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Doing Differently: Towards Practice-Based Teacher Education to Promote Justice

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.3.1.4><https://mje.williamwoods.edu/>**Rebecca Gadd
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PBTE can be used as a powerful tool to support novice teachers to think and do differently in their practice to promote justice by disrupting white supremacy and oppression in everyday teaching practices. Using the practice of *assigning competence*, which requires attention to content and equity, we conducted a conjectural analysis describing our teaching of the practice in a secondary social studies and an elementary mathematics teacher education course. Our analysis highlights the challenges of teaching justice-focused practice. We offer an initial framework for practice-based teacher educators with a social justice focus and identify three essential areas of work: (1) broadening novices' conceptions of what counts as worthwhile content, (2) enabling them to navigate and manage power, and (3) helping them learn to embody justice-focused aims in their enactment. We explore each area of work, what they could look like, and the challenges and requirements for teacher education.

Keywords

Practice-Based Teacher Education (PBTE), Novice Teachers, Assigning Competence, Acknowledging Competence, Justice

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Introduction

The turn toward practice-based teacher education (PBTE) in the last two decades has been driven by the conviction that intending teachers must learn and practice what to do in interactions with young people around content before taking over their own classrooms (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020). This focus on practice has inspired critiques of PBTE suggesting that it reproduces white supremacy in teaching and teacher education (TE) (Daniels & Varghese, 2020). Critics argue that the practices, techniques, and perspectives upon which PBTE is based, presuppose whiteness as a default state and fail to interrogate how this orientation reifies systemic oppression in classrooms (Daniels & Varghese, 2020).

As teacher educators who are committed to disrupting oppression and transforming teaching practice in ways that promote justice, we remain convinced of the promise of PBTE. The work of teaching is fundamentally relational and informed by teachers' multiple subjectivities (Ball, 2025; Daniels & Varghese, 2020) which shape how they perceive and respond to children and content in the discretionary moments that make up their work (Ball, 2025). Further, white supremacy fundamentally informs everyday patterns of interaction in classrooms in predictable and oppressive ways by limiting how teachers understand their roles, how they shape young people's relationships with one another, how they understand and communicate disciplinary ways of knowing, and how they exercise their discretion in moment-to-moment interactions with students around content (Ball, 2025; Cherry-McDaniel, 2016; Langer-Osuna, 2016; Warren et al., 2020). As such, careful attention to practice – what teachers do and how they do it – is necessary to prepare novice teachers to disrupt patterns of oppression in their everyday work with young people. We argue that novices require opportunities to consider and practice what they might do differently in order to teach in ways that disrupt and transform the oppressive status quo (Ball, 2025; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; Khasnabis et al., 2019; Schiera, 2023).

However, the move from ideas about justice and PBTE to the design and enactment of preparation for novice teachers is not straightforward. While powerful principles and pedagogies have begun to be developed for PBTE (Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Khasnabis et al., 2019; Moldovan & Gonzalez, 2023), novices don't tend to automatically incorporate ideas about justice into their practice, even when those ideas have been a major feature of instruction (Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; Schiera, 2020). In this article, we describe our efforts as practice-based teacher educators to identify and teach a particular practice, assigning competence (Cohen, 1973; Cohen et al., 1999; Featherstone et al., 2011), to novices in ways that enable them to disrupt everyday patterns of oppression in their work with children and adolescents. We taught the practice in two separate pre-service TE courses, secondary social studies field instruction and elementary mathematics methods. Here, we describe and analyze our approaches in each course to understand the decisions and moves we made as teacher educators. Based on our analyses, we offer an initial framework for what is involved in taking a practice-based approach aimed at fostering beginning teachers' dispositions and capacities to be deliberate about disrupting everyday patterns of oppression and promoting justice.

Literature Review

Classroom teaching can be a site for the reproduction and reification of oppression, or it can be a site of disruption and transformation (Ball, 2025; Calabrese Barton et al., 2020; Cohen, 1973). Too often it's the former as the practices teachers employ, and the ways they enact them, are rooted in white supremacist

assumptions about what is “normal” or “best” (Daniels & Varghese, 2020; Gadd, 2018; Warren et al., 2020). Shifting this status quo is no simple task. Teacher educators, who are themselves typically ensconced in whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 2005, 2017), must work against powerful patterns of socialization related to teaching, the social realities of schooling, and race (Lortie, 1975; Love, 2019; Wilkes II & Battey, 2024). Given these conditions, it’s not enough to simply teach novices critical, culturally relevant, culturally sustaining, and/or anti-racist frameworks because these ways of being and doing are likely to be very different from their existing scripts for what teaching is and how it’s done (Gadd, 2018). Instead, novices require opportunities to systematically practice new ways of being and doing during TE if they are to practice differently from the status quo when they move into their own classrooms (Ball, 2025; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; Khasnabis et al., 2019; Moldovan & Gonzalez, 2023).

PBTE has the potential to shift novices’ developing practice toward more justice-oriented enactments by providing them opportunities to practice and receive feedback on what they do with children and with content prior to beginning teaching. At the heart of PBTE is attention to the what and how of teaching – what practices novices should learn and how novices learn to enact them (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman & McDonald, 2008). Over the past 10-15 years, this focus has led to the development of principles and pedagogies to guide the design and enactment of PBTE (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Lampert et al., 2013; Khasnabis et al., 2019). However, critiques of PBTE highlight the ways that assumptions about who teachers and teacher educators are, what equity is, and how a focus on practice can help to achieve equity are rooted in dominant social norms and values (Daniels & Varghese, 2020) and/or treat equity as a separate issue from disciplinary content and practice instruction (DeFino, 2022). These tendencies reinscribe white supremacy by leaving everyday patterns of status quo practice undisturbed (see Table 1). Practice-based teacher educators must critically examine both the practices we teach to novices and the ways we teach them if we are to pursue justice (DeFino, 2025; Gadd, 2023).

