

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

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**ABSTRACT:** Emerging research finds connections between teacher candidates' student teaching placements and their future career paths and effectiveness. Yet relatively little is known about the factors that influence these placements and how teacher education programs (TEPs) and K-12 school systems match teacher candidates to mentor teachers. In our study of this process in Washington state, we find that TEPs and K-12 systems share overarching goals related to successful student teacher placements and developing a highly effective teacher workforce. However, distinct accountabilities and day-to-day demands also sometimes lead them to prioritize other objectives. In addition, we identified informational asymmetries, which left TEPs questioning how mentor teachers were selected, and districts and schools with limited information with which to make intentional matches between teacher candidates and mentor teachers. The findings from this study inform both practice and research in teacher education and human resources. First, they illuminate practices that appear to contribute to informational gaps and institutional disadvantages in the placement of student teachers. Additionally, they raise questions about what constitutes an effective mentor teacher and provide researchers and policymakers with better insight into the professional realities of teacher educators and K-12 educators, as well as those of district human resource (HR) coordinators, which is important given their differing accountabilities and distinctive positionings in the education of teacher candidates.

**KEYWORDS:** student teaching, teacher preparation, teacher education, mentor teachers

## Introduction

Formalized apprenticeships are a common feature of many human resource settings; the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that there are over 800 apprenticeable occupations (Crosby, 2002) in which about half a million individuals are trained

each year (Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2020). The largest of these occupations is teaching, as every year nearly 200,000 preservice teachers are placed in apprenticeships known as student teaching positions across the country (US Department of Education, 2019). These student teaching apprenticeships have been recognized as a critical component of an effective teacher education program (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013) and are the culminations of most traditional models of teacher preparation (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2018). These “hands-on, real world experience[s]” (Kasperbauer & Roberts, 2007, p. 31) involve matching prospective teachers with “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).

A large theoretical and case study literature spanning several decades describes the importance not just of student teaching in general, but also of specific features of student teaching placements (e.g., Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Yendol-Hoppey, 2007; Zeichner & Gore, 1989). For example, Ganser (2002) argues that specific cooperating teachers can “influence the career trajectory of beginning teachers for years to come” (p. 380). More recently, quantitative studies utilizing survey and administrative data have found connections between specific features of teacher candidates’ student teaching placements and their future career paths and effectiveness. For example, the characteristics of the school where preservice teachers student teach have been found to be predictive of teacher effectiveness and attrition (Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2017; Ronfeldt, 2012, 2015). Additionally, emerging evidence suggests that teacher candidates who student teach with more effective cooperating teachers are themselves more effective once they enter the workforce (Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ronfeldt, Brockman, & Campbell, 2018). While these findings do not describe the mechanisms that lead to these patterns, they suggest that student teaching assignments play a role in differential outcomes for prospective teachers.

The student teaching internship is only one feature of the teacher education experience, of course, with other aspects (e.g., performance assessments and portfolios, analyses of teaching and learning, case methods, autobiography and practitioner inquiry) also shaping teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, Pacheco, Michelli, LePage, & Hammerness, 2005). However, these findings raise important questions about the factors that influence student teaching placement decisions and whether internship opportunities vary across teacher education programs (TEPs). Yet we are not aware of any research that has specifically examined the process through which student teachers are matched to cooperating teachers, leaving questions to be answered about how TEPs, districts, and schools make these decisions and little empirical information from which to contemplate improved practices.

In this paper, we examined the practices and procedures that lead to student teacher placement patterns in Washington state. To do so, we interviewed the

individuals responsible for facilitating student teaching placements across sixteen TEPs and districts/schools. Specifically, we asked the following questions:

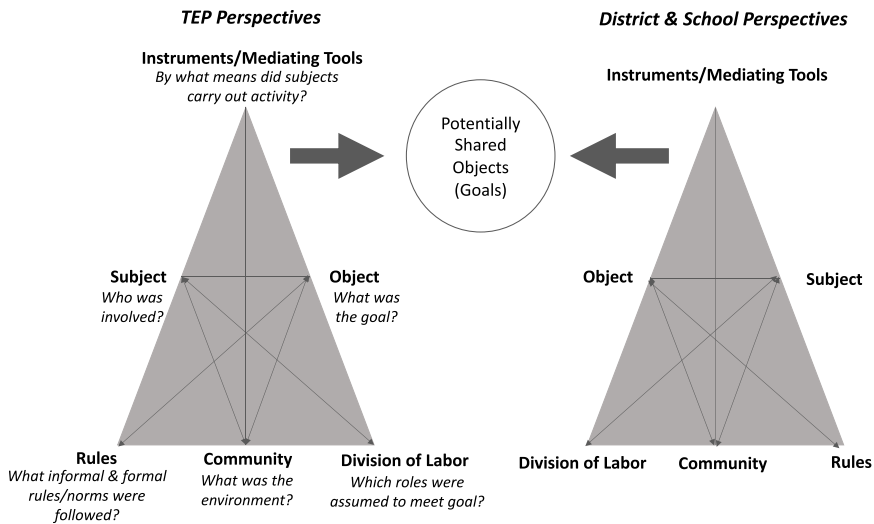
1. How do TEPs and districts/schools work together to match prospective teachers to cooperating teachers in schools?
2. What factors influence these placement decisions, and how, if at all, do practices vary across TEPs and districts/schools?

## 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 *object-oriented activity*: in this case, student teacher placements. We found the CHAT framework helpful for deconstructing and identifying the nuance in this distributed, complex activity, while not losing focus on the common practices and goals inherent in this activity.

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; Lupu, 2011). 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.<sup>1</sup>

As illustrated in Figure 1, TEPs and districts/schools each have their own goals and reasons for 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, 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.



**Figure 1:** Illustration depicting CHAT third-generation activity system: student teacher placements

Source: Adapted from Engeström (2001).

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. 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.

CHAT provides a valuable tool for investigating the multilayered and complex activity in which TEPs and district/schools engage when placing prospective teachers in student teaching assignments, and yet we augment CHAT with social capital theory because we also want to consider how social networks may affect this activity. Maier & Youngs (2009) found that TEPs play an integral role in the development of social networks between teacher candidates and schools, which, in turn, influence where student teachers take their first teaching positions.

Social capital theory argues that capital is derived from one's location in a social network (Lin, 2001). 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 the activity of student teacher placements.

## Methods

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 in-service teacher and student outcomes. In this study, we analyze qualitative interview data from the individuals most connected to student teacher placements to understand how student teacher placement activity unfolds across TEPs and districts/schools, and why it may differ across contexts. We chose a qualitative research approach because, rather than determining cause and effect or studying the distribution of an attribute of student teacher placements across a population, we wanted to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This focus upon participants' perspectives and roles in the student teacher placement process was particularly important given the distributed nature of this activity. Doing so allowed us to describe the ways the different educators involved in student teacher placement decisions come to understand, account for, take action, and manage the day-to-day activities associated with this activity (Miles, Huberman, Saldana, 2014), while also staying attuned to the shared nature of this work. In addition to aiding our analysis of student teacher placements, we wanted to include this depiction of student teacher placements as a shared activity so that educators and district HR personnel can recognize their roles in this multilayered and intricate activity, and so that researchers and policymakers can grasp the complexity of a multisteped, multiplayer process they may not be close to.

## Data Collection

Data gathered for this study were collected during the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 academic years. All 15 TEPs that participate in TELC were invited to participate in the study. Among the 15 TEPs affiliated with TELC, 8 agreed to participate. Since the intent of qualitative research is to explain particulars as opposed to

generalizing to a population (Creswell, 2013), we also sampled from eight districts/schools that work most closely with these TEPs. 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. In all, we interviewed 18 educators across the TEPs (10 educators), districts (2 educators), and schools (6 educators) in our sample.<sup>2</sup>

Closely representing the distribution of TEPs and teacher candidates across the state, the majority of TEPs and district/schools in our sample are positioned across six counties in the western portion of the state, with some representation in 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 PhD-granting institutions. To limit the variation in fixed human resource considerations (e.g., certification requirements) and facilitate comparisons across schools, the six schools included in the sample are all elementary schools. Among these elementary schools, we employed a maximum variation sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013) by selecting three schools that are designated as high-performing and three that are designated as low-performing by their districts. While this decision narrows principals' perspectives to primary education contexts, we asked TEPs and districts to discuss their practices in the context of broader K-12 considerations. Because membership in TELC is public, for the purposes of confidentiality, we limit the description of specific characteristics of the particular TEPs and districts/schools in our sample.

