To Follow, Reject, or Flip the Script: Managing Instructional Tension in an Era of High-Stakes Accountability

High-stakes accountability policies can and do influence language arts (LA) instruction (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Coburn, 2001, 2005; Stillman, 2009, 2011). Recent accounts indicate that accountability pressures can lead educators to narrow the LA curriculum (Crosland & Gutiérrez, 2003; Valli & Buese, 2007), adopt reductive notions of what “counts” as reading (Pacheco, 2010a), abandon locally responsive curricula in favor of mandated, test-aligned LA programs (MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004), and even engage in practices that oppose their professional understandings of and convictions about effective LA instruction (Dooley & Assaf, 2009; Valli & Chamliss, 2007). In tightly monitored “low-performing” schools, especially, research suggests that accountability policies can press teachers toward teacher-centered, skills-based LA instruction and away from student-centered approaches that balance skill instruction with the development of meaning-making competencies (Anagnostopoulos, 2003; McNeil, 2000).

As various scholars have noted, these trends are most prevalent, and arguably also most harmful, in schools serving youth from historically marginalized groups (Gándara, Rumberger, Maxwell-Jolly, & Callahan, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2006; McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001; Valenzuela, 2004). There, especially, they run the risk of exacerbating teachers’ deficit ideologies (Pacheco, 2010b) and disadvantaging students by promoting fragmented, skills-based, and/or scripted instructional approaches that potentially increase the distance between their lived experiences, languages, and cultures and the LA curriculum (Brown & Ryoo, 2008; Gay, 2000; Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Asato, 2000; Lee, 2007; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

For teacher educators, these risks raise critical questions: in particular, how can teacher education better prepare preservice teachers to design and deliver robust LA instruction—instruction that recognizes and builds upon students’ cultural and linguistic resources (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Asato, 2000) despite mandates to teach otherwise? In response, this article describes one preservice teacher’s attempt to make a mandated reading program more responsive to the English Learners (ELs) in her second-grade student teaching placement. It then envisions how teacher educators might have better facilitated this preservice teacher’s learning in relation to her teacher education program’s vision of robust literacy instruction and in relation to contextual factors she encountered in the field.

Urgency and Authentic Purpose in Teacher Education

An emerging body of research describes skills and understandings teachers should have to teach responsively in the face of accountability-related pressures. These accounts detail teachers’ efforts to integrate mandated programs’ technical demands with instructional practices intended to serve ELs and other youth from historically marginalized groups (Cuban, 2008; Sleeter, 2005; Sleeter & Stillman, 2007). Some additionally consider teachers’ explicitly political responses—for example, engaging in strategic negotiation with local administrators (Stillman, 2009, 2011) or resisting reforms on the basis of professional principles (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006).

Still, we know relatively little about the roles that teacher educators play in facilitating learning among preservice teachers such that they emerge
well-equipped to seize and create opportunities for responsive LA instruction. More specifically, we have little insight about whether and how teacher educators might ensure that student teaching placements—intended as spaces where preservice teachers begin practicing principled teaching—support preservice teachers in developing requisite knowledge about responsive LA instruction. Indeed, few studies capture evidence of the relationship between what teacher educators do with and for preservice teachers in the field and what preservice teachers subsequently learn about how to facilitate students’ literacy learning (Brock, Moore, & Parks, 2007; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). This is the case despite evident awareness that accountability policies do indeed impact preservice teachers’ opportunities to learn in K–12 placements (Anderson & Stillman, in press b; Lloyd, 2007; Margolis, 2006).

Study Context

The example of practice featured in this article was culled from data collected during a qualitative study of approximately 30 preservice teachers from two teacher education programs, both of which emphasize sociocultural perspectives on learning; press preservice teachers to explore issues related to educational equity, multiculturalism, language acquisition, and critical pedagogy; and situate student teaching placements in urban, high-needs schools. In the study, participants reflected on what they learned from student teaching and how student teaching experiences contributed to their successes and struggles as beginning teachers in similar contexts. Utilizing a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we analyzed participant profiles, which were developed in consultation with participants’ culminating master’s projects, as well as transcripts of semi-structured, audio-taped interviews.

