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## Decomposing the Act of Teaching: Secondary Preservice Teachers Learning to Teach Writing Through Practice-Based Education

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study explores how preservice teachers (PSTs) develop pedagogical understanding through decomposition of practice within a practice-based teacher education (PBTE) framework. Focusing on a secondary writing methods course, the research examines PSTs' debriefing sessions and written reflections following collaboratively planned and implemented writing lessons in a middle school classroom. Findings reveal that PSTs attend to both visible aspects of teaching – such as pacing, classroom organization, and student participation – and invisible aspects, including motivation, engagement, and teacher identity. Through scaffolded decomposition, PSTs gained insight into writing instruction and student learning, demonstrating growth in professional vision and instructional decision-making. The study highlights the importance of structured reflection and collaborative teaching in supporting PSTs' ability to notice, name, and enact effective writing pedagogy. Implications suggest that decomposition practices should be central to PBTE to foster deeper understanding of the complexities of teaching writing.

**Keywords**

Practice-Based Teacher Education, Writing Instruction, Preservice Teachers, Decomposition, Reflection

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## **Introduction**

Learning any skill requires significant practice, and this is certainly true for learning to teach. Preservice teachers (PST) must not only have a conceptual understanding of teaching, but also opportunities to practice the pedagogical skills necessary to become an effective teacher (Grossman et al., 2000; Smagorinsky, 2011; Smagorinsky et al., 2013, 2015). In order to bridge PSTs' conceptual and pedagogical knowledge, teacher educators have advocated for university methods courses to be directly connected to K-12 classrooms. Teacher education reformers have advocated for such practice, highlighting the need of learning in real contexts. Practice-based teacher education (PBTE) (Grossman, 2010, 2011; Grossman et al., 2009a) offers "experiences for candidates to begin to understand the complexities of teaching and integrate knowledge from learning and developmental theories into practice" (Vartuli et al., 2016, p. 503). The PBTE approach strengthens the bond between learning in the methods classroom and application in the K-12 classroom (Smagorinsky et al., 2003) by providing opportunities to directly practice teaching rather than focusing on "...traditional academic or theoretical topics that may have only marginal relevance to the realities of the classroom" (Forzani, 2014, p. 357).

In this article, we focus on how PBTE yields a deep understanding of teaching writing (Grosser-Clarkson & Neel, 2020). There are ongoing calls for more frequent and comprehensive writing instruction in schools (Gillespie et al., 2014; Graham, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative that preservice teachers are prepared to design writing instruction that meaningfully supports writers, while intentionally improving students' writing. The purpose of this research is to explore how preservice teachers (PSTs) engage in one aspect of PBTE, the act of decomposition of teaching writing, during debriefing sessions and through written reflections. We posed the following question: What do PSTs notice during the decomposition of teaching during debriefing sessions and in written reflections?

## **Theoretical Framing**

We situate this study within sociocultural theory, specifically focusing on the social aspect of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective guides our understanding of learning being mediated by interactions with others in a social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Applying this theoretical lens to teacher education provides insight into how PSTs' learning is mediated by their social interactions with each other and more knowledgeable teachers during field experiences. Specifically, we explore how collaborative teaching and debriefing serves as scaffolds for knowledge construction as PSTs learn to analyze their learning within a social space and subsequently grow in their learning of how to teach. An analysis of PSTs decompositions of their collaborative teaching shed light into their growing understanding of writing pedagogy and students as writers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Practice-Based Teacher Education**

For many teacher educator researchers there has been a shift from a focus on developing PSTs' conceptual knowledge to strengthening their application of that knowledge into specific instructional approaches (Grossman et al., 2009b; Kavanagh et al., 2025; Waychunas, 2025;

Zeichner, 2012). To that end, Grossman et al., (2009a) identified three key concepts in how PSTs learn the complex practice of teaching. These include representations of practice, decomposition of practice, and approximations of practice. These concepts can guide the work of teacher educators as they prepare PSTs for their future roles in the classrooms.

Representations of practice provide novices with ways of seeing and understanding professional practice and include learning opportunities such as videos, direct observations of K-12 teachers, student work, lesson plans, and experiences with the methods professor (Grossman et al., 2009a). Representations help illustrate what teaching should look like. For instance, in a writing methods course, PSTs are often placed in the role of students as the faculty member leads them through a unit of study on flash fiction, similar to the teaching they will soon be doing with middle school students (Pytash et al., 2022, 2023). Within representations of practice, there are visible features of the practice; however, the reasoning behind decision-making and actions are often invisible (Grossman et al., 2009a) and need to be made explicit.

Approximations of practice offer opportunities for PSTs to practice teaching (Davis, 2019). This scaffolded teaching may occur through micro-teaching, rehearsals, and in K-12 classrooms. In these teaching experiences, PSTs can receive feedback and guidance, learning about orchestrating all that teaching entails, while developing skills and confidence. These approximations can range from simple to more complex tasks, for example, working with one student, a small group, or teaching to the entire class. The nature of the setting influences what PSTs learn as well as the unpredictability and messiness inherent in such practice (Grossman et al., 2009a). Learners can benefit from learning in low-risk settings with access to coaching from more expert others (Schön, 1987). Within teacher education, this may mean hand selecting the site where PSTs teach or create after school opportunities specifically for teaching purposes (Moody et al., 2022). There is a large experimental aspect to approximations as PSTs learn to apply what they know, allowing them to also come to realize what they do not understand or have a tentative grasp on.

