

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING TEACHER
EDUCATION TO FACILITATE STUDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to give teachers a voice to express their self-efficacy beliefs, their opinions about the content and the effectiveness of their teacher preparation programs to facilitate student learning, and to hear their suggestions for improving teacher education to enable future educators to achieve that goal. The advent of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002, referred to as No Child Left Behind, has reframed the debate on teacher quality. Across the board, from scholars to government officials to private foundations, there is a call for reform of schools of education. It is these schools which are responsible for preparing teachers to educate students who will succeed in the globalized society of the 21st century; yet the voice of the classroom teacher is nearly absent. In this transcendental phenomenological study, I collected data from a sample of 25 educators who have been teaching in schools between 5 and 10 years. An online survey, face-to-face interviews, and one focus group was used to address the topic of how to improve teacher education to best meet the educational needs of a diverse student population. While nearly all participants expressed positive self-efficacy beliefs and an overall satisfaction with the quality of their respective teacher education programs, each reported deficiencies in preparation. Participants expressed concern in the areas of content knowledge, special education, teaching English language learners, using instructional technology, classroom management, and building relationships with families.

Descriptors: Teacher education, teacher preparation, teacher quality, self-efficacy

Dedication

Father God, I thank you for the many gifts and blessings you have bestowed upon my family and me. Bless this endeavor for the benefit of children and teachers everywhere.

To my James Matthew, you are my dear heart, my joy, and my light. To my daughter, Marina, and my son, Mason, I am so proud of you, and I hope to see you use your talents to make the world a better place by helping others. To my parents, John and Linda, you have always been there with unwavering, unconditional love and support. Thank you all for your encouragement and love.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The manner in which teachers are prepared in the United States has come to the forefront of the education debate in recent years (Cochran-Smith, 2008). When the level of performance of American students ranked 25th in math and 21st in science among 30 developed nations by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), many parents, politicians, and pundits focused upon the method of teacher preparation as a factor contributing to student achievement (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). PISA statistics from data gathered in 2009 show that 15-year-olds in the United States perform at average levels in science and reading, and statistically significantly lower in mathematics among the 35 countries which are a part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). As this lackluster performance occurs in an age when other countries pose threats to challenge the dominance of the United States in the economic realm, the ability of teachers to prepare students in a globalized economy in the twenty-first century continues to be scrutinized. Teacher preparation varies from state to state; even the national standards set by High, Objective, Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE) via the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), are fulfilled by each of the fifty states in as many different ways. Secretary of State Arne Duncan called the current system “byzantine” in both its complexity and level of effectiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b).

While some would call for a national standard, others who are concerned with issues most cogent to states and localities favor state control of teacher preparation.

The most relevant literature contains analyses of the importance of teacher preparation relative to student learning and achievement. NCLB, 2001, mandates that American children meet standards for academic growth as measured by annual standardized testing. As the federal government exerts pressure upon schools in the United States to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, schools are facing unparalleled challenges in the history of education to meet goals for achievement. As administrators search for every advantage to meet these benchmarks, the relative importance of teacher preparation as a factor in student achievement has been called into question (Evans, Stewart, Mangin, & Bagley, 2001). While the natural intelligence of a teacher is important, the question of teacher preparation is also being examined as a force to precipitate positive student achievement.

A report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning Commissioned by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) released a report titled, “Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers” (NCATE, 2010). “The education of teachers in the United States needs to be turned upside down,” (NCATE, 2010, p.ii) begins the first sentence of the executive summary of the 30-page report. The document cited work by the National Research Council that recently named clinical preparation the key factor to improving teacher preparation (NCATE, 2010). The report also endorsed 10 design principles for clinically based preparation, naming student learning as the top focus (NCATE, 2010). It also called for the use of data and research-

based strategies in conjunction with state-of-the-art technology and partnerships between school districts, preparation programs, teacher unions, and state policymakers (NCATE, 2010). The panel was comprised of 31 members from higher education, state departments of education, and the two major teacher union presidents, Dennis Van Roekel of the National Education Association (NEA) and Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The report also named California, Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, Ohio, Oregon, and Tennessee, as the eight states who have representatives who have signed letters of intent to implement the policy recommendations (NCATE, 2010).

As federal and state entities grapple with the question of how to best prepare teachers to affect positive student achievement, the voice of the classroom teacher has been conspicuously absent from the debate. Politicians, business leaders, and leaders in the field of higher education have been invited to debate the best ways to prepare teachers to meet the learning needs of the current population of students. These stakeholders, while important, have not been actively soliciting the opinions of the classroom teachers who work with students on a daily basis and might be in the best position to assess their challenges, obstacles, and needs in the learning process.

Problem Statement

With so many competing interests and issues governing the topic of teacher education, including content knowledge, social justice, bilingual education, diversity, low socioeconomic status, special education, the concept of opportunity cost dictates that the inclusion of one topic can result in the exclusion of another. One researcher cited the need for primarily field-based programs with subject specific pedagogy (Allen, 2002).

Another advocates for professional development school partnerships (Creasy, 2008). Others cite success related to using student achievement data to drive instruction (Dean, Lauer, & Urquardt, 2005; Heckaman, Thompson, Hull, & Ernest, 2007). As the special education population grows, some are calling for special education teachers and content teachers to be prepared in the same manner (Brownell et al., 2009). In light of a diverse society in which achievement gaps exist, there is also a push for emphasizing social justice in teacher preparation programs (Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, & Mitescu, 2008).

The most recent reauthorization of NCLB in 2002 is 670 pages of legislation, authored by Representatives George Miller (D-CA) and John Boehner (R-OH), and Senators Judd Gregg (R-NH) and Ted Kennedy (D-MA). It contains language pertaining to the preparation, training, and recruitment of teachers. Since it has been signed into law, several groups have issued reports on recommendations for improvement. These groups include the American Association of School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Council of State Legislators, the National School Boards Association, and the Education Trust. Adding their voices to this group are the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2007).

Despite the comprehensive nature of NCLB and the reality of HOUSSSE, individual states still maintain autonomy over determining acceptable methods of teacher education and certification. However, many leaders of these groups are largely comprised of government workers, businesspeople, and administrators rather than classroom

teachers. For example, the nine-member Virginia Department of Education consists of a business owner, an attorney, a technology consultant, a school board member, and a former Secretary of the Commonwealth. Of the remaining four members, two are former central office administrators, and two are deans of schools of education (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). While these final four have teaching experience, none are currently active classroom teachers.

The two major accrediting bodies for schools of education, NCATE and the Teacher Accreditation Education Council (TEAC) merged in October 2010 to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Although the list of the interim board has not yet been published, we can look back upon its predecessors to gauge teacher involvement. Of the two bodies, NCATE has six teacher representatives on a board of thirty (NCATE, 2011). TEAC has only one teacher on a 16-member board of directors (TEAC, 2011).

While many different groups of stakeholders debate the manner in which teachers are prepared, the input of teachers is valuable to this discourse (National Education Association, 2010; Students First, 2010). NEA President Dennis Van Roekel addressed this issue at the NEA Representative in New Orleans in 2010:

How can we better lead our own profession? What would the profession look like if we—the union—actually controlled teacher training, induction and licensure, evaluation and professional development? How do we ensure that all teachers are prepared to enter the profession and then are supported, especially in their first years? (Van Roekel, 2010)

The trend of excluding or marginalizing the perspectives of teachers does not honor the experience of everyday educators. The problem is that opinions of classroom teachers generally have not been solicited to address the question, “How can the teacher education process be improved to better prepare teachers to facilitate student learning?”

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to give teachers a voice to express their self-efficacy beliefs, their opinions about the content and the effectiveness of their teacher preparation programs to facilitate student learning, and to hear their suggestions for improving teacher education to enable future educators to achieve that goal. I interviewed 25 kindergarten through sixth grade teachers in Virginia who have been in the classroom between five and ten years to gather and analyze this data.

Significance of the Study

Following the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with No Child Left Behind in 2002, the issue of improving teacher quality has come to the forefront of the education debate in the United States. Various political bodies, nonpartisan councils, accrediting institutions and for-profit entities are questioning the methods of the preparation of American teachers toward the goal of improving student achievement (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). While alternative certification programs are being proposed and implemented, traditional routes to certification are being scrutinized in an effort to improve student outcomes (Allen, 2002). Although some of those discussing how to make positive changes to the system of teacher education in the United States may have been former teachers, subsequent years

outside the classroom may have insulated them from this generation of learners, therefore affecting their opinion. The perspective of administrative experience may have also shifted their outlook upon how to improve teacher education in an era where American students rank relatively low when compared to their counterparts in other developed nations throughout the world.

There are many issues to be examined in the current debate. Atop the bureaucratic layer of policy, there is an argument about traditional versus alternative routes to licensure. Upon merging to become the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). These two bodies have worked to reconcile their standards and systems for the review and evaluation of schools of teacher education (CAEP, 2010).

Educational programs provide instruction in both subject matter and pedagogy, including courses on methods and social foundations of education. Critics argue that there is an imbalance between these elements and clinical teaching experiences under the supervision of a mentor (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Leslie, Gee, & Matthew, 2010; Louden & Rohl, 2006; Karamustafaoglu, 2009; NCATE, 2010). For this reason, the prospect of utilizing professional development schools so that teaching candidates can get more exposure to these experiences earlier in their programs rather than simply at the end (Lesley, Gee, & Matthew, 2010; Lim-Teo, Low, Wong, & Chong, 2007).

In addition to examining teacher preparation, reform efforts are often based upon areas of need related to student demographics. Serving a population with growing numbers of culturally, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse students poses a

challenge for those striving to meet the needs of these learners (Buck & Cordes, 2005; O'Neal, Ringler, & Rodriguez, 2008). Educating students who have autism, attention deficit disorder, and/or learning disabilities is another daunting task for teachers (Sindelar, Brownell & Billingsley, 2010). At the same time an emphasis upon content knowledge for all teachers, including educators of students with disabilities, is currently being emphasized (Brownell et al., 2010; Griffin, Jitendra, & League, 2009; Barbour & Mourshed, 2007).

While reading and writing command much of the student school day, teachers must also be diligent and effective when providing math and science instruction to address the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) crisis so that graduates may be competitive in the globalized economy of today (National Math and Science Initiative, 2007). Integrating technology to provide this instruction is another skill set that teachers need to be successful (Doppen, 2004). Managing behavior issues, such as bullying, and forming relationships with families are also part of the job description for a teacher (Baum & McMurray-Schwartz, 2004). Amid the pressure to balance these issues, teachers are expected to prepare students to succeed on standardized tests (Allen, 2002). Failure to do so is an issue when it comes to teacher retention and can affect compensation in systems where merit pay has been introduced (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2009a).

As challenges for teachers mount, the relative value of the current system of teacher education has been called into question. However, this debate has been dominated by politicians, philanthropists, and pundits who have not widely solicited the input of the classroom teacher. In the efforts to improve the system of teacher preparation, classroom

teachers have rarely been accorded an opportunity to share their experiences and concerns. Allowing teachers to voice their opinions and provide their unique perspectives can potentially have a large impact upon the current movement to improve teacher education to facilitate student learning in the United States.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

First, what are the self-efficacy beliefs of each teacher regarding the ability to perform their job duties?

Second, which courses and learning experiences in the respective teacher education program most effectively prepared each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Third, which courses and learning experiences in the respective teacher education program did not contribute to the ability of each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Fourth, what improvements do participants believe should be made to each respective teacher education program to facilitate and advance student learning?

Delimitations

The participants in the sample were 25 kindergarten through sixth grade certified teachers from central and southwest Virginia who have been teachers between five and ten years and have graduated from one of 37 accredited teacher education programs located throughout the state of Virginia (Virginia Department of Education, 2011a). I targeted participants in this particular stage of their teaching career because they have a reasonable amount of experience to base their opinions upon, and because the method by

which teachers are prepared in the United States has not varied greatly within and since this period of time.

Research Plan

This qualitative study employed a transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) to allow the participants to share their experiences as educators. The design enabled me to collect and analyze data as I interviewed 25 kindergarten through sixth grade teachers in Virginia, each of whom have five to 10 years of teaching experience. While much quantitative data has been collected to examine the correlational relationships between teacher preparation and student achievement, the transcendental phenomenological approach enabled me to hear the participants' experiences, perspectives, and suggestions for improving the teacher education process in Virginia.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The advent of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2002, referred to as No Child Left Behind, has reframed the debate on teacher quality. The 670 pages of controversial legislation address how to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers who can demonstrate gains in student achievement. The descriptions of the challenges facing the preparation of teachers in the nation's pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade public education system paint a bleak picture. The literature is neither vague nor timid; many are calling for the massive overhaul of the traditional teacher preparation system (Houston, 2007; NCATE, 2010).

The first sentence of a Blue Ribbon Panel report reads, "The education of teachers in the United States needs to be turned upside down" (NCATE, 2010). If this is a critical juncture in the road for American education, the map has many easements and byways. Some state that the answer lies in alternate routes to teacher preparation, such as Teach for America (TFA) or Troops to Teachers (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). Regardless of the routes to licensure, subject area specialists are calling for the use of content-specific pedagogy to teach reading, writing, math, and science (Richardson & Liang, 2008). Amid the back-to-basics and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) movements are those call attention to additional issues including fine arts, physical education, and foreign language. As the population of special education students grows, there are those who are advocating dual certification for all licensed educators. Obstacles to this process include limited economic resources, a high attrition rate for teachers, and a

looming teacher shortage as many educators will soon reach retirement age. The road to the destination of higher levels of student academic achievement is being paved by those who wish to overhaul the current process to prepare teachers of pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade students. The question is: what direction will society take to get there?

Theoretical Framework

The individual works of two researchers who are often quoted in the field of education provide the theoretical framework for this research. First, Albert Bandura's (1982) theory of self-efficacy is cogent to the question of how to best prepare teachers for the daunting task of educating students. Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p.2). In his work, Bandura (1994) stated that this self-efficacy influences how individuals think, feel, and behave and emphasized the importance of the belief of the individual to overcome obstacles posed by external factors. Bandura (1982) wrote, "The higher the sense of self-efficacy, the greater the perseverance and the higher the chance that the pursued activity would be performed successfully".

Bandura (1997) wrote about how his theory applied to different aspects of human enterprise, including education. He stated that high levels of satisfaction based upon experiences with well-designed teacher preparation programs lead to greater levels of confidence and self-efficacy among novice teachers (Bandura,1997). Bandura found that teachers with high self-efficacy employ strategies that are more likely to facilitate student achievement, such as increased effort toward planning, teaching, and finding or developing new learning strategies. Also, these teachers were more likely to have high

expectations for student performance (Bandura, 1997). In the face of external obstacles to student success, Bandura asserted that teachers with high degrees of self-efficacy would look to enlist family support for when working with a difficult student (1997). Building on the work of Bandura, subsequent researchers have focused their attention on self-efficacy, and the role it plays in building motivation, competence, and competence in the classroom teacher (Lim-Teo, Low, Wong, & Chong, 2008; Viel-Ruma, Jolivet, & Benson, 2010).

Second, Abraham Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs informs this research. According to Maslow, humans act in order to fulfill needs in the following order: physiological (including air, water, and food); safety (security of body, family, and belongings); social (friendship, family, acceptance, and love); and esteem (respect from others and for self). Fulfilling needs that are on a lower level of the needs pyramid enables an individual to address needs that are higher in the hierarchy. If needs at all levels are being satisfied, Maslow (1943) stated that the individual could attain self-actualization, is "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (p. 383). At this peak level, people act upon their need to become their best selves rather than act to meet a deficiency. Freedom from fulfilling lower-level needs allows problem-solving and creativity could occur.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs complements Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory in the following manner. If teachers are under stress and doubt their teaching abilities because they feel that preparation programs were not up to par, then their needs for confidence and achievement at the esteem level (Maslow, 1954) are not being met. This crisis of confidence for teachers then interferes with their feelings about their capabilities,

and therefore reduces their respective levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In turn, low levels of self-efficacy interfere with their ability to realize self-actualization, becoming the best teachers they can potentially become (Maslow, 1954). This means that students will not receive the best possible quality of instruction from these teachers, thereby reducing student learning and achievement.

Review of the Literature

Teacher quality for student learning and achievement. The quality of pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade education in the United States relies more heavily upon the quality of the American teaching workforce than any other factor. Floden (2005) asserted that teacher quality is a result of interplay between the characteristics of a teacher, the quality of instruction in the classroom, and the environmental conditions contributing to student learning.

As American society continues to grow and change, the measures of teacher quality grow more complex. In the age of growing accountability, the ability to increase student learning and achievement are accorded a higher level of importance.