Similar to others who have documented preservice teachers’ experiences navigating between university-based and school-based teacher education (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999; Ritchie & Wilson, 1993; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003), we found that participants struggled to reconcile discrepancies between the LA pedagogies advanced by their teacher education programs and those that prevailed in their “low-performing” placement schools. Most prominently, they struggled to make mandated content meaningful for and accessible to students, to determine which mandated program components to implement with fidelity and which to adapt or ignore, and to move beyond superficial “supplements” when attempting to make mandated programs more responsive to students. For example, participants often mentioned layering “realia” or “extra stories” on top of mandated programs in efforts to increase students’ engagement and interest; their responses rarely revealed more sophisticated understandings of how to adapt or transform mandated curricula in order to facilitate more rigorous literacy learning (Anderson & Stillman, in press b).

In light of these findings and so few examples detailing how teacher educators facilitate preservice teachers’ learning about LA instruction in and for urban, high-needs schools, this article focuses on one recounted attempt by “Cristina,” a student teacher in California, to make a mandated, phonics-based, English-only LA unit more responsive to the students in her placement. The article then uses this account as an opportunity to envision how teacher educators, like ourselves, might have more effectively facilitated Cristina’s learning in light of both her teacher education program’s espoused curricula in order to facilitate more rigorous literacy learning (Anderson & Stillman, in press b).

Participants reflected on what they learned from student teaching and how student teaching experiences contributed to their successes and struggles as beginning teachers in similar contexts.

Teacher Education through the Lens of Cultural Historical Activity Theory

To guide our thinking, we draw on research that underscores the benefits of applying learning theory to the study of preservice teacher learning and the organization of teacher education. Smagorinsky et al. (2003) demonstrate how sociocultural learn-
Learning and Struggling to Offer Responsive Literacy Instruction

As mentioned previously, Cristina was one of about 30 study participants, all of whom student taught in urban, high-needs public schools. Like others, Cristina recounted that student teaching had provided valuable opportunities to observe a more experienced teacher making use of a reading program that “going into [this district], you know you’re going to have to teach.” Like others, learning theory can help teacher educators recognize the strengths and limitations of their programs—and particularly in relation to field placements—and better anticipate and respond to preservice teachers’ “twisting paths” of development (p. 1399). Similarly, others illustrate the affordances of social learning theory in supporting teacher educators to identify preservice teachers’ zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and to scaffold preservice teachers’ learning in contextually sensitive ways (Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Zeichner, 2005).

Because we are most concerned with preservice teachers’ learning in a particular kind of context, we frame our analysis using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Cole and Engeström (1997) explain that from a CHAT perspective, learning does not simply occur in one’s head, but requires “additional cognitive resources . . . found in the sociocultural milieu” (p. 3). That is, learning takes place within consequential social, cultural, and historical contexts, where artifacts and rules mediate relations between subject and community, and participants negotiate the distribution of tasks, powers, and responsibilities. This collective, mediated, and contradiction-rife notion of learning—referred to as an “activity system” and represented in Figure 1—provides an especially useful theoretical lens.

As we show in analyzing Cristina’s account of her own practice, considering student teaching as an activity system can assist teacher educators and researchers to address the dynamism and complexity of preservice teachers’ learning in and from student teaching. As a conceptual map, CHAT draws attention to the various people, norms, artifacts, and conditions that mediate preservice teachers’ learning, and that of their students, in the field. Thus, it helps illuminate where, how, and why teacher educators might need to strategically re-mediate preservice teacher learning—that is, mediate preservice teachers’ learning in ways that deliberately attend to the contextual factors that are themselves simultaneously (and consequentially) mediating preservice teachers’ field-based learning. As the ensuing analysis indicates, such re-mediation may be necessary in order to ensure that preservice teachers learn to facilitate meaningful literacy learning among their students.

Learning and Struggling to Offer Responsive Literacy Instruction

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Despite uncertainties, Cristina’s interview revealed several attempts to take “the first step” toward reconciling these tensions. Thus, while all participant interviews offered insight, Cristina’s—and her response to one question in particular—stuck with us, cycling back into our consciousness and conversation over the following year.

This response came when Cristina was asked to “describe a time in your student teaching where you were able to apply something that you had learned from your teacher education program.” She described a mural strategy that was introduced in a university-based course and that she then implemented in her second-grade placement.

It was during the [mandated reading program’s] camouflage unit. . . . Since we were doing desert life and wildlife . . . I got three large pieces of butcher paper and cut it in half and said ok this side will be . . . a tropical rain forest [and] the other side was a desert. . . .

She then explicated the steps she took to engage students in constructing the mural and referenced evidence of their enthusiasm.

I brought in groups, and I said ok on this side we’re going to draw what you see in a tropical rain forest. . . . They started drawing trees and leaves. I had them sketch and then I had them trace. They loved it. . . . They’d be waiting for their turn. Then on the other side, we put the desert.

