



How the Match Gets Made: Exploring Student Teacher Placements Across Teacher Education Programs, Districts, and Schools

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Abstract

Student teaching has long been considered the most important component of an effective teacher education program. Recently, new research is finding links between these experiences and teacher candidates' future effectiveness, yet relatively little is known about the student teacher placement process and, in particular, the processes that lead to the matching of teacher candidates to the inservice teachers who supervise their student teaching ("cooperating teachers"). In this study, we examine the match process as well as the factors that influence these placement decisions. We also explore how, if at all, practices vary across teacher education programs (TEPs), districts, and schools. We find that, in broad terms, the process for matching student teachers to mentor teachers is similar across educational institutions, although TEPs and school systems sometimes face competing priorities when placing student teachers in classrooms. We also identify a problem of information asymmetry in the placement process, which leaves TEPs with questions about how cooperating teachers are selected and districts and schools with limited information with which to make thoughtful and intentional matches between candidates and cooperating teachers. Finally, we document the important role of social networks in placements and how they can advantage some TEPs, districts, and schools in this process.

1. Introduction

The student teaching internship has been recognized as the most important component of an effective teacher education program (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010), often providing prospective teachers with their first teaching experiences before entering the workforce. Annually, nearly 200,000 preservice teachers are placed in student teaching positions across the country (Greenberg, Pomerance, & Walsh, 2011). These “hands-on, real world experience[s]” (Kasperbauer & Roberts, 2007, p. 31) involve matching prospective teachers with mentor teachers (or, in Washington State, the focus of this study, “cooperating teachers”) in classrooms and schools, providing teacher candidates with opportunities to integrate theory and practice and utilize knowledge and skills learned in their training programs (e.g., Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

The notion that teachers’ preservice training would be enriched with supervised classroom teaching experience makes sense. And recent evidence now connects candidates’ student teaching placements with their future career paths and effectiveness (e.g., Goldhaber, Krieg, Theobald, 2014, 2017; Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016; Ronfeldt, 2012, 2015; Ronfeldt, Matsko, Greene, & Reininger, 2018). For example, the characteristics of the school where preservice teachers student teach have been found to be predictive of teacher effectiveness and attrition (Ronfeldt, 2012, 2015). Cooperating teacher characteristics (Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2015, 2017), internship location (Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016; Maier & Youngs, 2009), and the “match” between characteristics of the school teachers work in and the school in which they student taught (Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2017) also appear consequential. These findings raise important questions about prospective teachers’ access to high-quality, intentionally coordinated student teaching internships and whether internship opportunities vary across teacher education programs (TEPs). Yet, surprisingly little research has

examined the process through which student teachers are matched to cooperating teachers, leaving questions about how TEPs, districts, and schools make these decisions.

Closely related research by Krieg, Goldhaber, and Theobald (in review) using data from Washington State investigates the observable characteristics of teacher candidates and potential cooperating teachers that predict specific student teacher assignments. This analysis finds that, relative to all teachers, cooperating teachers are more likely to have greater experience and a master's degree and that student teachers are more likely to be placed into schools with lower levels of historical teacher turnover but with more open positions the following year. Krieg, Goldhaber, and Theobald (in review) also find that teacher candidates are more likely to work with cooperating teachers of the same gender and race and are more likely to be placed with cooperating teachers and in schools with administrators who graduated from the candidate's TEP.

In this study, we examined the practices and procedures that lead to these student teacher placement patterns in Washington State. We employed qualitative case study methods (Yin, 2009) using data from interviews with the individuals responsible for facilitating student teaching placements across eight TEPs, two districts, and six schools. Specifically, we asked:

1. How do TEPs and districts/schools work together to match prospective teachers to mentor teachers in schools?
2. What factors influence these placement decisions, and how, if at all, do practices vary across TEPs and districts/schools?

2. Conceptual Framework

While TEPs hold the ultimate responsibility for placing prospective teachers in student teaching assignments, they work closely with districts and schools to make these placements. To stay attuned to the various perspectives and motivations for involvement among these different actors, we turned to the third-generation cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). Developed by

Engeström (1987) and others, CHAT places the unit of analysis at the level of the *objectoriented activity*; in this case, student teacher placements.

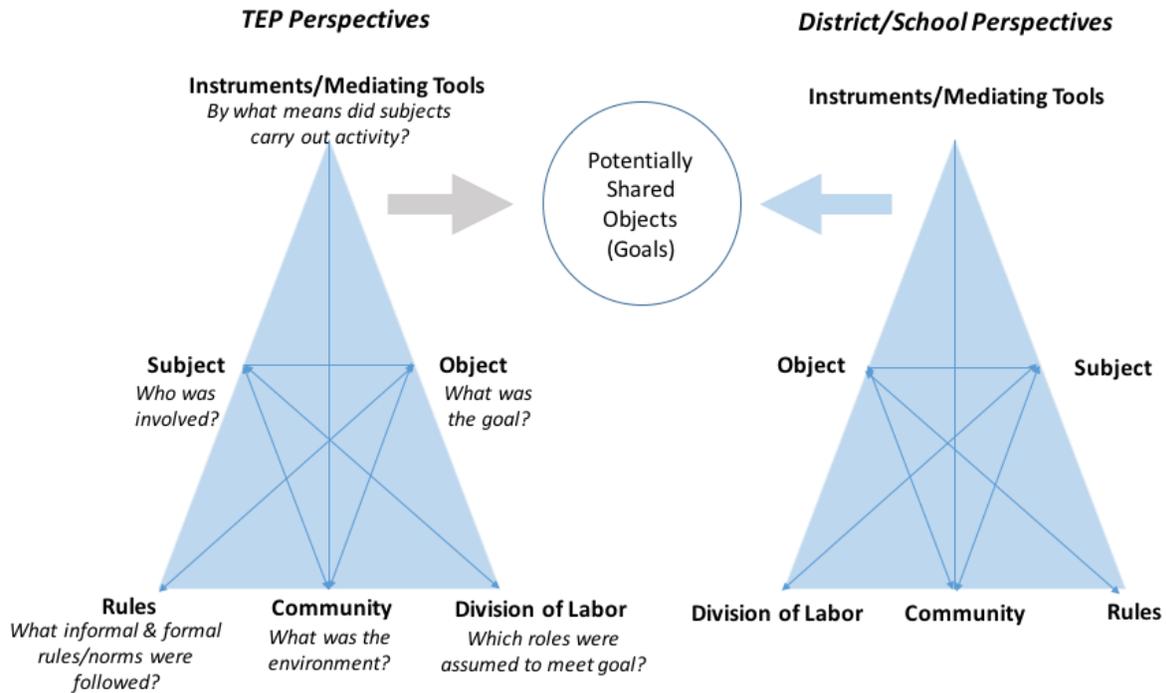
According to CHAT, an activity system is made up of six central elements: a *subject* (or actor), an *object* (a goal or desired outcome), the *tool(s)* subjects use to meet the object, the *community* (others involved and interested in the same object), *rules* (both local and larger contextual norms for how subjects engage in the activity), and *divisions of labor* (the varying roles and tasks that are taken on) (Foot, 2014). By giving attention to these varying components of an activity, CHAT allows us to move beyond focusing only on the most obvious interactions between TEPs and districts and schools in the placement of student teachers. It reminds us that shared activities are multivoiced and multilayered (Foot, 2014) and helps us recognize that cultural and historical dimensions also influence student teacher placements. Finally, focusing on student teacher placements from these various perspectives also permits us to examine how goals may vary across TEPs and districts/schools.¹