Based on the assumption that education and the economy are inextricably linked, it is now assumed that all teachers can – and should – teach all students to world class standards, serve as the linchpins in educational reforms of all kinds, and produce a well-qualified labor force to preserve the nation’s position in the global economy. (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p.271).

Another study promotes the idea of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers to promote problem-solving and communication skills necessary for participation in a more modern economy (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

The evolution of content and skills-based learning goals for students impacts the manner in which teacher quality is assessed. Because the evaluation of teacher quality can sometimes be a highly subjective process, the use of many different measures can help provide a truer picture of teacher effectiveness. These methods may include process-product observational measures, evaluation checklists, professional standards considerations, and commercially available observation systems. The use of a multi-method approach links measures of teacher quality to student outcomes (Blanton, Sindelar, & Correa, 2006).

Study after study emphasizes the importance of the role of teacher quality in attaining high levels of student achievement. According to one study, the quality of an education system is ultimately dictated by the quality of its teachers (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). Manivannan and Premila (2009) found the following:

The concept of quality instruction goes above and beyond innovation. It is not that we do not know how to make learning more innovative and joyful. We do. It is that we need to design education experience that will deliver predictable learning. Success can come from thinking about acting strategically to define, design, and deliver quality instruction. (p. 78)

Teacher quality is the most important school-based factor affecting student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). This study found that a one standard deviation increase in teacher quality has a greater effect upon student achievement than reducing class size by 10 students. Ding (2006) also suggested a direct causality linking teacher preparation, teacher quality, and student achievement. Another survey of average-performing eight-year-old students was conducted in 1992. One group was assigned a

“high performer,” the other was assigned a “low performer.” Within three years, the latter group trailed behind their peers by more than 50 percentile points (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007).

While teacher quality plays an important role, the holistic view of student achievement takes other factors into account, including environmental factors, parenting issues, language barriers, socioeconomic status, and special education qualifications. The need to improve the nation’s worst schools requires the commitment of financial resources that are controlled by politicians rather than teachers. The status of the economy, including the quality of housing, health care, and jobs, also affects the education process (Cochran-Smith, 2008). While the role of the teacher is an important one, no one should be cast as an omnipotent Superman or Wonder Woman.

According to an article by William Brickman originally published in 1954 and reprinted in 2010, the teacher of quality must master several domains of knowledge including; the psychological, the sociological, the historical, the philosophical, and the comparative (Brickman, 1954).

Teachers of the successive generation of learners must present lessons in lower-order thinking skills on Bloom’s Taxonomy of knowledge, comprehension, and application in conjunction with the development of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation skills. To be prepared to master analytical skills required in the current workforce, students must be given opportunities in the classroom to develop these higher-order skills (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

While the skill set required for successful learners grow and change, student enrollments are expected to climb in specific target areas of the United States. To meet

the challenges of these increases, preparing teaching candidates online can help circumvent teacher shortages in many urban and rural school districts (Harrell & Harris, 2006). According to Harrell and Harris (2006), these teachers will require skills to create “an environment where all students can learn irrespective of gender, ethnicity, disability or English language acquisition.” (pp. 755-756).

While teacher quality affects the ability of students to perform comparably with those of other nations, the allocation of precious time and monetary support for continuing teacher education in the United States is relatively low. According to a comparative study (Darling-Hammond, 2005), teachers in several other countries teach students an average that is between 15 and 20 hours each week. In Japan, teachers receive 20 hours each week or more for collaborative work and planning (Darling-Hammond, 2005). As for financial resources, 52% of money spent on education in the U.S. reaches the classroom. In other industrialized nations, this figure averages 75%. And while 43% of educators are classroom teachers in the United States, this figure averages between 60 and 80% for other developed nations (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Seeking solutions beyond U.S. borders to improve teacher quality and student achievement is a valid strategy which should be employed (Murnane & Steele, 2007). There are three million teachers in the United States who face a challenging job, are often underpaid, and seldom have adequate training (Poliakoff, 2002). In a recent study by the National Council for Teacher Quality (NCTQ), approximately 4,000 teachers were surveyed about their teacher education. Of these teachers, 81% expressed the need for a national review of teacher education, and only 59% felt prepared to teach upon entering the classroom (NCTQ, 2011). Improving teacher education can result in a more effective and successful

workforce and can ultimately benefit the schoolchildren of America as these teachers help them succeed in the classroom.

Politics, policy, and comparative reports. A great deal of attention has been drawn to the relatively poor academic performance of students in the United States to those in other developed nations around the world. In a comparison of developed nations by the Organization for Economic Cooperation (OECD) in 2003, Americans students ranked 15th in the world in average reading literacy and 24th in the world in combined mathematics literacy (OECD, 2011). In order to improve student achievement levels, many issues are currently being examined both within the educational community, and in a wider forum that includes economic and political leaders. As public servants who are accountable for billions of tax dollars, politicians have criticized teachers and schools who fail to achieve desired student outcomes (Brownell et al., 2010).

Many critics of education in the United States are quick to point to factors such as funding and class size when discussing how to improve student achievement. However, studies show that between 1985 and 2005, per pupil spending levels in public education have increased by 73%, even after allowing for inflation (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). Also, the teacher to student ratio fell from 1:22 in 1970 to 1:17 in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). These studies have led to a further examination of the quality of our nation's teachers.

In 2001, the issue of how to increase the supply of high quality, effective teachers was included in 46 out of 50 State of the State addresses by governors across the country (Allen, 2002). The issue of teacher quality is at the crux of the conversation. Allen (2002) wrote, "Policy makers and educational leaders have become convinced that if they are

going to make significant improvements in the quality of education, attention to the quality of teaching is of the very highest importance” (p.8).

Education policy entered the forefront of American domestic policy when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized with bipartisan support in 2001 during the administration of President George W. Bush. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has received mixed reviews since its conception and implementation. The four components of this plan include stronger accountability for student achievement, more school choice for parents, greater freedom and control for states, and more focus on research-based teaching practice (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002). It is this last component that drives proposed revisions of teacher education programs. Many choices need to be made in the areas of subject matter versus pedagogy, using universities or preK-12 schools as sites for teacher education, and regulation versus deregulation (Cochran-Smith, 2008).

There has been no shortage of critics of NCLB. Some claim that the focus on accountability and testing has marginalized other important components of education, including an emphasis on democratic ideals and social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2008). Others maintain that the emphasis on Highly Qualified Teacher status has not caused an improvement in teacher preparation and professional development because it emphasizes subject matter while ignoring pedagogy (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2005). Another viewpoint praises the mission of NCLB to mitigate the achievement gap. However, it criticizes the resulting practice of drilling children from lower socio-economic backgrounds on basic skills so that schools in those areas meet

AYP, exacerbating a situation where higher-order thinking skills remain the domain of children from more affluent schools (Houston, 2007).

While NCLB has reframed the education of our nation's children, the way that teachers are prepared has also been altered by federal policy. Under the terms of Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1998, teacher education programs must meet mandatory reporting and accountability requirements. The act also tied federal funding to the revision of teacher certification, and provided monies for alternative routes to certification (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1998). Since its passage, some have called for an amendment to the HEA to increase accountability and reporting of quality control of teacher preparation even further (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2004).

Over time the criteria for assessing teachers has changed and developed. In the wake of the reauthorization of the ESEA in 2002, empirical data focused upon student achievement has most recently been emphasized. This shift towards data-driven instruction has primarily affected how teacher performance is evaluated. It also can be seen as a pebble dropped into the center of a pond, with the concentric waves being viewed as how the very best potential teachers are attracted to the profession, how they are currently prepared to teach their students, and how teachers on the job who are struggling can be led to either improve their practice or leave the classroom.

Differences of opinion among scholars and stakeholders regarding each of these issues add both to their complexity and to the number of solutions proposed to address them. Although few policymakers possess up-to-date knowledge of classroom practice, they continue to develop legislative policies that affect the daily lives of both teachers

and students. Communication and collaboration is needed to adopt policy that is rooted in professional knowledge supported by both theory and research (Lesley et al., 2010).

Barbour and Mourshed (2007) wrote, “The only way for the system to reach the highest performance is to raise the standard of every student” (p.13). This axiom can also apply to new teachers entering the workforce. However, novice teachers who are still developing their teaching skills are subjected to the same pressure to elicit high student achievement on standardized tests. One teacher who was interviewed said, “We teach in an element of fear right now” (Lesley et al., 2010).

Models to address the imbalances in teacher quality, particularly in hard-to-staff schools, have been plagued by practical considerations and controversy. Representative George Miller introduced legislation to revise No Child Left Behind to attempt to ensure “the equitable distribution of teachers.” (ESEA, 2001) Although the legislation was lauded for its lofty goal, it would effectively result in transferring most senior staff members to the poorest schools without regard to each teacher’s impact on student achievement. Even if the union rules could be ignored, it is not sound practice to assume that experience will net gains in student performance (NCTQ, 2007a).

The examination of how each state has implemented The Highly Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation, or HOUSSE, to ensure that the goal of each classroom having a highly qualified teacher by January 2006 as prescribed by No Child Left Behind has uncovered many inconsistencies, both from state to state and within states themselves. Each state was evaluated on how they implemented HOUSSE and assigned a grade. With the exception of Illinois, which was found to have honored the true spirit of the legislation, many other states were accused of watering down the

standards to satisfy the requirement on paper rather than in practice (Tracy & Walsh, 2004). In another study, Colorado was praised for instituting “rigorous systems that settle for nothing less than objective evidence of a teacher’s subject matter knowledge” (Walsh & Snyder, 2004). The other states did not fare quite so well, with more than half earning Cs, Ds, and Fs (Walsh & Snyder, 2004).

Gross inconsistencies within states were also discovered. For example, attending two professional conferences in the state of Georgia is weighted the same points toward earning “highly qualified” status as earning a doctoral degree in a specific content area (Tracy & Walsh, 2004).

Traditional vs. alternative routes to licensure. Opposing sides have emerged in the debate between traditional teacher preparation and alternative routes to licensure, and the level of aggression between sides is high among those with strong opinions about teacher preparation (Gimbert, Cristol, & Sene, 2007). The federal government under former President George W. Bush and the Department of Education were on one side, along with the Abell Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The line was most dramatically drawn in the sand by former Secretary of Education Rod Paige when he asserted that many teachers graduate from education programs lacking the knowledge of subject matter and the command of language necessary to educate students effectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). He called for the complete dismantling of the system of schools of education for teacher preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). On the other side of the debate are Arthur Wise and James G. Cibulka of NCATE, and Linda Darling-Hammond and Dr. Tom Carroll of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF). Some watching the fray argue that the federal

government has the upper hand, citing that many aspersions have been cast on the knowledge of pedagogy and other requirements of educational programs to improve student achievement (Brewer, 2006). Others call for the “breaking of the monopoly” of teacher education schools and argue for alternative routes to certification (Sears, 2002).

In March 2010, President Barack Obama’s administration issued a proposal for the reauthorization of ESEA titled “A Blueprint for Reform” with an emphasis on graduation, college attendance, and global competitiveness (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Towards that end, the document reasserts that the interaction between teacher and student is the top factor contributing to student success. In the section regarding pathways to teaching, there is a claim that neither traditional nor alternative teacher preparation programs have adequately prepared teachers to meet the challenges of student learning. It also stated that teachers from programs with more clinical teaching experiences and those with culminating projects, such as a teaching portfolio, produced teachers who were better able to achieve positive student results. When the report was released, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said that the Obama administration would push for bipartisan support to pass reauthorization to improve accountability measures for schools and teachers.

The core standards of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) promote benchmarks for teacher quality. These include understanding of how learners develop and differ; creating supportive and collaborative learning environments; understanding content knowledge, engaging learners in critical thinking; using multiple methods of assessment; planning for instruction; using a variety of assessment strategies; engaging in ongoing professional learning; and leading and collaborating with learners,

families, colleagues, and community members (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011).

Arthur Wise, former head of the NCATE, asserts the role of traditional preparation programs to successfully prepare effective teachers. His evidence includes a study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of 270,000 teachers who took the Praxis II. While 91% of those who graduated from a traditional, accredited teacher preparation program passed the exam, just 74% of those who did not attend one earned a passing score (ETS, 1999).

Linda Darling-Hammond (2005) often compared the American system of teacher education to systems in other countries whose students outperform those in the United States. She stated that while the decentralized system in the United States supports innovative practice, it can also lead to devastating inequalities when resources are not allocated fairly (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

This battle between the two sides has been extremely contentious as times. In a report sponsored by the Abell Foundation, Kate Walsh indicted of the body of research used to support current practices in teacher certification programs. Walsh alleged that studies used to inform teacher preparation programs contain data that is too old to be either reliable or retrievable, were padded with irrelevant resources, have not been subject to peer review, were not based on standardized measures of student achievement, and reflect unsound statistical analyses. Walsh, the current president of the National Council for Teacher Quality, specifically cited research conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond, the former executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and professor of teacher education at Stanford University (Abell Foundation,

2001). Darling-Hammond responded to Walsh's attack, casting aspersions upon the basis, methods and findings in the report. According to Darling-Hammond, Walsh ignored evidence that was counter to her claims of teacher education ineffectiveness (Brewer, 2006). Walsh (2001), with the help of contributing analysis from Michael Podgursky, countered with a rejoinder responding to each of Darling-Hammond's claims. Darling-Hammond then responded with a lengthy paper which again asserted the legitimacy of her research (2002).

In an attempt to label and describe the opposing sides of the debate, one study dubbed them "professionalists" and "deregulationists" (Cohen-Vogel & Hunt, 2007). While the NCTAF, NCATE, NBPTS, and INTASC favor stronger licensure requirements, an expansion of types of certifications, the teaching of pedagogy and licensing boards, the Abell Foundation, the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, and the federal government favor stronger content knowledge and increased routes to licensure. Each side is engaged in a war using research and promises of accountability as ammunition to win in the eyes of the public.

While NCLB was designed in part to ensure that each student is granted access to a "highly qualified" teacher, some low-income and minority families claimed that it has the opposite effect. In *Renee v. Duncan* (2010), a coalition of students, families, and community groups sued the U.S. Department of Education, claiming that poor and minority students had a disproportionately high number of "intern teachers" who were deemed "highly qualified" by the state of California. In July 2009 they lost their case, but won in October 2010 on their appeal. The new ruling requires a review of the California

legislation that grants “highly qualified” status to these teachers, and requires that such teachers are evenly distributed throughout the state.

Another high-profile disagreement with NCLB stems from someone who was once a staunch proponent of the legislation. Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, who publicly thanked President George W. Bush and Congress for the passage of NCLB, has most recently condemned it (Ravitch, 2010). In her most recent book, Ravitch claimed that the implementation of NCLB has been ineffectual in improving the state of public education. Instead, she said the job of improving schools should be given to teachers and schools so they can share effective strategies rather than competing with each other.

As the battle continues, the pressure on the system to turn out higher quality teachers to facilitate student learning is increasing. According to Brownell et al. (2010), “research on teachers and teacher education has been used both to ratchet up expectations that students have access to highly qualified teachers and to discredit formal teacher preparation” (p. 367). Looming teacher shortages and concerns for meeting staffing needs in different areas of licensure are issues to be dealt with when drafting education policy.

Some policymakers claim that a correlation exists between increasing the number of routes to licensure and improved teacher quality. In England where school systems boast student achievement scores which have been improving steadily in recent years, there are 32 different means to enter the teaching profession (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). In the United States, as alternative certification programs have increased, the numbers of minority candidates entering the teaching profession have increased (Harrell & Harris, 2006). Teach For America (TFA), which began in 1989, was founded to

provide high caliber teacher to students in high-need areas. The New Teacher Project (TNTP), which began in 1997, was established to teach students in high-poverty, urban school districts. TFA and TNTP are both considered to be highly competitive programs. Only 14% of applicants to TFA have been placed in classrooms. TNTP has an application to hire ratio ranging from 8 to 1 in New York, and 15-to1 in Oakland, California and in Washington, D.C. In almost equal measure, the two programs placed a combined 27,000 teachers in classrooms around the United States. The mean undergraduate grade point average for TNTP is 3.35; for TFA it is 3.54 (Teaching Commission, 2006).

Although TFA graduates leave the classroom after an average of five years, the program has been identified as “the largest, most effective, and most systematic effort to bring quality teachers into low-income American schools” (Teaching Commission, 2006). When principals who had worked with TFA teachers were surveyed, 92% said they would hire another TNTP teacher (Teaching Commission, 2006).

Troops to Teachers is a similar program which operates on a smaller scale, using federal funding to aid more than 4,000 former military personnel move into careers in the classroom. Businesses with a high degree of technical knowledge have also created programs to help former employees lend their knowledge to students in new teaching careers. For example, the IBM Corporation’s Transition to Teaching program reimburses participants for tuition up to \$15,000, and offers stipends and online mentoring to program participants. Both the Bush administration and several individual businesses have worked to allow qualified professionals to work as adjunct teachers to share their knowledge in the classroom on a part-time basis (Teaching Commission, 2006).