Next, Cristina recounted how students appropriated the mural as a space to communicate experiential and scientific knowledge, how she responded to students’ revelations, and how the project culminated.

On the second day, I started seeing them drawing crosses and rest in peace. I was like, rest in peace? I was really curious; why are they doing crosses and rest in peace? And at the same time, I was hearing in the news about immigration, how people were going through the desert, and they were dying and there was no water. . . . I started making sense of it and I asked them, “Why are you doing crosses here?” [I responded,] “Oh, for the people that are dying because they want to come over here.” And I didn’t want to stop it, but I didn’t want to steer the direction and the focus of the mural. So I just let it be . . . and then they got really creative and started saying oh well a snake can be in both places . . . . We [my cooperating teacher and I] talked about it very minutely.

Concerning literacy instruction, Cristina juxtaposed administrators’ expectations that she implement the mandated program with fidelity and her teacher education program’s expectation—also her own—that she recognize students’ “cultural wealth” and “use their knowledge to expand the curriculum.”

Similar to others, Cristina described student teaching as a complex space that required a delicate balance of determination and deference regarding instruction, particularly in LA:

It’s not like I have the full command of the ship. You’re kinda like in the back sort of saying, “Don’t go here, go there!” But somebody else still calls the shots. . . . Now that doesn’t mean that I have to submit to do whatever was in the [cooperating teacher’s] classroom, but how can I marry my ways and the ways already set?

Thus, Cristina emerged from student teaching with a sense of agency and a commitment to finding common ground amidst competing demands. She emerged with some clarity about her teacher education program’s goals and hopes concerning how she would take up those goals in her own literacy instruction—“not forgetting that these little bodies have so much they can offer, even in second grade and when you have assessments and pacing.” Unfortunately, she emerged with less clarity about, “How do I make it work? . . . What’s the first step?”
When pressed for further detail about what preceded and followed this account, it became clear that Cristina’s cooperating teacher had offered praise, but not constructive feedback or reflective coaching. Apart from the initial reference to the teacher education program course from which she drew the activity, Cristina mentioned no one who supported her to plan for, enact, or evaluate the instruction she provided or the learning she facilitated.

Factors Mediating Cristina’s Student Teaching Experience

Conceiving of student teaching as an activity system helps illustrate contextual and cultural factors—and related discrepancies and tensions—mediating Cristina’s learning in the field. In doing so, we identify Cristina as the learner or “subject” in Figure 2; we also identify student teaching’s explicit general goal or “object” (drawn from the mission statement of Cristina’s teacher education program) and more implicit literacy-specific goal or “object” (inferred by bringing this mission into conversation with Cristina’s interview content): to enact robust LA instruction in ways that recognize and honor students’ assets and interests, offer students multiple forms of participation, embed cultural relevance, encourage critical thinking, and reflect high academic and personal expectations.

As Figure 2 suggests, although Cristina’s teacher education program aimed to prepare teachers to enact instructional approaches that aligned with the teacher education program’s stated goal, this “object” was not necessarily shared by all “community” members in the activity system, nor readily enabled by established “rules”—whether advanced by the state (e.g., preservice teachers must practice teach for a certain number of hours), the school district (e.g., teachers must adhere to mandated programs and pacing plans), the teacher education program (e.g., student teachers must attempt to put teacher education program-espoused theories and pedagogies into practice), or permeating social interaction in the classroom (e.g., norms and routines for turn taking or collaborative grouping). For example, administrators who monitored classrooms at Cristina’s placement school tended to be more concerned with teachers’ fidelity to the mandated program, Open Court Reading, and ability to raise test scores, and less concerned with teachers activating students’ prior knowledge, offering varied forms of participation, encouraging critical thinking, and/or enacting culturally responsive literacy instruction. Though Cristina’s cooperating teacher

Figure 2. CHAT model of Cristina’s student teaching experience

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offered space for Cristina to experiment with different approaches, he did not appear to know or understand the “object”—what Cristina’s teacher education program expected her to learn—and/or did not view it as his responsibility to scaffold her learning in relation to that goal. These tensions were compounded by the fact that teacher education program faculty and school administrators did not always share similar ideas about how to treat students’ prior knowledge, which did not necessarily reflect dominant notions of what primary grade learners tend to know and understand. Indeed, just addressing content raised by students could be seen as challenging more traditional notions of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