As illustrated in Figure 1, TEPs and districts/schools each have their own goals and reasons for why they engage in placing teacher candidates in student teaching assignments (the “object” of the activity). While the overarching goal (and “potentially shared object”) is the successful placement of teacher candidates in student teaching assignments, it is important to note that TEPs and districts/schools also have additional and potentially competing goals in their day-to-day work. For example, if a district is facing teacher shortages in a particular endorsement area or a school principal is simultaneously addressing teacher workload issues, these competing concerns and goals may influence what they prioritize and how they engage in the activity of placing student teachers in schools and classrooms. These variations in priorities and engagement

¹ We want to call attention to our grouping of district and school perspectives as one unit in our analysis of student teacher placement practices. In this paper, we group districts and schools as one entity since they are supporting TEPs in this activity. However, it is important to note that if we were to examine the roles of districts and schools separately, we might find interesting and important distinctions among them in this activity.

may potentially result in varying outcomes across TEPs and districts/schools in the matching of student teachers to mentor teachers and schools.

Figure 1. Third-Generation Activity System: Student Teacher Placements



The subjects involved in student teacher placements vary across TEPs and districts/schools.

Among TEPS, the primary actors making the decisions about student teacher placements are field coordinators and teacher candidates, while the primary decision makers in districts and schools are human resource (HR) coordinators, principals, and cooperating teachers.

Variations in the divisions of labor also influence this process. For instance, in some districts, TEP field coordinators work with district HR coordinators to match student teachers to cooperating teachers and schools, while in other districts TEP field coordinators work directly with individual school principals. As will be discussed in our findings, these differences influence the types of instruments and tools TEPs and districts/schools use to carry out student teacher placements, as well as the cultural norms and rules governing the performance of the activity.

While CHAT provides a valuable tool for investigating the activity of placing prospective teachers in student teaching assignments, we augment CHAT with social capital theory because

we also want to consider how social networks may affect this process. Maier & Youngs (2009) found TEPs play an integral role in the development of social networks between candidates and schools, which, in turn, influence where student teachers take their first teaching positions. They also argue that research into teacher labor markets overlooks this sociologically based framework and that it should be incorporated.

Social capital theory argues that capital is derived from one's location in a social network (Lin, 2001). These social capital resources typically provide information and influence to people within networks, as well as the benefits of timing, access, and referrals (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1995). In the case of student teacher placements, prospective teachers gain access to social networks within their student teaching schools and districts, which may provide them with professional contacts along with insider information about issues such as school and district culture and potential job openings. Likewise, schools, districts, and TEPs might benefit from the social capital derived from these relationships, allowing them to gain access more easily to the educational contexts they value most. Yet, while a social network may provide these benefits to its members, others peripheral to or outside the network may be excluded (Portes, 1998) and left to undertake more laborious efforts in reaching their goals (Coleman, 1988). In this study, we use these ideas to examine if, and how, social capital resources may advantage some TEPs and districts/schools in student teacher placements.

3. Methods

We employed qualitative case study methods (Yin, 2009) to explore the student teacher placement process. The case for this paper was the activity of placing prospective teachers in student teaching internships. Using case study methods, we were able to investigate the activity of student teacher placements in depth and within its real-life context, which was helpful for understanding how placements actually occur within a given context (Yin, 2009). TEPs and districts/schools engage in this shared activity, but they take on different roles in doing so, and

we wanted to understand both the structure and process of student teacher placements as well as if and how practices varied across contexts. By considering the perspectives of TEPs and districts/schools, we were also able to use evidence from multiple sources for the purpose of triangulation (Yin, 2009). Lastly, it is important to note that we did not distinguish these TEPs, districts, or schools as exemplars in the matching of student teachers to cooperating teachers and schools; rather, we considered them “instrumental cases” (Yin, 2014), or cases that we may learn from in our study of the student teacher placement process.

4. Data

This study is situated within a larger, multiyear study of the teacher pipeline in Washington State conducted as part of the Teacher Education Learning Collaborative (TELC). TELC is a partnership of 15 TEPs in Washington State that collaborate in the sharing of data and information about their programs, with the purpose of learning how preservice teacher education experiences influence inservice teacher and student outcomes. The data gathered and reported in this paper are qualitative. However, aspects of this study were informed by an associated quantitative examination of this topic, which analyzed data on student teacher placements from participating TEPs in TELC (Krieg, Goldhaber, & Theobald, in review).

The qualitative data reported here were gathered during the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years. All TEPs that participate in TELC were invited to participate in the study. Among the 15 TEPs, eight agreed to participate. We began the study by interviewing the TEP field placement coordinators. In all, we interviewed 11 individuals across the eight TEPs. To understand the perspectives and roles of districts and schools in student teacher placements, we next interviewed HR coordinators from two school districts and principals from six schools. Note that the schools represented here are from districts with decentralized student teacher placement practices. There were no district-level staff that facilitate this process in these districts; therefore, interviews were conducted at the school level.

Using data gathered from the associated quantitative study, school districts and schools were invited to participate in the study if they were among the top three districts or schools in which student teachers were placed by the TEPs in our sample. Closely representing the distribution of TEPs and teacher candidates across the state, the majority of participants in our sample are positioned across six counties in the western portion of the state, with some representation within the northern and eastern portions of the state. Half of the TEPs in our sample are private institutions, while the other half are public. Among the eight institutions, three are Ph.D.–granting institutions. To facilitate comparisons across different schools, the six schools included in the sample are all elementary schools.

It is important to note that the TEPs represented here are self-selected. They may differ in important ways from the TEPs that did not respond to our invitation to participate, either because they declined to participate in TELC at all or because they declined to participate in this specific study. Likewise, the districts and schools included here also volunteered to participate in the study. Their perspectives were included to triangulate and flesh out our understanding of the student teacher placement process across the eight participating TEPs. However, these districts and schools also work with other TEPs across the state and sometimes reflected on differences in practice across programs outside our sample as well. While we do not utilize these data about other programs in our analysis of the student teacher placement process across our sample TEPs, we do reference these data in discussions of variations in practice.