Table 1

Examples of Normative Practices that Reinscribe White Supremacy

Examples of normative practice	How they reinscribe white supremacy
Teacher assigns students to answer multiple choice questions and justify their answers	Reinforces a narrow view of content work as exclusively about using prescribed methods to arrive at accepted conclusions and/or single correct answers (see for example, Warren et al., 2020)
Teacher regularly calls on students they expect to provide correct responses, avoids calling on students they expect will give incorrect answers	Reinscribes social hierarchies related to narrow conceptions of what it means to be “good at” a given content (see for example Langer-Osuna, 2016)
Teacher praises a student when they correctly apply approved strategies and techniques	Confers social value based on conformity with dominant ways of knowing/being (see for example Cherry-McDaniel, 2016)

Methods

In our courses, we employed principles and pedagogies of PBTE to teach the practice of *assigning competence* to novice teachers. *Assigning competence* is the practice of publicly highlighting children's intellectual contributions to the group's work to intentionally disrupt established social hierarchies and reposition marginalized children as worthy members of the classroom community (Cohen, 1973; Cohen et al., 1999; Featherstone et al., 2011). Prior to our collaboration we'd separately decided to focus on this practice in our courses because it was developed to intervene on the negative effects of race-based social hierarchies in desegregating public schools (Cohen, 1973, 1984; Cohen & Roper, 1972) by leveraging teachers' power within their classrooms to shape how young people view themselves, view their peers, and understand academic content (Cohen, 1973; Featherstone et al., 2011; Langer-Osuna, 2016; Lotan, 2006). By focusing novices' attention and enactment on the choices they make about how to frame content, about what counts as a "smart" contribution, and about whose ideas are valuable, we reasoned that teaching the practice of assigning competence might help novices learn how to intentionally disrupt inequitable classroom hierarchies in their everyday interactions with children.

Approach to Examining Our Practice

We taught the practice of assigning competence in two separate TE courses during the same semester. The first author taught a course focused on teaching in the secondary social sciences (e.g., social studies, US history, etc.); the second and third authors co-taught a course focused on elementary mathematics instruction. We treat our efforts in each course as public texts (Lampert, 1998) of justice-focused teacher education practice. These texts function as cases on which we conduct conjectural analyses (Ball & Lampert, 1999; Lampert, 1986; Lampert, 1998) to interrogate what's entailed by the work of teaching novices to take up justice-focused practice more broadly. As such, we apply a practitioner's lens to examine our work and develop an initial conceptual framework to describe what's involved in supporting novices' development of practices that disrupt everyday patterns of oppression.

We met formally and informally throughout the semester to discuss our approaches, activities, and assignments and reflect together in service of our ongoing planning and instruction. We continued to meet after the semester ended to reflect on how things had gone and identify the common kinds of work we had engaged in across both courses as we "tried out" this kind of teacher education instruction (Ball & Lampert, 1999; Lampert, 1986). The framework we share in this paper is based on our collective efforts to learn in and from our practice. In this section, we provide brief overviews of the two courses and the records of practice we drew on to make sense of our practice in each case.

Secondary Social Sciences Field Instruction Overview

The first author taught Secondary Social Sciences Field Instruction (SSFI) for undergraduate novices in the first semester of their TE program. The course was the complementary field placement component for novices' methods coursework and consisted of a once weekly field seminar plus two days per week of supervised field placements in one of three area high schools. Across the semester, novices rotated through these sites in groups of three, with each group spending eight to 10 school days at each site. While all three field sites included Advanced Placement classes, two were located in wealthy, predominantly white suburban areas with the third located in a systematically neglected, predominantly Latinx urban industrial area. As such, the SSFI course overall focused on how context shapes practice.

The instructor drew on Grossman and Compton et al.'s (2009) framework of representations, decompositions, and approximations of practice to design in-class activities, field site observation protocols, and course assignments to support novices' uptake of the practice of assigning competence. She introduced the practice during the first third of the course using excerpts from *Smarter Together!* (Featherstone et al., 2011) and designed activities and assignments to help novices begin to learn to see it in instruction. During the middle third of the course, instruction shifted to decomposing the practice for and with novices so that they could understand and start to take up the "parts" that make up the whole. During the final segment of the course, the focus shifted to activities and assignments that engaged novices in approximating the practice in the seminar classroom and in their field placements.

Records of Practice. The instructor examined the following records of practice during and after the semester: planning documents (i.e., syllabus, weekly lesson plans); field notes of observations of novices at their field sites; videos and transcripts of seminar meetings; a reflective journal focused on how instruction was going each week; novices' in-class work products (e.g., charts created during group activities) and course assignments; and novices' formal and informal course feedback.

Children as Sensemakers Overview

The second and third authors co-taught Children as Sensemakers (CASM), a required course for undergraduate elementary novice teachers near the midpoint of their TE program. The course focused on instruction in elementary mathematics, with an emphasis on teaching fractions and the high-leverage practice of *eliciting and interpreting children's thinking* (TeachingWorks, 2026). The course included a field component situated in a local elementary school and was organized around field-based assignments in which novices had opportunities to elicit and interpret children's mathematical thinking for the purposes of planning and improving mathematics instruction. A primary goal of the course was to support novices in developing a view of children as active agents in their own learning and to take up practices that would enable them to foster children's agency.

