

Mentoring in Transformative Hybrid Spaces: Preservice Teacher Preparation and Literacy Learning in Moçambique

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How can transformative hybrid spaces be used as a promising context for disrupting traditional notions of teacher preparation?

We often find ourselves puzzling through the learning opportunities and challenges that we encounter within, across, and between the two contexts in which we work as teacher educators. One of our contexts is in Texas (United States), where our work focuses on teacher preparation in urban schools. The second is our current work in Moçambique, where we are working with young adults who are studying to be teachers. Across these contexts, some of our important work has occurred in what Zeichner (2010) described as hybrid spaces. Hybrid spaces bridge the gap between academic coursework and traditional practicum experiences so beginning teachers can be more innovative in their practices and, thus, transform education.

We focus this commentary on transformative hybrid spaces because they are a promising context for disrupting traditional notions of literacy teacher education and literacy teaching. We hope this commentary encourages readers who work (or are interested) in secondary literacy teacher education to consider transformative hybrid spaces as a viable way of supporting their beginning teachers.

From Practicum Experiences to Practice-Based Experiences: The Hybrid Space of Mentoring

Practicum experiences in initial teacher certification are common in university-based teacher education

programs in the United States. Over time, practicum experiences have expanded in these programs because critics saw the student teaching experience placed at the end of the program as too little and too late in terms of engaging with practice (Austin & Morrison, 1961). Although practicum experiences are more common earlier and throughout preparation programs today, the disconnect between university methods courses and field-based sites remains a challenge for the field (Lazar, 2018) because the concepts introduced in academic coursework may differ from those found and valued in classroom settings.

Practicum Experiences

Research has documented that practicum experiences offer affordances for beginning teachers that coursework alone cannot (Sailors et al., 2004). For example, when reading methods courses were taught in conjunction with field experiences, preservice teachers felt more prepared than when they were only exposed to

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a lecture model (Knackstedt, Leko, & Siuty, 2018). Yet, simply assigning beginning teachers to placements as part of the practicum experience is not enough. The quality of teaching that they see in those placements is critical to their growing understanding of what it means to be a literacy teacher (Sydnor, 2017). Beginning teachers must see the alignment between the theories they are learning in their coursework and their field experiences (Adoniou, 2013). Faculty involvement in mediating these field experiences is essential in the context of partnerships between the practicum site and the university (Pytash, Testa, Hagedorn, & Edge, 2017).

Ideally, practicum experiences offer beginning teachers not only opportunities to transfer learning but also opportunities to negotiate school contexts (Street, 2004), reflect on and negotiate tensions of practice (Bieler, 2010), and engage in reflective routines so they are ready for (or at least aware of) the tensions that they will have to negotiate in their first years of teaching (Smagorinsky, Gibson, Moore, Bickmore, & Cook, 2004). More importantly, field experiences support beginning teachers in decentering the ways that children are racialized, classed, and gendered in traditional school settings (Dutro & Cartun, 2016).

Literacy Teacher Preparation in Transformative Hybrid Spaces

Although there has been significant progress in teacher preparation toward increasing field experiences and offering them throughout the program, Britzman (2003) raised the caution that uncritical field experiences in contexts that do not reflect the values and strategies taught in preparation programs can actually lead to negating the effects of transformative teacher preparation. She framed this argument as “practice makes practice.” Although careful selection of cooperating teachers could reduce this concern, finding these teachers in the numbers needed can be a daunting challenge.

One alternative, proposed by Zeichner (2010), was to increase the uses of what he called hybrid spaces. These are spaces where the teacher candidates are working with students outside of classroom contexts and supported directly by teacher education faculty. These hybrid spaces provide opportunities to try out practices in learning contexts without the constraints of classrooms. Also, hybrid spaces provide opportunities for teacher educators to engage directly in support

of candidates in ways that connect their academic curriculum with teaching.

According to a review of research into the uses of hybrid spaces (Hoffman et al., 2019), hybrid spaces (often called tutoring in the literature) provide beginning teachers opportunities to grow in their knowledge of literacy, language, and word structure and in the use of particular pedagogical and instructional strategies. Hoffman et al. (2019) argued for the use of the term *mentoring* over *tutoring* in the context of learning to teach. They contended that mentoring emphasizes relationship building and the colearning that occurs between the mentor (beginning teacher) and the mentee (youth with whom the beginning teacher is working) much more than does tutoring. Working in hybrid spaces provides opportunities to develop relationships with youths, families, and colleagues and to grow as culturally responsive teachers. Also, it provides opportunities for beginning teachers to reject deficit notions they may hold about youths.