A total of 18 educators involved in student teacher placements across the TEPs, districts, and schools were interviewed. These semi-structured telephone interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants were asked to describe the student teacher placement process in their program and to discuss the various factors that influence these decisions. To understand how student teachers are assigned to schools and mentor teachers, participants were asked questions such as, “Can you tell me how student teachers are assigned to the cooperating teachers? Who makes those decisions and what criteria do they use? Why are these criteria important? And how

does the matching of student teachers to cooperating teachers differ across the different districts and schools that you partner with?” All interviewed were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

5. Analytic Approach

Once the data were collected, the transcripts were entered as text into Dedoose, a webbased software program for qualitative and mixed methods data management and analysis. Data analysis began with a provisional coding procedure, where we read through the transcripts and assigned codes to data “chunks” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), or segments of text germane to our research questions. Because we are interested in examining student teacher placements across TEPs, districts, and schools, we employed both descriptive coding (to understand issues of context, for example) and process coding (to extract information about the activity of placing student teachers). After this first cycle of coding (Saldana, 2013), we reviewed the provisional codes alongside our research questions and conceptual framework and revised and consolidated the codes into a set of categories we found useful for organizing and analyzing our data across the cases. Examples of these categories include “description of process,” “social capital,” “placement philosophy,” and “cooperating teacher.” A total of 33 codes and subcodes were used in our preliminary analyses.

We coded all data with these categories, and then, using the CHAT framework (Engeström, 2001), further oriented our analysis around the *subjects*, *objects*, *tools*, *rules*, *community*, and *divisions of labor* in student teacher placements. As discussed in the preceding section, we operationalized the *subject* of our analysis as individuals involved in student teacher placement decisions, and we focused our attention on the potential shared and competing *objects* associated with student teacher placements to understand why TEPs and districts/schools might be motivated to work together but also sometimes disincentivized from focusing on the same goal. In doing so, our analysis became more narrowly focused upon the activity of placing

prospective teachers in student teaching assignments and how the activity may vary according to varying tools, rules, divisions of labor, community contexts, *and* social capital. Using codes aimed at capturing issues related to influence and advantage in this process, we also examined how access to social capital resources influenced student teacher placements across contexts.

6. Results

In broad terms, the people involved in student teacher placements within our sample of TEPs and districts/schools generally described similar processes for placing student teachers. However, we found that while they may share overarching goals related to successful student teacher placements and developing a highly effective teacher workforce, day-to-day demands and realities also sometimes lead them to prioritize other objectives. In addition, we identified a problem of information asymmetry, which left TEPs with questions about how cooperating teachers were selected and districts and schools with limited information with which to make thoughtful and intentional matches between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. Finally, we documented the important role of social networks in placements and how they advantage some in this process.

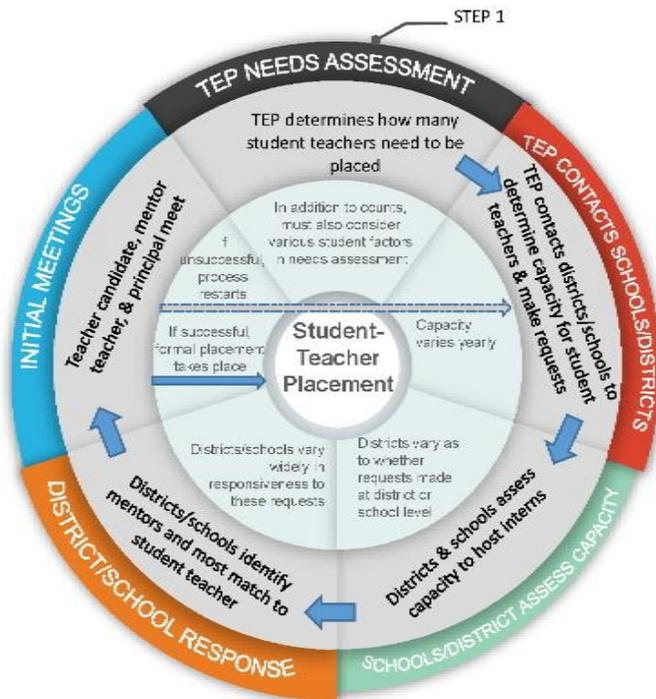
The Student Teacher Placement Process at a High Level

Across TEPs there were some variations in the student teacher placement process (particularly for TEPs with unique structures such as Teacher Residency Programs and Alternative Route Programs), but all TEPs identified five general steps that culminate with the formal placement of a teacher candidate in a student teaching assignment.

As Figure 2 illustrates, TEPs first determine the number of candidates needing placements for the upcoming school year and gather information, including teacher candidate endorsement areas, preferred grade level, where they live, how far they are willing to travel, the preferred geographical region for their student teacher assignment, and their personal educational

background. Using this information, the TEP placement coordinator creates a profile for each teacher candidate to share with the districts and schools.

Figure 2. Student Teacher Placement Process



Next, TEPs contact districts and schools to determine their capacity for accepting student teachers. In Washington State, as previously noted, districts differ with respect to whether this process is centralized at the district office or whether student teacher placement decisions are made by school principals. If a district has a designated HR staff member to facilitate these decisions, all student teacher requests generally go through that person, who then makes requests to school principals. If these decisions are left to individual principals, the TEP field placement coordinator contacts each school principal separately to make these inquiries.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general practice. One TEP coordinator described “a third option” in which “some districts allow our coordinators to work directly with building teachers,” explaining, “Of course that all happens because of the relationships that have been

built up.” But not every principal was supportive of that practice. A principal explained, I don’t think it’s a very good practice, but I have had some schools reach out to the teachers directly and request an internship...as the leader in the building, that’s always been a problem for me because I want to be the one to approve whether or not a teacher has an intern. That hasn’t happened often, but it has occurred.

Although few reported making student teaching requests directly to potential cooperating teachers, TEP field coordinators all described keeping track of cooperating teachers they felt were particularly effective, with one explaining,

Because I have to start with the building administrator when I put in a request, I can name drop, for a lack of a better term—“I think this teacher would work well with this student.” That sometimes gets things moving a little more quickly and probably has a great likelihood of a match.