As in the SSFI course, the instructors used Featherstone et al.'s (2011) *Smarter Together!* as a starting point for their work on assigning competence. They designed and enacted instruction intended to help novices broaden their ideas about what it means to be smart in math class, develop their understanding of children's intellectual contributions, and collectively unpack the purposes of assigning competence. In particular, they developed activities in which novices analyzed elementary mathematics content, considered the kinds of responses children might give to different types of problems, and anticipated and analyzed children's reasoning in order to identify different forms of mathematical competence that children might demonstrate. They also designed discussions and video-based activities to help novices distinguish assigning competence from the superficially similar activity of offering praise and to help them begin to generate a repertoire of moves for identifying and naming competence in instruction.

Records of Practice. The instructors examined the following records of practice during and after the semester: planning and course documents, including the course syllabus and weekly lesson plans; planning meetings and post-class debrief conversations; and classroom artifacts such as slide decks, novices' work products, etc.

Results

In each course, we introduced assigning competence to novices using the text *Smarter Together!* (Featherstone et al., 2011). We incorporated class discussions and practice-based activities designed to (a) help novices in each course define the practice and distinguish it from superficially similar activities such as offering praise and (b) give novices opportunities to decompose and/or approximate enactment of the practice. When comparing our experiences across courses, we found that, though our understandings of assigning competence were well-aligned with one another and though we incorporated similar instructional activities, there were important differences in how we defined the practice for and with novices and in how our two groups of novices took up the practice. Reflecting on these differences, in turn, helped us to identify core areas of work that undergirded our efforts to teach the practice across the two courses. Here, we describe key incidents in each course that helped us to identify and unpack the areas of work we will discuss below.

Case 1: Social Science Field Instruction

The instructor introduced assigning competence using excerpts from *Smarter Together!* The text is a practitioner's guide to designing and implementing complex instruction in elementary and middle school mathematics. Despite the difference in subject matter, she identified this as a relevant text for novices because of the clarity with which the authors define the practice. Additionally, although there have been some investigations of assigning competence in areas other than math (Cohen & Lotan, 1997), the instructor was unable to find examples of the practice that were situated specifically in secondary social studies.

The class read excerpts from *Smarter Together!* and then engaged in small group and whole group discussions in which they worked to tease out key elements of the practice that teachers would have to attend to if they were to enact it in their own classrooms and subject areas. The group identified the following as particularly important for classroom enactment:

- Teachers would have to have rigorous instructional goals rooted in their subject area content;
- Teachers would have to plan instruction that made room for young people to offer worthwhile intellectual contributions; and
- Teachers would have to notice and name young people's competence when they demonstrate it.

From these discussions, the class collectively developed a working decomposition comprising three phases: Before Planning (identifying goals), After Planning, Before Teaching (identifying opportunities for young people to contribute intellectually during instruction), and During Teaching (noticing and naming competence). They used this working decomposition throughout the semester to analyze and reflect on observations and class activities centered on the practice.

To help novices learn to see the practice in their own content areas (e.g., history, civics, etc.), the instructor designed a weekly observation and analysis assignment that prompted them to look for different aspects of the practice in their field placements. None of the mentor teachers that semester specifically identified assigning competence as one of their own practices; however, they each engaged in "pieces" of the practice. For example, all three mentor teachers were explicit about developing rigorous instructional goals that were

rooted in their subject area content. Two of the three also consistently offered adolescents multiple openings to make substantive intellectual contributions to subject matter discourse. However, novices often struggled to identify whether the mentor teachers noticed and named competence because the ways they did so tended to look different from the examples described in *Smarter Together!*

The instructor also engaged novices in an in-class activity in which they watched a video of secondary history instruction featuring one of the mentor teachers. The lesson focused on collectively analyzing political cartoons and included multiple opportunities for young people to make a range of intellectual contributions. In the video, four students stood next to a 19th-century political cartoon posted on chart paper. The cartoon criticized Abraham Lincoln in the lead up to the Civil War. Their task was to “hash out” the author’s meaning and purpose by identifying visual and textual elements in the cartoon and analyzing them in context with what they’d been learning in class about that era. Although the teacher joined the group at the beginning of the activity, their only role was to ask clarifying questions when students made claims about the cartoon (e.g., “What makes you say that?”). Novices worked together across two consecutive seminar meetings to identify different kinds of competence that young people might demonstrate within the activity, attending both to the forms of competence evident in the video and imagining other forms of competence that might emerge given the content and format. Novices also generated sentence stems teachers might use to name competence in an activity like this. They then re-watched the video, stopping to roughly approximate noticing and naming competence using the sentence stems they had generated.

Finally, one group of three novices also had the opportunity to approximate assigning competence in their field placement. Each group of novices were required to plan and enact a lesson once during the semester; and each group taught their lesson at the same field site, with one group teaching at the site during the first third of the semester, the second group during the second third, and the third group during the final third. The groups who taught first and second had limited exposure to the practice before planning and enacting their lessons and were therefore not explicitly expected to incorporate it into their teaching. However, the instructor directed the final group to incorporate the practice into their lesson and worked with them throughout their planning process to support their implementation. They did this by working with the classroom teacher to select content and design an activity structure that would invite worthwhile intellectual contributions. They also spent time prior to the lesson *attending to patterns of student thinking* (TeachingWorks, 2026) by anticipating students’ likely responses to the content based on their prior observations of the class and identifying sentence stems from our course that they might use to assign competence. The instructor observed their lesson during the final week of their field placement and saw evidence of them attempting to assign competence. Specifically, they used sentence stems from the video-based activity to name competence at various points during the lesson and lesson debrief. They were also able to identify multiple forms of competence they’d observed during the lesson as well as several they’d anticipated while lesson planning but that hadn’t come up during enactment.

