

Coakley-Fields, M., Kelly, C., Cunningham, K. E., & Krafick, K. (2022). Teacher candidates' pivot to virtual literacy field experiences: The interplay of culturally responsive sustaining pedagogies and improvisation. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 22(3), 453-474.

Teacher Candidates' Pivot to Virtual Literacy Field Experiences: The Interplay of Culturally Responsive Sustaining Pedagogies and Improvisation

[Mary Coakley-Fields](#) and [Courtney Kelly](#)
Manhattanville College

[Katie Egan Cunningham](#)
Sacred Heart University

[Kori Krafick](#)
Manhattanville College and Danbury Public School District

This qualitative investigation examines how teacher candidates enrolled in literacy courses navigated virtual field work experiences during summer and fall 2020. The study is grounded in theories of improvisation as a pedagogical practice and culturally responsive and sustaining approaches to teaching. Data show that teacher candidates took advantage of the affordances of the environment and adapted their practice to suit the new situation by improvising and growing their virtual teaching skillset for culturally responsive literacy instruction. Findings reveal the importance of teacher candidates developing improvisational culturally responsive and sustaining practices, including learning about students' interests, cultures, and experiences and applying that knowledge to build rapport and curricular connections

Field-based literacy methods courses constitute a cornerstone in teacher preparation programs as a way to engage teacher candidates (TCs) with literacy theory and practice while receiving real-time guidance from university instructors and mentor teachers in the field (Smagorinsky & Barnes, 2014; Zeichner & Bier, 2015). However, during Covid-19 and the move from physical to virtual classrooms in P-12 settings in spring 2020, field-based literacy methods courses also moved to virtual spaces. This pivot to online instruction forced teachers, students, university instructors, and TCs to adapt in their approach to literacy teaching and learning within the constraints of social distancing. In this article, we describe our exploration of the ways TCs developed what we saw as both improvisational teaching and culturally responsive and sustaining practices (CRSP) while engaging in online literacy education fieldwork.

This article reports on our qualitative study of 34 graduate-level preservice and in-service TCs' virtual literacy field experiences during summer and fall 2020. The data and findings were interpreted by the three literacy instructors of the three courses these TCs took (authors Mary Coakley-Fields, Katie Egan Cunningham, and Kori Krafick) as well as their literacy department chair (Courtney Kelly). We identified patterns in TCs' engagement by coding our data, which included TCs' lesson plans, weekly reflections, case study assignments, and our (the instructors') field notes and lesson plans. In our analysis, we realized that we and the TCs became more intentionally improvisational as the semesters progressed. What initially was an adaptive response to our technology use as a result of social distancing became more purposeful and developed into more principled improvisation (Philip, 2019) as we researched educational improvisation further.

The field for the virtual field hours consisted of working with upper elementary students enrolled in a year-long private academic Saturday and summer school program, Mosaic Academy (pseudonym). Mosaic served Title 1 public school boys performing at or below grade level in a diverse northeast suburb, 100% of whom identified as Latinx. In our data collection and subsequent analysis, we began noting the ways that our TCs improvised in large and small ways to respond to the children we were working with and the new virtual context.

This article offers a description and analysis of how our TCs navigated planning and improvisation, often enacting a CRSP stance, in their virtual literacy field work experiences with the Mosaic boys. We first provide a conceptual framework that synthesizes research on improvisational teaching, virtual literacy teacher education, and CRSP, specifically as it relates to improvisational teaching. We present our data that indicates TCs increasingly improvised in their teaching, beginning to enact what we call "improvisational CRSP." We also offer a reflection on how what we learned about our TCs' engagement in online teaching might help teacher educators support TCs' confidence and skill with what Philip (2019) called principled improvisation in more deliberate ways in the future. Overall, this study aimed to add to our understandings about technology use in literacy-related teacher education and its role in providing a generative context for improvisational CRSP.

Literature Review

The literature review that follows presents three areas of research central to our study and analysis. First, our study was situated within literature on improvisation as a pedagogical practice (Philip, 2019; Sawyer, 2004; Tanner, 2019) that allows for responding to the unexpected (such as COVID-19 and social distancing) and leaving space for emerging ideas and responsiveness to students. Next, we present literature about virtual literacy-related teacher education. Our work was situated through a CRSP stance (Ladson-Billings, 2009; New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2019; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) as we examined how TCs drew on course materials focused on CRSP (i.e., Muhammed, 2020; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2017) while working with students.

In holding these frameworks together, we see generative synergy as well as tensions between the literature on teaching as improvisation, virtual instruction, and the literature on CRSP. For example, we found generative synergy between improvisation and CRSP by drawing from Philip (2019), who described improvisational classroom practice as potentially culturally relevant practice. Yet, we noted the tension that the literature on improvisational practice in the classroom has been produced by mostly white researchers, while CRSPs seek to center and sustain historically marginalized students' experiences and culture and has mostly been conceptualized by Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) researchers.

Improvisation as a Responsive and Relational Pedagogical Practice

Effective teaching depends on structures, procedures, and methods which teachers develop over time, as well as improvisational dialogue, emotional responses, and pacing that involve teachers' responsiveness to the students they are working with (Sawyer, 2004). This responsiveness on the part of teachers often helps connect students' ideas and contributions with the lesson objectives, thus helping students build understandings as viewed through a constructivist manner. Teachers who employ both procedural and improvisational teaching strategies employ more connective teaching, facilitating construction of knowledge, "emerging from the actions of all participants" (pp. 12-13).

In describing teachers' beliefs about the dialogical nature of learning, Tanner (2019) posited that, like improv performers, teachers should value the collective interactions of the group, share power, overcome inhibitions, and above all, build on student offerings. Such interactive dialogic work, fueled by what he called *improvisational ethos*, allows for creativity and responsiveness in teacher and students' knowledge-building.