These alternative certification programs, in conjunction with efforts to streamline the teacher certification and hiring processes in many states, have been implemented in the hope of providing an influx of teaching candidates into the profession and to affect a positive change upon student learning outcomes. However, the effort to simultaneously address a potential teacher shortage and the improvement of teacher quality has led to an odd phenomenon. While some states have increased teacher preparation and certification requirements, others have eased these restrictions and introduced alternative routes to licensure. Those seeking to base practice upon solid knowledge and research are at a disadvantage. One study stated that the body of research evidence is not yet sufficient to inform policy in a meaningful way (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wycoff, 2007).

Nonetheless, the proposed Blueprint for Reform calls for a focus upon teacher ability to achieve positive student outcomes through the maintenance of the provisions of the current laws regarding “highly qualified teachers” while adding additional flexibility. The proposed legislation also calls for the equitable distribution of effective teachers, leaders, and principals (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Research cites the dramatic impact a good teacher can have on student performance (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). Subsequently, this leads to a debate about what a good teacher has the capacity to do in the classroom. While many people might agree that effective teachers possess similar traits, there is an argument that good teaching encompasses a wide range of preparation and practice as it evolves over time and serves a diverse population of learners. According to Connell (2004), “ We do not need a picture of ‘the good teacher’ in the singular sense, but pictures of good teachers in the plural, and

good teaching in the collective sense...it is time for the broadest possible debate on good teaching and how it can be supported” (p. 226).

Improving traditional teacher education programs. Beyond the debate between the respective merits of alternative and traditional routes to licensure, many are focused upon improving schools of education (NCATE, 2010, U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2010). A 2001 report by the Abell Foundation alleged that efforts by teacher preparation programs to increase student achievement have been misguided. The oft-quoted report titled “Stumbling for Quality” reviewed more than 150 studies of teacher education programs over the second half of the 20th Century “Teacher certification is neither an efficient nor an effective means by which to ensure a competent teaching force. Worse, it is often counterproductive” (Walsh, 2001).

A Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (2006) review of the 2005 American Educational Research Association Panel on Research and Teacher Education stated “There is very little empirical evidence to support the methods used to prepare the nation’s teachers” (p. 1). The review also cited a lack of evidence to support the premise that education schools accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) are better than those who do not carry this endorsement.

Another study likened the current model of teacher education to the American automobile industry – outdated, outmoded, and no longer able to keep up with modern-day demands (O’Connell-Rust, 2010). O’Connell-Rust (2010) cited evidence that new teachers are dynamic and capable as weak. As other professions including law and medicine have a standardized curriculum, the study called for teacher preparation reform to follow suit.

The National Council on Teacher Quality has undertaken an effort to evaluate teacher certification programs in each of the 50 states based on graduates' ability to teach reading and mathematics in elementary school classrooms. According to one of the reports in the series, the NCTQ (2009b) stated, "teacher preparation programs, or 'ed schools' as they are more commonly known, do not now nor have they ever enjoyed a particularly positive reputation" (p.1). Claiming not to be defenders of the status quo, the NCTQ (2009) asserted that it is "deeply committed to high-quality formal teacher preparation" (p.1).

In a study of eight teacher preparation programs located in New Mexico, the NCTQ examined each program on the basis of four criteria: admissions standards, preparation in reading, preparation in math, and exit standards. In addition to making allegations of the usage of irrelevant textbooks, the study criticized seven of eight programs for not utilizing the most current research regarding the current science of reading to instruct their students. It also recommended raising both the entry standards for each program as well as the exit requirements (NCTQ, 2009). Heckaman et al., (2007) noted that "the challenge for teacher preparation programs is to build teacher candidates' knowledge and skills in identifying evidence-based practices, implementing appropriate strategies for their learners, and analyzing learner outcomes" (p. 5).

According to Dean et al. (2005), five instruments can be used to improve teacher education programs. These include strong licensure requirements, high standards, meaningful accreditation guidelines, effective PreK-12 partnerships, and a goal of continuous improvement through consistent systemic evaluation. A marriage of data-driven policy and building relationships with stakeholders within and outside education

through positive communication is a hallmark of outstanding teacher preparation programs. This allows feedback that can be used for improvement to emanate from every involved group. “Leaders need to pay attention to the program’s culture, build trust, facilitate conversations between key players, and foster open-two way conversations between key players, and foster open, two-way communication that values all participants as equals” (Dean et al., 2005, p. 289). Wineburg (2006) similarly advocated improvement of traditional university-based teacher education programs using four specific methods: increased teacher observation; surveys of preservice teachers both during the program and following graduation; the use of portfolios and work samples; and standardized teacher certification tests.

Teachers of the successive generation of learners should include lessons ranging from lower-order thinking skills on Bloom’s Taxonomy of knowledge, comprehension, and application in conjunction with explicit instruction in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. To be prepared to master analytical skills required in the current workforce, students must be given opportunities in the classroom to develop these higher-order skills (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009).

Helterbran (2008) stated that good teaching is attributable to knowledge and presentation; personal traits of the professor; and professional and instructional qualities. Teacher education focused on the real world of teaching is what draws the rapt attention of preservice teachers. According to Helterbran (2008), “[students] are appreciative when their teacher educator professors make the connection between what they are doing in the classroom to what they will themselves be doing in their own future classrooms” (p. 136). The author posited that teacher educators emulate their own teachers to some degree.

Because this can conceivably hold true for future generations of teachers, it is a factor which must be carefully considered in the preparation of teachers.

In a study of field placement and self-efficacy by Parkinson (2008), two strategies were employed. A clinical observation strategy was used with one group. In six field observations, this group of preservice teachers was evaluated in the areas of classroom environment and culture; instruction; teacher-student interaction; and student engagement. Another group of preservice teachers were each assigned a peer coach to work with using a reflective teaching cycle. This cycle included planning, action, and reflection steps. Both treatments were found to encourage the implementation of best practices, self-evaluation, and professional reflection.

Parkinson (2008) recommended three separate methods for preparing elementary, secondary, and special education teachers based on the premise that each group has different needs based on the student populations they serve. For elementary teachers, 130-160 hours of field experience and more methods courses was suggested. For secondary educators, the study advocated 45-80 hours of field experience with more content knowledge, and methodology specific to that content knowledge. Parkinson (2008) recommended the highest amount of field experience, 180-210 hours, for special education teachers.

The adoption of the teacher work sample methodology by NCATE in 2000 gives preservice teachers a tool to demonstrate their impact on student learning. One study suggested that the use of the teacher work sample methodology in teacher preparation showed positive learning gains in 96% of the work samples assessed (Pratt, 2007). The study stressed the importance of effective pedagogy, the commitment to lifelong learning,

and giving preservice teachers the opportunities for successful classroom experiences prior to graduation and licensure.

Researchers echo the cry of policymakers to investigate the link between preparation, induction, and practice (Brownell et al., 2009; Kamman & Long, 2010). This call for more research applies to reading instruction, special education, and a host of other skills and specialization areas.

Standards and accreditation. In a trend reflecting the growing emphasis upon outcomes-based education, the importance of standards comes into play. Standards of teacher knowledge as well as competencies and behaviors are advocated for the evaluation of teacher preparation programs (Adiguzel & Saglam, 2009). However, questions about new teachers' abilities to meet standards have been raised in a study which cites lack of alignment between the teacher preparation program and educational mandates (Lesley et al., 2010).

As with many worthwhile endeavors, the limitations of time are a factor. This brings the subject of program structure under scrutiny. While some teacher education programs are two-year graduate programs, a growing trend is to transform teacher preparation to a five-year undergraduate program with the option of embedding a master's degree. A stronger, more focused concept of teacher quality can help to guide the best use of time in these programs (Brownell, et al., 2009). By expanding the length of the teacher education program, the goals of deeper content knowledge, stronger pedagogy, and more intensive clinical training can be facilitated and realized (Darling-Hammond, 2005). In a comparative analysis, Darling-Hammond (2005) reported that beginning teachers in other countries are assigned a lighter teaching load, additional

training both in and outside of school, regular opportunities to visit and observe classrooms, more consistent feedback, and more personal support (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

As the accreditation process is meant to ensure that education schools are facilitating positive student outcomes, a paradigm shift may be required to welcome it instead of resisting it. One study based in South Africa suggested that the accreditation process should be viewed as an opportunity for improvement rather than a threat. This model would best embody the spirit of education, which is “an ongoing process of change for individuals and societies alike” (Bitzer, Botha, & Menkved, 2008).

Prior to merging with TEAC to form CAEP, NCATE revised its evaluation standards to focus upon outcomes. NCATE has been observed to shift from calibrating the number and context of courses taught to a measure of the ability of the program to demonstrate that their candidates are learning and can increase the achievement of the students who will enter their classrooms (Heckaman, Thompson, Hull, & Ernest, 2007).

According to a study conducted by Arnon and Reichel (2007), only a minority of students reported that their teacher preparation programs in Israel contributed to their knowledge base. Only 2% of students reported an increase in their levels of general knowledge, and just 17% reported an increase in their content knowledge (Arnon & Reichel, 2007).

One study of teacher education reform in both the United States and Namibia centered on the debate between preparing teachers as technicians versus reflective practitioners, for teacher-centered or learner-centered instruction (Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008). While the authors of the study recommended that each country should do the best

possible job with the respective resources allocated to teacher preparation, they also illustrated the importance of drawing attention to the inequitable distribution of resources within and among nations to improve schools and by extension, societies. Ziechner and Ndimande (2008) concluded, “In the end, we should not settle for anything less for everyone’s children than we would want for our own children” (p. 340).

Entrance and exit qualifications and the role of dispositions. Stronger entrance and exit qualifications can go a long way toward improving the quality of teachers from educational programs throughout the country (Allen, 2002). In 1971, 24% of the nation’s teachers scored in the top decile of their high school achievement tests. In 2000, only 11% did (The Teaching Commission, 2006). To support the significance of this statistic, studies show that a teacher’s literacy level/cognitive ability as measured by vocabulary and other standardized testing is the single highest predictor of student academic success (Walsh & Tracy, 2004).

According to Barbour and Mourshed (2007), the best-performing school systems recruit teachers from the top ten percent of each cohort of students. These students are subject to further checks to evaluate their teaching potential and practice, including testing in reading and math, initial panel interviews as well as monitoring over time to evaluate attitude, aptitude and personality. Group exercises and teaching demonstrations throughout the education process test communication as well as interpersonal skills. In addition, countries with superior school systems have only one place in their teacher preparation programs for every ten applicants, a quality control dictated by both supply and demand (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). In contrast, almost 90% of teacher preparation programs at colleges throughout the United States accept more than 70% of their

applicants (Walsh & Tracy, 2004). Raising the standards for what it takes to get into an education school is a tactic also advocated as a step to be taken by states to improve the quality of K-12 math and science teachers (National Math and Science Initiative, 2007). Colleges that are more selective about the approval of teaching candidates admitted to their programs produce more effective teachers (Walsh & Tracy, 2004).

In addition to academic qualifications, more attention is being paid to dispositions, or personal characteristics of the ideal teacher, such as compassion, caring and citizenship. Because the teacher is also a social agent (Arnon & Reichel, 2007), and because character education has been linked to higher levels student achievement (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2006), traits of teachers contribute to student learning (Brickman, 1954; Hufford, 2009; Yoon 2004). Some studies indicate the suitability of the use of personality tests. While some discussed their use as a condition of admission (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007), others recommend them as a tool for preservice teachers, illuminating strengths and weaknesses that could contribute to student learning (Bain, 2004).

In addition to a strong set of ethics, one list of dispositions for successful teachers includes a commitment to lifelong learning, community responsibility, social justice, helping all students learn, promoting positive growth, reflectivity, modeling behaviors expected of students, and relationship building with students, colleagues, and parents (Kent, 2005). Another list calls for teachers to be innovative, enthusiastic, caring, committed, flexible/adaptable, and able to collaborate (Lesley et al., 2010).

Desire to teach on behalf of the candidate also plays a significant role. In countries whose schools enjoy top student achievement ratings, students who chose to

teach ranked education as one of their top three career choices rather than something to fall back on (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). The fulfillment of the desire to educate students plays an important role in the intrinsic motivation of these individuals and is shown to boost their effectiveness in the classroom.

To be a teacher is to master the art of self-reflection. In the daily interactions with students, staff, families, and stakeholders, teachers face challenges to their personal assumptions, prejudices, and ideological convictions (Hufford, 2009). To overcome this cognitive dissonance, teachers work to fit the new knowledge they are gaining in with the experiences they bring to education. Reflecting upon one's identity and how one's actions affect learning in the classroom is an activity that simultaneously promotes self-awareness, personal growth, and positive student learning outcomes.

Self-reflection is a behavior that is also encouraged by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. A study comparing board-certified teachers and non-board certified teachers showed that there were similarities in teacher behaviors and commitment to well-founded pedagogical principles (Scheetz & Martin, 2006). Based upon the increased level of interconnectivity with other board-certified teachers and colleagues, the study recommended the pursuit of certification.

The exams used to certify teachers, namely the Praxis I and the Praxis II, both developed by the Educational Testing Service, have been criticized for a lack of academic rigor. It is estimated that the content knowledge necessary to complete these exams is based on standards traditionally taught in the seventh and eighth grades. Critics argue that the content of these tests should be much more complex and substantial (Harrell, 2009; National Math & Science Initiative, 2007; Walsh & Snyder, 2004). Furthermore, there

are many differences among the cut scores required by each state to earn a passing grade on the exam. Among states with the lowest acceptable scores, a teaching candidate is not required to achieve a percentage which would constitute a passing grade in the traditional school setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In addition to a lack of rigor, other problems with the tests include poor alignment with state standards, failure to assess pedagogical and content knowledge and teacher effectiveness, and an inability to correlate to traditional hallmarks of teacher knowledge such as number of courses taken, grade point averages, and test scores (Harrell, 2009). The down side to certification exams is that they have a tendency to disproportionately discourage minority teacher applicants. For policymakers, the challenge is to strike a balance between providing requirements to improve student outcomes while deterring relatively few potential teachers (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wycoff, 2007).

Houlihan (2002) recommended the alignment of teacher preparation programs with the knowledge, dispositions, and performance indicators with standards from the state and from the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Consortium (INTASC).

Teacher preparation programs must be designed to ensure that all candidates have developed strong foundation of both content and pedagogical knowledge, can show an ability to apply this knowledge in practice, and have habituated the professional behaviors specified by their state's standards. (Houlihan, 2002)

To demonstrate these behaviors, Houlihan stated that teaching candidates must be given the time to practice them within the framework of a comprehensive clinical experience and support.

Professional development schools, mentoring, and induction. Allowing preservice teachers access to schools earlier in the education process rather than waiting until their field experiences at the end of their coursework is a suggestion for improvement. Such a dynamic could be promoted through the use of the Professional Development School (PDS) model, or simply a closer partnership between universities and schools. This dynamic may help to bridge what many cite as the existing chasm between theory and practice (Lesley et al., 2010; Lim-Teo et al., 2007).

Clinical experiences improve the chances for preservice teachers to demonstrate knowledge of their pedagogical coursework in the classroom. Bain (2004) wrote, “while university preservice programs provide instruction of theoretical knowledge such as the developmental stages of adolescents, theory does not guarantee that teacher candidates understand how to apply this knowledge in the classroom” (p. 44). Programs in which universities work with local schools also allow the induction and mentoring process to begin earlier for the preservice teacher (Allen, 2002). These processes can help student teachers overcome challenges such as choosing suitably learning activities for the subject matter and the student, implementing classroom management techniques, and demonstrating effective communication skills (Karamustafaoglu, 2009). Mastering these challenges, as well as implementing technology in the classroom, can enable the teacher to demonstrate positive student performance in an outcomes-based system (O’Connell-Rust, 2010).

A professional development school (PDS) is a partnership between a teacher education program and a PreK-12 school. These programs provide a convenient location for field experiences for teaching candidates while providing meaningful

professional development opportunities for faculty. The collaboration between preservice teachers and inservice teachers has been shown to increase the teaching effectiveness of all parties while improving the quality of teacher education (Cave & Brown, 2010). This study reported an increased ability of teachers prepared by PDS in the areas of lesson planning, teaching effectiveness, post hoc lesson reflections, classroom management questioning skills, interactions with students, the use of technology in instruction, the quality of feedback provided to students, and the retention of pedagogical knowledge.