Uptake and Resistance

Throughout the semester, novices made what seemed to be good faith efforts to understand and take up assigning competence in class activities, field observations, and practice teaching. However, they repeatedly raised concerns about the nature of the practice and its appropriateness for adolescents. Additionally, their field observations and attempts to enact the practice reflected their ongoing grappling

with ideas about what “counts” as a worthwhile intellectual contribution in different classroom contexts. Their field work also revealed an apparent disconnect between the core aims of the practice, as identified in the literature, and how novices understood it in action in real world teaching contexts.

Appropriateness for Adolescents. Several novices raised concerns that the practice of assigning competence as described in *Smarter Together!* would be counterproductive in secondary settings. Novices worried that, for teenagers, being publicly recognized by their teachers would be embarrassing and even demotivating. They drew on their own relatively recent experiences as high school students to assert that “no kid” in this age group wants their teachers to draw attention to them in that way. While the instructor questioned the universality of their assertions, she was also cognizant that the limited literature on assigning competence in middle school classes has shown mixed results, at best, with respect to improving adolescents’ learning (Cohen & Lotan, 1997). The class discussed whether the ways secondary teachers go about assigning competence to adolescents might need to look different from the examples offered in *Smarter Together!* However, several novices continued to advance the argument that singling older students out – regardless of approach – would lower, rather than raise, their status among their peers.

What “Counts” as Rigorous and for Whom? Novices’ weekly field observations became a rich source of discussions around what “counts” as an intellectual contribution worthy of assigning competence. At the same time, throughout the semester, their assessments of the kinds of contributions that could be deemed “intellectually rigorous” varied based on the classroom context they observed. For example, in the two predominantly white, wealthy contexts novices observed, they highlighted young people’s use of primary sources, historical reasoning, and complex argumentation as worthwhile intellectual contributions. By contrast, when they observed in the predominantly Latinx and working poor classroom, they identified young people’s ability to correctly answer multiple choice prompts as worthwhile intellectual contributions. In both cases, students were responding to the opportunities to engage with content that their teachers offered. However, novices failed to notice or question why their white students seemed to be offered such rich opportunities to engage compared to their Latinx students. When the instructor tried to draw their attention to this distinction, they argued that responding to multiple choice-style questions could “count” as an intellectual contribution because the teacher required students to offer a rationale for their response. In this case, it seemed that novices were trying to retrofit the logic of assigning competence onto instruction in ways that allowed them to rationalize implicitly lower expectations of Latinx and poor students rather than critically questioning the nature of the instruction these students were offered.

Disconnect Between Core Aims and Enactment. Finally, when the instructor observed the third group of novices enact their sample lesson, it was clear they were attempting to incorporate assigning competence. They designed a lesson that offered multiple opportunities for young people to make worthwhile intellectual contributions, and they made overt attempts to assign competence at several points throughout the lesson. The instructor noticed that in a class of approximately 30, the novices assigned competence multiple times to one student in particular. Further, the individual they singled out was one of the most frequent contributors to class discussions throughout that semester and seemed to already be viewed by peers as smart. During the debrief, when the instructor asked novices why they had focused so heavily on this student, they admitted that, because the individual had participated so much throughout their brief time with the class, he was one of the few whose names they could remember. Thus, novices had “assigned competence” to an already high-status student rather than strategically working to elevate lower-status peers.

The instructor reflected on this outcome and posited that the design and enactment of the assigning competence classroom activities may have contributed. For instance, in the video activity in which novices brainstormed possible contributions and “assigned competence” to the young people on-screen, the instructor was unable to give them any information about the relative status of the students who appeared in the video. Thus, their efforts to “assign competence” were based purely on whether students offered the types of contributions novices had pre-identified as worthwhile—that is, whether or not they offered the responses that novices were looking for. Further, when the instructor reviewed the foci she had assigned novices for their classroom observations, she realized that she had written several prompts around identifying intellectually rigorous lesson designs and worthwhile intellectual contributions but few that explicitly drew novices’ attention to young people’s identities or relative statuses within the classroom. In this way, the assignments she devised may have encouraged novices to separate the enactment of assigning competence from its core purpose of disrupting status hierarchies.

Case 2: Children as Sensemakers

Children as Sensemakers (CASM) was an eight-week mathematics methods course for undergraduate elementary education novice teachers. Novices took CASM during the second semester of their first year in the TE program, and it was their first methods course. Four teacher educators who were familiar with the program and with PBTE taught the course. The first half of CASM focused on the high-leverage teaching practice of *eliciting and interpreting student thinking* (TeachingWorks, 2026) through analyzing student work, learning to explain key content, and beginning to design lesson plans.

The second half of the course focused on the practice of assigning competence. Instructors introduced the practice in the sixth week of class by having students read pages from the chapter “Addressing Status Issues During the Lesson” in *Smarter Together!* The instructors felt that starting with status was an opportunity to define the practice and ground it in equity. They introduced the practice as a method to manage status differences among students and support all students’ mathematical development by improving their intellectual contributions. Novices were split into groups and asked to consider questions such as, “What are different purposes for assigning competence?” and “What is the difference between assigning competence and praise?” Novices then watched a video of classroom instruction that focused on one student’s explanation for naming a fraction using an area model. The instructors selected the video because: (1) the lesson addressed familiar mathematical content (i.e., fractions) that novices had already been working on, and (2) the explanation given by the focal student in the video featured several strengths and identifiable intellectual contributions, despite their answer being incorrect. After watching the video, novices discussed it in relation to the reading and to their understanding of teachers’ roles in the classroom social order.