Dezutter (2011) similarly likened teaching to other improvisational professions, such as improvisational theater and musical jazz, to better understand the conscious efforts that can be made to develop improvisational expertise, while also recognizing the differences between teaching and artistic performance. She noted that the teacher's role is to create an environment of routines and participation structures (i.e.,

collaborative group work), where students feel safe in taking intellectual risks and making mistakes (she referred to Lobman & Lundquist, 2007).

Philip (2019) called on teachers to plan for principled improvisation, which includes cultural responsiveness and engaging students in a critical stance. He asserted that improvisation in teaching can be part of what a teacher prepares for and expects rather than wholly extemporaneous. To accomplish principled improvisation, Philip asserted that novice teachers must practice the following:

1. Learning to authentically listen to students.
2. Learning to follow students' lead in their learning.
3. Learning to facilitate students' building on each other's ideas.
4. Learning to craft critical questions that build on students' responses and move their analysis toward a deeper consideration of power and historical, social, political, and economic processes. (p. 8)

Philip (2019) recognized the continuum of improvisational teaching and procedural teaching, noting that lessons are not either/or, but fall on a continuum for being more or less improvisational and more or less procedural. This study is noteworthy because it emerged from a study completed with preservice teachers of color enrolled in a field-based social foundations class that sought to familiarize these future teachers with theories of ethical, political, and consequential teaching and learning through a framework of improvisational dialogue and reflective practice. As proponents of culturally responsive and sustaining models of teaching and learning, we, the authors of this article, recognize the significance of exploring the relationship between metaphors of improvisation and classroom practices that build on students' lived experience as well as their knowledge and preferences.

Improvisational Teaching in Virtual Teacher Education

Researchers have written about the role of improvisation in virtual settings for teacher education for several decades, though different researchers have conceptualized the term improvisation somewhat differently. In their description of video conferencing in initial teacher education classes in rural settings, Wiesemes and Wang (2010) described how they and the instructors who were participants in the study used video conferencing as a tool to engage students in fieldwork when they were geographically far from a P-12 school. As a result the authors argued that TCs could learn from the teachers they observed virtually, mute the video to discuss amongst themselves and with the instructor, and then try out teaching, as well as improvise, or extemporize, contextualized responses to students when given the opportunity.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the universal move to virtual teaching in March 2020, more researchers documented the role of improvisational teaching in virtual settings for teacher education. In their study of the process of converting their teacher education courses from in-person to virtual spaces, Bryson and Andres (2020) described the improvisation instructors demonstrated in setting up online teacher

education classroom spaces as a “buffering response” to the uncertainty and trauma incurred by the pandemic. In other words, the instructors’ quick thinking and ability to create interactive and supportive teacher education courses offset some of the emotional and social difficulties of the time. These authors listed the ways that online instruction transforms teaching in its demand for clearly narrated and organized materials, multimodal presentation of concepts and intentional attention to possibilities for community building.

Stoetzel and Shedrow (2021) also reported that teacher education courses moving online during the pandemic required improvisation on the part of instructors to curate files and materials quickly, focus on engaging students despite social distance through using blog and chat features, as well as providing more breaks in the lecture format to make space for discussion through chat, games, and discussion. Improvisation in virtual teacher education settings, as recounted in this literature, seems to focus on (a) instructors’ adaptations to the physical space change, such as curating accessible and clear materials for students, as well as (b) instructors’ responsiveness to the emotional needs of students to connect during an isolating time.

Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies

Researchers studying CRSP likewise have emphasized the importance of relational and responsive teaching but also emphasized creating opportunities for students to nurture and sustain their cultural and linguistic knowledge, particularly students from historically marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). In particular, proponents of culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) seek to plan lessons that foster, or sustain, linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation and mitigation of past exclusion and bias (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

In this paper, we drew on theories of culturally relevant pedagogies (CRP) and CSP, as both offering a helpful stance for centering the voices, experiences, and needs of students from communities that have been historically marginalized (Ladson-Billings, 2009; NYSED, 2019; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Conceptual Framework

Overlap and Tensions Between Research on Improvisation and CRSP in Teaching

There are some similarities as well as key differences between improvisation in teaching and CRSP. First, both stances value teachers connecting their teaching objectives and content with students – their lives, questions, experiences, and discursive offerings (Dezutter, 2011; Philip, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014). Yet, descriptions of CRSP consistently articulate the importance of teachers understanding, connecting, and sustaining students’ cultures in the classroom space, as well as supporting students in developing a critical consciousness.

Another similarity between much of the research on improvisation in teaching and CRSP is that both approaches reflect a constructivist approach to learning – believing that knowledge is constructed when the learning connects (and sometimes revises) previous understandings with new understandings. In both stances, collaborative learning among students is valued as well. Philip (2019), in particular, highlighted the importance of teacher candidates “learning to craft critical questions that build on students’ responses and move their analysis toward deeper consideration of power and historical, social, political and economic processes” (p. 8) as a part of their principled improvisational practice. Thus, it seems that one commonality between Philip’s articulation of principled improvisation and CRSP is this development of students’ critical consciousness. See Table 1 for a side-by-side comparison of principled improvisation and CRSP.