A study by Branyon (2008) using both mentoring and cohort collaboration to enhance teacher quality in preservice teachers concluded that feedback, support, encouragement, and evaluation indicated higher levels of preservice teacher preparation. Measures to gauge this improvement included a teacher work sample, evaluation of portfolios, assessment of teacher dispositions, Praxis II scores, candidate self-report exit surveys, focus groups results and open-ended surveys. Another researcher indicated that teachers trained in PDS partnerships demonstrated an increase in confidence, self-efficacy, and the dispositions believed to contribute positively to student learning (Creasy, 2008). On-site support helps teachers apply their theoretical knowledge while balancing the day-to-day realities of real life teaching (Murshidi, Konting, Elias, & Fooi, 2006).

In the world's top performing school systems, new teachers receive more than 20 weeks of coaching using a model consistent with other professions including nurses, doctors, and attorneys, and utilizing the highest quality instructors (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). The pair of researchers asserted that "we would never turn out a freshly minted

doctor and say, ‘go operate on somebody’ without three or four years of practice. But we turn out teachers, put them in classrooms, and ignore them” (p.33).

Observation and coaching allow teachers to become aware of specific weaknesses in their instruction, and to receive the support that will enable them to address and correct them. Boston has instituted a program based on a medical residency model, combining practical experience with theoretical knowledge. After six weeks of summer school, teacher trainees spend four days with an experienced teacher, and one day a week on coursework. The second year continues with a mentor who provides 2.5 hours of coaching each week. Student achievement levels have risen in response to this program (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). According to a survey of the 400 teachers who have been awarded the distinction of being a state teacher of the year, 73% indicated that a more supportive environment would help to retain effective teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). A program such as the one in Boston could help to fulfill this need.

In the areas of the world where students are consistently achieving success, regular observations are scheduled so that teachers are able to observe and learn from each other’s best practices, which are best demonstrated in an authentic setting rather than being based on learning theory alone. Teachers in Finland and Japan also plan their lessons together during a common planning time, and offer help for improvement. In top-performing school systems, ten percent of a teacher’s working time is used for professional development to address new educational theory as well as continuing challenges in the teaching and learning environment (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007).

Preparedness and suitability are cited as being external and internal factors, respectively. Bain (2004) calls for preservice teachers to be reflective about their own personality traits because they know themselves better than anyone else.

To meet varying needs in different localities, it has been suggested that teacher education programs tailor their preparation to the needs of specific districts (Allen, 2002). However, there is little research to document the ability of partnerships between local schools and universities to address specific needs in a community (O'Connell-Rust, 2010). This lack of research may hinder the implementation of this revamped model of teacher education based on continual improvement with an emphasis on local control.

Policymakers have called for fewer constraints on site level administrators to make personnel decisions, to include hiring and firing. "In the United States, it is relatively rare for a public school teacher, tenured or untenured, to be dismissed from teaching" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In a suggestion that would reverse a trend begun with No Child Left Behind, one study advised Congress to give more autonomy, not less, to schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (NCTQ, 2007b).

Amid the cries for increased local control are comparisons which point out that salaries, class size policies, curriculum, and licensure standards are set at the local and state level in the U.S. while in many other countries they are nationalized (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

Subject matter vs. pedagogy and social foundations of education. To be considered effective, educators face a lengthy list of qualifications which include strong character, subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical skill. Brickman (1954) wrote, "The teacher must possess a strong educational foundation that furthers as the same time his

own development as an individual and his or her unfolding as an intellectual being responsible for the guidance of children and youth” (p.68). But this quote does not resolve the debate as to what knowledge that entails. According to Brickman (1954), the hallmarks of an effective teacher include a clear understanding of the learner and the learning process, teaching procedures and guidance techniques. He also argued in favor of the classically trained teacher, knowledgeable in history, literature, philosophy, religion, political science, economics, science, mathematics, and at least one foreign language. The lofty ideals of this model come down on both sides of the current debate as to how teachers should be educated.

The link between teacher preparation and student achievement was cited by Barbour and Mourshed (2007) who wrote, “The only way to improve (student learning) outcomes is to improve instruction” (p. 40). This premise led to a comprehensive effort by The National Council on Teacher Quality to review the quality of teacher preparation programs in every state (NCTQ, 2009). In addition to a recommended overhaul of teacher preparation programs, this organization has pushed for an increased emphasis upon content knowledge in each subject area, particularly in reading, math and science (NCTQ, 2009).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has also played a role in promoting teacher quality by encouraging knowledge of subject matter. Some studies have shown no effect upon the performance of students of teachers who have successfully completed the certification process as compared to other teachers, while others have shown only a slightly positive correlation.

The increased emphasis on content knowledge coexists with some researchers' claims that gaps continue to exist in the research linking the relationship between pedagogical knowledge and student learning (Boyd et al., 2007). To meet the qualifications of HOUSSSE, teachers who hold at least a bachelor's degree and full certification or licensure must also demonstrate content knowledge, particularly in the case of secondary teachers. One study states that NCLB has placed disproportionate emphasis on content knowledge, even while special education teachers often struggle to meet this requirement (Drame & Pugach, 2010).

This either-or debate is rejected those who claim that student achievement requires solid knowledge of content, students, and pedagogy (Helterbran, 2008). One study attributed a significant portion of variation in reading gains to classroom management practices and the provision of explicit, engaging instruction. Quality teaching is not only defined by whether something is taught, but how it is taught (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008). It has been suggested that the teaching techniques that contribute to student achievement can best be measured by direct observation (Brownell, et al., 2009). This comprehensive approach enables quality teachers to boost achievement while fostering affective outcomes such as prosocial behavior (Brophy, 2010).

The current focus on the link between teacher quality and student academic performance has been criticized as being too simplistic and one-sided. Instead, researchers have proposed the addition of a balance of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical competence (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008).

Furthermore, domain-specific expertise influences the choice of learning activities used in that subject area. With more knowledge of the subject, the fewer general

strategies are used. New teachers, however, require more support to integrate knowledge about content, pedagogy, and students and formulate strategies for learning (Brownell, et al, 2009).

The concept of opportunity cost has led many to criticize teacher preparation courses that teach the social foundations of education. These critics recommend these courses should be eliminated based on the claim that they take up valuable room in course schedules that would be better served by another topic more directly related to student learning. However, some argue that social foundations of education courses frame three important conceptual constructs: the disciplinary study of education; issues of multiculturalism; and the dynamic history of the sociopolitical context in which education occurs (Butin, 2005).

Philosophy of education is a course that has also been scrutinized and criticized as a waste of time, yet proponents of the course assert that teachers can benefit from its merits. Students of such a course may be better equipped to analyze an argument, deliberate about the goals of education, and analyze the true meaning of key terms such as teacher quality (Floden, 2005). However, this course offering may prove to be a casualty of the accountability standards set forth in NCLB as the focus remains on raising test scores in reading and mathematics. Ironically, the circular reasoning of the argument that high-quality teachers are those who produce gains in student achievement and teachers who produce gains in student achievement are high-quality teachers does not stand up to a philosopher's logic.

According to Hufford (2009), teacher preparation requires gaining increased self-awareness in addition to technical skills, content knowledge, historical perspectives and

other expectations of colleges, universities, and bodies of accreditation and licensure.

Hufford argued that the question “Who am I?” should be left open ended in anticipation of personal growth. Hufford (2009) wrote, “We, in teacher education, must be sure there is a place for self-creation and personal reinvention, even within the enforced boundaries of a system of pre-established, standardized, testable outcomes” (p.11).

While direct input from preservice teachers was relatively rare in the body of literature about how to improve teacher preparation, one participant in a study expressed frustration on the journey between theory and practice. One student in a study by Garvis (2009) responded, “Theory is good in a university situation, but in the real world all that theory goes out the door the minute you walk into a classroom . . . Make it relevant today! Not yesterday!” (p. 536).

In a study of perceptions of preservice teachers in a literacy course, students echoed this cry for practicality. The authors of the study, however, were not surprised by this reaction. Louden & Rohl (2006) concluded, “Whatever the mix of theory and practice teacher educators believe to be optimal, they can expect teacher education students to echo the beginning teacher in this study who understood the problem as ‘too many theories and not enough instruction’ ” (p. 78).

Literacy. The debate over effective reading instruction begins with the premise that the verbal and reading ability of a teacher is a strong predictor of the quality of literacy instruction. From this point, studies have been conducted to evaluate specific teaching methodologies for reading. One study was critical of degree attainment, college coursework, and teacher certification to teach reading, asserting that these criteria are weak measures of student achievement. The author called for further research for the

range of knowledge that it takes to teach reading effectively. This research can be used to craft both policy and programs to ensure that each teacher can aptly assimilate this knowledge (Phelps, 2009).

The STEM crisis and global competitiveness. The National Math and Science Initiative has called for an improvement of the quality of undergraduate studies in these areas (NMSI, 2007). In addition to strengthening college level coursework, it also points to examples of watered-down Algebra I classes for eighth-graders around the country that do not stand up to curriculum calibration or alignment measures. This is significant in light of the fact that it is the current school system which produces many future STEM teachers (NMSI, 2007).

In 1999 only 47% of American secondary teachers held an academic major in the subjects they taught (National Science Foundation, 2004). Although relatively low, this figure is improving over time. Of new teachers with three or fewer years of experience, 58 % majored in the subject area in which they teach. The mean may distort the lower numbers in hard-to-staff schools. It is estimated that this number is significantly smaller in lower socioeconomic schools (Walsh & Snyder, 2004).

Mathematics teachers are often cited as the exception when it comes to content knowledge and teacher preparation. Because this area of knowledge is so vast, methodical and precise, it is argued that teachers of mathematics need higher levels of content-specific knowledge. Policymakers and reformers have recently used this argument in their push for more intense preparation for teachers in this content area (Griffin et al., 2009).

To effectively teach, evidence-based practices should be employed in the classroom to achieve positive student results (Haager, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007). These varied strategies must be appropriate for the specific content and the characteristics of the student population (Heckaman et al., 2007). In the teaching of science, one study identified a gap between theory and in-class applications for preservice teachers (Ergul, 2009). Another study suggested that preservice teachers who completed a two-part, inquiry-based course titled “Investigations in Math and Science,” posted significantly higher levels of self-efficacy in the teaching of these courses (Richardson & Liang, 2008).

English language learners, multiculturalism, and socioeconomic status.

Trends including growing numbers of English Language Learners and projections of minority student population growth, and the considerable numbers of students living in poverty should guide efforts to prepare teachers to meet the needs of underserved populations (Buck & Cordes, 2005). While alternative certification processes can be used to attract teaching candidates who can serve the needs of these students, a more comprehensive effort to improve teacher preparation can yield a more balanced strategy. This includes two approaches: the developmental approach, which enhances opportunities for teacher learning; and the regulatory approach, which calls for the regulation of effectiveness of systems, institutions, and individuals (Butcher, Sinka, & Troman, 2007).

As student populations become increasingly diverse and the teaching force remains largely comprised of White, middle class, monolingual educators (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), it is the responsibility of education schools to prepare

teachers to instruct students from diverse backgrounds. Still, many states do not require teachers to study theories and methods for teaching English Language Learners despite the fact that the population of this subgroup is growing, particularly in rural areas (O'Neal et al., 2008). A study of foreign language teachers in rural areas found increased levels of self-efficacy among teachers with strong content knowledge to facilitate instruction (Swanson & Huff, 2010).

A study of English as a foreign language in China examined teachers' knowledge of subject matter and curriculum in conjunction with the development of a personal philosophy of learning (Wang, 2010). The author recommended that student-centered teaching, as well as communication and cooperation, could be aided through self-reflection and professional development.

In addition to preparing educators to teach English as a second language, this diversity illustrates the need for multicultural perspectives coursework. However, classes that simply focus on preparing different foods and learning how to say hello in several languages have been criticized for a shallow approach that fails to focus on meeting the education needs of all learners (Czop-Assaf, Garza, & Battle, 2010). The authors of this study called for coursework that works toward a common vision of student learning and a thorough examination of preservice teachers' individual and shared beliefs. Findings from another study suggested that discussions and activities that engaged the affective domain of preservice teachers encouraged them to examine issues of equity and diversity for the benefit of their students (White, 2009). These activities included observations, journals, surveys, as well as reading books and watching movies designed to challenge

predominantly white, middle class preservice teachers' experiences as members of the majority group (White, 2009).

Social justice education is based upon “the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups” (Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2006). These groups include race, class, sexual orientation, and ability. Social justice education also fosters critical perspectives and promotes socialization. The five tenets of social justice education are based upon: inclusion and equity for all learners; high expectations; reciprocal community relationships; a system-wide approach; and explicit social justice education and intervention. The integration of such an approach is rooted in a belief in the link between social justice and student achievement.

While NCATE made the decision to include social justice as a measure of evaluation of teacher preparation programs in the year 2000, it became a controversial issue as many criticized this move. NCATE subsequently removed it from the rubric for evaluation in 2006 (Enterline et al., 2007).

The inclusion of an emphasis on social justice in teacher preparation programs, despite its complexity, can help educators serve the needs of a diverse learning population. Social justice principles encourage teachers to challenge inequities that exist in access to a quality education among different groups. This concept of social responsibility challenges teaching preparation programs to “broaden and deepen what we count as legitimate and measurable outcomes of teacher education” (Enterline et al., 2007). The trend of evaluating teacher preparation programs through the lens of student outcomes has discouraged the inclusion of social justice to a large degree.

Special education. While beginning general education teachers often struggle with pedagogy, discipline, and student engagement, beginning special education teachers showed strong classroom management and positive student engagement while struggling with specific strategies for teaching reading (Seo, Brownell, Bishop, & Dingle, 2008). Due in part to the growing number of students who receive special education services, it has been suggested that general and special education teachers both take the same program of classes in their teacher education programs in which knowledge for both is embedded (Brownell et al., 2010). The lofty recommendation for dual certification from the authors of this study point to research that has demonstrated that general education teachers with special education preparation show greater efficacy in teaching reading and math skills than teachers without it.

In a study of special educators, researchers examined the relationship between reported levels of teacher self-efficacy, collective self-efficacy, and job satisfaction (Viel-Ruma, et al., 2010). These researchers asserted that higher levels of self-efficacy translated into higher levels of job satisfaction regardless of teaching levels, settings, and certification. This work could have implications for future research on the preparation and retention of quality special education teachers.

Researchers who used a survey to examine the preparation of special education teachers identified trends including: focusing on federal initiatives; teacher beliefs and practices; program descriptions and evaluations; recruitment, retention, and attrition; collaboration; and technology applications (Spooner, Algozzine, Wood & Hicks, 2010). Another study suggested that the future agenda for research on the preparation of special

education teachers should include studies of innovative practices that foster development of teacher quality (Sindelar et al., 2010).

Integrating technology. As both the sophistication and the availability of technology increases, the applications for teaching and learning are formidable. Attention has been given to its role in online learning, creating electronic portfolios, and preparing teachers to use it in the classroom as a tool for student learning.

In an attempt to assess an online program and its ability to address curricular goals, one study suggests that online programs are at least as proficient as face-to-face programs when judged using the criteria of creating a supportive learning community, expanding the knowledge and skills of beginning teachers, and helping beginning teacher assess their own professional growth (Harrell & Harris, 2006). Additionally, online programs are believed to attract more diverse candidates, address critical shortage areas like math and science, and to produce candidates who score as well or better on the GRE and state certification tests (Harrell & Harris, 2006).

As the clamor for an increase in teacher quality to improve student achievement reaches a crescendo, using an electronic portfolio to document teacher candidate performance can contribute to systems of accountability for teacher education programs (Evans et al., 2001). These portfolios can establish a habit of reflective practice while allowing the candidate to demonstrate standards and teaching processes.

Once a teacher enters the classroom, the technology available for use also demands practice and mastery. A study of beginning social studies teachers suggested that explicit instruction in the benefits and use of technology affects their beliefs about using it as well as their efforts to integrate its use into the curriculum (Doppen, 2004).

Addressing the affective domain. While maintaining a focus upon student achievement, we cannot lose sight of the fact that education needs to respect the relationship between the cognitive and affective domain. Brophy (2010) found the following:

Teacher effectiveness in eliciting student achievement gain cannot be equated with teacher quality, because teacher quality is a broader concept that usually would be defined to include not only achievement outcomes such as stimulating student motivation to learn the subject matter and developing students' sense of efficacy and confidence as learners. (p. 32)

Brophy (2010) identified these other aspects to include general classroom management strategies, providing all students the opportunity to learn, having clear expectations of the learners, explicitly defined roles in the classroom, an active style of teaching, clarity of presentation and enthusiasm.