In the following class session, instructors picked up on the previous discussion to unpack an emerging tension novices seemed to be experiencing around the purpose of assigning competence. Some novices saw the practice as encouraging a safe and supportive environment, while others raised questions around whether employing the practice gives teachers too much power at the expense of decreasing students’ responsibility and agency. Instructors made space for novices to discuss and debate their ideas about the purposes of assigning competence before showing a video of classroom instruction to help novices deepen and nuance their understanding of the practice. The video featured an example of instruction that seemed, at first glance, to be similar to assigning competence. However, careful observation of the teacher’s

approach made clear that their practice could create and/or reinforce inequitable hierarchies among students. This example seemed to resonate with novices, as they were able to understand the value of the practice in promoting classroom equity.

In the last session, instructors built upon prior sessions by having novices watch another video recording of classroom instruction that offered an example of one way to assign competence. In addition, instructors provided novices with strategies they could use to assign competence, such as asking a student to explain a contribution that the teacher identifies as worthwhile, publicly recording an important idea generated by a student or students, and ensuring that they do not “assign incompetence” inappropriately (e.g., by reinforcing students’ misconceptions around content knowledge or disciplinary practices, by reinforcing traditional and exclusive ways of being, etc.). Lastly, instructors engaged novices in generating their own possible strategies and techniques to assign competence in their classrooms, which they recorded in a google doc that they could return to in the future.

Uptake and Resistance

Throughout the semester novices showed progress in understanding the practice of assigning competence. Initially, some struggled to see the value in the practice or the role that power and responsibility played in it. In particular, some novices believed that children’s learning has just as much, if not more, to do with the child than with the teacher’s practice. That is, novices argued that it is children’s responsibility to do what they need to do to maximize their own learning. In addition, some novices struggled to distinguish between praise and assigning competence, as well as to accurately identify intellectual contributions in the context of a mathematics classroom. However, class discussions and videos of classroom instruction provided novices with opportunities to see the utility of assigning competence as well as begin to parse its complexity.

Distinguishing Between Praise and Assigning Competence. A primary challenge for novices was differentiating between praise and the practice of assigning competence. Novices seemed accustomed to providing generic evaluative feedback such as “Good job” and “Great work.” However, with respect to assigning competence, those responses are too general, lacking intentionality about which students receive the feedback and lacking specificity about what the student does or says. As such, praise can often simply reinforce the hierarchies we hope to disrupt (e.g., by affirming general effort rather than specific intellectual contributions). One challenge novices grappled with in recognizing assigning competence as something distinct from praise was recognizing what an intellectual contribution is. Through shared readings and class discussions, instructors defined intellectual contributions as reflecting a combination of content knowledge and disciplinary practices. In other words, they aimed to support novices in recognizing the many ways that children might act as mathematical thinkers and doers making original contributions to the group’s mathematical understanding – above and beyond their ability to mimic standard procedures and generate and/or evaluate correct answers. Novices might praise compliance with a standard procedure, for example; but they could only assign competence by first identifying children’s substantive mathematical content knowledge, practices, and/or techniques.

Tensions Around Teachers’ Power and Responsibility. Another issue that arose for novices was around the role of teachers’ power and responsibility to shape social relationships in the classroom. Some novices argued that their responsibility was only to teach content and not intervene in children’s social relationships. They felt that students should have independence and agency to form their own social bonds, which the

teacher has no impact on. These novices saw teachers' interventions as inherently intrusive and inappropriate, and they required additional support from instructors to connect teachers' power in the classroom with the responsibility to intervene on potential social inequities that negatively affect students' well-being and ability to learn. While not all novices had this perspective, it was important to uncover and address, as it was a barrier for some novices' understanding and subsequent willingness and/or ability to implement the practice of assigning competence.

Developing Strategies and Techniques. By the end of the course, novices expressed the desire for concrete examples that they could use to implement the practice of assigning competence. Until that point, they had seen video recordings of classroom instruction that reflected both good and bad examples of strategies and techniques. They also created a living resource (i.e., a google doc) that captured their ideas about strategies and techniques they could try. Based on their responses in the document, several key features of novices' understanding emerged: (1) novices wanted to make sure that every student was assigned competence at some point during class, (2) novices recognized the importance of being specific about student contributions when assigning competence, (3) novices recognized the importance of engaging students with problems that allowed multiple solutions, and (4) novices understood the need to create a classroom culture that supports the implementation of assigning competence. However, novices' responses did not explicitly address status hierarchies and social identities, potentially indicating an important disconnect between the practice of assigning competence and its core aims.

Discussion

Across these courses, we challenged ourselves to operationalize our understandings of justice and anti-racism through our work with novices on the specific practice of assigning competence. Our goal was to help our novices begin to do anti-oppressive practice—rather than simply recognize or critique it—and that goal drove all of our planning, decision-making, and practice as teacher educators. In the process, we were forced to grapple with a set of critical considerations that, we argue, are essential for teacher educators who aim to develop teachers capable of disrupting everyday patterns of oppression in classrooms. For any given focal practice, these considerations include:

- What are the essential areas of work required to disrupt status quo patterns of oppression through the enactment of the practice?
- What could enactment of the practice that disrupts oppression look like within each area of work?
- What must teacher educators provide in order to enable novices to take up the practice in ways that disrupt the status quo?
- What are common challenges teacher educators are likely to face when preparing novices to enact the practice in ways that are disruptive, and how might teacher educators navigate those challenges?

Here, we discuss how we have come to think about these questions both with respect to the focal practice in these courses and with respect to justice-focused PBTE more broadly.

Areas of Work

We've identified three areas of work that are essential for supporting novices to develop the capabilities necessary to enact practice that disrupts everyday patterns of oppression and promotes justice: (1) learning to broaden conceptions of what counts as worthwhile content, (2) learning to navigate and manage power, and (3) learning to embody justice-focused aims in enactment.