Table 1
Comparing Principled Improvisation and CRSP

Principled Improvisation (Philip, 2019)	Commonalities Between Principled Improvisation and CRSP	CRSP
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Learning to authentically listen to students 2. Learning to follow students’ lead in their learning 3. Learning to facilitate students’ building on each other’s ideas 4. Learning to craft critical questions that build on students’ responses and move their analysis toward a deeper consideration of power and historical, social, political, and economic processes. 	<p>Constructivist understanding of the learning process</p> <p>Drawing on students’ knowledge/listen to students and (often) follow their lead</p> <p>Developing students’ critical consciousness</p>	<p>Culturally Responsive Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Draw on and connect with students’ cultural knowledge in lessons 2. Foster academic success 3. Develop students’ critical consciousness <p>Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012)</p> <p>Seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation and revitalization</p>

With the exception of Philip (2019), most of the research on improvisation in teaching we found does not explicitly connect with CRSP. A few other exceptions include Graue et al. (2014), and Mitchell (2010), who addressed cultural aspects of teaching as well as improvisation. Graue et al. used improvisation as an analytical lens through which to understand early childhood teachers teaching lessons in culturally and developmentally responsive ways. The authors noted how teachers

responded to their students' talk, cultural references, play, and actions. The teachers centered students' interactions and formulated their teaching responses in the moment depending on the students' "offerings." The authors suggested that future research should center on teaching prospective teachers a skill set of improvisation, as derived from improvisational theater, in teacher education courses.

Much of the literature we found on improvisation in teaching that drew on improvisational theater was written by white researchers. The CRSP literature has largely been written by BIPOC authors with the explicit purpose of creating culturally nurturing and sustaining, empowering, engaging, and rigorous educational opportunities for youth from historically marginalized communities that have a history of being injured, ignored, and marginalized in schools and society.

We examined our data through a lens of disciplined improvisation in teaching, as articulated by Philip (2019) to interpret and extend what we learned from pivoting to virtual settings for fieldwork during the pandemic, while also recognizing the CRSP stance that we, as educators, bring to our work with literacy methods courses.

Setting and Participants

The virtual field experience opportunities for the three literacy methods courses were established as a result of a partnership between the department and an after-school built over several years. The partnership setting started as an optional in-person field experience in the summer of 2018, matching TCs with Mosaic Academy's elementary-aged boys attending the Mosaic summer program. The program aimed to support a lifelong love of learning, increasing self-confidence, and strengthening academic literacy skills. In May 2020, the Mosaic director reached out to request support in offering virtual literacy learning experiences, expressing her concern that students were experiencing learning loss during remote schooling. We decided to embrace the uncertainty caused by the shift in instruction by including a required virtual field experience element in the courses. With the help and coordination of the Mosaic director, we matched our 34 TCs from the three courses with students in Grades 3-6 needing support.

Participants included TCs who worked with Mosaic students across the three courses. Cunningham taught two sections of the same course in fall and spring. The participants' cultural and linguistic identities varied across the courses and can be found in Table 2.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the courses required the TCs to complete fieldwork hours for about 1 hour per week. During the summer session, students in Coakley-Fields' and Cunningham's classes met with the Mosaic boys for two half-hour sessions per week on Zoom. During the fall, Krafick's class met for one longer session per week and used Google Meet.

Table 2
Participants in Literacy Courses With Mosaic Students Virtual Field Experiences

Section	Program/Course	No. of TCs	Demographics of TCs
Author 1 Mary Coakley-Fields	Initial licensure Literacy Methods Course Focus on Teaching	6 of 11	2 - Latinx women - Spanish and English speaking 3 - White women - English speaking 1 - White man - English speaking
Author 3 Katie Egan Cunningham	Literacy Specialist Literacy Methods Course Focus on Teaching and Coaching	11 of 11	10 - White women - English speaking 1 - Latinx woman - English and Spanish speaking
Author 4 Kori Krafick	Literacy Specialist Practicum Focus on Teaching and Coaching	Fall 2020 Semester 5 of 5 Spring 2021 Semester 12 of 12	Fall: 3 - White women - English speaking 1 - Asian American woman - English speaking 1 - White man - English speaking Spring: 12 - White women - English speaking

The TCs were grouped into pairs in all three courses and each pair met with one to three Mosaic boys in Grades 3-6 for each session. The TCs coplanned their sessions, utilizing materials and procedures they learned in their courses, while also dealing with unanticipated challenges, which are detailed in the findings section. They cotaught the sessions and recorded anecdotal notes as well as collected student writing from the session (either writing shared in the chat or sent to them via a Google classroom).

The course instructors hopped around between the TC's virtual meetings, observing, coaching, and weighing in on each pair's meeting at least twice over the course of the semester. We observed each TC teach at least one time and often more. Finally, the TC's were required to write weekly reflections about their fieldwork hours, where they described what happened, reflecting on points of interest or confusion, what they were learning about the boys as literacy learners and themselves as teachers. They also wrote possible next steps for instruction for the boys.

After the completion of the courses, we collected and analyzed multiple sources of qualitative data, including our own field notes from teaching and observing during the field hours, as well as the TCs' lesson plans, case study assignments, and reflective writing completed as part of the courses. Our department takes a CRSP stance to our work with literacy pre- and in-service teachers, which is partially reflected in some of the course

materials, such as Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell's (2017) piece, *Committing to Culturally Relevant Teaching as an Everyday Practice: Its Critical!* We also engage students in listening to podcast interviews with authors and teacher educators Ghody Muhammed (2020) and Carla Espana and Luz Yadira Herrera (2020) and children's literature author Grace Lin, for example. Cunningham, in particular, posed questions about improvisational teaching practice to her students to reflect on as a part of the course as well.

When beginning our review of the data, however, we first took an inductive approach, by reading through data multiple times, noting and discussing our initial impressions of TC's interactions with students during virtual field hours. Then, we each annotated and coded the data, noting repeated ideas and words (as recommended in Maxwell, 1996). The data showed many examples of TCs responding to unforeseen challenges in the moment, as well as shifting gears (or deliberating whether to shift gears), thus we interpreted the pattern of improvisation.

When we identified more than five examples of a repeated idea or word, we began to interpret this as a pattern. We also noted many connections with what the TCs and students were doing with a CRSP stance – sometimes the same data showed improvisation and a developing CRSP stance. We interpreted themes from the patterns we identified in the data through the lenses of improvisation as a teaching practice and CRSP approach to teaching. The TCs' reflective writing served as a central data source.