Another issue to note is that district and school capacity to host a student teacher varies year to year depending on issues such as district and school leadership changes, upcoming retirements, teacher shortages, school status, etc. A TEP placement coordinator explained, Those vary from year to year, for a whole host of reasons...Like right now there’s a district that is...three of its schools were underperforming; they’re all Title I schools. So, they have said “No student teachers at those schools.” Then the district will have a new superintendent, and the new superintendent will say “Hey, during my first year, I don't want to take any student teachers in the district.”

Upon receiving student teacher placement requests—often from multiple TEPs—districts and schools assess their capacity for hosting particular students by considering the teacher candidate’s endorsement area and grade-level requests as well as their own capacity to host a student teacher that year. Principals, who have the most direct knowledge of teachers’ workloads, personal life circumstances, and individual classroom characteristics, also take these types of factors into consideration when selecting cooperating teachers. A principal of a

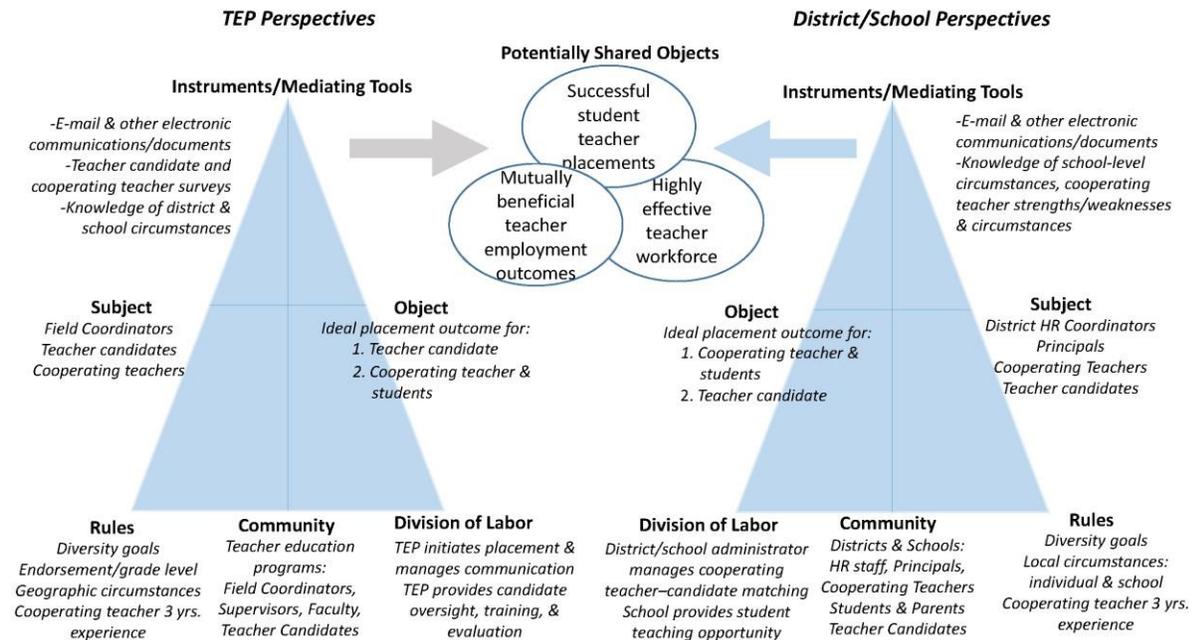
highperforming elementary school explained that when she selects a cooperating teacher she thinks about “their individual capacity to have a student teacher—so, their maturity in the craft and their personal obligations that year. You know, maybe they are in a master’s program [or] maybe they are doing some district leadership or something.”

Once cooperating teachers have been identified and agree to take on a student teacher that year, districts and schools provide cooperating teacher contact information to the TEPs. At that point, a meeting is arranged between the teacher candidate, cooperating teacher, and principal in which they collectively determine whether there is “a fit.” In the majority of circumstances, the match is successful and a formal placement agreement results. However, sometimes teachers are reluctant to take on student teachers that have “not had the strongest of experiences in their practicum.” As one principal explained, “My teachers are pretty unwilling to take [a struggling student teacher] just because sometimes it ends up being more work for the teacher and it’s not the best for the students either.” In the event a school or district does not accept a student teacher that year or the match is deemed unsuccessful, the TEP field coordinator begins the process again for that candidate until a successful match is made.

The Object of Student Teacher Placements: Aligned and Competing Goals Among TEPs, and Districts/Schools

Although TEPs and districts/schools described a similar process for placing teacher candidates in teaching internships, they have distinct roles in this process, and these differences position them separately within the student teacher placement activity system (as illustrated in Figure 3). In this activity system, TEP educators are negotiating with district and school educators and teacher candidates for a common object of the activity (a successful student teacher placement), and while they share some important objectives in doing so, they also sometimes face competing goals.

Figure 3. Third-Generation Activity System: TEP Educators Negotiating With District/School Educators & Teacher Candidates for a Common Object of Activity:—Student Teacher Placements (adapted from Engeström, 2001)



The central goal in matching a teacher candidate to a cooperating teacher is a successful student teaching internship that will result in positive learning outcomes for the teacher candidate, the cooperating teacher, and the students in their classroom. In addition, engaging in this activity also helps TEPs and districts/schools address other shared goals such as fostering potential opportunities for future teacher employment in districts and schools. Prior research has indicated that teacher candidates are more likely to be hired into the districts and schools in which they do their student teaching (Krieg, Theobald, & Goldhaber, 2016). Therefore, engaging in this shared activity facilitates an additional objective among TEPs—that their teacher candidates will be hired into teaching positions upon graduation from their program. In some instances, TEP field coordinators reported strategically placing teacher candidates to help meet this goal. One TEP coordinator explained that he will intentionally place teacher candidates according to their endorsement area when he knows a retirement is about to take place.

Similarly, when districts and schools engage in this activity they support another object: meeting their local teacher workforce needs. As a principal from an elementary school reported, “I’m

always looking at a student teacher as a potential hire.” Another explained, “We take student teachers, and then we hire them.” And, of course, it’s in the best interest of both TEPs and districts/schools that they support the development of a highly effective teacher workforce. An elementary school principal thought about this when selecting teachers to serve as cooperating teachers. He stated that he asked himself, “‘Is the mentor teacher going to provide a good model?’ If we are going to take on the responsibility of teaching our next generation of educators, we [had] better be doing it well.”