This “common object problem” (Hakkarainen, 1999) was both a reflection of and reflected in multiple “artifacts”—including state standards, aligned standardized tests, and mandated curricula—and community members’ differential uptake of them. At the school level, pressure to teach the standards, raise test scores, and use with fidelity the mandated program impacted both what Cristina was expected to teach and what she observed on a daily basis. Although Cristina’s cooperating teacher granted her some leeway to apply what she learned from her teacher education program, she was still required to use the mandated curriculum, which privileged externally determined content, whole-class and teacher-centered pedagogies, and discrete skill development. And because of the strict pacing calendar, Cristina explained she often found herself pressed to “cover” a lot of “official” material in a set amount of time. This left limited opportunity to uncover and build upon students’ prior knowledge or native language capacities, engage them in critical thinking, or respond to needs as they emerged during instruction. In essence, Cristina’s placement appeared oriented mostly toward the goal of implementing mandated programs with fidelity, rather than utilizing programs as tools to facilitate learning—tools that would necessarily be used differently contingent upon students’ needs and variations in context and culture across communities, schools, and classrooms.

Another tension pertains to the “division of labor”—who does what, when, and how—during student teaching. That the feedback Cristina received on the mural included only vague encouragement from her cooperating teacher, with whom she “talked about it very minutely,” has consequences for the depth and durability of her learning. It also raises questions about teacher education program resource constraints and allocations, and prompts consideration of how teacher education programs might better support cooperating teachers as teacher educators. While many teacher education programs continually grapple—and rightfully so—with that very issue, we opt to focus here instead on the role of university-based teacher educators—faculty and/or field supervisors—in helping mediate Cristina’s learning so that she might emerge from student teaching better equipped to manage instructional tensions like those that prevailed in her placement (and in her own second-grade classroom the following year). We focus on these tensions because Cristina’s account and prior research suggest they generate particularly acute challenges in urban, high-needs schools, and that preservice teachers and beginning teachers—despite some research suggesting otherwise (Lloyd, 2007)—struggle to reconcile these tensions (Barrett, 2009) without strategic guidance from more experienced others, who can help them envision both “what’s principled” and “what’s possible” (Crosland & Gutiérrez, 2003 cited in Anderson & Stillman, 2010, p. 237).

At the school level, pressure to teach the standards, raise test scores, and use with fidelity the mandated program impacted both what Cristina was expected to teach and what she observed on a daily basis.
& Hoffman, 1999), we maintain preservice teachers must develop capacities that enable them to generate sophisticated critiques of mandated curricula as tools (i.e., things that potentially facilitate and/or impede robust learning), rather than less nuanced but more common views of mandated curricula as either worthy or unworthy goals unto themselves (i.e., things to implement with fidelity or reject outright). In turn, we emphasize the need for teacher educators, ourselves included, to support preservice teachers to make meaning of and with tools, including those they are required to use—that is, to assess the value of various tools, to determine where, when, and how tools (or their component pieces) might be of use in relation to robust literacy goals, and to discern how best to supplement, adapt, transform, and create tools in accordance with students’ needs and features of the local context.

Envisioning Re-mediation

This subtle, but fundamental, shift from viewing (and dismissing) mandated curricula as goals, to critiquing and adapting or transforming curricula as tools takes on added importance given the employment vulnerability of beginning teachers (who face potential sanctions, including job loss, should they fail to demonstrate use of required tools) and the need to retain highly-qualified and committed teachers in urban, high-needs schools (NCTAF, 2003). In turn, it leads us to ask—again drawing on CHAT—what it would look like to re-mediate Cristina’s learning in relation to the mandated reading program she was expected to teach, the mural she and her students generated, the local ecology at her placement site, and the notions of robust literacy instruction advanced by her teacher education program. This question is the one to which we now respond.

We would begin, for example, by encouraging Cristina to acknowledge the assets for learning already present in her instruction—namely students’ mural contributions, which made transparent students’ prior knowledge, learning preferences, information processing, and personal concerns and

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INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

As a preservice teacher, Cristina struggled to make the mandated curriculum relevant for her English learners. The strategy guides on ReadWriteThink.org (http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/) define and provide examples of effective literacy teaching and learning strategies and offer a wealth of related resources to help sharpen your instruction. They are also perfect to share with preservice teachers! Here are a few:

Assessing Student Interests and Strengths

In this Strategy Guide, you’ll learn about a number of specific methods that can help you to gain a fuller picture of the interests of your students as well as what your students understand, know, and can demonstrate by doing.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/assessing-student-interests-strengths-30100.html

Making Connections

In this strategy guide, you’ll learn to model how students can make three different kinds of connections to a text (text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world). Students then use this knowledge to find their own personal connections to a text.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/making-connections-30659.html

