



Cut to the core practices: Toward visceral disruptions of binaries in PRACTICE-based teacher education



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Research on core practices and critical research on systemic oppressions in teaching and teacher education too often tend to happen separately.
- Theories of affect and discourse support considerations of how language of practice(s) focus the field's lens on particular aspects of practice.
- Engaging complexities in binary language supports novices in recognizing discourses related to power and varying stakes in enactments of practice.
- Practice-immersed methods preparation provides opportunities to experience the complexities of power that permeate learning of teaching practices.

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ABSTRACT

Situated in the field's burgeoning attention to identifying and specifying "core practices" of teaching and drawing on data from a study of a writing methods course in a US teacher preparation program, this article draws on poststructuralist discourse and affect theories to show how attending to the affective dimensions of practice was crucial to "un-naming" discourses of Control and Failure in one preservice teacher's writing lesson. The authors argue that binaries within metaphors of practice(s) must be continually troubled to ensure that children's racialized, classed, and gendered positioning in schools is centered within practice-based teacher preparation.

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"Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost."

—Henry James

"O my body, make of me always a [hu]man who questions!"

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

1. Introduction

Increasingly, teacher education researchers are exploring how focusing teacher preparation on particular practices of teaching can support novice teachers as they enter the profession. In the US,

some researchers are drawing on the term "core practices" to describe, in McDonald, Kazemi, and Kavanagh's (2013) words, "specific, routine aspects of teaching that demand the exercise of professional judgment and the creation of meaningful intellectual and social community for teachers, teacher educators, and students" (p. 378). Such practices may include facilitating discussion, modeling, orienting students to each other's ideas, and orienting students to instructional goals, to name but a few examples. Whatever term used to identify those practices—core, high-leverage, key, or central—the conversation centers on identifying and specifying a manageable set of particular teaching moves novices can learn and hone to support rich learning as they enter the profession.

As literacy researchers who ground our work in affect, critical, and poststructuralist theories, we are compelled by what we view as the productive complexities of identifying and specifying certain practices teachers will use routinely in their teaching to support

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students' access to rich learning. In this article, we focus on the term “core practices” to indicate that movement in teacher education research and practice because we are invested and engaged in research with colleagues on what happens when a group of teacher educators from different disciplines and university teacher preparation contexts deliberate on key practices of teaching, the principles in which they should be grounded, and the design of innovative pedagogies and models of apprenticeship to support novice teachers (*Core Practices Consortium, 2013*). We believe these efforts can foster ambitious teaching (*Lampert, Beasley, Ghouseini, Kazemi, & Franke, 2010*) and humanizing pedagogies (*Paris & Winn, 2013*). However, attempts to identify particular aspects of any large and complex terrain, certainly teaching, inevitably focus the field's lens on particular aspects of practice and away from others (*Forzani, 2014*). Thus, it is imperative to vigilantly attend to what falls within and outside of the field's gaze in efforts to identify what is central to effective, impactful teaching.

All metaphors we might use to capture important aspects of teaching are complex and “core” is no exception. Core always already signifies an outside that surrounds it. Core and surround—one term cannot hold meaning without the other. Thus, as a metaphor, it cannot but construct boundaries of what is in and what is out, what is in the center and what is not. At the same time, core signifies heart, depth, and what lies well beyond the surface. We dig, devour, and drill down to a core. We are shaken to our core. We search for the core of who we are. We ascribe intuition to our gut and our deepest sorrows and delights to our heart. We seek the center, scoop it out with our hands, because it is the sweetest, most tender part. In both of these senses of the word, the core depends on its surround. And, of course, the surround is only seen as surround because it is in relation to what we designate a core. What is carved away, the juices that run through our fingers, the pile of earth our shovels create, the particular body feeling the ache or aflutter of the heart—those things are just as present as whatever it is we are digging toward. However, they can only be seen as just as present, or, perhaps, seen at all, if watching for the eruption of the binary and seeking its disruption is always in process. In just this way, the presence of the binary inherent in the term “core practice” holds potential to open a productive space for inquiry and conversations. How, we wondered, might we use the complexities inherent in the binary of this and other metaphors used to describe sets of particular practices of teaching to help us in our work with novice teachers? How can we support them (and ourselves) to attend to specific moves of teaching *and* all that bursts and spills from efforts to define and enact them?