Aside from content knowledge and pedagogy, the potential for teachers to bring about positive student learning outcomes is also related to practical skills, such as building relationships with families and bullying prevention. Studies show that higher levels of parent involvement have been linked to more positive student attitudes towards school, more consistent homework completion, and increased academic achievement (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson, 1987). Research also suggests that it can decrease chances of student retention at the same grade level and the amount of time needed to receive special education services (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Professional associations that advocate collaboration with students' families include the National Association for the

Education of Young Children and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards.

Family involvement is characterized by regular, two-way communication between home and school regarding student learning and other school-related activities (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). The researchers also recommended that teachers should approach this communication with a positive attitude, a commitment to effective communication, and a sense of respect for parents as their children's first teachers.

Developing the ability to develop collaborative relationships with children's families is a concern of many preservice teachers. Specific skills include dealing with contentious parents, including those who are far-removed from the classroom and those who volunteer, and working with parents who may not be acting in the best interests of their children (Baum & McMurray-Schwartz, 2004). Barriers which interfere with parent involvement include: lack of time; language; transportation; access to a telephone, computer, or Internet; negative feelings about school stemming from personal experiences; fear of talking to school personnel; and fear of attending night activity at a school in a dangerous neighborhood (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Strategies to develop specific skills promote communication and establish partnerships to serve the learning needs of children should be integrated in the curricula of teacher education programs on behalf of the child (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). The authors of this study suggested that specific learning strategies to master this skill include observations of parent-teacher conferences, videos, panel discussions, and role playing, as well as explicit instruction in active listening and assertive communication skills.

Another factor influencing the academic performance and emotional well-being of students is bullying. A study which attempted to predict the likelihood of a teacher intervening in a situation when a student was being bullied found that three teacher characteristics played a role in the intervention (Yoon, 2004). Teachers with a strong sense of empathy, a high degree of self-efficacy, and who were able to perceive the seriousness of the situation were much more likely to intervene. Given the pervasive nature of bullying in schools, the results of this study can also have implications for the way teachers are prepared in the United States.

The role of standardized testing. In most scenarios for improvement of teacher quality, continuing assessment, both internal and external, has been recommended to promote and ensure the growth and development of teacher quality. High-performing school systems closely monitor both the progress of their teachers and their schools, realizing that data can be used to drive improvement measures (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). Value-added data, which take a child's annual growth into consideration, is being modeled in several states including Tennessee (NCTQ, 2007b). Many educators argue that this is the only fair way to assess gains by students who are multiple grade levels behind. For example, if a sixth grader is reading a third grade level and improves to a fifth grade level by the end of the year, his teacher will receive a favorable evaluation for achieving one or more grade levels of growth in a year.

The pressure upon teachers for students to perform has increased since the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 2002, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). However, it can be counterproductive if systems of

accountability hold teachers responsible for what is outside of their scope of influence (Allen, 2002).

Compensation and the question of merit pay. A controversial topic among teachers, politicians and union leaders is merit pay, which has been touted by several key leaders in education as the solution to ensuring teacher quality, including current Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and President of the National Council on Teacher Quality Kate Walsh. According to the authors of a study coordinated by the National Council for Teacher Quality, compensation should be a products of teacher effectiveness as well as longevity (NCTQ, 2009a). Based on research that indicates that the most dramatic improvements in teaching performance are achieved over the first few years, one study calls for compressing pay scales so that the largest gains in salary are achieved during the initial years of a teacher’s career (NCTQ, 2009).

In addition to funding teacher salaries, one study calls for the opposite of what is often the current funding situation in the United States, where the neediest schools often have the smallest budgets. In high-performing school systems in New Zealand, Alberta, and dramatically improving school systems in England and Chicago, funding models which divert additional resources to schools in need of improvement have been instituted to bring about and maintain student success (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). According to the Teaching Commission (2006), merit pay is needed because traditional salary schedules do “almost nothing to attract America’s best and brightest into the classroom and to keep them there” (p. 25).

Extrinsic motivation in the form of monetary reimbursement can be provided by ensuring that starting compensation for teachers in high-performing school systems is in-

line with graduate salaries in other professions (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). This proposal is supported by a survey of 400 teachers who had been honored with their respective state teacher of the year awards. When asked what would help to attract and retain effective teachers, 82% of respondents identified better pay scales, a factor second only to more administrative support which received 89% of the vote (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Increasing teacher salaries across the board would also help to boost the low percentage of minority teachers who could be making more money in other fields , particularly math and the sciences (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

In the United States, average teacher salaries have not kept pace with either inflation or other salaries for positions that require a comparable level of education (The Teaching Commission, 2006). Top performing school systems pay a starting salary as a percentage of gross domestic product per capita. In South Korea and Germany, starting teacher salaries are at the top of the worldwide scale at 141%. In Finland and Singapore, they are at 95%, on par with the average of countries surveyed. In the United States, starting teacher salaries are at 81% (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007). Also, teachers in Korea, Japan, and Portugal are rewarded more handsomely for their experience and expertise as the pay differential is comparatively much higher between those at the bottom and the top of the scale (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

Even within the United States, salary ranges can vary greatly from district to district and state to state, considering urban versus suburban districts, and where variances in local economies exist. In Yonkers, a suburb of New York City, teacher pay ranges from \$41,671 and \$84,310. In Buffalo, the pay scale begins at \$30,387 and rises to a maximum of \$54,432 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In comparing Hartford,

Connecticut, which serves many bilingual and low income families, the average salary is up to \$4,000 less than surrounding, more affluent areas (NCTQ, 2009).

In addition to improving the competitiveness of base pay, awarding increased pay for service in high-needs schools and subject areas where there is a shortage of teachers has been suggested (The Teaching Commission, 2006). Attracting new teachers to the profession and filling hard-to-staff assignments with strategic compensation is another strategy which has been advocated (NCTQ, 2009). To allow districts to address teacher shortages in particular schools, some advocate differential pay. This system allows market conditions to result in increased salaries for more challenging teaching assignments (Evans et al., 2001). Incentive packages, including cash bonuses, have also been offered to fill those gaps. Allen (2002) cited student loan forgiveness, particularly for those who teach in hard-to-staff subjects or areas, as another strategy that has been identified for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers.

One way in which teachers can attain an increased level of compensation is to obtain a master's degree. More than half of the nation's teachers hold this advanced degree, a statistic that has nearly doubled in the last 50 years (NCTQ, 2009b). However the vast majority of these degrees are in the area of education, including curriculum and instruction or educational leadership. Only 22% of these master's degrees are in a teacher's subject area (NCTQ, 2009b). Evidence suggests that while master's degrees may have no effect or a negative effect at the elementary level (Murnane, 1975), they can have a positive effect on secondary education (Clotfelder, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007), if only in math and science and not English or history (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1997).

While some have been critical of the effect of unions upon teacher quality (Hoxby & Leigh, 2003, The Teaching Commission, 2006), other research shows that the work of both the National Education Association as well as the American Federation of Teachers have resulted in higher salaries, better benefits, more favorable working conditions, and increased job security, likely enhancing both the attraction and retention of teachers (U.S. Dept. of Educ., 2004).

The importance of Bandura's theory of self-efficacy. Albert Bandura's (1995) research on self-efficacy demonstrates a link between confidence and the quality of a teacher. His research has been cited in a great deal of scholarly work regarding teacher preparation at a wide range of developmental levels and across multiple subject areas. For example, Garvis (2009) wrote, "Teacher self-efficacy is developed through the interaction between an individual's judgment of their ability to perform a task and their perception (of) the actions required to perform that task successfully," (p. 534). Furthermore, Bandura argued that high levels of self-efficacy boost the tendency of an individual to persevere, which is of high importance in a profession where the attrition rate approaches 33% after 3 years, and 50% after five years (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

Cerit (2010) studied preservice teachers at the beginning and end of their preparation program to elicit data about teacher's beliefs about self-efficacy in the classroom. The author demonstrated that a teacher training program created the levels of self-efficacy perceived by the teacher. Preparation that imparts knowledge of subject matter, strong classroom management techniques and effective teaching strategies, and the ability to diagnose and meet student needs can boost rates of teacher retention (Justice, Grenier, & Anderson, 2003).

Another study conducted by Lesley et al. (2010) reported that 82% of participants reported that their teacher education programs positively influenced their ability to teach. Despite overall satisfaction, data indicated that 29% of participants felt that at least one class was irrelevant, particularly those not connected to methodology or field experience. Although participants felt well-prepared, they wanted further training in practical applications including classroom management, paperwork, education law, and specific techniques to teach reading (Lesley, Gee, & Matthew, 2010).

A study by Lim-Teo et al. (2008) reported that teachers felt that practicum was most important. Strong preparation in this area had the potential to build self-efficacy. This confidence translated into a willingness to try new instructional techniques, improved attitudes towards students, and persistence in trying to solve learning problems (Lim-Teo et al., 2008).

To contribute to a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, external factors can boost teacher quality. Ensuring schools are conducive to teaching and learning, strong leadership focused upon instruction, and well-designed and funded mentoring programs are three major ways to develop and retain quality teachers (Allen, 2002).

The need to extend teacher preparation beyond graduation to examine inservice teachers' use of evidence-based practices during the novice years has been examined (Heckaman et al., 2007). Although these induction practices vary, they may include instructional days, focus on specific skill sets and instructional delivery, mentor support and peer coaching (Kamman & Long, 2010). Even at the early childhood education level, an analysis of preschool teacher preparation emphasized the role of continuing professional development (Saracho & Spodek, 2007).

Summary

The question of how to improve teacher preparation has been widely addressed, yet the voices of classroom teachers have been conspicuously absent from the discussion. The hard-won practical wisdom of educators to reshape teacher education has not been fully integrated into formal strategies for improvement (O'Connell-Rust, 2010). While policy makers outside of the school milieu have many recommendations for improvement, there has been a lack of consideration of the opinions of those who have experienced working with children (Adiguzel & Saglam, 2009). This poses a very real threat to the validity to suggestions for improvement. Another problem is the fact that the research base has been deemed inadequate to base conclusions on how to improve teacher quality (Allen, 2009).

Additionally, Hsien (2007) noted that "there has been little available research examining teacher attitudes toward their teacher preparation programs" (p. 49). The prior experiences that teachers bring to the classroom with them are the framework upon which to build new knowledge of effective teaching practice, as well as increased levels of confidence (Light & Georgakis, 2007).

According to Hufford, (2009), Maslow's (1943) goal of self-actualization promotes the idea of a successful teacher as a continually evolving professional. The teacher should reflective upon practice through obstacles and challenges, failures and successes. This process often begins with the knowledge of one's own personal identity and ends with uncertainties, anxieties and ethical dilemmas (Hufford, 2009).

Incorporating novice teachers' suggestions for improving teacher education programs could allow successive generations of teachers to reap the benefits of their

insight as they prepare to enter the classroom. Murshidi, Konting, Elias, and Fooi (2004) wrote that “Bandura’s efficacy theory suggests that efficacy may be the most malleable early in learning, thus is it most appropriate to develop a stronger sense of efficacy among the beginning teachers during the first years of teaching” (p. 274).

Some researchers propose a career-long continuum beginning with teacher preparation. Strong teacher education can help teachers grow from preservice candidates to graduate, competent, highly accomplished, and finally, lead teachers as they demonstrate mastery of the standards for the teaching profession (Ingvarson, 2010). In an echo of the theory of self-efficacy of Bandura, Kent (2005) wrote that “the goal of improving student achievement and school performance will remain unfulfilled without teachers who view themselves as competent and capable of meeting the needs of a diverse group of students” (p. 347).

The literature on teacher preparation is a cacophony of disparate voices calling for changes to be made to the process of teacher education to improve student achievement. However, the majority of voices do not emanate from the demographic of the teacher. This study will attempt to address this disparity by allowing teachers to share the opinions wrought from experience of years in the classroom working to facilitate student learning.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the years following the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act with the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2002, the issue of improving teacher quality has come to the forefront of the education debate in the United States. Various political entities, nonpartisan councils, accrediting institutions and other groups are challenging the validity and effectiveness of the methods of the preparation of American teachers to facilitate student learning. Not only are alternative certification programs being proposed and implemented, traditional routes to certification are being scrutinized in an effort to improve student outcomes. With so many competing topics and issues, including content knowledge, pedagogy, social justice, English as a second language, diversity, low socioeconomic status, special education, the concept of opportunity cost dictates that the inclusion of one topic can result in the exclusion of another. While the input of many different groups of stakeholders is being solicited and debated, teachers' experiences and viewpoints are conspicuously absent from the debate. The purpose of this study is to solicit recommendations from educators on how to improve teacher education to facilitate student learning.

Research Design

This was a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) to facilitate the expression of participant voices based on their lived experiences as classroom teachers. The transcendental phenomenological design is characterized by *Epoche*, from the Greek which means "to refrain from judgment"

(Moustakas, 1994). Because I am also a classroom teacher, I attempted to bracket out my personal experiences to the greatest possible extent. I used memoing to promote consciousness of the values, biases, and experiences I carry with me that are pertinent to the goals, results, and implications of this study (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to listen to the participants with an unadulterated ear, and analyze and interpret the data in a fresh, open, and unbiased manner.

This design was geared toward hearing the participants' textual descriptions of how their respective teacher education programs prepared them to meet the individual learning needs of their students, and how these programs might be improved to facilitate student learning. It enabled me to examine multiple participants' perspectives to find commonalities among their experiences without passing judgment (Moustakas, 1994).

In addition to a 10-question survey about teacher self-efficacy and the possibility of participation in a focus group, this study utilized the interview format as the primary method of data collection. The data was analyzed for participants' descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon of graduating from a teacher education program and becoming a classroom teacher who is responsible for meeting individual student learning needs. In addition to these textual descriptions of what happened, I also solicited structural descriptions about how each participant's lived experience was shaped by external forces and other circumstances. Because many factors affect education, including resource availability, policy, and interaction with students, parents, fellow teachers, aides, and administrators, I asked participants to describe the challenges to student learning they have experienced throughout their careers. Following data

collection, I analyzed the data for significant statements, and presented a discussion of the essence of the participants' experiences.

In the horizontalization process, I analyzed the data for significant statements by the participants which revealed how participants believe their respective teacher education programs prepared them for classroom teaching and how it could be improved to help them facilitate and advance student learning. The horizontalization process dictates that I will give each significant statement cogent to the topic equal value (Creswell, 2007). By eliminating overlapping or redundant statements, further analysis of the results allowed clusters of meaning to emerge into themes which can potentially inform the improvement of teacher education. These recommendations will be rooted in the experiences of the participants who aspire to improve their teaching practice to achieve the goal of positive student outcomes. Through the self-efficacy survey, in-depth interviews, and at least one focus group, this study addressed the research problem by asking participants about self-efficacy, dispositions and abilities, teacher preparation experiences, and recommendations for improving teacher education to enhance student learning.

Participants

The participants in this study included 25 kindergarten through sixth grade teachers in central Virginia who have been in the classroom at least five years but no more than ten years (Polkinghorne, 1989). All participants graduated from one of 37 accredited teacher education programs located throughout the state of Virginia (Virginia Department of Education, 2011a). To be included in the study, participants must have graduated from a traditional teacher education program. That is, they could not have been

provisionally licensed, or certified through a program such as Troops to Teachers or Teach for America. Although three participants were career switchers and some took online courses to partially fulfill the requirements of their respective programs, each participant in this study attended an accredited college or university in the commonwealth of Virginia to earn a degree to fulfill the requirements of obtaining a teaching certification. In further accordance with the methodology for this study, no more than three participants attended any one college or university.

The participants assented to be a part of this study on a volunteer basis and were generated through convenience, snowball, and discriminant sampling. First, I sought out coworkers and colleagues over whom I had no supervisory role who met the criteria of teaching assignment and years of experience. Next, I surveyed the teachers who participated in the study to see if they could put me in touch with other teachers in Virginia both across and outside of this division that meet the criteria for this study. Because I wanted to include participants from a range of different teacher preparation programs to prevent overrepresentation of any one program, as well as the aforementioned criteria, this also required the employment of discriminant sampling. That means that I accepted the first three qualifying participants who responded from any one teacher education program in Virginia.

The participants are all female; 24 are white and one is Asian-American. They range in age from 26 to 59. All have bachelor's degrees and seven have master's degrees. Seven participants teach in suburban schools and 18 participants teach in rural schools. Twenty-two participants were from one school division, and two participants were from other divisions. They represent a total of fourteen accredited colleges and universities in

Virginia. To preserve the anonymity of participants, as well as their respective teacher education programs, and schools of employment, pseudonyms were assigned and utilized.

Table 3.1.