These shared goals motivate TEPs and districts/schools to engage in this activity in ways that support the most beneficial match between student teachers and cooperating teachers and schools. However, as indicated in Figure 3, TEPs and districts/schools also face some incongruence in how local goals are prioritized. TEPs are tasked with preparing their teacher candidates to be highly effective teachers, and they hold the primary responsibility for providing these prospective teachers with a constructive student teaching learning experience. Districts and schools, on the other hand, are tasked with educating their K–12 students to the highest standards possible and are held accountable for delivering effective instructional and educational services to that end. While the shared goals discussed above may motivate TEPs and districts/schools to work together in the student teacher placement activity, diverging responsibilities and competing priorities can sometimes affect student teacher placement practices in ways that deviate from these shared goals. For instance, some principals reported that they have, on occasion, intentionally matched student teachers to cooperating teachers that they thought would benefit from having a student teacher, with the hope of either supporting or motivating a cooperating teacher’s practice. One principal explained,

I select people who (a) know good teaching practice and (b) also would be a good mentor to someone. But then I also think about who would benefit from having an intern in terms of “Will it push them to grow as a result, too?” Maybe they are stagnant or they need something different to switch up their own practice, too.

Another elementary school principal explained that bringing in a student teacher sometimes “provides that additional body in a classroom. So, if you know you have a particularly challenging group of students, having an extra adult is always beneficial, too.” One principal reported that sometimes her teachers are motivated to bring in student teachers to support their work, explaining, “We had six interns in our building, and in the spring when the interns were doing their full-time teaching, it did free up our classroom teachers to do some more individualized or small group work than they were able to do normally. So, I think that’s part of it.”

However, a concern among TEPs and districts/schools was the notion of “mentor fatigue.” Nearly every educator interviewed worried about burdening these teachers over time. One TEP coordinator explained, “We find these high-quality mentors, but we don’t want to have them mentor with us for 10 years straight...at what point do they need a break?” Another concurred: “Those CTs [cooperating teachers] need a break. Their principals want them to have a break or they’re gonna go move to a new school.” Another explained a slightly nuanced concern related to mentor fatigue:

I also think a lot of teachers I identify as a high-quality teacher get recommended to be mentors, but then they also get recommended to be on 10 different committees. I think that plays a part, too—that an effective teacher sometimes can’t be an effective mentor because they’ve got too many other things pulling at them.

This notion, that an effective teacher may not always be an effective mentor, was a common theme across educators. For example, a principal stated, “I’ve had teachers who are outstanding in their practice, but because of the way they manage themselves and operate, they’re not typically the best people to place interns with...they’re not as collaborative.” This viewpoint was repeated frequently across the TEPs and districts/schools in this sample. However, one TEP coordinator reasoned,

Given the choice of someone who is a great mentor with not very strong instructional practices or a lousy mentor with really strong instructional practices, I'd rather go for the really strong instructional practices/lousy mentor. So, the reason being that the person is going to be doing great modeling even though maybe it's not great coaching.

The Division of Labor in Student Teacher Placements: How Current Divisions Lead to a Problem of Informational Asymmetry

Examining the student teacher activity from different perspectives helped to illuminate asymmetries in the information shared in the matching of teacher candidates to cooperating teachers. This asymmetry in the sharing of information left TEPs wondering whether their teacher candidates were being matched with the most effective cooperating teachers and placed a significant burden upon districts and schools to make thoughtful decisions about how to match cooperating teachers to teacher candidates with little information to do so.

The TEP Perspective

In the fourth stage of the process described above, cooperating teachers are selected and matched to student teachers. While some field coordinators occasionally circumvent protocol by contacting cooperating teachers on their own, as discussed above, in most cases TEPs reported relying on the judgment of districts and schools when selecting cooperating teachers. This part of the process was largely a mystery to TEPs. As a TEP field coordinator explained, "District protocols are terribly opaque in this. I don't know what districts do behind the scenes. This is a point of breakdown in the process. I assume that principals are giving their thumbs up, but I don't know that for certain." Recall that, in Washington State, the placement of student teachers is sometimes a centralized process, meaning that there is a district-level employee responsible for facilitating student teacher placements in schools. However, in some of the largest districts in the state, these decisions are left to individual principals. One TEP field coordinator summed up this

process from his/her perspective, “I’m working with 13 different districts, and there are 13 different stories for how that happens.”

One TEP field coordinator discussed the pros and cons of these varying practices: Sometimes we work with an HR person from the district. So, a benefit of that is it’s pretty streamlined. We go through one person...they can get back to us pretty fast, and they have a vested interest in making sure these placements happen because that’s their job. However, they don’t know teachers. They don’t know good mentor teachers from poor mentor teachers. So, that’s the drawback to that.

Another TEP field coordinator reported,

In the majority of the districts, I go right to the buildings and schools. I trust that they are going to choose mentor teachers who they think would obviously be a good mentor. So, I don’t get to go directly to the teachers...[In other districts] we go through the district level. They have lists of teachers who they have vetted and feel would be a good mentor. We’re highly trusting that the principal or district personnel will choose a good mentor teacher.

While they assumed that HR coordinators and principals were selecting their strongest cooperating teachers, some also worried: “Sometimes they use our students to supplement the bad teacher. Sometimes they use our students so they can use the teacher for substituting. Sometimes, [they use student teachers to support] teachers that are getting their national boards.”

District and School Perspectives

When asked to explain how cooperating teachers were selected, the majority of district placement coordinators and principals reported selecting cooperating teachers based on a combination of attributes. Here a principal explains in detail the characteristics she seeks in a cooperating teacher:

Number one, you have to have excellent instructional and classroom management skills so that you can actually model for them. Then, you have to have those kind of counselor

skills to be able to kind of debrief “What did you learn from that lesson?” Then, you have to be willing to turn your class over and let them try. Then, when they fail—everybody fails a lesson sometimes—to take the time to review with them, to look at how you would expect to be better the next time. Then, you have to do all the other things that aren’t instruction and classroom management. How do you fill out the electronic report card? How do you communicate with parents? How do you write an effective newsletter? All of those things that are beyond the obvious, you have to help mentor them on those things, too.

The educators in our sample frequently expressed this attention to a combination of pedagogy and mentoring skills. However, one principal also reported relying on teacher evaluation scores. She explained, “I think if I were to look at teacher evaluations and all of the different components of the teacher, I would say a teacher who makes less than proficient in really any of them shouldn’t have a student teacher.”

When it came time to select cooperating teachers, principals varied in their practice. Some principals reported inviting individual teachers, while others invited their teachers to selfselect into the role. For instance, a principal reported “put[ing] out an e-mail that’s very broad based and say[s], ‘Is anybody in this grade span that the student is wanting? Is anybody even willing to consider?’” This principal left these decisions to individual teachers because she felt her teachers could best assess their personal and professional workloads and capacity to take on a student teacher. This practice contrasted with another principal, who reported that she “identified a couple of teachers in the building who I’d be comfortable placing student teachers with. I don’t generally just put the request out to everybody; I tap a few people on the shoulder.”