Decomposition of practice can be considered “a naming of the parts” by “breaking down complex practice into its constituent parts for the purposes of teaching and learning” (Grossman et al., 2009a, p. 2069). A noted challenge is knowing what to look for and how to interpret what is observed (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985) as PSTs are less skilled in these areas. Building on Goodwin’s work on professional vision, Grossman et al., (2009a) argue that in helping novices or PSTs develop professional vision for complex practice, attention needs to be directed to the components of practice for students to attend to and enact essential elements of a practice. Paying attention to discrete parts of teaching are necessary for understanding the eventual orchestration of teaching. Within teacher education, decomposing may be focused on helping PSTs with something specific, say writing objectives, planning, developing formative assessments or more broadly focus on debriefing a lesson.

### **Preparing PST to Teaching Writing**

Many PSTs do not take a course on the teaching of writing during their teacher preparation coursework (Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Myers et al., 2019). Writing is a complex construct and students need guidance in learning how to write well, therefore understanding how PSTs learn to take on this challenge is needed. Research has examined PSTs’ reflections on teaching writing (Pytash & Testa, 2020), and their understanding of technology integration when teaching writing

in field experiences (Pytash & Testa, 2024). Preparing PSTs to teach writing via collaborative teams during a writing methods course with accompanying middle school field experience has been found to positively shape their understanding of writing instruction (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Pytash et al., 2022, 2023). PSTs need time to work with student writers. Research has focused on how to prepare PSTs to be responsive to student writing (Ballock et al., 2018; Heron-Hruby et al., 2020; Peck & Kavanagh, 2024; Pederson, 2018).

Additionally, recent research suggests that PSTs find several important factors that help them grow as writing teachers during a PBTE field experience. Co-teaching placements, in which PSTs teach with other PSTs, can be effective in creating a social network to support PSTs' learning (Moody et al., 2022; Pytash et al., 2022, 2023). Another exploration of PBTE examines how engaging PSTs in collaborative problem solving allows them to refine their teaching practices and adjust (Pytash & Morgan, 2025), with this structure being similar to learning labs where small groups of teachers plan together, enact the lesson, and reflect on student learning (Kavanagh et al., 2024). Additionally, there is research documenting how teacher educators can partner with teachers and students for specific writing projects (Dutro et al., 2017; Johnson & Barnes, 2018). PBTE efforts are designed to support preservice teachers' earliest work with students when they are learning to implement instructional approaches in classrooms (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Moody et al. (2022) found that use of such frameworks in teacher education supported PSTs and that modeling and co-teaching are effective components in their learning about second language (L2) writing instruction. When PSTs have multiple opportunities to teach, they become more effective at homing in on instructional approaches that are effective (Moody et al., 2022). These studies point to the areas of PBTE that support and scaffold PSTs' learning to teach.

Researchers have called for reflection and reform in teacher education programs in examining how PSTs are being prepared and the need for learning to teach in authentic contexts (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Our previous work and this current study help meet the call of fellow researchers for offering PSTs opportunities to notice, name, enact and reflect on teaching practices (Janssen et al., 2015; Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017) while also providing much called for descriptions of how PSTs gain feedback from their approximations (Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017).

Teaching is “complex work that looks deceptively simple” and adding to that challenge is that while the specialized knowledge needed for teaching is critical, so is the ability to foster discussions, create communities, and orchestrate instructional activities (Grossman et al., 2009b, p 273). Within PBTE is a cycle of experiences for supporting learning how to teach. While this cycle of learning is important, our study focuses specifically on PSTs' decomposition of practice through their debriefing conversations and individual reflections on their learning. How do PSTs make sense of their approximations of practice, specifically, the lessons they co-planned and taught in a middle school classroom? What were they able to notice and name about teaching from these field experiences?

## **Methodology**

### **Context and Instruction**

As researchers we were most interested in the ways PSTs were noticing and naming aspects of their teaching during debriefing sessions and in their written reflections, and how they used these reflective opportunities to better understand writing instruction and students as writers. This qualitative study took place at a midwestern mid-sized university. PSTs were enrolled in a Teaching Language and Composition course which is part of the Integrated Language Arts program that prepares PSTs to teach grades 7-12 English language arts. The course teaches both theories and research-based practices for the teaching of writing.

During the semester, 20 PSTs were enrolled in the course. All PSTs agreed to participate in the study and were between 20-21 years old. Of the PSTs, 15 self-identified as White females, one self-identified as a Black female, and four self-identified as White males. For this article, we focus on one teaching team of six PSTs, which included five self-identified White females and one self-identified White male. This teaching team was selected because their debriefings and reflections offered a cohesive and representative example of PSTs learning during the field experience. Focusing our analysis on one team allowed for an in-depth examination of their learning and implementation of writing instruction.