The research questions that shaped our data analysis included the following:

1. In what ways did TCs improvise within the context of virtual teaching?
2. In what ways did those improvisations reflect CRSP in a virtual environment?

To identify improvisational teaching, we looked at places in TCs' lessons where they deviated from their plan to respond to the student's speech or behavior and to respond to the demands of online teaching. For instance, if a TC reflected on a lesson that "fell flat" at first, and then they pivoted to engage students in using the chat and moving on to a more relatable and funny picture book, we coded that series of moves as improvisational teaching. We also coded that example as having attributes of CRSP, in that it involved responding to students' varied participation styles and finding texts that reflected students' interests and identities.

In some of our data we identified improvisational teaching as responding in the moment to students in this new setting and pivoting to engage students when a lesson did not go as planned. Yet, as we interpreted data from later in the semester, we found more examples of intentional improvisation, where the TCs planned for student choice and dialogic interactions as a result of initial difficulties in their teaching.

Findings

The sections that follow describe our findings from virtual field experiences in literacy courses, organized into four themes. The section begins with analysis of how students used tools grounded in CRSP, like interest inventories and heart maps, to create space for students' interests and life experiences while developing the rapport required for improvisational learning. Next, we address how improvisation emerged from shifts in procedure required by change in class format with the shift to a virtual space. Then we zoom in on students' evolution in their approach to lesson planning procedures and their perspectives on teaching, which reflect a growing awareness of the importance of responsiveness, improvisation, and CRSP.

Same Literacy Goals, New Technological Tools, and Improvisational Insights

While the Mosaic partnership pivoted to a virtual model during the pandemic, the goals for our TCs in many ways remained the same. Our courses introduced TCs to theories and methodologies of teaching literacy in the upper elementary classroom. The course objectives included to become familiar with theories of learning and teaching literacy, to learn strategies for creating an inclusive literacy classroom, to select and use diverse texts and resources, and to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching students foundational literacy skills and strategic thinking. Underlying these theories was our shared commitment to CRSP or pedagogies that reject deficit perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse youth and, instead, harness and build on the knowledge that the boys of Mosaic already possessed.

As advocates of CRSP, we teach TCs to begin the fieldwork experience by seeking to learn about students' lives and cultural knowledge and build connections with the lessons. Fully online literacy methods field experiences meant that everyone – the instructor, the TCs, and the children – met for the first time on Zoom. Before meeting the boys virtually, the preservice TCs expressed apprehension about being in charge of the sessions and building a positive experience with children over a screen.

When we shifted to online instruction, the TCs spent more time than they anticipated conducting interest- and literacy-related inventories and interviews, involving questions for students about their interests, experiences, cultures, and perceptions of reading and writing. To help them build positive rapport and to mine for students' knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2009), they used the same literacy and interest inventory questions that TCs had used in previous semesters. During this virtual semester, however, several TCs immediately brainstormed ideas about how to administer the inventories online to suit their styles and connect with the boys virtually – such as using the chat and poll features of Zoom. One pair of TCs created a revised inventory that focused almost entirely on technology and literacy, with questions about the children's favorite video games, apps, music, TV shows, online kids' magazines, and comics.

Similarly, as a part of teaching the writing process, TCs taught students to create a “heart map” (Heard, 2016), a drawing of a heart, filled with names of people, places, and things that are special to them, as well as topics and issues that they care about. This activity was another way the TCs mined for students’ knowledge and interests, getting to know them and encouraging a supportive community, while also inviting them to generate ideas for their narrative, opinion, and informational writing pieces. Raul, a rising sixth grader, wrote that he loved fishing and Minecraft and wanted to be an architect when he grew up. Another student, Thomas, wrote that his grandmother was “near and dear to his heart” but had passed away. He wrote that he loved the movies *The Matrix* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*.

Educators have long recognized that tools like interest inventories and heart maps allow teachers to collect useful data about students that can provide the foundation for building the student-centered curriculum inherent to CRSP. While these relationships will develop organically over the course of instruction, it also makes sense to create structures to solicit them directly from students. As Sawyer (2004) affirmed, the balance between structure and spontaneity makes the collaboration inherent to improvisational learning possible, an assertion that helped us to contemplate the connection between CRSP and this newer lens.

Further insight into the intersection between the two frameworks emerged when two TCs helped us to recognize how these tested tools can serve as starting points for the relationship building both required for and inherent to improvisational learning. After using their Interest Inventories, the TCs told their classmates that it had not worked to simply ask the children questions without sharing a little bit about themselves. They shared how important it was to create an introduction slide to share with the children with a few photos and topics they cared about because, “it’s only fair to be brave and share if we’re asking children to share with us.”

Irizarry (2007) made the point that culturally relevant teaching requires teachers to think of culture broadly – as incorporating a variety of interests and patterns shown within a group of people, not simply the attributes that everyone shares in a group. In this way, recognizing that students needed the teachers to share about themselves to build trust helped teachers build a CRSP.

This conversation helped TCs realize that what initially felt like chit-chat was actually an extremely important part of connecting with students and enacting the lessons. They learned that their students spoke Spanish and enjoyed doing so, so they made sure to speak in Spanish each session to build comfort and rapport, and they chose texts in Spanish and invited them to write in Spanish to honor and build students’ literacy skills in their home language as well as English. One TC wrote about her first virtual field experience:

At first, Raul [all names are pseudonyms] seemed a little shy and didn’t respond, so to break the ice, we also told him a few of our hobbies and pets. Then ... he began speaking in great detail about his Betta fish (Mrs. Bubbles). We also learned that he is of Peruvian and Ecuadorian descent (we even exchanged some

words in Spanish). ... Once he came out of his shell, he seemed so eager to share.