Supporting Comprehension Strategies for English Language Learners

This strategy guide is for developing comprehension that incorporates the gradual release of responsibility model.

interests. This is important because it would allow us to acknowledge additional accomplishments: Cristina’s courage, evident as she experimented in ways that converged with her teacher education program’s goals and diverged from dominant modes of practice in her placement; her creation of an unscripted space for meaning making through joint productive activity (e.g., Rogoff, 1990); and her construction of an artifact (i.e., the mural) within which she could have situated meaningful, content-rich literacy instruction. In such conversation, it would likewise be important to press Cristina to identify and analyze the various and potentially conflicting literacy goals advanced by her teacher education program, the state’s English Language Arts (ELA) standards, and the mandated reading program.

The development of an integrated social studies unit could serve as one forum for addressing these goals in concert. In addition to building upon Cristina’s accomplishments, unit development would present an opportunity for Cristina to foster authentic literacy learning (Ogle & McMahon, 2003) and provide instruction that responds to students, state mandates, and local expectations. It would also allow teacher educators, like ourselves, to support Cristina to do the following:

- embed literacy learning in culturally relevant content (Au, 2001);
- balance opportunities to develop literacy skills (e.g., phonics; word study/analysis) with meaning-making and communicative capacities (e.g., comprehension, analysis) (Au, 2003; Pearson & Raphael, 1999);
- scaffold students’ understandings and production of academic language in more specific ways (Brown & Ryoo, 2008; Lee, 2007); and
- provide unscripted spaces where students can make meaning on their own terms and draw more openly on their full linguistic toolkits (Gutiérrez et al., 2000; Souto-Manning, 2010).

Using the Jigsaw Cooperative Learning Technique

In this strategy guide, you will learn how to organize students and texts to allow for learning that meets the diverse needs of students but keeps student groups flexible.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-jigsaw-cooperative-learning-30599.html

Using the RAFT Writing Strategy

This strategy guide introduces the RAFT technique and offers practical ideas for using this technique to teach students to experiment with various perspectives in their writing.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-raft-writing-strategy-30625.html

Using the Think-Pair-Share Technique

In this strategy guide, you will learn how to organize students and classroom topics to encourage a high degree of classroom participation and assist students in developing a conceptual understanding of a topic through the use of the Think-Pair-Share technique.

http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-think-pair-share-30626.html

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

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Thus, we could take advantage of the mural as a concrete artifact around which to brainstorm ideas about what content such a unit might cover and what forms it might take (Souto-Manning & James, 2008). By starting from the mural, we could support Cristina to recognize the occasion she presented for learning and the knowledge that occasion revealed, while also pressuring her to consider how she might leverage that knowledge in the service of more rigorous literacy goals. In that sense, creating an integrated unit could serve as a means for scaffolding Cristina’s learning, starting from what she knows and can do, while also modeling for Cristina how to do the same for her students, starting from what she has learned about what they know and can do.

In the subsequent sections, we describe what this unit development might involve and what teacher educators might do to ensure that this occasion for preservice teacher learning and others like it are indeed generative of learning. Specifically, we describe how we might work with Cristina to embed in the integrated unit “robust” literacy practices—practices that “mediate . . . or assist learning in a variety of ways; utilize . . . [students’] social, cultural, and linguistic resources; regard diversity and difference as resources for learning; and define learning rather than teaching as the targeted goal” (Gutiérrez et al., 2000, p. 13). We then discuss how we might assist Cristina to develop a “most robust” version of the unit—an approximation of what’s most principled, what’s worth aiming for—and assist her through calibration exercises to consider what’s possible and what forms this unit might take at different times and under different ecological conditions. This approach reflects our commitment to advancing educational equity in urban, high-needs schools, while also taking seriously the perspectives and vulnerabilities of our preservice teachers and beginning teachers and acknowledging the very real “dilemmas” they must manage in an era of accountability (Lampert, 1985).