While no TEPs in our sample reported this practice themselves, one district recounted an experience working with a TEP outside our sample that “place[s] the burden primarily upon the candidate” to identify a mentor teacher and school. She explained, “The candidate really kind of identifies their place of preference kind of on their own, and then [TEP] just kind of confirms

that with the school and with me that that's going to be okay." This district coordinator wasn't critical of this practice, however, explaining that the teacher candidate "had a connection already with one of my teachers, and that's how that ended up happening...it was a good match between the intern and the teacher because they already had a relationship to some degree established outside the school setting."

This district coordinator's support of this practice may be reflective of the challenges people in this role sometimes feel when matching student teachers to cooperating teachers. Recall that district personnel and school principals are also typically tasked with matching cooperating teachers to individual student teachers, and they reported that they sometimes don't feel they are provided with enough information about the teacher candidate to make a thoughtful matching decision. One district coordinator explained that she was often left no other choice but to arbitrarily assign teacher candidates to cooperating teachers:

If there aren't any parameters, per se, like they need to be in the south end of the district or they need to be in a school with a high ELL population, I will just look at my list and say, "Oh, I need to place a student in a third-grade classroom. Here's all the third-grade teachers," and I just kind of start going through the list somewhat in alphabetical order...I try to find a balance, but not having worked in a classroom myself I don't know. I just make the best choices I can based on the information that I have.

When information is shared, a principal reported that "it does vary slightly by program...they usually attach a résumé, give a little bit of information about what they're looking for grade level wise, or [a] population of students they'd like to work with." She then reaches out to "teachers that I think would be appropriate to have an intern and connect them with the school directly. Then I'm kind of out of it at that point to see whether or not the teacher is interested in taking on that intern." When asked how cooperating teachers make the decision to host a particular student teacher, a principal reported, "It's in the dark to some degree. I think it's kind of a vibe that the

teacher gets. ‘Do I actually want to work with this person?’—because they don’t really know a whole lot about the candidate.”

The Varying Rules Associated With Student Teacher Placements: Culturally Negotiated Norms, Expectations, and Established Practices

TEPs, districts, and schools reside in larger educational and community contexts, and the issues of importance in these contexts influence the norms, expectations, and established practices associated with student teacher placements. Take, for example, the issue of teacher shortages. Across the state of Washington, teacher shortages create different challenges for TEPs, districts, and schools, and educators adapt their practices related to student teacher placements accordingly. Within our sample, for instance, some TEPs explained that regional teacher shortages were changing how districts and schools engaged with student teacher placements. In a program touched by the teacher shortage, one coordinator explained, “So, the interviews have become much more rigorous, and the process on the district end has been much more thorough and time consuming....The district is now thinking of them in HR terms, which they didn’t use to do.” Other TEP coordinators also reported that districts and schools were becoming more responsive to TEP requests to host a teacher candidate.

Yet, some regions reported being less impacted by this issue. According to a principal at an elementary school, “We’re not experiencing it right now. When we do the bulk of our hiring in the spring, we have a lot of applicants. We are having no problems filling our openings with highly qualified people.” This principal did not feel pressure to adapt the school’s practices with regard to how they engage TEPs in the placement of student teachers. However, the responses of the districts and schools facing regional teacher shortages illustrate how practices may be modified in response to local circumstances.

Another issue of importance to many of the TEPs and districts/schools in our sample was the need to diversify the teacher workforce, and this priority helped to shape local rules and guidelines for how to train and place prospective teachers. A TEP field coordinator explained, “One of the other important goals for our program is to increase the diversity of the teaching core because the majority of teachers in Title I schools are not reflective of the students that they’re teaching.” This concern was shared by some principals, as well, who were also rethinking how they engage in student teacher placements to support this goal. According to a principal, “We’re just really trying to prioritize getting interns of color because we know that if somebody has a great experience at our school, they’re more likely to be hired by us...and so, we’re trying to stack the deck in our kids’ favor.” She went on to say, “So, recently, I have been saying, ‘If you have students of color that need placements, we will find a way. If you don’t, then we’re full, for right now.’”

Across the TEPs, some programs also reported purposefully diversifying their teacher candidates’ preservice teaching experiences from their prior educational experiences to address this issue:

Part of our charge is to make sure we give people placements that we would call diverse placements. Somebody who grew up in small-town Washington and they only ever knew other farm kids, we might want to consider giving them a placement that’s more urban to give them just a very different experience than they know.

However, another TEP coordinator reported a different rule or guideline for placing student teachers. She explained,

I think it needs to be a match for the student. It’s really...at what place are they gonna feel comfortable? ... ‘Cause you want them to be successful. If they grew up in a district that maybe was not socially [and] economically diverse or racially diverse and they aren’t gonna feel comfortable in that setting, it might be better for them to start in a setting that

is not that diverse so they can practice their pedagogy and then maybe move into a more diverse setting.

Although these educators attempted to adhere to their own local rules for engagement, TEPs shared a common concern about overburdening districts and schools and being too selective in their requests for student teacher placements. While they may wish to place their candidates in particular contexts to diversify a student's prior experience, for example, or provide a student teaching opportunity at their preferred grade level, one also worried, "Then, there might not be any third-grade placements. So, I have to be very careful what [are] the limitations I'm gonna place on requests because I might limit myself out of a placement." Another TEP coordinator explained, "I can say we'd prefer this, but we're open to anything. I often do that. If we can find early elementary, that'd be great, but we'll take whatever you have.

Which is the reality of how students will get their first jobs."

Mediating Tools: The Means Supporting Student Teacher Placements

The TEPs in our sample typically place between 40 and 200 teacher candidates in student teacher assignments each year. To aid them in this task, TEP field coordinators, HR district personnel, and principals all reported communicating among each other and their teacher candidates and cooperating teachers using e-mail. In addition to e-mail, some TEPs and districts reported relying on tools such as shared electronic documents and spreadsheets to help facilitate the matching of teacher candidates to cooperating teachers. Many pondered how they might improve communication strategies. For example, one TEP field coordinator explained, "We're wondering, what's the best vehicle to talk to our K-12 partners, to our CTs, to our interns? Is it e-mail? Is it modules? Is it face to face? Is it an online course?"

As new tools become available, a district HR coordinator reflected on how these instruments have influenced this process:

They used to send out just a paper form and say "Please fill this out," or "Please send me an e-mail with these names," and I have gone to using a Google form. So, the principal

can go in, they choose their school, they can just type out the names and grade and content of the teachers they are recommending. And then they just submit it to me electronically.

