



# Making the socio-historical visible: A place-conscious approach to social foundations in practice-centered teacher preparation



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Social foundations coursework can contextualize representations of teaching.
- Contextualizing practice includes examination of ideas, structures, and processes.
- Place-conscious social foundations localizes the practice of contextualization.
- Ways of seeing place give pre-service teachers tools for further investigation.

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## ABSTRACT

In this conceptual article, the authors argue that the turn toward practice in teacher preparation can be deepened and made more authentic by a “place-conscious approach to social foundations.” The authors offer three ways of seeing place that can ground social foundations coursework: 1) ways of seeing place through expansive data use; 2) ways of seeing place through experience; and 3) ways of seeing place-making. Using examples from their own foundations courses, the authors contend that such an approach can help pre-service teachers use tools of the humanities and social science to engage the socio-political contexts of teaching and learning.

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## 1. Introduction

The field of teacher education has turned toward *practice* as a solution to widespread reports of teacher unpreparedness and educational inequalities in the USA. Quite rightly, several scholars have recognized the deep historical roots of these calls to ground the development work of teacher preparation in the everyday pedagogical methods and experiences of teachers. For example, Bullough (2012) finds appeals to “best practice” back in the 17th century literature of the Royal Society of London; Forzani (2014) locates calls for practice-based teacher education in the “object teaching” of the German pedagogical seminaries and American normal schools of the 19th century; and Zeichner (2012) sees roots in the “Commonwealth Teacher Training Study” and the broader social efficiency movement of the early 20th century.

Yet, contemporary practice-based teacher education scholars—especially, but not exclusively in the USA<sup>1</sup>—argue that their work has taken teacher preparation in new directions, away from the overly prescriptive approaches of the past and in contradistinction to the corporatized alternative certification routes of the present (e.g. Relay Graduate School, Match Teacher Residency, Teach for All).<sup>2</sup> These contemporary scholars speak in terms of “ambitious,” “core,” or “high-leverage” instructional practices that better

<sup>1</sup> Here, we are thinking about the site-based learning scholarship of McGraw and the Better Pedagogies Research Group in Australia (2017); Orland-Barak's (2010) work on the teaching and learning practices developed through mentorship; and the scholarship on teacher learning-in-activity that derives from Engeström (1987) and Billet (2003).

<sup>2</sup> However, practice-based scholarship has been extremely attractive to corporatized alternative route certifications in the USA— with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) collaborating with scholars affiliated with TeachingWorks at the University of Michigan to align “high leverage practice” with performance assessments and virtual classroom avatar systems (e.g., Qi & Sykes, 2016; Sykes & Wilson, 2015).

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prepare equity-minded teachers who can support discipline specific, intellectual press for all students (e.g., [TEI Curriculum Group, 2008](#); [Ball & Forzani, 2009](#); [Forzani, 2014](#); [Lampert, 2010](#); [Kazemi, Ghouseini, Cunard, & Turrou, 2016](#)). Teacher educators, they argue, should work together to “decompose” some of the central practices of disciplinary teaching—thereby making them visible—and then create instructional activities that allow pre-service teachers to engage in a cycle of analysis, rehearsal, and enactment of these practices ([Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009](#); [Lampert, Beasley, Ghouseini, Kazemi, & Franke, 2010](#); [Lampert et al., 2013](#); [Peercy & Troyan, 2017](#)). Central to each of these stages is a focus on student sensemaking and the “social, intellectual, and linguistic resources” ([Kazemi et al., 2016](#), p. 19) that students bring into disciplinary thinking and activity (see also [Windschitl, Thompson, & Braaten, 2011](#)). Contemporary practice scholars claim that unlike previous generations, their vision of practice acknowledges the contingency, uncertainty, and relational nature of teaching while also recognizing that instruction “is at least partly predictable” ([Forzani, 2014](#), p. 360).

As such, a common sight within the analysis stage of these instructional activities in practice-centered programs is a group of pre-service teachers watching discipline-specific videos of instruction ([Beilstein, Perry, & Bates, 2017](#); [Christ, Arya, & Chiu, 2017](#); [Hatch & Grossman, 2009](#); [Santagata & Guarino, 2011](#)). A video in an elementary math methods class, for instance, might show the instruction of a master teacher engaging students in a whole class discussion on fractions. The teacher educator stops the video at a predetermined point and asks pre-service teachers, “What do you see?” This launches a conversation about different aspects seen in the short clip: teacher-student instructional interactions (the kinds of questions posed, how the teacher ‘takes up’ student responses, how the teacher captures responses on the board, etc.); the environment of the classroom (the spatial arrangement of students, patterns of participation, assessments of student engagement); and the mathematical ideas discussed. Joint analysis of these “representations of practice” ([Grossman et al., 2009](#), p. 2058) are understood by many practice scholars as an essential part of the work of practice-centered programs (PCPs), which themselves are gaining traction in the field as a promising development in the preparation and professionalization of novice teachers (e.g., [Kazemi, Franke, & Lampert, 2009](#); [Zeichner, 2012](#); [TeachingWorks, 2017](#)). To these scholars, conjoint meaning-making amongst teacher educators and pre-service teachers—grounded in the observation of classroom instruction—is a necessary part of teacher development. Ideally, it provides a model for inquiry that teachers take into the profession and that guides their continual efforts to improve instructional practice and ultimately provide intellectual press for all students.