Certainly, standards and prescribed curricula are not neutral, nor without flaw; like others, we look critically upon artifacts intended to standardize knowledge or practice (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Therefore, we would suggest that neither standards nor prescribed curricula drive Cristina’s instruction. However, we do see power in using standards and prescribed curricula as mediating tools (not goals) and guides (not rules); thus, we would introduce them accordingly. Specifically, we would invite Cristina to bring them into conversation with teacher-education-program–espoused philosophies and pedagogies—identifying goal convergence and divergence, analyzing respective affordances and constraints, and considering how to take advantage of or create resonance across goals and tools. For example, we might discuss with Cristina the potential connections between students’ mural contributions and specific standards, such as Social Science Standard 2.1: “students trace the history of their own families . . . and compare their own daily lives with those of their parents and other family members,” or Standards 2.2 and 2.3, with their emphasis on “how the U.S. and other countries make laws, carry out laws, determine whether laws have been violated, and punish wrongdoers” and how “groups and nations interact with one another to try to resolve problems in such areas as trade, cultural contracts, treaties, etc.” This kind of scaffolded analysis would support Cristina to develop an integrated unit of study (e.g., a unit on immigration) and to better articulate learning goals for students that would ideally reflect grade-level expectations, account for mandated curricula, and privilege students’ prior knowledge.

**Anchoring with Content**

Given students’ contributions to the mural, we would press Cristina to identify what they appear to understand (e.g., “people dying”; “a snake can be in both places”; etc.) about the content in question (e.g., the desert) and explore potential connections between students’ knowledge, the study of camouflage, and California’s content standards. Certainly, standards and prescribed curricula are not neutral, nor without flaw; like others, we look critically upon artifacts intended to standardize knowledge or practice (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Therefore, we would suggest that neither standards nor prescribed curricula drive Cristina’s instruction.

In the subsequent sections, we describe what this unit development might involve and what teacher educators might do to ensure that this occasion for preservice teacher learning and others like it are indeed generative of learning. Specifically, we describe how we might work with Cristina to embed in the integrated unit “robust” literacy practices—practices that “mediate . . . or assist learning in a variety of ways; utilize . . . [students’] social, cultural, and linguistic resources; regard diversity and difference as resources for learning; and define learning rather than teaching as the targeted goal” (Gutiérrez et al., 2000, p. 13). We then discuss how we might assist Cristina to develop a “most robust” version of the unit—an approximation of what’s most principled, what’s worth aiming for—and assist her through calibration exercises to consider what’s possible and what forms this unit might take at different times and under different ecological conditions. This approach reflects our commitment to advancing educational equity in urban, high-needs schools, while also taking seriously the perspectives and vulnerabilities of our preservice teachers and beginning teachers and acknowledging the very real “dilemmas” they must manage in an era of accountability (Lampert, 1985).
Contextualizing Literacy Instruction

After working with Cristina to articulate subject matter goals, we would support her to explore possibilities for contextualized literacy instruction that could advance students’ authentic literacy learning and the goals laid out in California’s ELA standards and the mandated reading program, Open Court Reading (OCR). OCR suggests that second graders develop the following (ELA standards-aligned) capacities, as they complete the Look Again (“camouflage”) unit:

- learn to read;
- develop vocabulary related to conceptually challenging sections of text;
- use a variety of comprehension strategies and skills;
- read, speak, and write about camouflage-related topics; and
- learn about conducting book research (using expository text).

The ELA standards additionally encourage teachers to engage students in literary analysis. In light of Cristina’s concerns that OCR was oftentimes inaccessible to her students, we would work with her to figure out how she might draw on her teacher-education-program–acquired knowledge to meet and extend, rather than reject altogether, OCR’s recommendations. Likewise, we would explore possibilities for addressing OCR’s emphasis on reading (over writing) and the program’s tenuous links to subject matter. We might, for example, encourage Cristina to carve out time within the unit to engage students in authentic writing, using a structure such as Writers Workshop—one of the instructional strategies introduced to her by her teacher education program. These more discrete goals, at least in part, grow out of our concerns that overemphasis on decontextualized skill instruction in early grades can discourage, even impede, students’ access to upper-grade literacy instruction, which generally relies on students already knowing how to write and read for meaningful purposes (Au, 2003).

Ideally, an integrated unit would support students to develop higher levels of literacy through exploration of meaningful content and to draw upon their literacy capacities as they deepen and expand their content understandings. For example, we might encourage Cristina to design learning experiences that would provide students with opportunities to research and document their families’ or community members’ immigration experiences. Here, we can imagine students collaboratively crafting and using interview protocols to capture key aspects of immigration experiences; in the process, they would have multiple, authentic opportunities to read (e.g., as they conduct interviews and share interviewees’ stories), write (e.g., as they create protocols and document stories), and speak (e.g., as they conduct interviews and use text from interviews to engage in discussion) about locally relevant content. Students might additionally draw on what they learn from interviews to write narrative accounts of local immigrants’ journeys (E/LA WS 2.1), thereby augmenting the OCR curriculum with meaningful writing instruction that captures voices from the community (Souto-Manning, 2009).