CRSP emphasizes the nurturing and sustaining of students' home languages as a part of pedagogy, and the TCs who spoke Spanish with the boys created space for students' knowledge of Spanish as well as their identities as Spanish-speakers, thus sustaining a part of their culture in the educational space (Paris & Alim, 2014). For Raul, the topic of pets inspired him to engage in the give-and-take that is foundational to both improvisation and student-centered learning with a CRSP framework. To reframe this interaction with the language of improvisation, knowledge of the Mosaic boys like Raul helped the TCs to make offers that these young multilingual learners would accept in the form of literacy lessons, both appropriate for the online learning space and responsive to students' lived experience and interests.

Practicing Procedural Improvisations

As the TCs began to teach lessons they planned based on the knowledge they had gleaned with their interest inventories, they realized that the modifications they had made to these tools to make them viable online provided a valuable lesson about improvisation that complemented the data about the students' lives. Teaching online required a higher ratio of improvisation to structure than what they were accustomed to in face-to-face settings. TCs needed support in how to effectively improvise when met with a new set of distractions: students spinning in their rolling chairs, traveling with their laptops into the kitchen for a snack, or unmuting themselves to make an unrelated remark. Students arriving to Zoom late or losing their internet connection presented the conundrum of when to pause the lesson to welcome a student or follow up if a student was no longer there.

Yet even as it demanded more improvisation, the online environment complicated the process. There were also challenges related to lesson procedures previously taken for granted. Sometimes the TCs chose texts that did not create the response they hoped for, but they pushed onward rather than pivoting, simply because toggling screens on Zoom and finding a different read aloud or resource in the moment was too difficult, and they feared the pivot taking too long. They could not merely take another book off the classroom shelf or invite students to turn and talk as easily. This occurred particularly in the beginning of the semester before they realized the ways they needed to be able to improvise.

The TCs' first forays into improvisation took the form of practical but clever procedural shifts. For example, they invited students to type in the chat as a part of active engagement or assessment in the lesson, offering an additional participation structure beyond speaking. TCs creatively addressed the dilemma of how to view and assess student work by inviting them to tilt down their computer screens and hold writing up to the camera. To address challenges accessing digital materials, several students downloaded a public library application on their computers so they could view and discuss texts with the boys using the share-screen feature of Zoom.

TCs began to draw on what they had learned about students when improvising around typical procedures for applying comprehension strategies. In a session soon after completing the heart maps, six TCs in the initial licensure course planned to teach the boys strategies for summarizing. These TCs read the Newbery-medal winning graphic novel *The New Kid* (Craft, 2019), featuring a Black middle schooler in a predominantly white, private school, as a part of the course.

For this lesson they used the beginning chapter of the book to read-aloud with the boys to model a strategy for summarizing called “Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then” (SWBST; Serravallo, 2015). To engage the students, especially Thomas who had been quiet and off camera, one TC said, “Remember how you told us that you liked the movie *The Matrix* and you were talking like Neo? Let’s see if we can summarize the movie using SWBST...” Interested, Thomas collaborated with the group as they summarized Neo’s (the main character’s) role in *The Matrix*. She wrote about this interaction (which Coakley-Fields had also observed in real time) in her weekly reflection:

I was getting panic-y because I was not sure how to engage him. Of course, I wanted him to gain the academic literacy skills. But neither of us were succeeding with him keeping his camera off and not responding. My instinct kicked in. I really tried to connect with him because maybe, if nothing else, this time together could be a moment of connection.

By tweaking the offer to a topic both familiar and interesting to Thomas first, the TCs then were able to engage him with the focal skill of summary as applied to the text chosen by the teacher (*The New Kid*).

This example of improvisational teaching is of particular interest to us as proponents of CRSP who enact the NYSED guidelines to create inclusive curriculum and assessment with “resources written and developed by traditionally marginalized voices that offer diverse perspectives on race, culture, language, gender, sexual identity, ability, religion, nationality, migrant/refugee status, socioeconomic status, housing status, and other identities traditionally silenced or omitted from curriculum.” (p. 28). As a Newbery winning graphic novel written by a BIPOC man who was diagnosed with dyslexia as a child, *The New Kid* is an ideal choice for a literacy unit grounded in CRSP. Yet, it was connecting with the student’s text of choice (*The Matrix*) that allowed a point of entry for the student.

Emphasizing Student Engagement: From Minilesson to Microlesson

While these changes were effective, it became clear that the online environment required shifts in practice that went deeper than in-the-moment responses to disruptions in routines and procedures. We recognized that a planning-centric view of teaching limited our students’ abilities to connect with students and enact meaningful, memorable lessons. The TCs first wrote highly detailed coteaching lessons, selected culturally relevant and sustaining texts, planned for modeling and active engagement, and then found that many of their students were actively

disengaged and less successful in reaching the literacy goals they had meticulously planned for.

TCs started to demonstrate greater comfort with letting go of an overly scripted minilesson toward more of a microlesson model. Whereas a minilesson would typically take 8-10 minutes in a face-to-face classroom, TCs started to value the microlesson as a brief, 3-minute lesson designed to capture student attention, validate their strengths, and set them up to quickly engage.

In analyzing the evolution of TCs lesson plans, the shift from transmission to improvisation was evident in the kinds of engagements TCs planned and the ways they released students to do more of the thinking from the start of the lesson. Table 3 demonstrates this shift from minilesson planning to microlesson planning that allowed students to shift from a transmission model of instruction to a more improvisational one by design (see Table 3).