There are at least two approaches to the use of hybrid spaces. The first approach is to use them as simplified and controlled contexts for trying out literacy practices that preservice teachers will be expected to use in the classroom. The other approach is to use hybrid spaces with a transformative goal in mind. In these kinds of hybrid spaces, preservice teachers have an opportunity to engage in practices that may not be present in classrooms. These transformative hybrid spaces allow beginning teachers the opportunity to see how innovative practices work, and allow beginning teachers to consider how they might appropriate the practices into their (more traditional) practicum classroom experiences. We find this distinction as essential to our practices as teacher educators.

The Context of Moçambique

Rich in culture, history, and language, Moçambique is one of the largest countries in sub-Saharan Africa. There are more than 40 documented languages spoken in Moçambique (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2019), including Bantu languages, Swahili, English, and Portuguese. Although Portuguese is the official language of the country, very few people speak Portuguese as their first language. Recent reports indicated that slightly more than 50% of Mozambicans speak Portuguese fluently, and the majority of these people are located in the urban areas (approximately 80%). In a country as multilingual as Moçambique, it is not surprising that most Mozambicans speak more than one language.

Education in Moçambique

Although rich in languages and culture, Moçambique faces challenges within its educational system. Namely, there are few materials authored in Moçambique that center on the home languages and experiences of youths. Many teachers are assigned to areas where they do not speak the language of the youths they teach. Also, although bilingual education was enacted in the early 2000s, progress in enacting this policy in classrooms around the country has been slow.

Like many of its neighboring countries, Moçambique faces a teacher shortage, thus allowing for a large number of youths in classrooms (55 learners to one teacher). Moçambique has struggled to catch up with its growing population and to provide youths with qualified teachers. As a result, the country has made concerted efforts to focus on and raise its literacy rates. One approach of the country's programming has focused on not only increasing the number of qualified teachers but also improving the quality of their teaching, motivating them to stay in the profession, and preparing them for the country's cultural diversity (UNICEF, n.d.).

Teacher Education in Moçambique

Schools are divided into primary (grades 1–7) and secondary (grades 8–12). Currently, most secondary teachers graduated from a university with a *Licenciados* (similar to a bachelor's degree). Secondary teachers (who have taught for at least five years) are eligible to teach at one of the 27 *Institutos de Formação de Professores* (IFPs; teacher training institutes) in the country. Primary teachers can also teach at an IFP, but they need to seek a *Licenciados* and have five years of teaching experience. These IFPs are strategically located around Moçambique.

Primary teacher candidates (called *formandos*) are prepared and licensed at the IFP. The coursework for *formandos* is designed and implemented by the instructors at the IFP (called *formadores*). Currently, the *formandos* are placed in one of several programs, with the two most prevalent paths being the 10+1 and the 10+3. The 10+1 is a program designed for graduates of 10th grade who spend one year at the IFP, engaged in both coursework and practicum experiences. They are then employed and placed in a primary school. The 10+3 program is similar (graduate of 10th grade), but the candidate spends two years at the IFP enrolled in coursework and practicum experiences and then completes one year of student teaching.

Although there are considerable conversations about the benefits and challenges of each model, one concern is that only some of the *formadores* are former

primary school teachers. Also, although the *formandos* have early field experiences, they engage in few field experiences that allow them to challenge traditional notions of teaching and learning.

Enacting Transformative Hybrid Experiences at Chitima IFP

Over the past several years, we have been engaged with colleagues at Chitima IFP working to grow their teacher preparation program as it relates to literacy teaching. The Chitima IFP is located in rural, northwestern Moçambique. Our initial work in Chitima, building on an initiative from the Moçambique Ministry of Education, focused on the introduction of interactive teaching methodologies in the IFP coursework. The courses offered at the IFP typically relied on a lecture model of presentation—mostly didactic (drawn heavily from practices of colonial powers) and disconnected from community-based interactions with children (close-in and hands-on work with children and their literacies). The interactive methodologies are teaching methods that move teachers away from didactic pedagogies into spaces with learners that engage them in dialogue and discourses across the subject areas (Siteo, Hoffman, Sailors, & Majuisse, 2018). Our second step was to introduce transformative hybrid experiences as a form of interactive methodology.