During the first seven weeks of the semester, the university methods professor represented, decomposed, and approximated practices that PSTs would be implementing during the field experience (Table 1). Instead of a traditional field placement of one PST in one classroom, PSTs were placed in teaching teams (5-6 PSTs per team) and completed their field work in an eighth-grade English class. The middle school is on a block schedule, and according to the state report card, a total of 596 students were enrolled in the middle school. Among the students, 5.7% of the population were Black, Non-Hispanic, 8% Asian or Pacific Islander; 4.5% Hispanic, 4.6% Multiracial, 77% White, Non-Hispanic. Students with disabilities contributed to 16.1% of the student population. Economically disadvantaged youth comprised 32.4% of the student body.

The 8th grade classroom is unique in that the course is co-taught. One teacher primarily teaches literature and reading, while the other focuses on writing instruction; they take on supporting roles when one is acting as the lead teacher. During this field experience, the university methods professor worked closely with the eighth-grade writing teacher to design a six-week field experience which began in week eight of the semester. The eighth-grade teacher structured her classroom as a writing workshop, implementing mentor texts, writing conferences, and technology for multimodal writing. Because of the unique nature of the classroom, there were 48 eighth grade students in each class.

PSTs were at the middle school one day a week for 80 minutes. The university methods professor formed teaching teams based on PSTs' schedule and their availability for the field experience. Each teaching team had a designated class time for the field so that they worked with the same middle school students over the six-week placement. Due to the nature of the middle school schedule, this meant each PSTs teaching team's field experiences occurred at different times during the day.

The teaching team met and self-assigned one of four rotating roles for each week of the field experience (see Table 2). Teaching teams worked closely with the university methods professor and eighth-grade teacher to conceptualize and implement writing instruction. During the lesson, the university methods professor and eighth-grade teacher observed instruction.

**Table 1**

*Explanation of PBTE in Methods Course and Field Experience*

| Practice Based Teacher Education | Role of University Methods Professor                              | Instructional Activities in Methods Course  | Connection to Field Experience  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Representing Practice            | Modeled and named aspects of instruction                          | Methods professor moved PSTs through each component of a unit of study, including using mentor texts, creating lists of noticings, and writing original pieces. | Instruction aligned to structure of the classroom, including implementing writing workshop, mentor texts, writing conferences, and technology for multimodal writing. |
| Decomposing Practice             | Explicit naming of instructional                                  | Used think-alouds to break down instruction; engaged PSTs in whole and small group discussions of practice.   | PSTs engaged in decomposition through written reflections and debriefings.  |
| Approximating Practice           | Designed opportunities for PSTs to practice during methods course | Microteaching of using mentor texts during writing instruction  | PSTs used these practices in the classroom during their own instruction.  |

**Table 2**

*Role Description*

| Role                  | Description   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Lead Teacher          | Organizes and initiates development of lesson plans. Leads lesson.  |
| Secondary Teacher     | Supports Lead Teacher, creating the parts of the lesson the Lead Teacher assigns and facilitating that part of the lesson at the middle school. |
| Participation Partner | Works with students. Attends closely to engagement.   |
| Note Taker            | Observes and provides detailed written feedback to group. Leads debriefing session.   |

After each lesson, PSTs, the university methods professor, and eighth-grade teacher debriefed the lesson. At the beginning of the field experience, the university methods professor explained that the role of the debriefing sessions was to reflect on what went well during the lesson and to refine teaching strategies. Additionally, the university methods professor explained that the goal was to discuss constructive feedback

so that all PSTs could grow, develop, and refine their instruction. These debriefing sessions were led by the Notetaker, who used a checklist created by the university methods professor to guide the conversation. PSTs audio recorded their debriefing sessions. Often these debriefing sessions were conversational in manner, lasting between 10 and 18 minutes. Following the field placement, PSTs used Google forms to answer the following questions weekly:

1. What insight do you have about the teaching of writing from today's lesson?
2. What have you learned about students as writers?
3. What do the students need next as writers?
4. What were your big takeaways/understanding after today's debriefing discussions?
5. What will you do differently because of the debriefing?

These reflections allowed the university methods professor to gauge PSTs' learning during the field experience.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The purpose of this qualitative study (Glesne, 2016) was to explore how the act of decomposing instruction through debriefings and reflections yielded deep understanding of writing pedagogy and students as writers. Framing this study as a qualitative study allowed us to document PSTs' decomposition of practice processes, while also attending to their experiences and perceptions of their learning to teach writing. Our theoretical framing guided our data collection and analysis as we explored how PSTs' decompositions took place in a social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). As we explored these social spaces, we were interested in how the social and collaborative nature of teaching and learning served as a catalyst for pedagogical understanding and practice.

Data included six weeks of transcribed audio recordings from each debriefing, for a total of six debriefings. The debriefings, lasting between 10 and 18 minutes, included all the members of the teaching team (6 PSTs) in addition to the university methods instructor and 8th grade teacher. Debriefings were transcribed by Kristy. Additionally, data included six weeks of Google Reflections from each of the six teaching team members. Each of the six participants answered the five reflective questions over the course of six weeks for a total of 180 Google Responses.