Sample Demographic Overview

Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Level of Education	School Setting
30	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	suburban
38	White	Female	8	bachelor of arts	suburban
29	Asian-American	Female	7	bachelor of arts	suburban
31	White	Female	9	bachelor of arts	rural
42	White	Female	5	master of arts	rural
26	White	Female	5	bachelor of arts	rural
59	White	Female	6	bachelor of arts	suburban
30	White	Female	8	bachelor of science	suburban
36	White	Female	6	master of arts	rural
37	White	Female	5	master of arts	rural
40	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	rural
54	White	Female	8	master of science	rural
31	White	Female	6	bachelor of arts	suburban
30	White	Female	7	master of arts	rural
35	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	rural
48	White	Female	6	bachelor of arts	suburban
29	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	rural
42	White	Female	9	bachelor of arts	rural
38	White	Female	8	bachelor of arts	suburban

38	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	suburban
52	White	Female	7	master of arts	rural
29	White	Female	7	bachelor of arts	rural
32	White	Female	9	bachelor of arts	rural
30	White	Female	8	bachelor of arts	rural
38	White	Female	6	master of arts	rural

Setting

The setting of this study was limited to Virginia. According to the 2011 version of the annual Quality Counts survey conducted by the EPE Research Center for Education Week, Virginia was ranked fourth overall in the quality of K-12 education performance (Education Week, 2011). The six factors that were included in this analysis of the United States included: the importance of a person’s education from cradle-to-career; kindergarten through twelfth grade achievement; standards, assessments, and accountability; transitions and alignment of curriculum and grade levels; the teaching profession; and levels of school finance (Education Week, 2011). Virginia, who ranked behind Maryland, New York, and Massachusetts, respectively, received an overall B- as compared to the average state grade of C (Education Week, 2011).

Interviews and a focus group were conducted in person within the state of Virginia to afford me physical proximity and access to the participants. It focused the study so that it may be used for the purposes of improving the quality of teacher education in the state of Virginia. According to the NCTQ State Teacher Policy Yearbook 2010, Virginia received an overall grade of D+ (NCTQ, 2010). Funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the effort assessed each of the 50 states in five

areas: delivering well prepared teachers; expanding the teaching pool; identifying effective teachers; retaining effective teachers; and exiting ineffective teachers (NCTQ, 2010).

In accordance with the licensure regulations upheld by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) and prescribed by the Virginia Board of Education, applicants seeking a teaching license in the state of must be at least 18 years of age (VDOE, 2011b). In addition to having a baccalaureate degree from a regionally accredited institution, teachers must possess good moral character, and obtain passing scores on professional teacher's assessments, such as the Praxis I and II (VDOE, 2011b). Early, primary, and elementary teachers must also pass a reading instructional assessment. All teachers must demonstrate proficiency in using instructional technology, complete a child abuse recognition and prevention module, and receive professional development in facilitating the study of the Standards of Learning (VDOE, 2011b). Under reciprocity guidelines, some of these conditions may be waived for teachers moving to Virginia with a license from another state. Although Virginia also has guidelines for alternative licensure (VDOE, 2010), including for career switchers, only those teachers who have completed their studies at one of 37 accredited teacher education programs in the state of Virginia will be included in this study.

Of the 37 programs, five have been recognized among the top 100 education schools in the country in an annual study conducted by U.S. News and World Report (2011). The criteria used for evaluation of these programs include tuition, enrollment, average Graduate Record Examination verbal score for entering doctoral students, research expenditures, and doctoral program acceptance rate for graduates (U.S. News

and World Report, 2011). The University of Virginia ranked 22nd, followed by Virginia Commonwealth University, which earned a tie for 29th. The College of William and Mary placed 41st, while George Mason University was judged 66th. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University ranked 100th.

Personal Biography

My role in this study was to objectively collect data from participants through the use of surveys, interviews, and focus groups. My relationships with the participants in the study ranged from being coworkers to casual acquaintances to acquaintances of acquaintances as I met participants through the use of snowball sampling. While these relationships may reasonably be expected to facilitate the data collection process, they should not have resulted in bias as I focused upon their responses to the interview questions.

I have worked as a classroom teacher for fifteen years. Although I have vivid recollections of the period of time I was a novice teacher, this should not be a hindrance in the data collection process. My prior experience as a print journalist for my middle school, high school, and college newspapers, as a student intern at a daily newspaper in high school and college, and at a triweekly newspaper for one year may facilitate the data collection process. However, my experience as a substitute teacher for two years and a fully licensed classroom teacher for 15 years may influence how the data is analyzed. More specifically, my point of view is shaped by experiences with teaching students, collaborating with faculty, working with parents, and building relationships with stakeholders in the community.

It should be noted that I strongly believe that this study addresses a gap in the literature. That is, it focuses on the voice of classroom teachers when it comes to improving teacher performance for student learning. I believe that this voice is missing from a great number of decisions driving educational policy, and that students oftentimes suffer the consequences when teacher input is omitted from the process. Identifying my values, experiences, and priorities will provide an element of reflexivity to the study.

I fell into the teaching profession by accident, while I was living in Northern California. In 1993, I took a job as a reporter for the *Dixon Tribune*. Unfortunately, I had to leave when the management of the newspaper changed hands. In July of 1994, I gave birth to my son, Mason. I did not want to return to such a demanding work schedule, and a friend casually suggested that I substitute teach. The hours were much more conducive to raising a family, the pay was adequate, and I could easily turn down a day of work if my son needed to go to a well-baby appointment, a play-date, or was sick. I began to substitute teach when he was a little over two months old, and immediately loved it. Looking back over my previous experience as a counselor and a coach, the fact that I enjoyed it so much made more sense to me.

My daughter, Marina, was born in September of 1995. In January of 1996 I continued to substitute teach during the day, and began to attend evening classes twice a week at Chapman University. I feel that this balance of work and school provided me with a high level of clinical experience throughout my program. Although my husband worked in the evenings, my parents were able to care for Mason and Marina. Perhaps in part because my children were so well cared for by my family, I was able to focus upon my coursework. I remember enjoying the course content, the readings, the class

discussion, and even the assignments. During the summer break, I took on an unusually large course load, and was able to complete the program in December 1996.

Because the state of California had committed to instituting a class size reduction to 20 students at the kindergarten through third grade levels to begin in January 1997, a host of teaching positions opened up, primarily first and second grade combination classes. Toward the end of my student teaching, I received a call from a family friend who had taught my sister at Fairytale Elementary School (pseudonym) in northern California. She called to let me know that the principal, who was also my fifth grade teacher, had one such opening. I finished my student teaching on a Friday in December, and reported to work the following Monday. I then spent the winter break preparing guided reading centers for my first and second grade students, accepting generous donations of supplies and materials from my colleagues, spending Christmas money at the teacher supply store, and decorating my classroom.

After all these years in the classroom, I smile when I think about how hopeful and how inexperienced I was. Substitute teaching was one thing, but taking on a class of my own required a much higher level of expertise and commitment. When the combination classes were formed, the principals were instructed to ask the teachers for a list of students who worked relatively well independently to form the combination classes midyear. Unfortunately, I remember feeling that some of my colleagues may have instead recognized it as an opportunity to move some of the more challenging students out of their classrooms and into mine.

With a full-time teaching assignment came planning, grading, the implementation of best practices, and forming new relationships with families. Perhaps because this

school served a relatively low socioeconomic population, the staff was like a family in and of itself, and they adopted me readily. The reading specialists gave me intensive training in literacy development, planning a balanced reading and writing program in the context of a whole language approach, and using running records to gauge my students' reading abilities and track progress. With this strong base of support and wisdom from these experienced teachers and administration I was able to learn, grow, and thrive, and along with me, my students. Within a few years, an opportunity to teach departmentally at the same school at the sixth grade level opened up. I have remained a sixth grade teacher, even after moving to Virginia. Though I have since obtained a single subject certification, I continue to teach sixth grade social studies at the middle school level. Although I enjoy some aspects of my job much more than others, I love the challenges and joys of my career, and I look forward to going to work every day.

Data Collection

Because this study involved participants over the age of 18 and no intervention was implemented, an expedited review process was utilized to secure Institutional Review Board approval for this study. I also obtained informed consent (see Appendix C) from the participants prior to taking part in this study.

Data collection consisted of an online survey (see Appendix D) to gauge the self-efficacy beliefs of the participating teachers, 25 oral interviews (see Appendix E), conducted in person and digitally video and audio recorded. Based upon the availability of the participants, I attempted to conduct at least one, but no more than five focus groups, with no more than five participants each to solicit more information about their opinions of the effectiveness of their teacher preparation programs. Seven of the original

28 interview questions were repeated in the focus group interview (see Appendix F). The purpose of the focus groups was to allow teachers to add to their original responses after hearing what other teachers had to say. The focus group was also conducted at a neutral, central location.

Self-efficacy survey. The following survey was developed by Ralf Schwarzer, Gerdamarie Schmitz, and Gary Daytner in 1999 following their work based upon Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997). It was copyrighted by the original authors and is available for use free of charge. It was retrieved from http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/teacher_se.htm

Table 3.2.

Self-Efficacy Survey

- 1) I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to even the most difficult students.
 - 2) I know that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise.
 - 3) When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.
 - 4) I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.
 - 5) Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.
 - 6) I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs even if I am having a bad day.
 - 7) If I try hard enough, I know that I can exert a positive influence on both the personal and academic development of my students.
 - 8) I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.
 - 9) I know that I can motivate my students to participate in innovative projects.
 - 10) I know that I can carry out innovated projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.
-

The response format for these questions is: strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; and strongly agree.

Interview questions. Each interview will begin by focusing on the participants' identifying characteristics, including gender, age, ethnicity, years of teaching experience, grade level(s) taught, level of education, location of teacher education program, and current school setting, such as urban, suburban, or rural. The interview questions will then focus upon the participants' teacher education, the challenges they face in their current and respective teaching assignments, and how the content and quality of this education has affected their teaching experiences. The questions will also focus upon suggestions for improving teacher education programs to enable teachers to meet the individual learning needs of their students.

Table 3.3.

Interview Questions

- 1) In general, were you satisfied with the quality of your teacher education program?
- 2) Were you prepared in conjunction with a Professional Development School (PDS) in which you had opportunities to work in a local school district throughout your program, not just at the end? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 3) Please list and describe which dispositions or personal characteristics you believe a good teacher should possess.
- 4) Did your teacher education program examine your dispositions or personal characteristics as a condition of admission to or graduation from your program? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 5) Please list and describe the tests you were required to pass in order to become a licensed teacher. How do you feel these tests relate to your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 6) What was your undergraduate academic major? Does this major relate to any of the subject matter you teach? If so, how do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 7) Did you take a history of education or social foundations of education course as part of your teacher education program? How do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

- 8) How do you feel that your pedagogical coursework (i.e., classes in which theories about how students learn were taught) improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 9) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of literacy?
- 10) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of mathematics?
- 11) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of science?
- 12) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' higher level thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis?
- 13) How do you feel that your teacher education program contributed to your ability to meet the individual learning needs of English Language Learners?
- 14) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a multicultural student population?
- 15) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a socioeconomically diverse student population?
- 16) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the learning needs of students who receive special education services?
- 17) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to utilize technology in the classroom as a tool to meet your students' individual learning needs?

- 18) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to build relationships with your students' families?
- 19) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to deal with bullying in the student population you teach?
- 20) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to help your students to be successful on high-stakes standardized tests?
- 21) How do you feel that your teacher education program prepared you to implement classroom behavior management strategies?
- 22) Describe your biggest challenges to facilitating student learning during your teaching career.
- 23) Do you feel there are any barriers to learning among the students you teach? If so, please describe them.
- 24) How confident do you feel about your ability to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
- 25) In what other ways, if any, do you feel your teacher education program has prepared you to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
- 26) Do you feel that some courses in your teacher education program were a waste of your time? If so, which ones?
- 27) Do you feel that some courses, subjects, or experiences should have been included in your teacher education program to further prepare you to teach your students before you began your career as a classroom teacher? Explain.

28) In what ways, if any, do you feel that your teacher education program could have been improved to further enable you to meet your students' individual learning needs?

The purpose of the first question pertaining to the level of satisfaction with each participant's program is related to the widespread call for the reform of the teacher education process (CAEP, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009; NCATE, 2010). The second question was included to determine the effectiveness of the Professional Development School approach (Lesley et al., 2010; Lim-Teo et al., 2007).

The third question was designed to elicit participants' opinions about the role of dispositions and character traits. Researchers have asserted that positive traits contribute to student learning (Brickman, 1954; Hufford, 2009; Yoon, 2004). Walsh and Tracy (2004) found that more selective colleges yield more effective teachers. Consequently, using these traits as a condition of admission to or graduation from a teacher preparation program is the foundation for question four.

With emphasis on the issue of testing for teacher quality, question five was designed to inquire about the tests participants were required to take, and impact, if any, of those tests upon student achievement (National Math and Science Initiative, 2007).

Question six was written to inquire what participants think about the relationship to their academic major and their ability to meet student learning needs. This correlation has been asserted in the literature (Brickman, 1954; NCTQ, 2009). History of education or social foundations of education is the focus of question seven. Butin (2005) contended that these courses are important because they address the disciplinary study of education; multicultural issues, and the sociopolitical context in which education exists.

Participants' opinions regarding the importance of pedagogical theories about how students learn are addressed by question eight. Helterbran (2008) emphasized that effective education cannot be provided through content knowledge without pedagogical foundations. Question nine was designed to ask participants about methods coursework, the actual teaching of learning activities, in order to compare and contrast participants' responses with question eight.

The effectiveness of content specific teacher preparation in several areas is the focus of questions 10, 11, and 12. Phelps (2009) researched the importance of teacher preparation in the area of literacy, while the quality of mathematics, science, and technology instruction has been scrutinized (NMSI, 2007). Question 13 asks participants about their preparation and their ability to meet students' higher level thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) stated that students should be given the opportunity to demonstrate these skills in the classroom.

Participants will be asked about the preparation they received to meet the changing demographics of students in the United States in questions 14 through 16. Question 14 about English language learners is rooted in the literature citing a rise in this segment of the student population (O'Neal, Ringler, & Rodriguez, 2008). Question 15 was designed to ask participants about how their preparation programs have enabled them to meet the needs of an increasingly multicultural student population. Researchers have alleged that many multicultural education courses are shallow and inadequate, failing to prepare teachers to meet student learning needs in this area (Czop-Assaf et al., 2010). Question 16 is related to the current American economic reality as well as the literature because it asks participants about their preparation in meeting the needs of a

socioeconomically diverse student population. This need has been emphasized in the literature (Buck & Cordes, 2005; White, 2009).

As the number of students who receive special education services has risen, question 17 was written to ask participants about their preparation in this area.

Researchers have called for improvements in this area, even advocating that special education be embedded in the same program for all teachers (Brownell et al., 2010). Due to the rising availability and sophistication of instructional technology, question 18 was designed to ask participants about how well they have been prepared to utilize it in the classroom to facilitate student learning. Research has shown that explicit instruction in how to use technology in the classroom improves teachers' feelings of self-efficacy in this area, and consequently increases the incidence of utilization of such tools (Doppen, 2004).

The affective, or emotional, domain is the subject of questions 19 and 20. Question 19 was conceived to gauge participants' feelings about their how their preparation has improved their ability to form relationships with families. Positive relationships between teachers and families have been shown to increase student achievement (Epstein, 1985; Henderson, 1987) while reducing student retention rates (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009). Question 20 was written to ask participants about how well they were trained to deal with bullying. Yoon (2004) identified self-efficacy, empathy, and ability to perceive the seriousness of the situation as the three factors supporting teachers' ability to address bullying.

Much attention has been drawn to the fact that American students rank 15th in literacy and 24th in math among developed nations (OECD, 2003). Question 21 was

included to solicit opinions about participants' preparation in facilitating student success rates on high-stakes standardized tests.

Floden (2005) identified environmental conditions contributing to student learning as part of a measure of teacher quality. Questions 22 and 23 ask participants about the challenges they face in the classroom, and the obstacles which pose challenges to student learning. Question 24 inquires about participants' confidence in their ability to meet the individual learning needs of their students. It is rooted in research about the importance of the self-efficacy of teachers (Bandura, 1995, Garvis, 2009). Question 25 allows participants to describe any other ways their respective teacher education programs have prepared them to meet the individual learning needs of students. Cerit (2010) identified a correlation between teacher training and feelings of self-efficacy.

Questions 26 and 27 were designed to afford participants opportunities to identify coursework in their teacher preparation programs which may not have had any correlation to student learning, as well as any gaps in their instruction. The literature illustrated a frustration with a chasm between theory and practice by preservice teachers (Garvis, 2009). Finally, question 28 was written to elicit participants' opinions about how their respective teacher education programs could have been improved to better facilitate student learning.