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, we do reference these data in discussions of variations in practice.

Semistructured telephone interviews were conducted across the sample of TEPs, districts, and schools. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participants were asked to describe the student teacher placement processes in their programs and to discuss the various factors that influence these decisions. To understand how student teachers are assigned to schools and cooperating teachers, participants were asked questions such as "Tell me about how student teachers are assigned to the cooperating teachers. Who makes those decisions and what criteria do they use? And how does the matching of student teachers to cooperating

teachers differ across the different districts and schools that you partner with?" All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Refer to Appendix A for a complete list of the interview questions.

## Data Analysis

To facilitate the coding and analysis of our data, we utilized Dedoose, a web-based software program for qualitative and mixed methods data management and analysis. Data were coded by the member of our research team trained and experienced in qualitative research approaches. To establish methodological integrity, memos and other analytic documents were used to facilitate analytical discussions with the larger research team throughout the course of the study. To increase fidelity, the team member responsible for coding the data sought to suspend and challenge prior conceptions of student teacher placements, particularly related to the prior and ongoing work of the larger research group (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morro, & Ponterotto, 2016). Finally, emerging findings were shared with the TEP participants in spring of 2018 to seek feedback on initial results. See Appendix C for examples of data from our interviews alongside their assigned codes.

Data analysis began with a provisional coding procedure, where transcripts were read and codes were assigned 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," "placement philosophy," and "cooperating teacher." In total, we coded 1,046 segments of data. A list of the codes and their definitions, as well as the frequency of coded segments, appears in Appendix B.

Once the data were coded within these categories, we utilized the CHAT framework (Engeström, 2001) to position student teacher placements as a human resource activity. Applying a theoretical framework also served to further increase the fidelity of our coding practices by permitting us to "observe dynamics that are marginalized, inaccessible to participants, or that are masked within dominant narratives" (Levitt et al., 2016, p. 12). As previously discussed, 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 disincorporated from focusing on the same goal. Using codes aimed at capturing issues

related to influence and advantage (such as those afforded through alumni relationships and geographic proximity), we also examined how access to social capital resources influenced student teacher placements across contexts. Finally, 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 might learn from in our study of the student teacher placement process. See Appendix C for examples of coding of interview data.

## Results

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 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: A Descriptive Analysis*

In answering our first research question, “How do TEPs and districts/schools work together to match prospective teachers to cooperating teachers in schools?” we sought to understand the process by which TEPs coordinate student teacher placements with districts and schools. We found that, while there was some variation in the student teacher placement process (particularly for TEPs with unique structures such as Alternative Route to Certification and Teacher Residency Programs),<sup>3</sup> all TEPs identified five general steps that culminate with the formal placement of a teacher candidate in a student teaching assignment.

First, TEPs determine the number of candidates needing placements for the upcoming school year and gather professional and personal information to inform their placements. Next, TEPs contact district HR coordinators and school principals 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 student teacher placement decisions are made by school principals.

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 high-performing elementary school explained that when they select a cooperating teacher they think 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, 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 who 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 that 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.

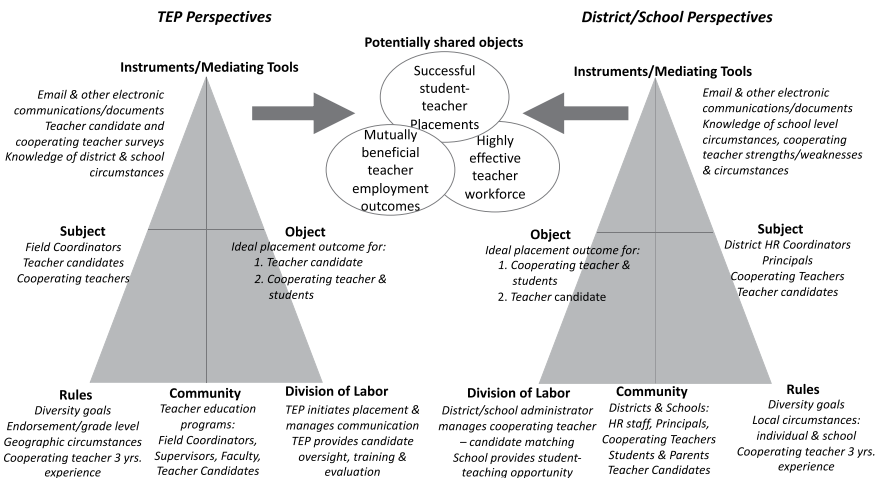
The student teacher placement process described here is well known to the educators who traverse these various steps each year. However, we hope that this descriptive reporting of student teacher placements will aid researchers, policymakers, and others less close to this process in the field to better understand the complexity involved in making decisions for individuals and school systems whose circumstances vary year to year. This analysis also provides a foundational narrative from which to examine our second research question, "What factors influence these placement decisions, and how, if at all, do practices vary across TEPS and districts/schools?" In doing so, we utilize the CHAT framework and social capital theory. The CHAT framework's attention to the six elements of an activity (subjects, objects, tools, community, rules, and division of labor) help us to (1) position student teacher placements as a human resource activity system and (2) organize our analysis so that we may examine both similarities and nuances within this system. Social capital theory reminds us to pay attention to potential benefits and advantages that may influence this activity within and across contexts.