The coding process began with all authors reviewing our research questions in relation to PSTs' reflections and debriefings, which involved carefully reading aloud each PST's comments during the first two weeks. This initial step helped build a solid understanding of the data, a key aspect in qualitative research, as it allows us to start noticing the overall tone, setting, and context (Creswell & Creswell, 2023, p. 204). Next, we individually took notes on early patterns and common themes on paper to identify emerging topics, following initial note-taking and open coding methods. We then came back together and identified 17 codes, including "recognizing classroom management" and "interacting with the writer." We documented the PSTs' overall reflections in Google Sheets as they reflected on their experiences and observations in the classroom. We employed gerunds and the participants' own words, for in vivo coding, to maintain their

authentic voice and focus on the process (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). As we continued to analyze the data, the authors met again and then merged some of the original codes into 12 more focused categories, mirroring the axial coding approach. These were explained as necessary to ensure clarity and consistency across debriefings and reflections (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Examples included “motivating and engaging student writers” and “classroom students' understanding of the lesson.” At this point in our coding, the 12 codes were collapsed, focusing on the trends that PSTs emphasized most during their debriefings and reflections, resulting in five final codes: student participation, pacing and leading instruction, interacting with the writer, motivating and engaging writers, and reflecting on planning/positioning. Overall, to ensure analytical rigor, we included a section for example quotes to capture vivid or representative expressions of participants’ experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). (See Table 3.)

**Table 3***Final Codes with Frequency and Example Quotes Across Field Experience*

| Code   | Frequency Count in Debriefing | Frequency Count in Individual Reflections | Example Quote (from either)  |
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Student Participation: Students participating or not in classroom discussions or generally in the class etc...   | 31                            | 29  | We can redirect the question to a similar one to help students brainstorm. We can also do a turn and talk to the person next to you, therefore, when we do call on students again they can frame their answer as "we" instead of "I" so that they don't feel alone. Having them also write down answers on a white board would be a good activity as well. |
| Pacing and Leading Instruction: Underlying aspects of teaching - pacing and instructional decisions  | 28                            | 39  | I also understand how important it is to lead discussions. I also understand how important it is to plan time in between stations for students to transition between them. Lastly, I understand more about classroom management and ways to effectively get students back on track in a polite but firm way.   |
| Interacting with the Writer: PSTs' learning from their experiences or interactions with students   | 21                            | 53  | I learned that students may want to write more or develop a piece more if you have a relationship with them. There is one student who seems to like me and while we were in our stations, he wanted me to read his work and asked what was the best way for him to condense it into a 25-word story.   |
| Motivating and Engaging Writers:<br><br>PSTs' learning about how to motivate, engage, and grow confidence in writers through specific writing instructional approaches | 12                            | 84  | Giving students choices allows them to feel like they have more control in a classroom where they otherwise might not. They also will participate and engage more if they are given choices.   |
| The Individual and Internal Focus of Teaching: Statements about themselves or things they will do in the future  | 12                            | 29  | Between working with Avery in class and watching her today with this lesson, I want to be more thoughtful in my planning like her. Avery does a great job picking content that really hits the lesson home and thinks through each part of the lesson which I think is admirable.  |

## Findings

This research demonstrates how PBTE, specifically the decomposition process within PBTE, can facilitate an understanding of the teaching of writing (Grosser-Clarkson & Neel, 2020). The goal of the decomposition of practice is to make aspects of writing instruction explicit in order to develop PSTs' ability to notice, name, and implement those approaches that make writing instruction meaningful and effective for developing student writers. Our findings revealed an interesting pattern of PSTs attending to both what we identify as the visible and invisible aspects of teaching. Visible aspects of teaching were those instruction practices that are identifiable during a lesson, including pacing, giving directions, managing the physical space of the classroom, and engaging students through their participation in the lesson. The invisible aspects of teaching refer to the underpinnings of instruction or the beliefs that drive the instructional choices that PSTs make. This includes their beliefs about how to motivate and engage writers, how to interact with writers, and their ongoing reflection on their roles and growth as teachers. These findings answer the research question: What do PSTs notice during the decomposition of teaching during debriefing sessions and in written reflections?

### The Visible Aspects of Teaching

#### *Pacing and Leading Instruction*

Through their decompositions, PSTs explicitly noticed and named aspects of instruction, such as pacing, giving directions, managing the physical space of the classroom and the students in that classroom space. PSTs identified visible aspects of teaching that typically support student learning and engage students in instructional activities. The visible aspects of teaching PSTs mentioned were not subject specific.

Throughout the entire field experience, PST mentioned the importance of pacing. For example, Harper noting "pacing as always is key to making sure the lesson is on track." After the first teaching session, Emery reflected the importance of considering pacing when developing a lesson plan. She wrote, "Time management is something that I think is very important and something that could be overlooked when planning but can really make or break the lesson."

While PSTs noted the importance of staying "on track" during lessons, by the end of the field experience, PSTs also realized that flexibility is critical so that students have the time needed to engage with the material. For example, in Avery's written reflections she wrote, "Finding a balance is important. I also learned more about time management and how I should time the pieces of my lesson better to make room for the more important topics while also not rushing through anything."