As previously reported, TEPs typically have little influence over how cooperating teachers are selected and matched to teacher candidates, and so, some TEPs also reported using electronic tools such as surveys to gather information about cooperating teachers for use in future placements. A TEP field coordinator reported,

I use Survey Monkey when the placement is over. First, I survey the practicum teachers or the student teacher mentors asking, you know, if I gave them enough information and what they thought our candidates' strengths were. And then I also send out a Survey Monkey to our students who were with that [cooperating] teacher asking them what they thought the teacher's strengths were and what they could maybe, you know, use. If we were to use this teacher again, what do you think?...So, there's nothing negative. It's just like, if they weren't as strong as we thought they were, well, what can we do better to make it a better placement?

One TEP field coordinator reported relying upon social media to keep abreast of the lives of their alumni. This program was particularly focused on recruiting alumni to serve as cooperating teachers to their current teacher candidates. The coordinator explained, "I just kept thinking, 'How am I going to keep track of all these folks?' And then I found out that they all had Facebook pages." Using social media, this field coordinator tried to assess who might not be available to serve as a cooperating teacher that year explaining, "Let's just say they had a baby; then I would, you know, make sure that I didn't ask them."

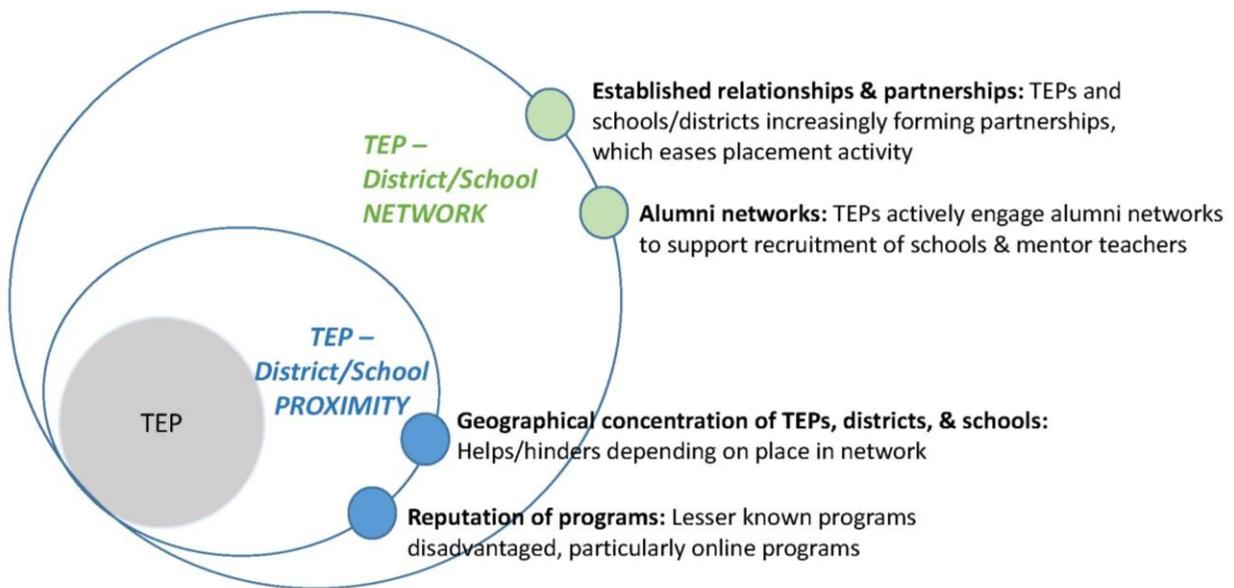
While these examples of creative tool use appear to support this task, one of the most frequent grievances reported among TEPs in the placement of student teachers was the varying protocols for doing so, which required that TEPs modify their placement process for each district and

school they worked with. A TEP coordinator reported, “Every district we operate with has a different protocol, and that’s something that’s of frustration to us.”

The Role of Social Capital in Student Teacher Placements

In the following figure (Figure 4), we place TEPs at the center of a social network focused on teacher placements so we may illustrate how we use social capital theory to better understand the advantages and disadvantages that TEPs and districts/schools face in this activity.

Figure 4. TEP-Centered Forms of Social Capital in Student Teacher Placements



Placing prospective teachers in student teaching assignments can be an arduous task for TEPs, depending upon the strength of the partnership between TEPs and districts/schools. We found that these relationships create benefits for some TEPs while making the process more laborious for others. For example, one TEP coordinator explained,

Some other schools that are larger, like, say [university] or [university]...Because of the name, and because of the resources those schools have, they’re able to carve out official or unofficial partnerships with other districts or buildings within a district. You’ll have a building where the principal will be a [university] grad. They only take student teachers

from [university]. Every year [university] can be assured that they can place, say, seven students in that building.

Attention to forming official or unofficial partnerships and relying upon alumni social networks was not isolated to TEPs, however. A district placement coordinator explained that she will sometimes narrow her selection of coordinating teachers based on where they got their degree.

When we talk about how I select a teacher, sometimes I go on that teacher's website, 'cause most school teachers have a web page, and I'll look and see where they got their degree from and if it is the same university that I'm trying to match somebody from, sometimes I will intentionally make that choice because it seems like alumni tend to want to support the program that they came from.

However, as discussed above, while this affords advantages to those programs with alumni relationships, it creates disadvantages for smaller or more remote programs. An individual from one such program reported, "I've contacted principals in [district] before who chewed me out, literally chewed me out and said, 'We only work with [university]. We have a contract with [university]. You need to stop calling us.'" Another said, "There's some turf war that goes on," explaining that some schools felt off limits to them.

In addition to easing the overall placement process, TEPs and districts/schools reported that they also sought to develop and maintain relationships among each other when doing so helped them adhere to their particular placement philosophies, especially those related to diversifying the teacher workforce. Yet again, however, these practices sometimes resulted in the exclusion of some TEPs, districts, and schools. For example, a principal explained that a local TEP had never placed a student teacher in their school because they were not designated as a Title I school:

We haven't yet had a student from [university], and part of that, I think, is because those teachers need to be in Title I schools. And even though we have students who would certainly be Title I students, because our Highly Capable program skews our percentages they can't teach here.

In most cases, placements simply tend to occur more frequently where relationships already exist. As a district placement coordinator explained,

I have really wanted to cultivate a relationship with [university] because I just find that...the interns they send are the best. They're the ones that we really wanna hire afterwards. So, I do kind of develop that. But there's another program that we get a lot of teachers from, and that just happens to be that the person who places teachers is very good friends with a principal that I used to work with years ago. So, we sort of have that connection there.