### ***Aligned and Competing Goals among Teacher Education Programs and Districts/Schools***

Though 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 activity system (as illustrated in Figure 2). In this system, TEP educators are negotiating with district and school HR personnel, 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 have competing goals.

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 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 in 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 programs. In some instances, TEP field coordinators reported strategically placing teacher candidates to help meet this goal. One TEP coordinator explained that he would intentionally place teacher candidates according to their endorsement areas when he knew a retirement was about to take



**Figure 2:** Illustration depicting CHAT third-generation activity system: TEP educators negotiating with district/school educators and teacher candidates for a common object of activity in student teacher placements  
Source: Adapted from Engeström (2001).

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 is in the best interest of both TEPs and districts/schools that they support the development of a highly effective teacher workforce. A school principal thought about this when selecting teachers to serve as cooperating teachers. They asked, “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 2](#), 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. The shared goals discussed above may motivate TEPs and districts/schools to work together in the student teacher placement activity, and yet 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 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 their 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."

### ***The Division of Labor in Student Teacher Placements: 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 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 with little information from which to do so.

#### **The TEP Perspective**

How cooperating teachers are selected and matched to student teachers is 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." Another argued, "I'm working with 13 different districts, and there are 13 different stories for how that happens." One TEP field coordinator explained the pros and cons of these varying practices:

Sometimes we work with an HR person from the district. So, a benefit of that is ... 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.

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. [In other districts] we go through the district. 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 that "Sometimes they use our students to supplement the bad teacher. Sometimes they use our students so they can use the teacher for substituting. Sometimes, [to support] teachers that are getting their national boards."

## District and School Perspectives

The majority of district HR coordinators and principals reported selecting cooperating teachers based on a combination of attributes. Here a principal explains in detail the characteristics they seek 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?

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. They 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.”

Some principals reported inviting individual teachers, while others invited their teachers to self-select into the role. For instance, a principal reported “put[ting] 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 they felt their 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 they “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.”

Last, 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 cooperating teacher and school. They 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 HR coordinator wasn’t critical of this practice, however, which may be reflective of the challenges people in this role sometimes feel when matching student teachers to cooperating teachers. One district HR coordinator explained that they were

often left no other choice but to assign teacher candidates arbitrarily 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.

### ***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. In Washington state, teacher shortages create different challenges for TEPs, districts, and schools, and educators adapt their practices related to student teacher placements accordingly. 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." 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."

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." They 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. They 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. 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. However, one also noted, "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. 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. As previously reported, TEPs typically have little influence over how cooperating teachers are selected and matched to

teacher candidates, and some TEPs reported using electronic tools such as surveys to gather information about cooperating teachers for use in future placements.

### **Networks and Proximity: Social Capital in Student Teacher Human Resource Activity**

In this study, we place TEPs at the center of a social network focused on student teacher placements so that we may illustrate how we use social capital theory to better understand the advantages and disadvantages that TEPs and districts/schools face in this human resource activity. 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,

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. A district placement coordinator explained that they will sometimes narrow their selection of coordinating teachers based on where the teachers got their degrees.

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 alumnus 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 with each other when doing so helped them adhere to their particular placement



philosophies, especially those related to diversifying the teacher workforce. Yet again, 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 it was 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 HR 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.