PSTs noted that part of pacing includes their effectiveness in giving directions. In their debriefing, they pointed out the importance of teaching presence when giving directions, with Livi reminding Drew "don't be afraid to be louder." But PSTs also recognized that students were more attuned with the lesson when they knew the agenda. Again, during a debriefing Livi shared, "I think showing the learning targets was a really smart way, and it's a way for kids to get adjusted and explain the lesson beforehand."

How to organize students into groups seemed to be a consistent learning point throughout the field experience. PSTs realized that while collaborative work is critically important, the transitions must be organized for students to move efficiently and to use their time effectively. This was especially noticeable

when the organization did not go well. Drew reflected, “there was some confusion with setting up groups, and problems with the timing of moving from group to group and setting it up all the time.” During the debriefing immediately following a lesson that included revision stations around the classroom, Livi shared, “My group had, like, my first group of like 15 students, and I was thinking, like this is not right.”

PSTs began to strategize how this type of organization might work in future lessons. Sophie shared during the debriefing, “That was one of my questions for next week. Like, should we move around and have them stay, and then we are all still in charge of one station?” Harper added, “I will find a way to better organize my groups/stations so that the lesson flow continues fluidly throughout the process,” implying she was considering the organization of students. This showed PSTs began to recognize classroom dynamics as students work collaboratively.

Collaborative grouping and organizing students in the classroom appeared multiple times in PSTs written reflections. For example, Harper reflected on two separate dates, “I need more organization when doing group activities that require students to migrate into different locations for different activities.” And even on the last day in the field, she wrote, “I will continue to workshop more efficient ways of managing group work and putting students into groups for activities as that causes the biggest delay across every lesson.” However, when it did go well, PSTs offered significant praise. Lila shared during a debriefing, “when they came back from the stations, you did a really nice job.”

The data highlights that PSTs spent almost equal time both debriefing (28 comments) and reflecting (39 comments) on these underlying aspects of instruction. PSTs’ attention to pacing, clear directions, and student organization suggests a growing recognition of how thoughtful planning and management of the classroom support writing instruction.

### ***Student Participation***

PSTs demonstrated heightened awareness of student participation or lack thereof. This occurred throughout their teaching experiences as each debriefing and the written reflections contained some aspect of understanding why students do or do not participate in classroom discussions, and strategies for engaging students in discussion.

Emery’s first written reflection was “with the nature of field work and especially in this age group I think silence and awkward interactions are inevitable, but I am trying to look at everything as practice.” Sophie’s reflections mirrored this statement as she wrote, “getting used to crickets again is a big thing.” Lila also shared her observations writing, “I learned that they have a lot of potential and creativity, but some are very hesitant to share aloud.” PSTs began to recognize the value of promoting dialogue in writing lessons and acknowledging that students require time to build comfort in a dialogic writing classroom.

While initially, PSTs focused on the lack of student participation, as the field experience went on they began to consider *why* students were not participating. For example, Lila shared, “I have learned that some of them are unwilling to share, as they seem almost embarrassed or shy to do so.” Avery had similar learning when she reflected, “I don’t want to just assume that students don’t want to participate because I was in eighth grade at one point too and was always nervous to raise my hand and answer questions (and to be honest, I still am sometimes).” Avery went on to consider the role of the teacher as the leader of discussions

and how teachers have to plan for their role in the discussion as well as she reflected, “I plan to do better at leading discussions with students.” Drew also noticed how the lesson can influence participation. In his reflection, he wrote, “students vary greatly in performance and participation, so doing what you can to capture their attention and keep the lesson moving and the students learning is important.” Additionally, he recognized the importance of varying teaching activities when stating, “Utilizing more methods to increase class participation is helpful when students don't want to respond.”

During the debriefings and reflections, PSTs began to brainstorm various strategies for leading discussions. One popular strategy identified was having students “turn and talk” before engaging the class in a whole class discussion. Avery shared, “I understand now that students might do better with discussions if they have time to talk to their peers first. I plan on using the ‘turn and talk’ idea if my discussions are not going as planned. I thought this was a great idea and lessened the pressure on students to share their personal thoughts.” Similarly, Sophie reflected, “We can also do a turn and talk to the person next to you, therefore, when we do call on students again, they can frame their answer as ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ so that they don't feel alone.” During a debriefing Livi shared that she recognized a “cold call” probably wouldn't be “the best thing.” But Harper shared, “I've got one person that always answers on one side of the room, and I don't have any kids that answer on the other side, I'll be like, is anyone over here? I'll target a side of the room before I target like an individual kid.”

Over the course of the field experience, PSTs' attention shifted from simply noticing when students didn't participate to thoughtfully analyzing reasons students may or may not participate and seeking strategies to foster participation and engagement. Student participation appeared 31 times in their debriefings and 21 times in PSTs' written reflection highlighting how the decomposition of practice seemed to facilitate a growing awareness of the reasons students may or may not participate, as well as the teacher's role in supporting student dialogue.

## **The Invisible Aspects of Teaching**

### ***Motivating and Engaging Writers***

When PSTs debriefed and reflected, their noticings surrounding writing instruction focused on the importance of students having a voice in choice of topic, instances when students were mostly engaged in the lesson, the importance of mentor texts, collaborative work during writing instruction, and the need for teachers to be passionate about writing.