We might also press Cristina to select various narrative texts that reflect diversity across immigrants’ experiences and could be made available for multiple uses (e.g., Read-Aloud; Guided Reading; Shared Reading; Literature Study). Cristina might then be able to engage students in literary analysis (ELA RS 3.1; 3.3) and scaffold their development of the reading comprehension strategies (i.e., asking questions, making predictions, monitoring and clarifying, summarizing, and making connections) and word study skills (i.e., knowledge of phonics, diphthongs, prefixes and suffixes, and closed and open syllables) delineated in Open Court Reading and the standards (ELA RS 1.1; 1.2; 1.6; 2.2–2.5), while contextualizing in meaningful content.

As the unit facilitated deep understanding of immigration as a topic with human, historical, social, cultural, legal-political, and economic...
dimensions, we would encourage Cristina to leverage students’ burgeoning knowledge to build academic vocabulary about now-familiar topics (e.g., discrimination, survival), which might then serve as the foundation for students’ reading of expository texts. Time permitting, we can imagine how, with appropriate scaffolding, students might eventually produce expository essays comparing experiences of different immigrant groups in ways that draw on language and content previously developed through interviews and through reading related narrative and expository texts.

**Re-mediating Open Court Reading**

There are numerous ways that we might then support Cristina to draw connections between an immigration unit and OCR’s *Look Again* content. Students’ prior understandings and unit-based explorations of immigrants’ journeys—particularly undocumented immigrants’ journeys—would support students to construct culturally relevant understandings of human camouflage that could then be applied to the study of animal camouflage raised in OCR’s reading selections. In fact, the OCR *Teacher’s Edition* makes similar suggestions (e.g., have students “compare animal to human camouflage”), but fails to explain how teachers might do this or how such an exercise would work as more than a stand-alone activity.

In many ways, Cristina’s mural project—though itself a stand-alone activity—had already done much to integrate some of the mandated program’s discrete suggestions (e.g., activate relevant background knowledge, make a science connection, compare animal to human camouflage) in ways that could potentially build robust, interdisciplinary understandings of camouflage. Indeed, the curriculum integration we describe would likely make students’ interactions with OCR texts more meaningful and accessible (i.e., help students to understand the urgency associated with hiding for the purpose of survival)—features that are critical to students’ literacy development.

**USING PICTURE BOOKS TO EXTEND THE LITERACY CURRICULUM**

When I taught second-grade English Learners in a culturally and linguistically diverse school, I felt pressure to prepare my students for the high-stakes exams they had to take and to use the prescriptive literacy curriculum my school adopted. I found that using picturebooks as part of my Social Studies instruction allowed my students to use their developing literacy understandings to go beyond the state standards in both Literacy and Social Studies. Ken Mochizuki’s *Baseball Saved Us* (1993, Lee & Low) offers multiple opportunities for teachers to integrate Social Studies and Literacy content, even within a prescriptive literacy program. *Baseball Saved Us* tells the story of Japanese American families living in one of the internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. The story is told through the eyes of a young Japanese American boy, who describes life in the “camp” in a way that helps elementary students understand how this discriminatory practice impacted Japanese Americans on many levels.

The experiences presented in the book may be ones that many students, particularly English Learners, may connect to. On a personal level, this topic is important because members of my husband’s family were placed in internment camps, and baseball continues to be the sport that binds the family in multiple ways. Using books such as this one allowed me to share my own extended family’s history, which I believe helped my students feel more comfortable making their own personal connections to the experience of being discriminated against or persecuted because of their cultural experiences or immigration status.

In addition to the Social Studies standards that could be addressed through this text, there are many literacy standards that can also be met through this text. For example, the vocabulary in the book might be used to talk about the multiple meanings words carry, and how these meanings depend on context. The internment camp is referred to as “camp” throughout the book. Before reading the book, a teacher might ask students to talk about the word “camp”
We would additionally press Cristina to draw on literacy skills and strategies developed through the immigration unit. We can, for example, imagine supporting Cristina to consider how she might reinforce literary analysis as well as comprehension skills and strategies developed through the immigration unit as students read OCR texts about camouflage. She would likely also be well-positioned to help students make connections between their everyday language/knowledge (e.g., hiding), relevant experiential knowledge (e.g., a family member’s military fatigue), and their academic language/knowledge (e.g., camouflage) (Brown & Ryoo, 2008), thereby providing ELs with the scaffolding they might need to meet OCR’s goal to “develop vocabulary related to conceptually challenging selections of text.”