Broadening Conceptions of What Counts

Teaching that disrupts status quo white supremacy is only possible when young people are critically engaged with worthwhile content. This is because both what is studied and how it's studied expand teachers' and children's ideational resources – that is, their ways of knowing, being, and doing that enable them to re/imagine and re/make their worlds (Givens, 2021). When teachers conceive of content too narrowly (e.g., as a limited set of “correct” propositions about the subject), they are only able to offer young people limited versions of subject matter content, which denies them opportunities to question or disrupt the status quo. Teachers' conceptions of what “counts” as worthwhile content may be limited due to their own experiences as students, systemic denial of resources (Anyon, 1981), assumptions about certain children's limited capacity to learn (e.g., Darby & Rury, 2019), political fights for control over what should be taught and learned, etc. Further, while conflicts over the what of content instruction are common, the how of content teaching and learning is just as important – how teachers represent content and how children are allowed to engage with content inside classrooms. Broadening conceptions of what counts as worthwhile opens space for young people's brilliance to shine by offering them new ways of understanding themselves in relation to the content as they grapple with, disrupt, and transform dominant ways of knowing, doing, and being. Teachers must learn to expand their own conceptions of what counts as worthwhile content so that they can recognize, facilitate, and build upon the incredible competence that children bring with them into classrooms to create opportunities for social transformation that interrupts existing social hierarchies (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020).

What Could It Look Like? To enact practice that disrupts common patterns of oppression, teachers must seriously consider the question of what makes content worthwhile for pursuing justice-oriented ends (Schiera, 2023). In mathematics, for example, novices must develop an expansive understanding of key mathematical concepts and practices, as well as ways children engage with them (Rodríguez et al., 2022). One way the CASM instructors approached this issue was by showing a video of a child offering a mathematical argument for identifying a fraction using an unequally partitioned area model. The instructors supported novices to see that, although the child's answer was incorrect, there were elements of their argument related to the core concept of naming fractions that warranted further discussion by the class. In doing so, they helped to expand novices' conceptions of what counts in mathematics instruction: the child's incorrect answer wasn't as important as the competence the child displayed in building a mathematical argument that could be taken up and discussed by the class.

In social studies, teachers working to disrupt injustice must learn to take up and engage students with the central question: Whose stories are told, and who gets to tell them? For instance, one of the SSFI mentor teachers routinely had their students critically compare historical master narratives contained in their approved textbook with counternarratives present in texts such as the *People's History* series (Zinn, 2016) and primary source documents. The SSFI instructor supported novices' uptake of this practice through

regular, structured observation activities. In this way, novices' conceptions of what counts in social studies instruction expanded to include substantive engagement with critical counternarratives.

Challenges and Requirements for TE. One significant challenge for TE in broadening novices' ideas of what counts as worthwhile content is the demand this creates for rich, complex content knowledge for teaching (CKT; Ball et al., 2008), which novices are still developing. This area of work requires teachers to know the content in ways that allow them to (a) identify what's worthwhile about it, (b) recognize and/or create openings for children to engage, (c) anticipate how young people may take up the content given their own prior knowledge and experiences, including those of marginalization, and (d) consider the implications for ongoing instruction (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020). Practice-based teacher educators must, therefore, explicitly facilitate novices' development of CKT. Yet it's impossible to give novices in-depth practice with every aspect of content they'll need to teach. Thus, teacher educators must carefully select content that's most impactful for student learning to develop novices' CKT, while simultaneously cultivating dispositions toward content as something that's open to ongoing interpretation and novel modes of sensemaking. For example, CASM novices' work on solving fraction problems from the perspective of children's sensemaking deepened their CKT by surfacing potential solution strategies and disrupted expectations they may have held about mathematics as defined procedures leading to a single correct answer.

This kind of disposition work must also disrupt assumptions novices may make about who can/should access challenging content by integrating disciplinary work with critical frames (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020; Schiera, 2023). Such assumptions are the product of status quo socialization processes that reinforce white supremacist social hierarchies, and they can lead teachers to limit young people's access to worthwhile content based on systemic patterns of oppression. The SSFI instructor surfaced and challenged novices' socialized assumptions about the relative capabilities of young people via the weekly classroom observation assignment. In the case of the test prep lesson that novices initially identified as intellectually robust, the instructor challenged novices to unpack their implicit assumptions about why they would consider that activity worthwhile for some young people but not others. They were then tasked with generating alternative activities that could critically engage students with worthwhile content, some of which they later incorporated into demonstration teaching. In this way, work on content-focused practice supported novices' dispositional development by requiring them to notice, question, and materially shift their orientations toward young people and content.

Navigating and Managing Power

Teaching that disrupts status quo white supremacy must also reckon with and be responsive to the ways that power informs all aspects of teachers' work. This means coming to grips with both how systemic power and oppression operate as big picture social patterns as well as with how those macro-level patterns can be enacted and/or disrupted at the micro-level of everyday classroom practice. This was the original intention behind Cohen's work on assigning competence (Cohen, 1973, 1984; Cohen & Roper, 1972). That early work focused on interrogating and interrupting the pervasive educational inequity Black children encountered in desegregating public schools. Cohen argued that "unless we changed the evaluation process, the nature of classroom tasks, and the role of the teacher [emphasis added]" (Cohen, 1973, p. 870), "belief systems concerning race and other status characteristics are so powerful that they will infect the interaction setting and will likely reinforce rather than change" the status quo (Cohen & Roper, 1972). Like Cohen and

her co-authors, we argue that teachers are powerful actors operating at the nexus of macro-level social systems and micro-level classroom interactions. We further argue that enacting practice that disrupts the status quo is only possible when teachers are responsive to the specific and emergent social dynamics in their classrooms (Peercy et al., 2019). As such, novices must become capable of and responsible for identifying and disrupting common patterns of oppression in their everyday practice by learning to strategically navigate and manage power.