As described by Moustakas (1994), this topic and these questions are rooted in both my experiences as well as a review of the existing literature. In order to hear the voices of the participants as they respond, I will bracket out my personal experiences to the greatest possible degree. To the extent to which the interview questions might inform policy regarding teacher education toward the goal of facilitating student learning, the

corresponding data may be expected to have social meaning and significance (Moustakas, 1994). In order to determine content validity of my interview and focus group questions, I have solicited input from a panel of three teacher education professors who teach in education programs in Virginia. Each of these professors has read and reviewed the interview and focus group questions, and I have edited these questions based upon their suggestions for improvement. In addition, I have piloted the questions with three classroom teachers who will not be participating in the study because they do not meet the requirements of the sampling population. Based upon these pilot interviews, I altered the order and wording of my interview questions to clarify meaning and reduce the potential need for additional clarification. Because the focus group questions are a subset of the interview questions, identical wording changes were also applied to these questions.

Due to the lengthy nature of the interview as prescribed by Moustakas (1994), follow-up interviews may be required.

Focus groups. I conducted one focus group interview with five participants. Seven of the original 26 interview questions were the basis for the focus group interview. As with individual interviews, focus interviews were digitally recorded for both audio and video. To preserve and protect the anonymity of the participants, their respective teacher education programs, their places of employment and other factors, respondents who participated in the focus group were asked to sign a form agreeing to keep the conversation private and not to reveal identifying information to others.

Table 3.4.

Focus Group Questions

- 1) Please list and describe which dispositions or personal characteristics you believe a good teacher should possess.
 - 2) Describe your biggest challenges to facilitating student learning during your teaching career.
 - 3) Do you feel there are any barriers to learning among the students you teach? If so, please describe them.
 - 4) In what ways do you feel your teacher education program has prepared you to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
 - 5) Do you feel that some courses in your teacher education program were a waste of your time? If so, which ones?
 - 6) Do you feel that some courses, subjects, or experiences should have been included in your teacher education program to further prepare you to teach your students before you began your career as a classroom teacher? Explain.
 - 7) In what ways, if any, do you feel that your teacher education program could have been improved to further enable you to meet your students' individual learning needs?
-

Together, all three data collection methods provided for triangulation in this study. The self-efficacy survey, the interview questions, and the focus group ensured credibility of the study and supported the resulting implications.

Data Analysis

Demographic information, including gender, age, race, ethnicity, years of teaching experience, level of education, and a description of the current school setting were gathered at the beginning of each interview and presented in tabular form.

Responses from the interviews and the focus group were analyzed for significant statements and themes. I transcribed interviews, and assigned and utilized pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. I conducted member checks to help ensure accuracy of each participant's responses. Digital video files and electronic files have been stored securely on an external hard drive.

Participants' responses were analyzed for both textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). In textural descriptions, participants related the phenomenon they experienced (i.e., completing a teacher education program and addressing student learning needs in the classroom). Data were also analyzed for structural descriptions (i.e., how their experience was affected by the context of their respective classrooms and schools). I analyzed these data for significant statements and clusters of meaning to find what teachers believe could have been improved about their respective teacher education programs to facilitate student learning. These significant statements were then analyzed to provide understandings of how their classroom teaching experiences have led them to develop suggestions for improvement of the teacher education process. Finally, I analyzed these statements to find the essence of what the participants experienced in trying to meet the cognitive and affective learning needs of their students with the education they gained in their teacher preparation programs (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, I analyzed the quantitative data from the Teachers' Self-Efficacy Survey in comparison with the qualitative findings from the 25 individual interviews and the focus group and presented correlations or discrepancies I observed.

Trustworthiness

I have made every attempt to ensure the credibility, dependability, and transferability of this study. The following procedures were employed to preserve the overall trustworthiness of this research.

Credibility. Although I worked to bracket out my own experiences, my background as an educator and a journalist will help to lend credibility to this study. Throughout the data collection process, I used memoing to bracket out my personal feelings and reactions to the fullest extent possible to facilitate listening to the experiences of the participants. This helped me to hear the participants as they provided textural and structural descriptions of their experiences in their respective teacher education programs. Within 24 hours of each interview, I wrote a page or two about my own feelings, experiences, reactions, and opinions based on my interaction with and the responses of the participants. Topics in this memoing process included information about my previous interaction with the participants, the tone, pace, and setting of the interview, my level of satisfaction with the interview, and any personal responses I might have had to what the participants said.

To record ideas about the evolving theory, I maintained an audit trail to outline the research process and to track the emergence of significant statements and clusters of meaning. A focus group provided the opportunity for participants to interact, facilitating communalization (Husserl, 1970). In this process, participants had the opportunity to

think more deeply about their responses in order to give more comprehensive, complete, and thoughtful responses.

Triangulation of data will also enhance the credibility of this study. To gauge teachers' perspectives and suggestions to improve the teacher education process to facilitate student learning, a self-efficacy survey designed for teachers was employed. IN addition to 25 individual interviews, one focus group was also conducted.

Dependability. Data has been recorded, analyzed and reported thoroughly and accurately to establish dependability of the study. For both individual interviews and focus groups, member checks were conducted to check the accuracy of the participants' responses, and to give participants an additional opportunity to clarify their input.

Transferability. Detailed descriptions of the sampling, data collection, and data analysis sections have contributed to the transferability of this study. The initial stages of analysis of textural and structural descriptions of the descriptions of each participant's teacher education program will also be included in the audit trail to help ensure transferability of this study.

Ethical Issues

As the collected data consisted of interviews and a focus group in which classroom teachers expressed their opinions about the quality of their respective teacher education programs, I need to maintain the safety and confidentiality of this information. Confidentiality of the participants will be scrupulously maintained through the use of pseudonyms. In addition, any names of students and schools were changed to preserve anonymity. Transcripts, digitally recorded video files, and password protected electronic files were saved to an external hard drive and retained in a locked receptacle along with

handwritten notes for a period of no less than three years following the publication of this study.

Summary

As the researcher, I have aspired to collect, analyze, present, and publish the data according to the highest levels of honesty and integrity. It is my intention that the results of this study will provide a voice for classroom teachers to express their opinions about how to improve teacher preparation. Furthermore, it is my hope that the policymakers who control the manner in which teachers are prepared can take the results of this study under consideration when making decisions about how these programs are structured, run, and accredited. I also hope that any similar studies can also help to inform this process. In turn, improvements to the teacher preparation process can improve teacher quality and student achievement (Ding, 2006). Since teacher quality is such an important school-related factor which impacts student learning (Dean et al., 2006), this study has the potential to improve the effectiveness of education in the United States. As I place an extremely high value on the affective and cognitive domains of students, I will honor the codes of ethics in accordance with the American Educational Research Association. Implementing best practices will allow me to address the research problem of integrating teachers' perspectives and suggestions for improving teacher education to facilitate student learning.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to listen to the voices of teachers as they shared their perspectives and suggestions for improving the teacher education process to facilitate student learning. Thus, the design of this work is a transcendental phenomenological study in which I attempted to bracket my experiences as a classroom teacher in order to perceive things as for the first time through the voices of the participants to arrive at a textural description of their individual experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study will describe and analyze the input of each participant to address the research problem, that the wisdom and experience of classroom teachers has largely been ignored in the debate about how to improve the teacher education process to facilitate student learning.

Research Questions

The following four research questions guided this study:

First, what are the self-efficacy beliefs of each teacher regarding the ability to perform their job duties?

Second, which courses and learning experiences in the respective teacher education program most effectively prepared each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Third, which courses and experiences in the respective teacher education program did not contribute to the ability of each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Fourth, what improvements do participants believe should be made to each respective teacher education program to facilitate and advance student learning?

Survey Summary

The first step in triangulation of data was for participants to take the Teachers' Self-Efficacy Survey developed by Ralf Schwarzer, Gerdamarie Schmitz, and Gary Daytner in 1999. Their work is based upon Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997). It was copyrighted by the original authors and is available for use free of charge. It was retrieved from http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/teacher_se.htm. The survey was designed to measure teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in each of four areas: job accomplishment; skill development on the job; social interaction with students, parents and colleagues; and coping with job stress (Schwartzter, Schmitz, & Daytner, 1999).

To facilitate administration and data collection, I entered this survey into the Survey Monkey program. Then I sent the link to access the survey to participants via electronic mail. Each of the 25 participants read ten statements and indicated if they disagreed strongly, disagreed, felt neutral, agreed, or agreed strongly with each one. The results of the survey are compiled in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Self-efficacy Survey Results

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to even the most difficult students.	0% (0)	24% (6)	20% (5)	52% (13)	4% (1)
2. I know that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise.	0% (0)	4% (1)	4% (1)	64% (16)	28% (7)
3. When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.	0% (0)	8% (2)	16% (4)	52% (13)	24% (6)
4. I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.	0% (0)	4% (1)	0% (0)	44% (11)	52% (13)
5. Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.	0% (0)	0% (0)	12% (3)	52% (13)	36% (9)
6. I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs, even if I am having a bad day.	0% (0)	0% (0)	4% (1)	68% (17)	28% (7)
7. If I try hard enough, I know that I can exert a positive influence on both the personal and academic development of my students.	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	48% (12)	52% (13)
8. I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.	0% (0)	4% (1)	20% (5)	52% (13)	24% (6)
9. I know that I can motivate my students to participate in innovative projects.	0% (0)	0% (0)	12% (3)	48% (12)	40% (10)

10. I know that I can carry out innovative projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.

0% (0) 0% (0) 0% (0) 64% (16) 36% (9)

An analysis of the survey responses indicates a high degree of self-efficacy among these respondents. All participants agree or strongly agree that they can positively influence the personal and academic development of their students and carry out innovative projects even when opposed by skeptical colleagues. Twenty-four participants, or 96%, agree or strongly agree that their capability to meet their students' learning needs will continue to improve over time, and that they are responsive to their students' learning needs even if they are having a bad day. Twenty-three participants, or 92%, agree or strongly agree they are able to maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise. Twenty-two participants, or 88%, agree or strongly agree that they can maintain their composure and continue to teach despite interruptions and motivate students to participate in innovative projects. Nineteen participants, or 76%, agree or strongly agree that they can creatively cope with budget cuts or administrative problems to teach well, and that they can reach even the most difficult students. The item on which the group indicated the lowest level of self-efficacy was the ability to teach all relevant material to even the most difficult students. Fourteen participants, or 56%, indicated that they agree or strongly agree with this statement regarding the facilitation of student learning.

Individual Interviews

I conducted 25 individual interviews using a set of 28 questions rooted in my literature review. The interviews were conducted in locations of the participants' choice,

including their classrooms, my classroom, public libraries, and the local coffee shop. Although my methodology prescribed the use of a video camera to digitally record the interviews, I noticed that the participants' affective filter was often raised by the presence of the camera. Some participants did not attempt to conceal their displeasure at the presence of the camera. Following assurances that no one would see the video recording by me, the participants adapted to the employment of the camera accordingly.

Themes

Several themes emerged throughout the interview process as participants discussed strengths and weaknesses of their respective teacher education programs, as well as their suggestions for improvement.

Satisfaction with teacher education program. I began each interview by asking each participant if they were generally satisfied with the quality of their respective teacher education program. Twenty-four out of 25 participants said they were satisfied to varying degrees; only one participant expressed dissatisfaction with her program. However, when asked later to judge their program on very specific merits, including literacy, math, science, higher-order thinking skills, literacy, math, science, English as a Second Language, multicultural and socioeconomic diversity, special education, bullying, building relationships with families, and using technology, they identified weaknesses in several of these areas. I was surprised when participants apologized after describing any weaknesses in their preparation. When one participant, "Bellatrix," answered repeatedly that her program did not prepare her to meet student learning needs in several areas, she stated that she felt "like a broken record." One participant, "Sybil," said apologetically that she felt like she was "dissing" her program. Another participant, "Elladora" said, "I

know this is terrible, but I really don't remember focusing on a lot of these topics until I was in a classroom. I sure hope classes have changed since then" (laughing).

The concept of a good teacher. Because my questions were rooted in the literature review, they are a reflection of what the current body of knowledge dictates about what makes good teaching. Toward the purpose of honoring teachers' perspectives and suggestions for improving student learning, I asked teachers about which qualities or dispositions contribute to being of a good teacher. Patience and flexibility were the top two answers, followed by being knowledgeable, understanding and caring or nurturing. Participants also cited compassion or empathy, a willingness to learn, ability to provide discipline for students, and having a strong sense of organization.

When the participants were asked as to whether or not their programs looked at their personal characteristics as a condition of admission to or graduation from their programs, 16 said no while nine said yes. Those who said they believed they were evaluated in this manner cited the necessity of references for the program, having to write essays for admission, and being evaluated by their cooperating teachers during their student teaching.

One candidate, "Lavender," spoke of classmates who were gently and tactfully discouraged from pursuing a career in the teaching profession.

But there (were) some obvious kids that you knew (shaking head) didn't belong. But they never embarrassed them, they just would work with them one-on-one, 'cause it was a real small college I went to, so there was a flexibility that they could hone in on that. And some of them dropped out, but it was never an embarrassment thing. But I think a precedent was set. It was kind of one of these,

this not just, ‘You’re going to be a teacher,’ it’s ‘You have to rise to the occasion, this is a demanding program, but you can do it,’ that kind of thing. But they also advocated that, if you are not meant to do this, you are doing a disservice to the education world.

Instructor more important than course. When discussing the relative merits of literacy, mathematics, and science courses, several participants discussed the value of the instructor over the value of the course. Many participants were able to name memorably poor or incredibly wonderful professors despite the fact that it has been years since the participants have taken these courses. One participant, “Cho,” specifically ascribed the benefit of each course as a direct result of the professor. “Honestly, my reading classes were not very helpful, and I specifically remember my instructor . . . I really didn’t learn much from her . . . My writing instructor was phenomenal, and I learned a great deal from her.”

Another participant, “Molly,” explained, “The teachers that I had were pretty amazing. K.H. was my teacher for the literacy, the reading methods class, and a lot of the things she taught me, I still do.” Molly also sang the praises of her mathematics teacher, and her favorite professor, Dr. M., who provided instruction in how to teach science. “Lavender,” another participant, spoke lovingly of her mathematics professor who was also the football coach. She recalled fondly that her professor was a little bit out of his realm when instructing teaching candidates in a lesson about using M&M candies to teach mathematics. When recalling the retirement party she and her classmates threw for this instructor, she admitted in the interview that she was near tears at the fondness of the recollection.

Several participants recalled the quality of their learning experiences almost exclusively in terms of the quality of their professor. With disdain “Hannah” recalled her science course, which was supposed to be taught by a professor who was substituted for at the last minute by a teacher’s assistant.

There is an old saying that students do not care what you know until they know that you care. The wisdom of this adage was supported by a conclusion by “Helena.”

I think one of the biggest (ways to improve my teacher education program) would have been instructors who cared more about us than themselves...They didn’t have the desire, I guess, to see that we could learn, or to see that we could learn what we needed to know...As opposed to telling us how we could do better, it was, ‘You did this wrong.’ But they wouldn’t tell us how to do it right, they expected us to know how to do it without telling us.

Hands-on and learning by doing. Participants also spoke of the effectiveness of hands-on learning in their programs. Ten of the 25 participants specifically cited the importance of hands-on learning in their interviews; several more alluded to it, but not by name. “Luna” cited the effectiveness of hands-on learning for her, and said this influenced her decision to teach this way to maximize learning for her students.

“Bathsheba” related the story of being assigned a bean journal by her science professor, recalling a family Thanksgiving trip to Tennessee. She was required to bring the bean plant along with her so she could continue to take pictures of the plant and write about it in her journal. Another participant, “Aurora,” stated:

. . . With it being inquiry, I think that really stuck with me, and I think that’s my learning style also, is that, you know, I’m very kinesthetic, I need to touch it, feel

it, have examples. I'm not very good at lecturing, and listening to a lecture, that, I'm not going to retain that. So I think my own personal learning style is what opens me up in the classroom, and that makes me realize that different kids need different things.

Although the student teaching experiences were concentrated near the end of each participant's programs, many teachers cited the importance of being able to gain observation time and work experiences in local schools through practica or "blocking" experiences. "Bathsheba" stated, "I learn more by doing and observation than I can from a book. So it gave me the opportunity to see what the real world is like."

One participant, "Lily," recalled her experience in a portion of her program referred to as partnership. "We were in the schools for half the day, and then had, actually, some classes the second half of the day so you could...very immediately ask questions of the professor."

Another participant, "Molly," describe the progression in her field experience coursework from observations to mini-lessons, to assuming teaching responsibilities for one portion of the day to an entire day. She stated that it would have been more beneficial for her to have these experiences earlier in the program and not just at the end in her student teaching. Another participant, "Helena," stated that her program was plagued by inconsistencies, with student experiences varying widely depending upon their placements. While some students were assigned only menial jobs with little responsibility and few opportunities for more than limited student contact, others were actually doing some student teaching during their internships.