Our primary purpose in this article is to present a conceptual argument related to the necessity of continually and explicitly questioning binaries in practice-based teacher education. We illustrate that argument within an analysis of one preservice teacher's writing lesson that occurred as part of our practice-based elementary writing methods course, taught in an undergraduate teacher education program at a large public US university. To ground our conceptual argument, we draw on an illustrative discussion of one preservice teacher's enactment of a writing lesson with a small group of children in a primary classroom. In particular, we focus on the experiences of the preservice teacher, Jacob, and two children, Jorge and Enrique, and how we employed affect and discourse as lenses to consider the crucial complexities of teaching in this lesson in the context of relationships and experiences each of them brought to that lesson.

Central to our considerations of what is contained (in both senses of the word) in the naming of practices as core to teaching, is the importance of continually questioning efforts to *name* in both the micro and macro contexts in which teaching occurs. Language inevitably creates categories that position individuals and groups

within or outside of what is recognized as the norm within histories of structural inequities of race, class, gender and sexuality, and language (e.g., *Anzaldúa, 1987; Butler, 2006; Fanon, 2008; Foucault, 1982*). In the context of classrooms, those categories often become labels that attach to children in highly consequential ways.

It is a productive and unavoidable conundrum that in cultivating a term it becomes rooted in particular notions of whatever it attempts to name. Such rootedness or potential for rootedness is an aspect of what *Deleuze and Guattari (1987)* critique as the consequential “root tree” nature of dominant, explanatory narratives. Any movement toward rootedness, therefore, should spark curiosity and suggest the need for expansive theories and forms of analysis that support moving away from rather than toward dichotomous framings of what counts as effective teaching. Thus, the long-circulating question of which practices of teaching hold the most promise for children's learning must be pursued in ways that foster movement toward useful clarity while sustaining attention on complexities of practice (*Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Lampert et al., 2013; Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten, & Stroupe, 2012*).

Centering on complexity is crucial, of course, because, in the context of questions of what is central, or core, to teaching practice within classrooms, trying to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost, as James urges in our epigraph, is a high-stakes imperative indeed. There is much to lose in the complexities of the histories and policies of schooling, the enactments of practices in the accumulating moments of classroom life, and the consequential narratives that are always under construction to position children and teachers. As Fanon poignantly and pointedly voices in our epigraph, bodies pose questions. Those questions embedded in bodies and their very different locations, we argue, must be explicitly part of the field's conversations about aspects of teaching identified as central and how to take them up with novice teachers. In other words, language positioning some teaching practices at the center can be an invitation to consider how language works to create binaries and prompt processes that complicate what is explicitly or implicitly named as what counts most in moments of teaching.

Thus, as we discuss further below, because children are too often named through categories that pre-exist them, a practice of un-naming is necessary as part of teaching and must occur simultaneously with learning and enacting specified teaching practices. In other words, we emphasize the need to support novice teachers to always be in a process of un-naming assumptions about children and what it means to participate in learning, as well as their own “success” or “failure” as teachers. A process of un-naming, in the way we use that idea here, involves explicitly embracing with candidates the concept that, in *Kumashiro's (2004)* words, “learning to teach involves disrupting [the] desire for certainty” (p. 115). We illustrate these stakes in novice's enactments of practice in our discussion of the experiences of Jacob, the preservice teacher, and two children, Jorge and Enrique, who were students in the primary grade classroom collaborating with the university course.

For us, this project of un-naming is supported by critical post-structuralist theories of discourse and affect as lenses. By discourse we refer to systems—of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices—that construct and regulate people and the worlds they inhabit. As we will emphasize, those systems include entrenched inequities of race, class, gender, and language that are always embedded in practice. Affect, in the theories on which we draw, refers to that not-yet-named space of sensation that precedes assigning a label to what we experience (*Massumi, 2002*). In classrooms, this includes, for instance, the sense of disequilibrium a teacher might feel in a moment before a child's unexpected response to a question gets named and attached to a child as “resistance”; or, the sensation of gratification a teacher might

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