Cristina might also note possibilities for helping students understand the “elements authors use as they write expository prose” (a phrase used in the teachers’ manual) by exploring connections between the features of their own expository writing about immigrants’ experiences and those of OCR’s expository texts. Finally, since students would have had some contextualized opportunities to strengthen word study skills, Cristina could draw explicitly on these experiences as students complete mandated OCR worksheets and tests aimed at assessing these capacities. In other words, Cristina might be able to leverage contextualized instruction (and its outcomes) to help students demonstrate knowledge on state-sanctioned artifacts (e.g., mandated program materials), since these often share properties (e.g., multiple choice questioning) with gate-keeping assessments.

If Cristina were supported to see the possibilities for facilitating deeper student learning in relation to the camouflage unit, we suspect this would support her to also see possibilities for deepening student learning across other mandated units. Indeed, Cristina voiced a strong critique (one we share) of OCR’s fragmentation and lack of apparent or explicit resonance across units—Sharing Stories, Kindness, Look Again (aka, “The Camouflage

and brainstorm the nuances and synonyms of the word, both with positive (i.e., “summer camp”) and negative (an alternative to “incarceration”) connotations.

There are also opportunities to teach multiple reading comprehension strategies, such as making inferences and making text-to-self connections. Throughout the book, the narrator alludes to the anger he feels toward the guards who watch over the camp. After the prisoners build a baseball field in the camp, the young boy describes wanting to “hit the ball past the guardhouse even if it killed me” (Mochizuki, 1993). A teacher could discuss with the students what they feel hitting the ball past the guards would mean to the boy, how they would have felt in his situation, or what experiences they have had that reminded them of the way he felt. The book also subtly presents the cultural values and traditions of the Japanese American culture that became strained in the internment camps, such as showing respect for elders. This could be an opportunity for students to share their own cultural values and traditions through a class discussion or a writing assignment.

Teachers can extend the reading of this book by inviting students to examine more information on this topic through websites such as The Japanese American National Museum (http://www.jannm.org/) and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (http://caamedia.org/jainternment/), a website dedicated to this period in history. Following this exploration, students could engage in an individual or group writing activity or inquiry project that requires them to use both Literacy and Social Studies understandings to investigate this topic and share what they learn.

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often ensue when preservice teachers navigate discrepancies between teacher education program expectations and student teaching realities (Anderson & Stillman, 2010, in press a; Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, Moore, & Fry, 2004; Smagorinsky et al., 2003; Zeichner, 2005). Given the increasingly prevalent impact of high-stakes accountability on LA instruction, our own preservice teachers face new and potentially even wider discrepancies, especially when they student teach in high-needs schools, where manifestations of the policy context often stand in stark contrast to teacher-education-program–espoused theories and practices (Anderson & Stillman, 2010, in press a; Margolis, 2006; Valencia et al., 2009). Likewise, they stand to face these discrepancies in their future workplaces and to face them most acutely if they follow through on their commitments and our call for them to serve where they are most needed.

Given our claim of preparing highly qualified educators for such contexts, we feel an immense sense of urgency and an ethical responsibility to maximize preservice teachers’ learning in light of and for such discrepancies. We realize this may require structural adjustments and resource allocations that address university-based teacher education program–espoused theories and practices (Anderson & Stillman, 2010, in press a; Margolis, 2006; Valencia et al., 2009). Likewise, they stand to face these discrepancies in their future workplaces and to face them most acutely if they follow through on their commitments and our call for them to serve where they are most needed.

But it is likely not just teacher education program mechanisms and structures that need adjustment; no doubt our practices do as well. That the
most robust form of the integrated curriculum unit, as conceived above, might be impossible for a new teacher to implement within a tightly monitored school is precisely the point. Keeping that in mind, we must ask ourselves where, if not in teacher education, can we be certain our preservice teachers will develop the capacity to envision what’s principled and the will and skill to work toward making possible approximations of that ideal practice in the context of their own classrooms? And where, if not in teacher education, can we be certain they will have access to conversations that intend to help them develop the political savvy necessary for balancing what is principled with what is permissible, possible, wise, and humane? Drawing again on CHAT, we argue for the critical importance of orienting preservice teachers toward principled “horizons”—“objects” offering direction, even if “never fully reached or conquered” (Engeström, 1999, p. 380). Such horizons, we believe, can anchor teachers as they manage tensions, potentially preventing them from getting lost in the “sea” of competing demands and pressures (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002).

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Jamy Stillman and Lauren Anderson | To Follow, Reject, or Flip the Script


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