Consistently, PSTs noted the importance of allowing students to have choice in their writing topics. For example, in Livi's reflection, she wrote, “I will work to give my students more independence when choosing a topic to write about.” Similarly, Emery's (reflection) shared,

From seeing the students work and talking to them today, I could tell that they were very engaged because they were able to have a little bit of choice in the matter and showcase themselves a little bit in their writing.

Finally, Drew wrote, “when given them enough freedom to choose what they want to write about, they can be quite motivated to write.”

These sentiments consistently appeared in the debriefings and reflections and were connected to how PSTs felt students were engaged and motivated to write. Interestingly, after working with students who took a while to generate ideas, Avery in her reflection noted that while “giving students opportunities to pick topics is nice, it is also helpful to have one or more ideas to give them in case they can't think of anything.” However, Avery still linked choice to motivation, sharing “When students can write about topics that interest or mean a lot to them, they often are more motivated to complete the assignment.”

Motivation and engagement also appeared in the data when PSTs discussed and wrote about student preferences in regard to writing. PSTs recognized that certain aspects of writing might not appeal to students, which also might hinder their engagement in the writing instruction. For example, Drew said “many students will not immediately find styles of writing that they particularly enjoyed.” Similarly, Lila wrote, “I also realized that not every genre of writing is going to be suitable or liked by every student.” PSTs often used the phrase “they weren't in the mood” to describe why students might not write anything. And PSTs seemed to think that students could and would do the work “as long as they enjoy it.”

When students did write, PSTs took notice and were excited by the factors that influenced their writing in class. For example, Emery shared,

I had a lot of fun with today's lesson because it gave way for the students to be creative and put their personalities in the assignment. At least from my high school and middle school experiences, there was always a stigma around English class being boring and so I think when teaching writing it's important to try and make it fun for the students.

Lila reflected on how willingly students wrote and emphasized her excitement when they enjoyed the lesson PSTs crafted.

As I stated previously, I noticed that the students are more productive and willing to write if it is about something that sparks their interest and they find entertaining. A lot of the students were excited about the music infographic and were sharing names of music artists for us to listen to.

PSTs also linked student engagement to the teacher's feelings about writing. Drew shared, “Students can sometimes be unenthusiastic about writing but pushing them in the right direction and continuing to portray your own enthusiasm about the text and providing them with enough support can help.” The notion of a teacher's passion as an influence was consistent in the data. Avery reflected, “Today I learned more about how if you are passionate about a topic, then your students are more likely to participate and be passionate as well.” Emery described teachers as “cheerleaders” for the subject being taught. Later in the semester, Avery shared that she also learned that teachers have to “teach them how to love writing; not everyone automatically loves to write. This can be taught, and we should encourage students to write in their free time.”

Recognizing that teachers must feel passionate about writing extended into PSTs ideas about instruction. PSTs discussed the importance of giving time for brainstorming, having prompts on hand when students need guidance and direction, and how using stations for small group instruction around revision, were all critical components for effective writing instruction. This practice was clear to Harper when she said, “Letting them facilitate the activity while still offering outside support is also very engaging and beneficial

to the students as it allows them to independently brainstorm or bounce ideas off of each other when split into smaller groups.” PSTs noted that teaching writing can be “difficult because there are a lot of skills to cover, but having a list of techniques and a clear rubric for students to follow can be helpful.”

During the field experience, PSTs were expected to implement writing pedagogy that was consistent with what they learned in their methods course and what Ann routinely implemented in her instruction. One important aspect of instruction that was repeatedly discussed was the use of mentor text to guide students’ writing. PSTs debriefed and wrote about the importance of mentor texts and how they can be used effectively during instruction. Harper reflected that “when provided clear examples of different methods of writing in this case poetry, can be really encouraging to students and help them produce stronger writing that they are more confident in.” Avery shared, “I learned that mentor texts help students quite a bit when it comes to finding inspiration. The quality of a mentor text can make or break the quality of their work.”

Overall, PSTs developed a more nuanced understanding of what makes writing instruction motivational and engaging. Interestingly, when we examine when PSTs talked or wrote most about writing instruction, it was during their written reflections. Even though PSTs were teaching writing, their attention to writing instruction only appeared 12 times in their debriefings as opposed to the 84 times PSTs mentioned in their individual reflections. When PSTs did discuss or write about writing, their insights revealed their understanding that student motivation is closely tied to choice and relevance. They also noticed their role in students’ motivation and the need to show passion and enthusiasm for writing. PSTs began to recognize that they were not simply facilitating writing instruction, but that they needed to situate themselves as writers and writing enthusiasts.

