

## **Constructing Teacher Expertise**

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U.S. state and federal education policy has played an increasingly influential role in the construction of teacher expertise over the past two decades, often narrowing, numericizing, and hyper-rationalizing this concept (Aguilar & Richerme, 2014; Holloway, 2018; Lewis & Holloway, 2018; Spring, 2014). These developments, however, frequently overlook the historical, political, and social influences on local understandings of expertise, which should be approached as a value-laden, as opposed to value-free, concept (Brady, 2018). This critique is especially pertinent considering the “post-truth” era we currently find ourselves in, where expertise is negotiated and challenged even in the most legitimized professions such as medicine (Holloway, 2020). Scholars and practitioners today are facing a dissonant and often contradictory educational landscape, where tensions between policy and politics simultaneously narrow and disrupt how we have come to understand teacher expertise. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore this complex moment by studying how teacher expertise is constructed within one school community.

This paper is an exploratory qualitative pilot study that approaches the construction of expertise as a complex process that is negotiated in politically, historically, and geographically situated contexts. Tracy Smith’s (2004) prototype of expertise in teaching provides a starting point to understand teacher expertise, yet the negotiation processes behind its situated construction is most effectively explored by also utilizing social sciences’ “boundary studies” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). This combination of educational and sociological theory illuminates how teacher expertise is constructed in one a rural Midwestern U.S. elementary school couched within a politically and socially conservative town. Focusing on a rural and conservative community is particularly important considering their potential skepticism toward educational and political institutions, providing a glimpse into an understanding of teacher expertise that may not often be discussed nor legitimized in educational research today. Data collection primarily includes conversations with school teachers and staff, district leaders, and local parents as well as observations (e.g., meetings and professional development workshops) and document collection (e.g., policies and evaluation protocol). I then discuss how policy- and research-based conceptualizations of teacher expertise align as well as contradict with those constructed within this specific context. While the ultimate goal of this project is a multi-school

ethnography within one rural school district, this pilot study provides a meaningful starting point to identify potential themes regarding how boundaries around teacher expertise are created, negotiated, and even deconstructed.