What Could It Look Like? Teachers who effectively navigate and manage power in practice combine careful analyses of systemic inequity (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020), of their students as individuals and as a group (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020; Peercy et al., 2019), and of their own subjectivities (Daniels & Varghese, 2020) to strategically re/shape relationships among themselves, children, and content in the classroom. Ball (2025) identifies the moments in which teachers do this strategic work as discretionary spaces in which they may enact practice in ways that intentionally disrupt inequity. For example, she unpacks a discretionary space in mathematics instruction in which a Black girl incorrectly names a fraction on a number line; although her answer is incorrect, her thinking is mathematically sound. At the same time, another Black girl in the class laughs and questions her answer. In normative practice, the teacher might correct the girl at the board and chastise the girl who laughed, framing her question as troublesome and irrelevant. Both of these moves would reinforce systemic patterns of invisibilizing Black girls' contributions and belonging in STEM spaces (Davis, 2022; Wilkes & Battey, 2024). Instead, the teacher takes both girls' contributions seriously by asking them follow-up questions that frame their respective contributions as mathematically worthwhile – responsively navigating and managing the power attached to mathematical knowing; the power that shapes each girl's experience in the classroom; the power to inform their peers' understanding of themselves, each other, and the content as they witness/participate in this moment; and the power she wields as teacher. In this way, the teacher moves beyond an analysis of inequity to enacting intentional, strategic practice that disrupts it.

Challenges and Requirements for TE. To navigate and manage power is complex work. Namely, it requires teachers to have both working knowledge of a variety of possible moves they could make with respect to children and content, as well as a robust enough ability to analyze power dynamics, to quickly and strategically identify the potential implications of making those moves in context. However, the understandings of oppression, inequity, and social identities novices likely bring with them into practice-based TE may pose challenges for justice-focused teacher educators. Deeply ingrained, socialized assumptions about what teaching is and who teachers and students are may constrain novices' ability to see or imagine transformative teaching practice. For example, the SSFI novices' inability to recognize and attempts to rationalize the difference in instructional quality offered to students of color living in a systematically neglected area versus that available to wealthier, white students reflects these imaginative limits. Many programs require novices to take critical foundations courses to address these issues, and, indeed, the SSFI novices had already completed one such course prior to beginning their practicum. However, as illustrated here, critical foundations coursework that focuses on educational inequity may support novices to understand injustice at a systemic level without grasping how teaching is implicated in it (see also Doherty, 2022; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020).

Further, both CASM and SSFI novices expressed views on the practice of assigning competence that reflected their rejection of teachers' individual power and responsibility based on their beliefs about teachers' system-level role identities. For instance, some CASM novices felt that teachers didn't have the

right to intervene in children's social dynamics because, in a democratic classroom, children should be responsible for their own relationships with one another and with content. Some SSFI novices argued that teachers didn't have the right to intervene because, as authority figures, teachers' approbation would negatively influence adolescents' relationships with one another. In both cases, novices recognized teachers' potential to wield power in the classroom, but by focusing on whether teachers had the right, given their role, to shift children's social dynamics, these novices ignored teachers' responsibility to disrupt everyday patterns of oppression that might be reflected in and reproduced through young people's interactions.

To prepare novices to navigate and manage power, then, teacher educators must strategically support novices to critically reframe practice (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020). With respect to assigning competence we leverage a reframed and expanded version of the practice as *acknowledging competence* (Mathews et al., 2022), comprising the following three components:

1. understand the status of students in the classroom
2. provide structures and activities to see what students know, with an emphasis on how their learning connects to the ... discipline
3. acknowledge the competence of the students privately (individually), semipublicly (during small group work), or publicly (during whole group discussion). (p. 6)

By reframing in this way, teacher educators foreground the assumptions that social status matters, that children are competent apart from whether teachers see it or not, and that teachers have the power and responsibility to recognize and acknowledge the strengths that young people bring with them into the classroom. Further, in order to acknowledge competence, teachers must have flexible knowledge of disciplinary content and practices that operates in conjunction with their understanding of children's social status to intentionally and strategically disrupt inequities.

Teacher educators must also provide robust opportunities for novices to connect systemic analyses of power and oppression to everyday classroom practice (Doherty, 2022; Gadd, 2018; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020). For instance, Gadd (2018), engages novices in cycles of analysis in which they identify systemic features of educational injustice at decreasing scales of schooling until they reach the level of everyday classroom enactment of practice. This helps novices to see how, for example, system-level patterns of racism in literacy instruction are directly connected to the ways teachers exercise their discretion-in-practice in literature classrooms. Similarly, in later iterations of the CASM course, novices completed an assignment in which they: (a) identified a child in their placement classroom whom they didn't know, (b) examined the ways that child was socially positioned by the teacher and their peers, (c) proposed what they would do to position that child differently and why, and (d) considered the consequences of the different moves they might make with respect to both the individual child and the broader classroom context – concretely connecting analysis of social patterns to teachers' enactment of practice.

Embodying Just Aims in Enactment

Finally, teaching that disrupts everyday patterns of oppression is only possible when teachers' enactment of practice actually embodies just aims (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020; Kavanagh & Danielson, 2020; Schiera, 2020). It's in this sense that such practices are more than avowed orientations or collections of

technical moves. The SSFI novices who repeatedly called on the one student whose name they could remember had demonstrated emerging commitments to educational equity throughout the course – yet their enactment reinscribed the status quo because they implicitly disconnected the technical features of enactment from the justice-focused aims of acknowledging competence. As their experience illustrates, teachers must become able to intentionally and strategically make moves in enactment that are animated by and illustrative of the imperative to pursue more just ways of knowing, doing, and being in classrooms.