### ***Interacting with Writers***

During the debriefings and in their written reflections, PSTs often discussed the strategies they used to interact with writers during the lesson. They viewed their interactions with writers as a way to teach and engage students in the writing they were doing. For example, in a debriefing Drew praised Emery for checking in with students and “making sure they understood, and when they didn’t, you pointed them in the right direction.” Following up, Livi also shared how acknowledging writing as challenging and giving encouragement was important. In the debriefing, she explained, “they were like, we don’t want to write. And you said, ‘I know how difficult it can be but try to write something down.’ Then they would actually start writing.” The importance of “checking in” with students throughout the lesson also appeared in PSTs’ reflections. For example, Lila wrote that one takeaway would be to “check in with as many students as I can during their work time while they’re writing and see if there is any way I can help them.” PSTs also discussed how certain instructional approaches allowed for more opportunities for interacting with writers during the lesson. Having revision stations seemed to allow PSTs more opportunities for walking around and engaging with students. During a reflection, Emery wrote,

Sophie had the stations set up to be student-led, which I think was super beneficial for the students. We want the students to be independent to learn a process as writers for learning from texts they read, so I think that it was super beneficial of Sophie to give them the time to practice that inquiry and learn from each other.

PSTs began to consider their presence in the classroom and how they presented themselves to students. Emery reflected, “I think showing vulnerability like this goes a long way and can make the students more comfortable.” Livi also shared during a debriefing that Drew’s presence allowed him to effectively interact with writers. She said, “whenever I saw you talking, you were very relaxed, and they seemed very eager to read something to you, or just even have a conversation with you.” During that same debriefing, Lila also praised Drew by saying, “You always do such a good job of checking in on the kids to see how their progress is going, and your energy is just, it’s always there, always there. I love it.” Throughout the field experience, PSTs consistently pointed out when they felt their classmates were doing an effective job interacting with students. In a debriefing towards the end of the semester, Emery praised Livi by saying

You do a really good job at explaining and reexplaining but also loosening the ropes and letting them work on their own. And you do a really good job at getting to know the students. You’re really good at asking questions, like, “what are you doing this summer?” And having those conversations makes you a person to them. So, I think that’s amazing.

PSTs also noticed that their presence in the classroom and how they developed relationships was critical to their ability to effectively lead writing instruction. Avery shared,

I learned that students may want to write more or develop a piece more if you have a relationship with them. There is one student who seems to like me and while we were in our stations, he wanted me to read his work and asked what the best way for him was to condense it into a 25-word story.

Similarly in his reflections, Drew wrote, “investing time into creating connections with students can be helpful when trying to motivate them when it comes to writing.” Not only did the PSTs notice relationships building with students, but they also observed that building relationships with each other encourages writing. In her reflections, Avery noted,

Based on my own experiences, as well as Livi’s experiences, students will listen more and work harder if they like and get along with the teacher. It is hard to build a relationship with every single student, but I think that if students saw a lot of other students participating and working hard, they may want to as well. Students want to learn because we are all curious people but you have to frame it in a way that works for them.

Through the decompositions, PSTs learned that meaningful interactions with writers can be both supportive and instructional. While PSTs commented on developing relationships with students (21 comments), they gave it increased focus in their written reflections (53 comments) on how to maintain and cultivate relationships with students that allowed them to better encourage and support students. They recognized that the way they build not only rapport, but relationships with students contributed to a more responsive and conducive writing environment. As they implemented certain instructional approaches, PSTs developed a clear sense of how their interactions with writers could help drive their instruction and students’ learning about writing.

### ***The Individual and Internal Focus of Teaching***

At times in both the debriefings and reflections, PSTs focused on their feelings, concerns, or what they want to do in their future classrooms. For example, at the beginning of the semester, Livi mentioned twice

in debriefings that she was “getting less anxious” and “becoming less nervous.” Similarly, Avery reflected, “I want to work on my ability to stand in front of a classroom and not be too nervous. I know that it will come with time and practice, but I know it is something I need to work on.” PSTs also noted areas where they needed to grow. For example, Drew reflected, “I need to continue to work on my question-asking skills and active teaching abilities.” Working on questioning as a teaching technique also was a point that Avery reflected on as she wrote, “I plan to ask more follow-up questions and even change my tone/gestures to hopefully encourage more student discussion.”

There were times throughout the field experience when PSTs specifically realized the importance of planning required for executing a lesson. After a debriefing, Emery shared that she wasn’t as prepared for her lesson and said “I could have done better being prepared. We need to be more commutative in the future so I feel pretty good that it will not happen again.” Harper also shared, “Between working with Avery in class and watching her today with this lesson, I want to be more thoughtful in my planning like her.” They also started to know that sometimes things weren’t going to go as planned. After a lesson with technology issues, Avery reflected, “After today’s debriefing, I understand more about flexibility and presence in a classroom. The slides weren’t working in the beginning, but Sophie was calm about it and the teacher and tech coordinator ended up figuring it out rather quickly.” Lila also learned that teaching writing could involve letting students collaborate, recognizing she doesn’t have to be the only teacher the whole time. This was clear when she stated, “I will be sure to facilitate some activities into my future classroom where students lead themselves, because I do feel that this is beneficial when it can be done properly.” After the last day, Emery shared,

My big takeaway from today, with it being the last day, was to keep in mind that when going into student teaching those awkward growing pains will feel themselves out. This was, I think, the longest and most interactive field experience I have had in college, and I really saw myself become comfortable in the classroom at Tallmadge so I need to remind myself going into my student teaching experience next year, that will happen there too.