## Discussion

Our description of the student teacher placement process suggests a sequence of discrete actions in the placement of student teachers. Although we found this 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. Take, for example, the issue of addressing teacher pipeline diversity goals. Some educators in our study used student teacher placements intentionally to address this goal: one principal reported prioritizing the placement of prospective teachers of color in their school, and a TEP coordinator explained their mission to place student teachers in school contexts that are different from their prior educational experiences. However, another TEP coordinator felt "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." These varying assumptions and philosophies have important implications for teacher education and the diversification of the teacher labor market.

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 investigate the implications of these different practices empirically, 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 teachers and relieving districts and schools of 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 HR coordinator explained that they had never worked in a classroom and did the best they could with the information available to them. 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.

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, 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. Mixed methods analyses, which link quantitative outcomes to qualitative processes, could also illuminate important patterns of practice that may contribute to varying outcomes. In addition, while we asked TEPs and districts to discuss placements across the K-12 spectrum, our sample of schools included only elementary schools, which limit our understanding of the middle and high school perspective.

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. However, while we propose that more detailed and nuanced information be shared, it is not actually clear that simply sharing more or even better information will result in improved student teacher matches, in part because there is no clear and strategic theory of action about student teaching. What makes a good cooperating teacher? Is a good cooperating teacher a good mentor 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, the overlapping and sometimes competing goals associated with placing student teachers in schools, and variation in social capital resources, we can begin to imagine and design more strategic, collaborative placement practices while chipping away at these larger questions.

## Conclusion

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.

In answering our first research question, 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.

Employing the CHAT framework in our analyses helped us to identify such variations. For example, we identified various ways that TEPs and districts/schools mutually benefit from engaging in the placement of student teachers in schools. Each benefit, for instance, 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. While shared goals act as an important motivator, local priorities and different accountabilities may also influence how TEPs and districts/schools engage in this process.

Finally, 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 districts/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).

## Notes

1. Alternative Route to Certification and Teacher Residency Programs are examples of teacher certification programs that utilize intentional variations from the descriptions of teacher placement included in this study. Often these programs are put in place to address specific goals, such as filling critical teacher shortages and providing a certification option for students who do not meet the typical educational requirements to enter a teacher education program
2. 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 worth noting 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.
3. Note that the schools represented here are from three school districts with decentralized student teacher placement practices. There were no district-level staff who facilitate this process in these three districts; therefore, interviews were conducted at the school level.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Teacher Placement Study Interview Protocol

#### I. Background

Tell me about your current role.

How long have you been working in your current role?

How long have you been at this [university/district/school]?

What other roles have you held here and with other [universities/districts/schools]?

#### II. The placement of preservice teachers in student teaching assignments

Describe the process for placing teacher candidates in student-teacher assignments.

Describe the sequence of events involved in this process?

[Probe: How does this process begin? Do these events follow the academic calendar in a routine way? When do you consider the process complete?]

Tell me about how your program/district/school selects the universities/districts/schools it partners with?

Tell me about how cooperating teachers are selected?

[Probe: Who makes those decisions? What criteria do they use? Why are these criteria important? How does this differ across districts/schools?]

Tell me about how student teachers are assigned to partnering schools?

Tell me about how student teachers are assigned to cooperating teachers?

What are considered most important: the qualities of the school where a student teacher is placed or the qualities of the cooperating teacher that they are assigned? Why?

Does your program/district/school utilize any specific guidelines or rubrics to help facilitate this process? If so, please describe them.

### III. Individuals involved

What are your main responsibilities specifically with respect to the placement of preservice teachers in student teaching assignments?

Roughly what proportion of your job is spent on all activities related to student teacher placements over the course of a school year?

Who else is involved in this process? [If applicable] Can you describe their role and responsibilities, and how their role/responsibilities differ from yours?

Of all your job duties, how would you rank the relative importance of your role in placing preservice teachers in student teaching assignments? Why?

### IV. Factors that influence this process

What are some of the issues that must be considered when working with universities/districts/schools in the placement of student teachers?

What are some of the issues that must be considered when selecting a cooperating teacher to work with student teachers?

What are some of the issues that must be considered when matching a preservice teacher with a district/school/cooperating teacher? Why are these important?

Among these issues, which is most detrimental to this success of this process? Why?

How would you describe the relationships between TEPS/districts/schools in this process? [Probe: If you know, how longstanding are



these relationships? How did these relationships first form? How do relationships differ across programs/districts/schools?]