In this article, we argue that though significant, moves in practice-centered preparation towards conjoint meaning-making are limited absent an embrace of social foundations. We aim to contribute to discussions of curriculum and pedagogy in PCPs by arguing that pre-service teachers also need the opportunity to grapple with the questions, “What do you *not* see?” or “What remains invisible?” in representations of practice, such as those depicted in discipline-specific videos of instruction. At the heart of this question is a press for the examination of macro socio-historical forces that push and pull teaching, learning, and schooling: forces that are likely to be invisible in videos, but that are nonetheless crucial to pre-service teachers’ understanding of the complex work of teaching.

In one respect, this article builds on the recent work of several practice scholars who have proposed strategies, tools, and practices that engage pre-service teachers in some form of contextual learning beyond representations of instructional practice. For example, [Turner and Drake \(2016\)](#) suggested that contextual

learning in the form of pre-service teacher inquiry into children’s cultural funds of knowledge might be used to support and increase children’s mathematical thinking and learning. [McDonald, Bowman and Brayko \(2013\)](#) argued that pre-service teacher learning about community/neighborhood contexts through community-based organization placements could help them develop “relational practices” that they could then apply in school classrooms to increase student participation and engagement in disciplinary thinking and activity. [Matsko and Hammerness \(2014\)](#) show how the “core practice” of an interactive read aloud can become “context specific” when a teacher education program intentionally designs opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn “local geographic, socio-cultural, district, and student contexts” and then use that knowledge to “inform text and instructional strategy selection” (p. 136). In sum, these calls for contextual learning alongside instructional practice learning within teacher education programs represent an important acknowledgement that every domain of teaching is relational and that family, community, and institutional contexts matter in teaching.

While we agree with this, we also find these operationalizations of context to be too narrow and instrumental. We contend that pre-service teachers also need opportunities to learn how contexts are shaped by the history of ideas (e.g. race, class, gender, and ability), ideologies (e.g. white supremacy, meritocracy, heteronormativity, and abilism), structures (e.g., federal laws and policies, capitalist modes of production and wealth accumulation), and processes (e.g., racialization, patriarchy). Exposing the development of multiple, layered, frequently overlapping forces—situating teaching historically and recognizing it as inherently political—traditionally has been the work of a social foundations course in teacher education programs.

At the same time, however, social foundations coursework can itself be deepened and made more relevant to better expose the multiple, layered and frequently overlapping forces that shape teaching, learning, and schooling. It can do this, we argue, by taking a place-conscious approach to social foundations ([Bowman & Gottesman, 2013](#)). As noted urban historian Dolores Hayden acknowledged in her book *The Power of Place*, “[p]lace’ is one of the trickiest words in the English dictionary, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” ([Hayden, 1995](#), p. 15). Yet, Hayden argued that fundamentally all places are “working landscapes”: the results of complex and continuous interactions of people laboring to “construct and maintain” (p. 20) spaces under particular social and economic conditions. In other words, we cannot hope to develop understanding of the places in which we live and teach unless we start unpacking the socio-historical work that has gone into constructing, altering, and maintaining these places. This unpacking requires examining, interpreting, and weighing a range of evidence and competing claims about the ways places are built, represented, and experienced.<sup>3</sup> Teacher education must, we argue, make socio-historical forces visible.

Just as math, literacy, and science teacher educators refocused their teaching around core practices, we contend that social foundations teaching should refocus around the socio-historical development of the places (schools, neighborhoods, cities, suburbs,

<sup>3</sup> Our approach to helping students make meaning of competing claims is broadly post-positivist—we are centrally concerned with the articulation of reasons to prefer one interpretation to another, based on what [Phillips and Burbules \(2000\)](#), drawing from Dewey, describe as “warranted assertibility” (p. 3). Though broadly post-positivist, we are also both deeply influenced by feminist theory and critical theories of race, which have pushed the post-positivist position to consider, amongst many things, the significance of standpoint in inquiry. These are conversations we engage in with our students. For further discussion of one of our approaches to conversations in the philosophy of social science, see [Gottesman \(2016\)](#).

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