Throughout the field experience, PSTs turned inward to consider their own feelings, challenges, and goals. Their debriefings and reflections revealed their developing awareness of who they are as future teachers. It makes sense that most of this work was done during their written reflections (29 comments), however, they did still share these feelings 12 times during debriefings. This self-awareness seems to highlight the transformative nature of the decomposition process.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Teacher educators are challenged with developing an understanding of the pedagogies that support the success of teaching future teachers (Butler & Bullock, 2024). Research demonstrates that the cycle of approximation, representation, and decomposition allows PSTs to learn about the complexities of teaching through learning specific components of effective instruction. PSTs are scaffolded through the process of learning to notice, name, and enact teaching practices, while reflecting on teaching practices (Grossman et al., 2009a; Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017). Kucan & Palincsar (2023) propose that PSTs knowledge and insights through co-construction are important contributions to learning specific teaching practices and should be considered an addition to the Grossman et al. (2009a) framework. This sharing can be achieved through decomposition although decomposing lessons during field experience has received less focus

(Kavanagh et al., 2023). While scholars have theorized that decomposition is a critical aspect of the PBTE model, there is more research needed on this process during field experiences.

And yet, this study demonstrates the importance of the decomposition process. Our findings revealed an interesting pattern of PSTs attending to both what we identify as the visible and invisible aspects of teaching. The visible aspects were their identification of teaching factors that provide almost immediate feedback, for example, the pacing of a lesson, the ability to give directions in a way that supports students action rather than confusion, the ability to organize students into groups efficiently, and evidence of student participation. These visible actions offer almost immediate or near immediate feedback in terms of observable calm or chaos, energy or apathy. However, much of the invisible work of teaching writing are the understandings that PSTs must hold as teachers and in this case, what they should do as teachers of writers. Insights of the invisible work within writing instruction included understandings such as the importance of their role as a passionate writer, their need to interact with students about their writing, offering them encouragement and direction, and their need to give themselves grace as they are becoming a teacher, knowing that dealing with nerves and understanding the level of preparedness needed for this role is part of the process. PSTs also identified the role of student readiness to write and how students could or could not be excited about the writing work they were asked to complete. These decomposition practices appeared to support PSTs in developing their understanding of the complex work of teaching. Additionally, this work highlights PSTs voices about their developing understanding, adding to the call for incorporating more of PSTs perspectives on this kind of learning (Waychunas, 2025).

These findings help showcase the different kinds of thinking PSTs do as they decompose or engage in the “naming of the parts” (Grossman et al., 2009a) of teaching. As they named these parts, we noticed that PSTs primarily addressed the visible aspects of teaching during their debriefing sessions, while their naming of the invisible parts of writing were mostly focused on during their individual reflections (see Table 3). We find it interesting that PSTs debriefing seemed to focus on the visible aspects of the lesson, including the pacing, directions, student participation, and organization of the classroom. We propose that timing was likely an influencing factor. PSTs debriefed immediately following the lesson and their attention to how the lessons flowed and how the students engaged were at the forefront of their mind. PSTs completed the written reflections after having distance from the lesson. We do acknowledge that the PSTs also had the five scaffolded reflection prompts with three writing directed questions asking specifically what they learned about the teaching of writing, about students as writers, and about what students need next as writers. However, we believe the written prompts provided a layer of scaffolding within the decomposition of practice so they could look more deeply at the nuances and consider, notice, and name the invisible aspects of writing instruction. A noted challenge for PSTs is knowing what to look for and how to interpret what is observed (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985) and the debriefings guided by the course instructor and classroom teacher and the prompted reflection questions might have helped alleviate that challenge.

### **Implications**

This study provides multiple implications for teacher educators as they consider how to structure and facilitate decompositions. Our study indicates that PSTs need many opportunities, and maybe different forms of decomposition, to fully develop their professional vision for the teaching of writing. Teacher educators should consider how decomposing instruction immediately after teaching might assist PSTs to focus on the observable aspects of teaching, including pacing and management. However, teacher educators

should also be aware that scaffolded reflections can provide opportunities for PSTs to engage in deeper thinking about pedagogy and even their identities as future teachers. The findings from this study, specifically the differences in response frequency between what they noticed and named within the debriefing and individual reflections about these invisible aspects of writing, is something to note and worth further investigation. If the decomposition of practice is critical to PSTs knowledge of teaching writing and ability to effectively implement writing instruction, then the act of “naming the parts” of this complex practice needs to be a central focus in PBTE (Grossman et al., 2009a). PSTs need to learn how to attend to the more visible aspects of teaching, in order to learn how to orchestrate an effective lesson; however, PSTs also need scaffolding to help them pay attention to underlying or invisible aspects that might not be as noticeable, but certainly drive the instructional choices that teachers make.

### Future Research

We hope our findings serve to expand teacher educators’ conceptualizations of how PBTE supports PSTs in developing a deeper understanding of teaching writing through the decomposition of practice. Our analysis of how PSTs decomposed instruction via debriefing sessions and written reflections provides insight into what they were able to notice and name and how they grew in their understanding of what it means to teach. More research is needed within practice-based teacher education to explore various decomposition practices that may offer multiple ways for PSTs to notice and name parts of their teaching. Ultimately, implications from the present study offer other teacher educators additional avenues to consider when helping PSTs make sense of the complex work of teaching.

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