How, if at all, do institutional policies (at your institution, at cooperating districts and schools) influence how this process works?

To your knowledge, has this process always worked this way at your institution, or has it changed over time? (If applicable) How has it changed? What prompted these changes?

How, if at all, do district, school, or teacher education program leaders influence this process?

#### V. Perceptions of the process

When you reflect on the student teacher placement process, what do you think is the single most important issue to consider when making these decisions? Why?

What do you consider to be a successful student teacher placement?

What about an unsuccessful placement? What does that look like?

What do you think are the ideal characteristics of a partner university/district/school/cooperating teacher? Why?

What are the types of scenarios you try to avoid when placing preservice teachers in schools/classrooms? Why?

How do universities/districts/schools support this process? What could they do differently to better support these placements?

When you think about all the aspects of placing preservice teachers, what do you think your university/district/school does particularly well?

What have been the greatest challenges your university/district/school has faced in placing preservice teachers in student teaching assignments?

#### VI. Conclusion

What other things do you think we should know or think about as we continue to learn about how preservice teachers are placed in student - teaching assignments?

## APPENDIX B

### Codebook and Code Frequencies

Code	Definition	Count
Alumni	Referencing the role alumni play in student teacher placements	15
Community	Referencing community contexts and the role community circumstances play in placements	37
Division of labor	Referencing how TEPs/districts/schools distribute work and divide labor within and across education systems	65

(Continued)

Code	Definition	Count
Instruments	Referencing the various tools used to facilitate placements	17
Rules	Referencing the formal rules and informal norms, expectations, and established practices	32
Competition among TEPs	Referencing the ways TEPs navigate cross-institutional competition for schools/districts when making placements	29
Cooperating teacher	Referencing mentor teachers	87
Description of process	Referencing descriptions of the placement process	272
Diversifying intern experience	Referencing the ways universities/districts/schools consider school context for student teachers when making placements	22
Diversifying teacher workforce	Referencing the ways universities/districts/schools consider their role in diversifying the teacher workforce	19
Geographic context	Referencing the role geographic proximity plays in placements	25
Institutional context	Referencing the role institutional context plays in placements	70
Mentor/student teacher match	Referencing the matching of students teachers to mentors	49
Placement philosophy	Referencing philosophies/beliefs that guide placements	68
Potential improvements to process	Referencing ideas educators have for improving placements	15
Practicum	Referencing practicum as it compares/relates to student teaching placements	17
Program/district/school relationships	Referencing relationships formed between TEPs and districts/schools	132
Student teacher preferences	Referencing student teacher preferences in placements	13
Student teachers are potential hires	Referencing student teachers as potential hires within districts/schools	33
Teacher shortage	Referencing the role teacher shortages play in placements	29

## APPENDIX C

### Examples of Coding of Interview Data

Code	Examples
Alumni	"If I have an alum in the building, then I'll specifically ask that alum, 'Who do you think would take a [University] student teacher or a practicum?' You know, 'Who do you know?' If there's not an alum at the building, then I'll just rely on the principal." [TEP Coordinator]
Community	"The very first quarter, one of the first things that they do is a community tour. Clearly, the perspective that's being enacted here is the perspective of, you need to get to know the community in which you are teaching, and the lives of the kids that you are going to see in your classrooms. One of the parts of their field trip, getting to know the community, is going to a local farmer who hires a number of our parents and has just a wonderful perspective about his business and the importance of being a family-friendly and school-friendly employer." [District HR coordinator].

(Continued)

