).

The purpose of the present study is to better understand contextual factors that shape teacher learning in paired-placement in an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher education context. It addresses the question: ‘What contextual factors shape teacher learning in the paired-placement?’, taking into account the

multiple contextual layers, including the meso-macro level. This study adopts a combined theoretical framework of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and third generation activity theory to investigate contextual factors that shape the learning of four pairs of Vietnamese pre-service teachers of English over their 15-week paired-placement. This theoretical framework, elaborated in Section 2, is chosen for its capacity to conceptualise ‘context’ and teacher learning (*as a process*), and how context shapes learning.

This study also draws on contemporary ITE literature in viewing teacher learning as socially situated (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Korthagen, 2010), emphasising the role of teacher participation in social practices, especially in school settings, on teacher learning. Teacher learning, *as a product*, encompasses growth in teacher professional knowledge and skill (Shulman, 1987), a focus on student learning as a teacher (Fuller, 1974), and collegial collaboration (Gardiner & Robinson, 2011; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) – key components developed in teacher preparation. Grossman et al. (2009) maintain that engagement in teaching practice helps novices “assume the role and persona of the teacher while receiving feedback on their early efforts to enact a practice” (p. 283).

## 2. Theoretical framework

A combined framework of Vygotsky’s (1978, 1981) sociocultural theory and third generation activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 2008) is adopted in this study to conceptualise teacher learning and explores how context shapes teacher learning in the paired-placement. The extant research on paired-placement mainly documented tensions and challenges in pair-placement as obstructive to teacher learning. From a sociocultural activity perspective, the study however views contradictions as sources of change and development. It conceptualises tensions in terms of systemic contradictions in the pair-work and learning is contingent on the resolution of contradictions. At the heart of the framework are Vygotsky’s concepts of mediation by tools and artefacts, genetic method, and third generation activity theory.

### 2.1. Mediation

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory recognises the central role of culturally constructed tools and artefacts, in the context of social relations, in mediating human forms of thinking and development (Vygotsky, 1978, 1981). Vygotsky saw “the transformation of elementary [mental] processes into higher order ones [such as learning to teach] as possible through the mediating function of culturally constructed artefacts, including tools, symbols, and more elaborate sign systems, such as language” (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 6). Mediation by artefacts “breaks down the Cartesian walls that isolate the individual mind from the culture and the society” (Engeström, 1999, p. 29), creating the link between subject and society.

In the present study, the PSTs’ principal mediating artefacts are pedagogical tools, comprised of conceptual tools and practical tools (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). Conceptual tools refer to the general principles, frameworks, or guidelines that teachers use to guide their decisions about teaching and learning, such as learning theories and philosophical views of schooling. Practical tools refer to concrete practices and strategies that teachers can enact in classrooms to address the needs of students. Arguably, in a paired-placement context partner discourse is another source of artefacts that mediate teacher professional learning. However, employment of these tools and artefacts cannot be understood outside the broader socio-cultural-historical context in which they are used. Here Vygotsky’s (1981) genetic method provides a

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