Table 3
Minilesson and Microlesson Samples From the Same TC

Week 1 Minilesson Teach	Week 5 Microlesson Teach
<p>Today I am going to teach you that writers can keep their ideas flowing while writing with a list of guiding questions in mind. These questions give writers the ideas they need to keep their stories going but also to make the stories as clear as they can be. The list of guiding questions also helps writers if and when they get stuck and don't know what to write next. Even though this is a quickwrite and the piece will not be published, this draft can be the beginning of a writing piece you wish to continue on your own. Now I am going to show you the list of questions to consider while completing your quick write prompt today. These are very similar to the ones Jason Reynolds mentioned in his video...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is the treasure you find? - How do you know what it is? - What are you going to do after you find the treasure at the pool? - Are you going to try and figure out who it belongs to? How are you going to find the owner of the treasure? <p>Now that I have shown you the list of questions to consider when writing, let me show you the quickwrite I completed using the same prompt and list of guiding questions. As I am reading, look out for answers to the questions from the list.</p>	<p>Today, you will use your writing skills and look at how punctuation is important in writing. What are some of the reasons why you think punctuation is important?</p> <p>Today, we're going to explore some sentence connectors to use in our own writing and how we punctuate with them. We will also compare and contrast various forms of punctuation and how they are used in other texts. Let's take a look at some mentor sentences and notice what makes them effective and how punctuation is used.</p>

Course instructors provided TCs with feedback on the lessons in advance of teaching, to anticipate where engagement or comprehension might break down. Drawing from DeZutter, TCs were asked,

- In what ways is the script of your lesson supporting or not supporting student learning and engagement?
- Who is “in charge” of the learning? Why? How do you know?
- How can you anticipate improvisational moves in future lessons based on your experiences teaching virtually so far?
- How can you support one another as coteachers and coaches to lean into the improvisational nature of teaching, particularly online?

These guiding questions helped TCs both to plan more flexibly, to allow for more improvisation and to respond meaningfully to the moves or offers made by the Mosaic boys during online instruction. The instructors’ feedback encouraged the TCs to accept and affirm students’ contributions first and then build on them – like the improv actors’ rule of “yes, and,” which helps actors advance a scene. Intentionally using a “yes, and” teaching move is an example of the kind of purposeful and disciplined improvisation (DeZutter, 2011) or principled improvisation (Philip, 2019) needed to engage students when teaching and learning within the strictures of an online environment like Zoom.

Discursive moves like “yes and” derived from improvisational theater position students as capable community members and “knowers.” Positioning students as capable community members whose knowledge and offers are valued are also attributes of CRSP practices described in CRSP literature (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014).

One common thread across TCs’ initial reflections on shifts in both procedures in terms of lesson planning and their teaching stance as beginning to reflect more principled improvisation (Philip, 2019) was the desire for more student engagement and attributing a lack of engagement to time rather than their own planning or methods. After the 1st week of instruction TCs reflected with statements like the following:

I know we were both stressed about the timeframe and that we were not able to teach the lesson in its entirety. We can both agree that our next lesson definitely needs to involve more student engagement because the boys have the ability to collaborate and build off one another. The student engagement piece was lost today because of the limited time and the need for us to address the main points of the lesson.

This TC showed her investment in student discussion and collaboration as well as her dilemma around how to create more of this peer engagement in the virtual space. Her use of the phrase “build off one another” captures the give and take of improvisational performances, even as it acknowledges the need to incorporate student voices and knowledge.

By the end of the second week of instruction, TCs looked more inward at their role as the teacher, with particular attention to who was doing the

talking and how that related to who was doing the learning. TCs were openly reflecting on their minilessons and how too much teacher talking built into their plans in an attempt to model reading and writing processes led to less engagement and less learning. TCs noted the ways that they filled wait time with talk because of uncomfortable silences and that their decision to model had limitations. For example, one TC wrote,

At the beginning of the lesson, while I was modeling, I was unsure if the students understood because I was doing most of the talking. It was not until the active engagement part of the lesson where the students got to work together that I was able to check for understanding and guide their thinking.

Improvisational teaching requires the collaboration present in the moments of active engagement when students' thinking becomes visible, allowing teachers to monitor understanding. The TC noticed the importance of interaction with students, both for the students' opportunities to process learning in a dialogic manner and for her ability to assess their learning.

As the semester continued, student reflections started to shift, revealing a rethinking of their roles and ways to engage students online as literacy learners with statements like the following:

I think what went well in the lesson was the ability to engage the students and get them writing right away! I know the students were engaged throughout the lesson because they were so eager to answer our questions and communicate with one another. One student was even noticeably looking up and referring to the guided questions provided.

By the end of the semester, TCs started to consider the complex decision-making that planning toward improvisation requires. As they let go of some of their planned modeling, they began to see more engagement, as the shift in control focused more on students' reading and writing from the start of the lesson rather than assuming they had to model every process.

Students' written reflections after each lesson demonstrated that they were becoming critical of their own methods that fostered a transmission-focused approach to teaching and learning despite using the architecture of a minilesson to invite engagement. They moved toward an understanding of good teaching as improvisational in a way that was generative of a space where students could process their learning through discussion and connection-making.

Discussion

In the following Discussion we consider the minor – and more substantial – shifts in practice that occurred in TCs' growing knowledge of procedural, technological, and pedagogical tools, their ability to improvise to be responsive to both students and the technology, and their application of culturally relevant teaching theories. Overall, teachers took on more of a leadership role during the shift to virtual field hours than during

traditional field hours, because the instructors could be in only one Zoom room at a time. Thus, the TCs developed their procedural methods as well as their more improvisational and responsive approach to student engagement and dialogue in the virtual space. In this way, effective teachers are defined as teachers who scaffold evolving thinking, broaden students' schema, and recognize the constructivist nature of teaching as a part of introducing students to particular content and strategies.

Table 4 demonstrates the ways TCs reconceptualized teaching as professional improvisation based on their lesson reflections. Data shows they rethought what is important to learn, how learning is constructed, where learning occurs, and how success is measured.