Code	Examples
Division of Labor	"For our school district we have an early childhood director and so [University] approached her and said, 'we think it would be a good idea if there was a point person outside the principal, based in a school,' and so then our district person talked to me and then so we asked my kindergarten teacher, and she said sure, she'd be happy to do that." [Elementary school principal]
Instruments	"We have an amazing database and all of that [student-teacher preferences] information goes into our database so that the quarter before they're to begin their internship, I am able to generate a report that gives me all of my people and what they would like." [TEP coordinator]
Rules	"This year, actually, was the first year where I was asked not to place any student teachers at one of our elementary schools that is getting a brand new principal, which was kind of interesting; but the Deputy Superintendent is the one that asked me not to do that, so I was like, 'Okay.'" [District HR coordinator].
Competition among TEPS	We do have a contract through [University], or an agreement. When we host student teachers who are not from [this University], we actually have them work with somebody at [University] so that they're going through that same agreement. I don't know exactly how it works. Human Resources helps with that end of things." [Elementary school principal]
Cooperating teacher	"We tell the mentors all the time that they are the residents' primary teacher/educator. They spend more time with you than they do any instructor, any coach, anybody else in the program. The quality of that mentor teacher is so critically important." [TEP coordinator]
Description of process	"I contact all of our building principals and ask for them to provide me with the names of teachers in their building who they think would be suitable mentors. We ask that the teachers have at least three years experience and would be somebody that would be good in a role as a mentor to an intern." [District HR Coordinator]
Diversifying intern experience	"It depends on how much stress you want to put on a person and how much they want to take on, but also, what is their goal? I mean if I grew up in a fairly comfortable homogenous community and I really felt a mission to serve a diverse community, then maybe I would want to be placed in a super needy urban school to test that out." [Elementary school principal]
Diversifying teacher workforce	"We have had principals, when they're hiring folks, be interested in our candidates of color for wanting to add to the diversity of their staff." [TEP coordinator]
Geographic context	"We're a little bit odd in this population that we serve in [geographical region of state]. We look more like a [different regional] school district, with the percentage of Latino/Latina students. Again, we're just not a huge district, so a lot of people drive through [school district] but don't necessarily know what's here. To me, it was a relationship, is a relationship building, kind of marketing endeavor to try to gain access to prospective teachers that we might not otherwise be able to attract our direction." [District HR Coordinator].
Institutional context	"I met recently with some folks from [University] who are trying to improve their process for placing student teachers, and in particular for identifying student teachers earlier who really have an interest in working at a school like [ours] where we have a high number of ELL students and a very diverse community. We're a Title I school, so a high level of socioeconomic need. I like that idea of being a little bit more intentional about it because my experience this past year has been that being here at [my current school], the factors that make me say yes or no to a student teacher are pretty different than the factors when I was at [prior school]." [Elementary school principal].
Mentor/Student teacher match	"I was doing this partnership with [elementary school] and that principal I got to know really well and I could bring my little list of mentor teacher qualities and I could say, 'Okay, this is the kind of teacher we need.' and then he could say, 'Well this is the kind of student intern that we want.'" Then we could match them up. He and I used to sit and match them up, match up interns and mentors together. But once he left then the new principal wasn't as approachable and so it didn't happen. And when they do it at the human resource level, at the district level, all the placements, then see, that's really difficult because I can bring her my little list but she doesn't know who's who." [TEP coordinator]

(Continued)

Code	Examples
Placement philosophy	"The hope is in those preplacement meetings that we kind of weed some of that out. The whole point of them having that discussion is to make sure that philosophies align. Different philosophies are great as long as they are not totally in conflict with each other. My hope is that those kind of come out in those meetings." [District HR Coordinator]
Potential improvements to process	"We're busy people and I feel badly when I know I get an email requesting an intern placement and it takes me two or three weeks to get back to those people, because it's just lower on my priority list. I wish there was a more streamlined process ... Almost if there were an online site that people could go visit." [Elementary school principal]
Practicum	"For the practicums, I can go directly to the principals in most of the districts. But then with student-teaching, I have to go to the HR person to get those placed. But what I've already done is my little groundwork to see if this teacher's going to take them and then I can say that I would like to request these teachers because they've already had our practicum students." [TEP coordinator]
Program/district/school relationships	"I have had a long-standing perspective now that external expertise and partnership is incredibly valuable to schools and districts. The work that we did with, and continue to do with [University] and [University] really enabled us to capitalize upon expertise that lived in the college that we didn't have here." [District HR Coordinator]
Student teacher preferences	"The student intern we had this past year, she specifically requested our school because she wanted to have an opportunity to learn in a more diverse setting." [Elementary school principal]
Student teachers are potential hires	"From my perspective I do think we have schools now calling us to say, 'We want to be involved! Their motivation being, 'I want to end up hiring your grads so how do I get that going so that I can get my hands on some as they get closer to graduation?'" [TEP coordinator]
Teacher shortage	"We certainly need more bilingual teachers in our setting. That's a huge shortage for us, but when we post an elementary school job, we're going to get plenty of quality applicants for fourth grade, you know? We don't really see a shortage in that respect." [District HR coordinator]