The current practicum experience at Chitima IFP (like the other IFPs in Moçambique) is similar to practices in the United States with early and continuous work in schools. *Formandos* are placed in classrooms and asked to practice teaching. The *formandos* are generally very pleased with their experiences but describe limited connections between their practicum experiences and their coursework. We discovered with our Moçambique colleagues that the uses of hybrid experiences are rare in teacher preparation. Through conversations, we explored the possibilities of adding a hybrid space to the program at Chitima IFP (in the form of a literacy mentoring program).

We shared and discussed this approach and brought our Moçambique colleagues to Texas to observe our programs. Together, we planned for ways in which we might create something new in the Moçambique context. We engaged with ministry officials around this kind of work and found considerable support for ways in which this work might enhance the experiences of the beginning teachers in Moçambique. To that end, we codesigned a practice-based experience (grounded in transformative hybrid experiences) for the preservice teachers in their first and second years of coursework (in the 10+3 program).

Chitima, like many other IFPs, has a primary school (grades 1–7) located on its campus; the school is known as an annex school and is intended to serve as a place for field experiences. Our goal was to capitalize on the relation between Chitima IFP and its annex school as a way of creating a hybrid, practice-based experience for the *formandos*. We worked with the director of the school to identify youths (ages 6–13) to attend literacy mentoring on a weekly basis. The mentoring program promotes oral and written language through the use of interactive methodologies.

The 45-minute mentoring experience includes the following components: beautiful books, read-alouds, guided reading, sentence and word work, and songs and poems (see details of the components in Goia et al., in press). Although there are few published books that represent the lived experience of the youths who read them in rural Moçambique, we located approximately 30 titles and used them as the beginning of a mentoring library for the *formandos* to use with their youths. We also gathered local resources to support their work (e.g., mats to sit on, easily accessible writing utensils) and encouraged them to draw on their culture for the texts they created with their youths (e.g., local songs,

oral stories). Figure 1 illustrates the context in which mentoring at Chitima takes place.

In addition to the affordances that mentoring offers the youths (Goia et al., in press), we have witnessed the affordances that the program offered to the *formandos* themselves.

Professional Learning. As the research would indicate, mentoring is a context in which beginning teachers learn to engage youths. In the case of the *formandos*, many of them described their work with youths as “more caring” and that they have “stronger relationships” with youths as a result of the mentoring opportunities. The *formandos* (and their *formadores*) said they are relying less on traditional ways of getting the attention of youths in their practicum setting. Rather, the *formandos* rely on their relationships with youths as they encourage their participation in educational activities.

As a result of mentoring, the *formandos* also have a better sense of how to teach a beginning reader to read. This is important because some of these *formandos* will seek an advanced degree and may end up as *formadores* themselves, teaching the next generation of primary-grade teachers. The *formandos* appreciate the attention to using

Figure 1
Context of Mentoring at Chitima



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

local resources for their lessons and have found themselves borrowing from the framework for their practicum classrooms, such as starting their day with a local song.

Personal Language and Literacy Development. As is true of many people in Moçambique, the majority of the *formandos* at Chitima speak a Bantu language as their home language. One of the affordances of the mentoring program is the described impact on the language and literacy learning of the *formandos* themselves. For example, one *formanda* told us that she now participates more in her IFP coursework because she is growing in her oral language confidence as a Portuguese speaker. Another *formanda* told us that the sentence work she does with her mentee helps her organize her own writing for her coursework. Others also told us that they plan carefully for the mentoring sessions with their youths. As a result, the *formandos* have to read the books that they will use in mentoring. Subsequently, they have realized that they like to read. One *formanda* attributed this to the fact that she had very little opportunities to read a “real book” prior to mentoring. She believes that she is a stronger reader, too, as a result of mentoring a youth.