Table 4
Comparison of Transmission-Focused and Improvisational Instruction

Transmission Focused	Improvisational
Teacher-driven	Teacher-framed; Student-led
Limited forms of knowledge valued	Diverse forms of knowledge considered including cultural and linguistic knowledge, strategic knowledge, knowledge of texts and their uses <i>and</i> content knowledge
Compliance-directed model of classroom management	Connection-driven model for classroom management that acknowledges learners, families, and communities
Impersonal text selection	Interest and identity-driven text selection
Technology for transmission and consumption	Technology for cultivating critical consciousness, creativity, and connection

The online fieldwork required TCs to gain comfort with building rapport quickly and directly with students, facing each other on a screen eye to eye, rather than reading social cues more peripherally, and over time, in a shared classroom space. This started as a challenge and felt uncomfortable for some TCs to build a community in what they thought was a more forced way, different from the classroom contexts we are all used to. This rapport building – through interest- and literacy-inventories, interviews, and heart maps, for instance – took much more time than we had originally planned, yet it was a crucial launchpad for the literacy lessons.

Synchronous Zoom teaching and learning allowed TCs to use a variety of culturally relevant texts and engage in similar conversations as would happen in in-person settings, but sometimes not as rigorously or for as long. Teaching in response to students' interests was easier to achieve than teaching toward critical consciousness in the short duration of the eight 30-minute sessions per class with audio problems, children needing additional encouragement to participate, and other distractions. Yet TCs

and students began many critical conversations, showing us the possibility of more culturally relevant literacy methods courses and fieldwork.

A tension that arose for us as we interpreted this data was the role of diverse texts chosen by the teacher as potentially stifling students' engagement, especially in the online space with fewer past interactions and common experiences than one would find in the in-person classroom space. It seemed that the TCs found that connecting teacher-chosen texts with texts chosen by the students yielded more student engagement, but both discussions were more stilted, perhaps because of constraints on time, than book discussions with students in prior semesters.

The TCs engaged the students in additional reading strategies that cultivated critical consciousness, such as identifying the social and historical context of a text and how that influences a character. Yet, these brief discussions were just a start – not a final destination – toward CRSP. Some of the boys shared their knowledge of current events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement when discussing issues of exclusion and racial identity in *The New Kid* (Craft, 2019). Identifying what the characters “wanted” in the SWBST strategy paved the way for identifying the changes that the characters desired in their lives when they experienced injustice.

Inspired by the course readings and discussion and their own interpretive stances toward teaching, several TCs worked toward CRSP as they mined for students' interests, cultural knowledge, and understanding of the world, while also supporting students' reading strategy development and critical consciousness. The TCs began to reflect on and discuss issues of fairness, equity, and access to class participation during a lesson, developing their critical consciousness for the ways that teachers can create or shut down opportunities for students' engagement and learning.

Many of the TCs began to develop this interpretive stance, as evidenced through the texts they chose, the questions they asked, and the discussions they facilitated with students, but in a short summer semester course, CRSP was an entry point without being fully realized. We decidedly took an asset-based approach to understanding our TCs and their enactment of teaching during the virtual field experiences, highlighting their attempts as approximations which were sometimes successful in teaching and engaging students and their dilemmas as important considerations for all teachers engaging students in literacy practices.

As vaccines offer the promise of a return to more in-person field experiences for TCs, we are left wondering about the possibilities for virtual teaching in a postpandemic world. Simply doing things differently than expected because of the pandemic showed TCs' improvisation to respond to the unexpected but did not constitute disciplined improvisation (Sawyer, 2011). While the TCs, particularly in the literacy specialist courses, became more conscious of the role of an improvisational stance to teaching rather than transmission of knowledge stance, our goal here is to suggest that engaging TCs in a more intentional study of improvisation in teaching (a more principled improvisational stance) would be helpful. More intentional or disciplined teacher improvisation, which, especially as conceptualized by Philip (2019), can be

a part of dynamic CRSP approaches to teaching, creates space for emergent, unexpected, and surprising material to emerge while also meeting teacher and school objectives.

We continue to wonder: How can we ensure equity and culturally responsive and sustaining practices remain central to the work our TCs do, whether virtual or face-to-face? How do we attend to the well-being of our TCs when future challenges arise? And what are the literacies that teachers and students must be familiar with to thrive in various learning environments and in the world? As the field reflects on the virtual field experiences TCs engaged in during the pandemic, it offers us an opportunity to reevaluate the value of teaching as disciplined improvisation, under what conditions our TCs are enacting culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, and how technologies offer TCs and students new ways to interact and meet learning goals.

Implications

This investigation sought to add to the research base on how TCs learn to improvise in virtual teacher education spaces and how the act of improvisation serves to support culturally responsive and sustaining practices. The article offers ideas for how teacher educators can support TCs learning to teach literacy while taking a CRSP stance through (a) purposefully mining (Ladson-Billings, 2009) for students' experiences, interests and cultural knowledge, (b) taking an improvisational approach to applying typical literacy lesson procedures, like teaching comprehension strategies, and (c) composing microlessons rather than more heavily teacher-talk focused minilessons, leaving space for increased student interaction with each other and the concepts at hand.

In interpreting data from our students' shift to virtual field experiences, we are convinced of the importance of introducing TCs to the concept of professional improvisation in teaching in a more intentional, or principled (Philip, 2019), manner in the future. Like many researchers advocating for improvisation in teaching, we believe that teaching TCs improvisation as both an intentional and principled stance and a set of discursive teaching skills (Dezutter, 2011; Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Tanner, 2019) will increase TCs' ability to center and build on all students' offers as key elements of the teaching-learning interaction, paying particular attention to students who have been traditionally marginalized and devalued as part of their schooling experience.