7. Discussion

In this paper, we explore the student teacher placement process, with a particular focus on the matching of student teachers to cooperating teachers. While we emphasize the broad and most encompassing practices in this process, we also identify some heterogeneity beneath the surface. In addition, we discuss the shared and sometimes competing goals and incentives facing TEPs and districts/schools, as well as how culturally mediated norms, expectations, and established practices influence placements. We identify an important problem of informational asymmetry and consider means for improving this shared activity. Finally, we discuss the role that social capital resources play in student teacher placements.

We found the process associated with matching student teachers to cooperating teachers in schools, at a high level, to be similar across TEPs, districts, and schools. Our emphasis on this being a *high-level* description is important, because the task of generalizing a process such as this across diverse educational contexts necessarily masks nuance, and these distinctions in practice are not insignificant. We also want to note that our description of the student teacher placement process suggests a sequence of discrete actions in the placement of student teachers. Although we found the illustration of student teacher placements as a circular process helpful in our analysis, we do not want to suggest that these placements represent a simple activity. On the

contrary, as we will discuss, we found student teacher placements to be a complex, culturally mediated, and dynamic activity (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978).

Indeed, at the micro level there are important variations in this process. For example, although every TEP in our sample reported having responsibility for securing student teaching internships for their teacher candidates, a district in our sample reported that another Washington State TEP left teacher candidates to secure these placements for themselves. Likewise, while the majority of districts and schools in our sample reported that they were responsible for matching student teachers to cooperating teachers, some simply provided the names of potential cooperating teachers to TEPs and let them make the matching decisions. It is beyond the scope of this analysis to empirically investigate the implications of these different practices, but we can speculate about potential improvements to this process based on what we have learned. In the latter example, for instance, it is plausible that (1) sharing detailed and nuanced information about cooperating teachers and teacher candidates and (2) placing the “matching” responsibility with TEPs, who must become acquainted with their new teacher candidates annually, could result in more thoughtful decision outcomes. This type of practice might help address the problem of informational asymmetry identified in this paper by allowing TEPs access to more information about the cooperating teacher and alleviating districts and schools from the burden of making matching decisions with little information about the teacher candidate. This seems particularly salient in the cases where districts make these matching decisions. One district placement coordinator explained that she had never worked in a classroom and did the best she could with the information available to her. Still, this study only included the perspectives of two districts. Other districts could employ practices that capitalize upon the various information sources available about cooperating teachers and student teachers and benefit from having a distinct position devoted to making these placement decisions.

Using the CHAT framework, we identified various ways that TEPs and districts/schools mutually benefit from engaging in the placement of student teachers in schools. For instance,

each benefit when student teachers are later hired into teaching positions within schools.

Likewise, TEPs and districts/schools are all incentivized to create high-quality student teaching placements given their shared objective of developing and utilizing a highly effective teacher workforce. However, they can also face incongruence between goals depending on their local contexts and circumstances. We should remember that TEPs are charged with preparing their teacher candidates to be highly effective teachers, and they hold the primary responsibility for providing these prospective teachers with a beneficial student teaching experience. Districts and schools are tasked with a different set of priorities related to educating their K–12 students to the highest standards possible, and they are held accountable to that goal. Although shared goals act as an important motivator, local priorities and different accountabilities may also influence how TEPs and districts/schools engage in this process.

Social capital theory also helped to identify mutually beneficial aspects of working together in this process, while also illuminating areas of dissonance. Consistent with other research, we found that TEPs and districts/schools benefited from the relationships developed among themselves. As Burt (1992) and Granovetter (1995) have noted, these benefits include the advantages of timing, access, and referrals. For example, the social capital resources that developed through these relationships provided TEPs with information about upcoming retirements, which allowed them to purposefully place teacher candidates where most needed, benefiting both TEPs and the districts and schools. Yet, we also found that those TEPs and districts/schools that were more peripheral within a network were sometimes excluded (Portes, 1998) and faced more laborious procedures in the placement of student teachers (Coleman, 1988).

In the course of studying student teacher placements, we also learned how variations in norms and beliefs, as well as established practices, can influence this process. For example, we discovered that educators held varying philosophies regarding the need to diversify student teacher experiences. For instance, some TEP coordinators valued creating teaching experiences

for candidates that differed from their prior educational experiences, believing this would better prepare them for diverse learning environments, while others focused upon placing candidates in familiar environments. There was far less variation, however, over concerns about diversifying the teacher workforce. This was a pervasive theme across the educators in our study.

Contemplations regarding what constitutes an effective cooperating teacher were also abundant. Many educators in our study argued that teachers with strong instructional skills did not always make the best mentor teachers, while some countered that argument, reasoning that student teachers would benefit more from the opportunity to model strong instruction. Only one principal reported using teacher evaluations as a criterion for selecting cooperating teachers. However, TEPs and districts/schools relied on numerous other tools to mediate this process, and these tools represent a promising area for improving communication. A district coordinator reported moving from paper forms to shared electronic documents, another used social media to stay connected with alumni and potential cooperating teachers, and a TEP field coordinator used electronic surveys to gather information about prior cooperating teachers. Employing more consistent and shared tools could potentially address some of the complaints TEPs and districts/schools had about varying protocols, as well.

This study relied upon educators' portrayals and perceptions of the student teacher placement process. Future qualitative research would benefit from including field observations in these analyses, which would allow us to observe these practices as they unfold in their own settings. Likewise, mixed methods analyses, which link quantitative outcomes to qualitative processes (such as the variation in student teacher placements across TEPs, districts, and school documented in this study) could illuminate important patterns of practice that may contribute to varying outcomes.

Finally, the educators we spoke to discussed their sense of responsibility and commitment to helping to train the future teacher workforce. While district HR staff and principals hoped to benefit from direct future hires in doing so, they simply considered hosting and mentoring a

student teacher to be a part of the work of being an educator. Nevertheless, we found schools' and districts' response to requests to host a teacher candidate—and TEPs' acceptance of these offers—to be situational and reactive. The intentional matching of student teachers to cooperating teachers based on an assessment of the individual student teacher's needs and the cooperating teacher's skills was rare.

Part of the problem may be the asymmetry in information shared across TEPs and districts/schools, which we identify in this paper. However, while we propose that more detailed and nuanced information about cooperating teachers and teacher candidates be shared, it's not actually clear that simply sharing more or even better information will result in improved student teacher matches, in large part because there appears to lack a clear and strategic theory of action about student teaching. What makes a good mentor teacher? How do we identify the best mentor teachers? Is a good mentor teacher a good mentor teacher for all? With these questions lie additional weak underlying theories and data about what good teaching is, as well as how to better link decisions about student teaching placements with workforce needs. It is our hope that by shedding light on the student teacher placement process, and the overlapping and sometimes competing goals associated with placing student teachers in schools, we can begin to imagine and design more strategic, collaborative placement practices while chipping away at these larger questions.

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