A number of *formandos* also reported that they are better readers because they have to read a book aloud to a youth. They said they read with expression and enjoy it. Sometimes when their youths are absent, we find the *formandos* reading a book rather than watching another mentoring pair. In fact, they love the books so much that they do not return the books as regularly as we would like them to. In part, that is because they are “hiding” the books in their dorm rooms, hoping to “hang onto them longer,” as Elsa Goia, the coordinator of the mentoring program, told us. Although both of these could be perceived as problematic, we see them as unintended affordances of this transformative hybrid space.

Affordances of Transformative Hybrid Experiences for Moçambique

In this section, we turn to those who have the most at stake in these hybrid spaces, *formandos* at the Chitima IFP. We selected three *formandos*—Rui, Sheila, and Pascoa—who were most passionate about their work with their mentees and asked them to describe the affordances of the mentoring program. Each of them, in turn, explicates those affordances.

This was a very welcome project for us. During the project, we learned and implemented the methods we were taught. I saw the progress with students from the first day using the methods that I’ve learned [see Figure 2]. The students improved a lot. I’d like to see this happening not only for us here

Figure 2
Rui Working With His Young Learners



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

but to be extended throughout Moçambique. I believe that if it happens, we wouldn’t see in the future the same high number of students with difficulties in classes [in upper grades]. We have to start from the base. I’m talking about the initial grades like the first and second. I believe that with the initiative of the project, we can overcome problems. (Rui)

This project is very welcome. Here in Moçambique, we have many children with reading and writing difficulties, so we are working with the children, and they are learning the first steps of reading and writing [see Figure 3]. [The older] student [I worked with] is in the sixth grade, and she showed

Figure 3
Sheila Working With Her Youth



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

interest in reading, I started being attached to the child, and the child corresponded to me. When I'm with her, honestly, I forget about everything. I only concentrate on her, and she also only concentrates on me. We practice reading out loud and guided reading. She likes the stories best. When I read a book for her, she pays attention to learn about the story. When I'm deciphering those words that are hard for her, she is very happy, so I like this very much. This moves me so much. I really, really enjoyed the mentorship. The teachers at the [IFP] and in the annex school understood that, in fact, the mentorship was worth it. (Sheila)

In this project, we acquired new abilities. We'd like for the elementary teachers [in our practicum experiences] as well to have this kind of experience and the opportunity to develop this knowledge....This would enable them to work starting with the first grade until the seventh grade and see students not having reading issues. When I started working with the mentorship [see Figure 4], [my practicum placement] was the sixth grade, and I observed that many students didn't know how to read. We worked on it [using the methods I learned in mentoring], and in three months, the students started to read. I believe that if the teachers for the elementary school also had the opportunity to be in this project, we wouldn't have students with these same issues in the middle school. (Pascoa)

In short, it is this transformative hybrid space of mentoring that allows the beginning teachers to see themselves as teachers and beginning activists as professionals (e.g., "all beginning teachers should have this opportunity"). Through their careful and close-up work with youths, the *formandos* grow both as teachers and as readers and writers themselves.

Figure 4
Pascoa Working With One of Her Youths



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

Next Steps in Transformative Hybrid Spaces

Our next steps in Moçambique involve expanding the project to other IFPs and beginning to consider ways in which we can do more to intentionally build the bridge from hybrid to classroom spaces. We are guided by the program coordinator who is taking what she is learning in the mentoring to reshape her own Portuguese-language methods courses. We are also guided by the preservice teachers who want to see greater levels of participation by classroom teachers in this kind of work.

Our next step in our U.S. context is to continue to research literacy mentoring in transformative hybrid spaces and how we can utilize the same leverage points that we have found in our work in Moçambique with classroom teachers and other teacher educators. In light of the *JAAL* readership, we note that Hoffman et al.'s (2019) literature review on mentoring in teacher preparation found that only a few of the 60 studies focused on teacher preparation to work with youths in middle school and high school settings. We hope this commentary encourages readers of *JAAL* to consider transformative hybrid spaces as options for their work.

While we carry forward with great enthusiasm across the two contexts in which we work, we are conscious of the kinds of challenges raised by Tierney (2018) around global meaning making and how to maintain supportive relationships among international partners. The key for us has been to examine our international work in ways that challenge us to name what we are learning and using in growing our own practices. Our shared efforts in Moçambique are helping us understand the potential for work in transformational hybrid spaces as an essential component of teacher preparation, one that prepares us and teachers to reshape the schools and classrooms in which we work.

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