Preparing TCs to connect with students' offers in ways that affirm students' lives, experiences, interests, and cultures, such as their home language, their popular culture choice texts, and their interactional styles, will help TCs demonstrate a CRSP stance through their teaching, both in virtual spaces and in-person spaces. Data showed that our virtual teacher education spaces needed TCs' intentional mining even more than we anticipated or had needed when meeting in person. Therefore, this mining should be a crucial and intentional part of online pedagogy that supports CRSP.

An additional consideration is the role of partnering with an after-school program (such as Mosaic, which is a Saturday and summer program for supporting the academic success of boys from low-income communities) for TCs' field experiences, because after-school programs often offer a more flexible space for TCs to work with students in improvisational and culturally responsive and sustaining manners. Consistent with the research on teleconferencing-centered teacher education field work, especially in rural settings, we found that hopping on Zoom with the children in this program made the experience more accessible for both the students and the TCs, who might be coming from other activities or work (the TCs), or not have a ride (as was the case of some of the boys).

Field work completed within courses with the support of professors and peers can function as a rehearsal space in which teachers might feel more free to embrace the spontaneity of improvisational pedagogies. As Phillip (2019) wrote, "Novice teachers must have a space to develop shared knowledge, judgment, and context-responsive improvisational practices through learning opportunities organized around principled improvisation" (p. 26). All teachers can benefit from these spaces. We feel fortunate to have witnessed TCs who not only rose to the challenge of the pandemic by adjusting instructional routines and procedures but who also recognized the significance of reflecting on how to apply the lessons they learned to their everyday classroom practices and principles.

Conclusion

Our goal in this paper was to advance knowledge concerning how TCs might draw on their learnings about culturally responsive and sustaining literacy pedagogy during virtual field experiences and incorporate intentional improvisation with procedures in their literacy teaching. The virtual space shaped the ways that TCs learned to lead students and balance planning with improvisation. TCs were forced to experiment with and try out Zoom, as well as curating accessible documents and procedures, and to learn affordances and limitations for teaching literacy in an online portal.

In this study, we built on theories of teaching and learning that consider how teachers improvised with their literacy teaching in a virtual space and what teacher educators can do to facilitate improvisational skill development in TCs in the future – in virtual and physically proximate settings. Instructors should encourage novice teachers to embrace the constructivist and collectivist mindsets that undergird improvisational performances and teaching as they also strive to take a CRSP stance. Improvisational teaching practices align well with CRSP practices in that both center an intentional teaching stance toward planning for responsive curriculum and centering students' offerings. Taken together, both improvisational teaching and CRSP offer virtual literacy teacher fieldwork spaces crucial tools for engaging P-12 students in culturally responsive and sustaining literacy practices.

References

- Bryson, J., & Andres, L. (2020). Covid-19 and rapid adoption and improvisation of online teaching: Curating resources for extensive versus intensive online learning experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 44*(4), 608-623.
- Craft, J. (2019). *New kid*. Harper Collins.
- Dezutter, S. (2011). Professional improvisation and teacher education: Opening the conversation. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 27–50). Cambridge University Press.
- Graue, E., Whyte, K., & Delaney, K.K. (2014). Fostering culturally and developmentally responsive teaching through improvisational practice. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 35*, 297–317.
- Heard, G. (2016). *Heart maps: Helping students create and craft creative writing*. Heinemann.
- Heath, S. B., & Street, B. V. (2008). *On ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. Teachers College Press.
- España, C., & Herrera L.Y. (2020). *En comunidad: Lessons for centering the voices and experiences of bilingual Latinx students*. Heinemann.
- Irizarry, J. (2007). Ethnic and urban intersections in the classroom: Latino students, hybrid identities, and culturally relevant pedagogy. *Multicultural Perspectives, 9*(3), 21-28.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass.
- Lobman, C., & Lundquist, M. (2007). *Unscripted learning: Using improv activities across the K-8 curriculum*. Teachers College Press.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design*. Sage.
- Mitchell, R. (2010). Cultural aesthetics and teacher improvisation: An epistemology of providing culturally responsive service by African American professors. *Urban Education, 45*(5), 604-629.
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.
- New York State Education Department. (2018). *Culturally responsive-sustaining education framework*. <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework>

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1), 85-100.

Philip, T. (2019). Principled improvisation to support novice teacher learning. *Teachers College Record*, 121(6), 1-32.

Sawyer, R. K. (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation. *Educational Researcher*, 33(2), 12-20.

Sawyer, R. K. (2011). What makes good teachers great? The artful balance of structure and improvisation. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 1-24). Cambridge University Press.

Serravallo, J. (2015). *The reading strategies book: Your everything guide to developing skilled readers*. Heinemann.

Smagorinsky, P., & Barnes, M. (2014). Revisiting and revising the apprenticeship of observation. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 41(4), 29-52.

Souto-Manning, M., & Martell, J. (2017). Committing to culturally relevant literacy teaching as an everyday practice: It's critical! *Language Arts*, 94(4), 252-256.

Stoetzel, L., & Shedrow, S. (2021). [making the transition to virtual methods in the literacy classroom: Reframing teacher education practices](#). *Excelsior: Leadership in Teaching and Learning*, 13(2), 137-142.

Tanner, S. J. (2019). "I needed that": An improvisational classroom ethos. *English Journal*, 109(1), 30-37.

Wiesemes, R., & Wang, R. (2010). Video conferencing for opening classroom doors in initial teacher education: Sociocultural processes of mimicking and improvisation. *Seminar.net: International Journal of Media, Technology and Life-Long Learning*. 1(6), 28-42.

Zeichner, K., & Bier, M. (2015). Opportunities and pitfalls in the turn toward clinical experiences in U.S. teacher education. In E. Hollins (Ed.). *Rethinking clinical experiences in preservice teacher education*. (pp. 20-46). Routledge.

Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education is an online journal. All text, tables, and figures in the print version of this article are exact representations of the original. However, the original article may also include video and audio files, which can be accessed online at <http://www.citejournal.org>