What Could It Look Like? To embody just aims in enactment, teachers must bring together content knowledge, a dynamic and nuanced understanding of power as it operates at both the systemic and interpersonal levels, and a commitment to pursue educational equity through their work (Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2020; Schiera, 2020). They must learn to strategically combine these elements to produce enacted practice that enables all of the young people whom they serve to learn and grow as critical thinkers and doers. This is a very different proposition from status quo expectations of teachers and schools to reproduce existing social hierarchies via approved methods of transmitting sanctioned versions of knowledge and skills.

In the case of acknowledging competence, the aim to disrupt and reshape oppressive status hierarchies must animate and be visible in teachers' efforts to broaden ideas about what counts as worthwhile content and in their strategic moves to recognize and acknowledge competence (Matthews et al., 2022). For example, an SSFI mentor teacher regularly conducted whole group discussions designed to open space for his students to demonstrate their competence by critically questioning historical master narratives. Although he saw discussion as a powerful tool for engaging adolescents, he also talked openly with novices about how this structure could further marginalize young people who were already marginalized within the social hierarchy of his privileged, white suburban high school. One method he devised to manage this issue was to encourage everyone to post their thoughts in writing on a wall in the classroom during discussions in addition to or in lieu of speaking out. The teacher would then strategically select posts to highlight, acknowledging the competence of young people whose ideas might otherwise be overlooked and positioning them as knowers and doers of history. In doing so, his enacted practice embodied his aims to (a) expand conceptions of what counts in historical study by challenging master narratives, (b) manage and navigate the power dynamics at play in his classroom by offering students multiple modes of engagement, and (c) strategically acknowledge intellectual contributions in ways that disrupted status quo assumptions around whose ideas and presence mattered.

Challenges and Requirements for TE. Teachers who embody just aims in enactment engage with young people around content in ways that make the pursuit of justice tangible and visible in their enactment (Calabrese Barton et al., 2020). Practicing in this way can be challenging even for experienced teachers because it is quite different from more familiar master scripts of status quo practice that prioritize control, compliance, and conformity with dominant ways of knowing and being. Novice teachers in particular, confronted with both the complexity and newness of the work of teaching, may rely on scripts for teaching developed as a result of their years of watching teachers at work (Gadd, 2018; Lortie, 1975), complicating their ability to take up and enact justice-focused practices. Thus, finding effective ways to intervene on novices' existing scripts and support them to begin to develop alternative, justice-focused scripts for practice is key to helping them learn to embody just aims in enactment (Gadd, 2018).

Another challenge lies in the fact that many justice-focused practices may be superficially similar to status quo practices with which novices are more familiar. For instance, acknowledging competence is superficially similar to the status quo practice of offering praise. In both cases, teachers publicly recognize children; however, offering praise tends to reinforce the status quo because it doesn't require teachers to engage any differently with content or power dynamics. For novices just learning to take up practice, the differences in enacting acknowledging competence versus offering praise can be difficult to see because enactment depends on an implicit combination of CKT, ability to analyze power dynamics in-the-moment, and decision-making that occur at the speed of classroom interactions. The discretionary spaces (Ball, 2025) of enactment are so densely packed with information that it can be extremely challenging for novices to see into them in ways that will inform their own uptake.

To address these challenges, teacher educators must provide novices with meaningful opportunities to slow down, unpack, and try out key aspects of target practices in a variety of contexts (Doherty, 2022; Percy et al., 2019). One way the CASM instructors supported novices to distinguish acknowledging competence from offering praise was to provide novices with sentence frames they could use while observing classroom interactions to convert praise statements into acknowledging competence statements by highlighting the mathematical content or practices a child demonstrated.

Teacher educators can also expand discretionary spaces in enactment to allow novices to experiment with different forms of enactment. For example, when the SSFI instructor had novices watch video of students "hashing out" the meaning of a political cartoon, she expanded the discretionary space in which a teacher would recognize and then acknowledge young people's competence by (a) guiding novices to discuss and identify a range of types of competence the young people in the video might display, and (b) repeatedly stopping the video to allow novices time to work together to notice competence and determine how they might acknowledge it. In this way, novices were able to explicitly and intentionally connect their content knowledge as history majors and developing CKT as novice teachers to an embodied script for enactment that they might try out. The discretionary space could be expanded further by combining this video activity with a case study or classroom observations in which novices are required to focus on classroom social and power dynamics, further highlighting the essential connection between just aims and enactment. By varying the contexts for approximations, teacher educators support novices to practice flexibly and responsively taking up practice in ways that more closely mirror the demands they will face in their own classrooms (Percy et al., 2019).

Conclusion

New teachers have to learn how to practice differently if they are to disrupt status quo patterns of oppression. Understanding injustice and believing in equity are insufficient – new teachers must also learn how to do things differently in their everyday interactions with children. To accomplish this requires teacher educators to engage novices in meaningful opportunities to practice equity- and justice-oriented ways of engaging with young people and content. Further, teacher educators must select and teach practices that enable novices to identify the connections between macro-level patterns of oppression and micro-level interactions, to consider their own and their students' subjectivities, and to develop their discretion-in-practice in ways that deepen young people's understanding of disciplinary content and practices. Our efforts across the SSFI and CASM courses highlights how complex this kind of TE work is. In addition to identifying justice-focused practices to teach, TEs must (1) broaden novices' conceptions of what counts

as worthwhile content, (2) enable them to navigate and manage power, and (3) help them learn to embody justice-focused aims in their enactment of practice. These considerations provide teacher educators a framework for designing and implementing justice-oriented PBTE that may enable novices to intentionally disrupt everyday patterns of oppression in classrooms. By supporting novices to do differently, teacher education can transform teaching practice to promote justice for every student.

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