Several participants spoke of how the diversity of their experiences, either in different schools within the same school division or even in more than one school division, contributed to their knowledge and exposure to a variety of working environments.

Test taking and preparation. When asked about the tests they were required to pass in order to become a licensed teachers, all participants cited the Praxis series of tests. A small number of participants were required to take the Virginia Reading Assessment. However, scores did not count for this group as that was the year the test was piloted.

Across the board, teachers in this study rejected the notion that taking a test has anything to do with the quality of their teaching. This question even provoked laughter in several participants. One participant, “Ginny,” ascribed her teaching ability to education and experience instead. Two career-switching participants over fifty, “Minerva” and “Bathsheba,” recounted their experiences with testing preparation to refresh their memories and reactivate prior knowledge before their exams. Two other candidates, “Ursula” and “Lavender,” explained that they have testing anxiety and consequently do not test well. “Aurora” mused that teachers often stress to their students that one test will not make or break their student careers, yet that is what is required of teachers themselves.

One teacher, “Fleur”, stated that the single benefit she gained from taking the test is that it helped inspire her to encourage her own students at times when they may be struggling with an assessment.

Most participants in the study acknowledged testing as something of a necessary evil, designed perhaps to “weed out people of a certain intelligence level,” said

“Hannah.” Another participant, “Dolores,” stated that she failed to see a correlation between her content knowledge and her ability to effectively meet her students’ individual learning needs.

The other side of the testing coin in preparing students to take high-stakes standardized tests under the auspices of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Virginia adopted the Standards of Learning in 1995 in response to NCLB, and 1998 was the first year of SOL testing. Although student passage rates on these tests determine Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and school accreditation, none of the 25 participants in the study reported test-taking strategies as a point of emphasis throughout their teacher education programs. Within the walls of higher learning institutions, several participants reported varying degrees of focus upon the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). Participants’ accounts ranged from a total lack of emphasis, to merely learning about the existence of the tests, to the importance of a curriculum that is entirely standards-driven.

One participant, “Lisette,” reported a gap between the philosophy of her school and the daily realities of her job.

I felt like the college classes were more . . . free-spirited, artsy . . . just very . . . open-ended, and here in the real world it’s multiple choice, you know? We have to learn how to cross out answers, and eliminate answers we know aren’t right . . . All of that stuff I developed in my first couple years (of teaching) . . . I didn’t have any coursework in teaching students test-taking skills.

Six participants reported that their preparation programs stressed the importance of teaching the curriculum, but deemphasized or discouraged teaching to a test. One participant, “Hagrid,” recalled that she and her fellow students believed that the SOL

would be like so many themes in education, transient. In light of their emphasis in Virginia today, she admits that they were very “naïve.” Another participant, “Josephine,” noted that the professors in her program were similarly unprepared for the unprecedented emphasis upon the SOL. She stated that they encouraged her and her classmates to remain true to their philosophy of education and their style of teaching regardless of high-stakes standardized testing.

Another participant, “Lavender,” discussed one of her professor’s attempts to put the SOL into perspective for the teaching candidates in her program.

. . . The professor said something basically to the fact that, they’re not going away, despite the fact that we don’t like them. But here’s the deal. This is what’s going to separate the good teachers from the excellent teachers. So if you can take this thorn in your side, and still blossom into a wonderful teacher, then this is what you were meant to be . . . However, it is more now into an ugly testing cycle that puts us in test mode instead of real-life situations that I don’t think prepares us for real life. Life is not multiple choice. But our school did a great job. And I, I liked it when professors would hear complaining and say, ‘Do something about it. Don’t let this test dictate what kind of teacher you’re going to be. You still have it in you to be a great teacher.’

Majoring in education. An analysis of undergraduate degrees showed that three participants majored in education, three majored in child or human development, and one double majored in these two disciplines. Education majors were instructed to earn specializations in two other areas. Two of the participants chose one in a content area such as English, mathematics, history, or science. The other concentration or

specialization was in an area like psychology or special education. However, “Ginny” said that her program now requires that students choose both of their concentrations in the content areas.

The remainder of the 16 participants earned undergraduate degrees in areas other than education. While some of this was because of a later entry into an education program, several participants attended schools where they were not allowed to major in education despite being in the teacher education program. Seven students majored in liberal arts, curricular studies, or interdisciplinary studies. While this reflects a philosophy that emphasizes content knowledge over pedagogical skill, some participants expressed frustration by this policy, and complained that their time was wasted on subject matter that does not help them meet the needs of their students. “Luna” shared her experiences of having to take 300-400 level classes in music, art, and communication to fulfill the requirements of her major as part of a women’s studies cohort.

Did I need to write a 50-page paper on why Sandra Bullock showed women stereotypes in her movie *Miss Congeniality*? I don’t feel like that prepared me . . .

I understand their point is to get a wide array of classes, but I feel like maybe we got that point in our gen. ed. undergrad. Why not take 100 and 200 level classes instead of wasting our time with these upper level classes?

Of the three participants who majored in a content area such as English or history, only one is currently teaching that content area now. Consequently, the students of the other two teachers are not receiving instruction in their subjects from a teacher who majored in that content area.

Two students who majored in other areas because they did not decide to become teachers until later in the program or in a later degree reported that because their degrees were related to the subject matter they currently teach, their benefit was serendipitous. For example, “Bathsheba” majored in accounting and now teaches math, while “Violet” majored in criminal justice and now teaches history. Both teachers report that earning these degrees have improved their ability to meet their students’ individual learning needs.

One participant, “Josephine,” discussed the importance and relevance of her degree in psychology. Because her classes discussed learning processes, memory, brain function, and the impact of learning environments, she said she found those classes to be “incredibly helpful” with teaching.

Social foundations and history of education. While nearly all of the participants recalled taking a social foundations or history of education course, very few ascribed any value to such courses when it came to meeting their students’ individual learning needs. Several participants said they found this course interesting, but that it did not have much of an impact upon the kind of teacher they have become.

Four of the participants noted that the class did have a connection to improving their ability to meet student’s learning needs. “Ginny” stated that the course featured a project in which each student was required to write a paper about his or her own philosophy of education. She stated that this forced her to think more deeply about student’s individual learning needs, and how she planned to meet them in her classroom. “Lily” and “Violet” each said that this class caused them to come to deeper realizations about students’ individual learning needs. “Lily” stated that the course illuminated the

fact that student needs can vary depending upon time and place. “Violet” stated that she benefited from an analysis of the relative effectiveness of different movements in education so that she could tailor her instruction accordingly. “Minerva” stated that her history of education course validates the things that she likes to do in her classroom, including an emphasis on hands-on learning.

Pedagogy vs. methods. There was a wide range of opinion among participants regarding the effectiveness of their pedagogical coursework. While some participants acknowledged a benefit from learning about how students assimilate information, several stated that the benefit of these courses were either marginal or non-existent. One participant, “Pomona,” expressed that this course was limited by a lack of practical application, that it was “pie-in-the-sky theory” that was untested until she got into her own classroom to actually teach.

Participants had a much more favorable impression of their methods coursework, classes which taught specific learning activities. Some participants expressed that this class was just the beginning of an education that continues to this day, depending upon which activities their current groups of students respond to the best. “Cho” shared how deeply these classes impacted her.

Those classes were instrumental because those were . . . the classes that I really learned how to do things with students that I didn’t even think were possible.

When I had first originally chosen education as a program, I thought it would be fun to teach kids, and I was all about doing fun things with them. But it was in those classes that I learned it’s not about having fun. Of course you want to have fun when you teach, but you have to have a thought process behind it, there has to

be a reason for all the fun things that you do. What is the learning behind everything? And that's where I really learned.

Another participant, "Violet," stated that a lot of the activities she learned how to do with student are not really feasible to do within the time frame of a normal school day. Since being in the classroom, she feels like she has learned a lot more. Several participants agreed that they have taken the basic knowledge from these types of courses and modified them depending upon their current teaching assignment. "Josephine" noted that the personality of each teacher is the factor that determines the feasibility of each learning activity assigned, and that not every teacher can successfully utilize each activity in the classroom. "Sybil" stated that while this class gave her the foundation of what she needed to know, the walls and the carpet came once she was on the job, from her team and from her mentor.

Higher-order thinking skills and differentiation. Fourteen of the participants stated that they felt that their programs either failed to address, or did not adequately improve the ability to address their students' higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and analysis. While several participants stated that their programs introduced Bloom's Taxonomy and discussed why it is important, only six said that they received instruction on specific ways in which to implement it in the classroom, including the use of rubrics and journals. "Olympe" said she believes that the rigor of assessments has increased since she has begun teaching, and that she has had to learn to prepare her students only after she began her career as a classroom teacher.

Several participants stated that they have trouble with differentiating instruction to meet students' individual learning needs. Altering the process, the content, and/or the

product depending on student ability levels is a daunting task for many instructors. The gap between learning why it is important to differentiate instruction to make content accessible for all students and how to do this in the classroom is a gap that is often bridged by gaining experience in the classroom, participants said. One participant, “Ariana,” stated, “I really have learned so much more since becoming a teacher.”

Technology in the classroom. While many participants in the program said their teacher education programs did as much as they could with the technology that existed at the time, their programs did not prepare them very well because much of the technology that is now commonplace was rare at the time they received their preparation. Most participants recalled receiving instruction in such Microsoft Office Programs as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, but did not receive training in the use of interactive whiteboards like Smart Board, and other instruments like document cameras due to their limited availability. Only one participant, “Cho” recalled receiving instruction in how to use a Smart Board. She reported that when she first began her teaching career, she was among the very first teachers who wanted to use the communal Smart Board, and one has since been installed in each classroom at the school. While some teachers noted that the technology was meant to be used to facilitate student learning, and that they were required to include a technology component in their lesson planning, some programs simply emphasized technology solely for teacher use.

As technology in the classroom has grown exponentially in such a short period of time, one participant, “Hagrid,” noted that her class was a springboard to foster a willingness to try new things for the purpose of student learning. She said that she was

encouraged to feel comfortable trying things out, which is a mindset that has benefited her in a general sense, more than an emphasis on specific tools or software.

Due to the relatively increasing rate of instructional technology, some participants noted that they have had to learn what they know about new tools for learning on the job. One participant, “Lavender,” admitted that her parents did not even own a computer until after she graduated from college, and this caused her to be slow to embrace emerging technologies. She posited that it would be “cool” to return to college in this age of iPads and iPods with educational applications for student learning.

English Language Learners and multicultural diversity. The overwhelming majority of participants said that they received little or no formal instruction in how to instruct English Language Learners (ELL). “Ginny” and “Sybil” recalled an admonition to form a strong relationship with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in the division in which they were hired. Four teachers, “Elladora,” “Luna,” “Josephine,” and “Aurora” reported that their student teaching experiences were in areas with a high concentration of English Language Learners. “Luna” recalled that one of her placements was with a cooperating teacher who also spoke Spanish, and that experience helped her to meet the individual learning needs of the ELL she currently teaches. “Josephine” took some Spanish classes to help with parent conferences and other forms of home-school communication. “Aurora” recalled working with ELL who struggled with cultural discrepancies as well as a language barrier. She stated that those students had never seen utensils or a flushing toilet, so they used video recordings to show them how to use these items.

Many participants stated that their programs either failed to address or did not address meeting the needs of a multicultural student population in an in-depth or meaningful way. “Lavender” reported that her education program had an annual Festival of Light project where teams of students would be assigned a specific country and would show how light was used during winter holidays that were celebrated in that country. She described how the project was a metaphor for teaching, that educators are the light for their students. Lavender did not speak specifically to how this project or this metaphor affected her ability to meet her students’ individual learning needs.

“Minerva” noted that the reason why these lessons are absent or lacking is because most parts of central Virginia are not as diverse as some other areas of the country. She posited that if she lived in or near a major city like Chicago or New York with a larger multicultural student population, it would be more a focus in programs in those areas.

Socioeconomic status. In sharp contrast to a widespread lack of diversity, participants in this study stated they have many learners from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. While ten participants said this was not addressed in any way, the remainder of the participants gained some knowledge from their coursework, or through their practica, blocking, or student teaching experiences, or both. One participant, “Violet,” specifically cited instruction in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. “Ariana” spoke of the help she received in this area from assigned reading in her courses, including *The First Days of School* by Harry Wong and *Among Schoolchildren* by Tracy Kidder. Several participants noted that they had Ruby Payne professional development once hired in their division. “Josephine” recalled being involved in donation efforts in the schools

where she student taught. She stated that it contributed to her sense of empathy for these students by giving her a clearer picture of the challenges they faced on a daily basis, such as living in homes with no heat or insulation.

Special education. Data reflect a huge discrepancy among the participants in terms of how well they feel their schools prepared them to meet the individual learning needs of students who receive special education services. Answers ranged from, “It didn’t” and, “Very poor,” to those who reported gaining only a basic competency to those who reported taking an entire course on the subject of special education and special needs. However, the scope of each course differed from program to program. “Ginny,” “Aurora,” and “Lisette” recall specific instruction in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and 504 plans, while “Molly,” “Lily,” and “Minerva” recalled learning about the range of disorders and challenges which would qualify a student for special education services. “Molly” and “Hannah” report that they were referred to seek out the special education teaching staff at their schools, but that their program did not prepare them to work collaboratively with these professions to meet their students’ individual learning needs. “Bathsheba” stated that she and her classmates should have been placed into a classroom for special needs students. “Josephine” did spend several hours in a special education classroom, and she reported that this experience was “helpful” in improving her ability to meet her students’ individual learning needs.

The affective domain. Participants answered questions about factors which can affect a student’s affective domain, such as bullying and building relationships with students’ families. When discussing bullying, 19 participants noted that bullying was neither mentioned nor addressed in their teacher education programs. However, nine

participants stated that they felt that the issue of bullying was not a big issue when they went to school, and has since emerged to be one of the more talked-about issues in education in recent years. “Violet” discussed the fact that increasing dialogue about the issue as well as expanded media coverage can help educators mitigate the incidence and effects of bullying, and “Fleur” cited staff development she has since received on the topic. “Pomona” stated that she has not yet seen anyone come up with a very effective way to handle the issue, in part because it is so pervasive and so difficult to deal with.

While some participants were simply told of the importance of communication with students’ families, 13 participants said that their programs did not address this issue. The importance of the role of the coordinating teacher in this area was discussed by “Ginny,” “Cho,” and “Lisette” in an illustration of two extremes. “Ginny” said she felt like she did not learn as much as her peers because her cooperating teacher did not feel that it was appropriate to allow her to sit in on parent-teacher conferences. In contrast, “Cho” said she learned much from accompanying her cooperating teacher on home visits; both she and “Lisette” were assigned the task of creating newsletters for parents. While “Luna,” “Ariana,” and “Hagrid” related role-playing experiences, they said that they did not prepare them in a comprehensive way. “It was all theory...until you’re actually in there with an irate parent, you can’t imagine what you’re going to do or how you’re going to respond,” said “Hagrid.”

“Josephine” stated that building relationships with all stakeholders is an important job for teachers because the education profession is a social one which requires teambuilding to get students to succeed. She stated that her professor emphasized the

importance of positive relationships with students, colleagues, administration, and all staff members as well as parents.

Challenges of teaching and learning. To probe further into the question of how participants believe their teacher education programs could be improved, I asked them questions about the challenges of their teaching assignments and the obstacles their students face.

The number one challenge to facilitating student learning, named by nine participants, is lack of time to teach the required curriculum. “I don’t think college prepared me for the mass amount of information I have to stuff into my children every year. When you have snow days and all that, it’s almost impossible,” stated “Ginny.”

“Ursula” stated, “The most difficult part is having the time to actually teach everything they want us to teach.”

“Fleur” stated, “You can’t spend enough time getting every child to understand everything before you have to move on.”

“Lisette” referred to this as “a constant pressure” to teach students, to review concepts with them in the spring, and to get them to be successful on the “SOL tests looming in May.”

“Minerva” stated,

Having too many concepts to have to teach in a short amount of time, and having to do it in such a hurry that they cannot get a full grasp . . . When you have nine weeks to teach eight concepts; you only get a week a concept. (Shaking head) It’s not enough.

Parents were the number two issue named participants. Eight teachers spoke about either a lack of support from parents, or a contentious relationship between school and home. “Violet” said, “. . . You have so many parents that are...trying to tell you how to teach. And then you have to kind of walk on eggshells in your own room because you don’t want to say the wrong thing.”

“Aurora” stated,

Unfortunately, you know, when I went to school, the teacher was always right. The child never would have talked back, and certainly the parent never would have talked back, either. And that’s just not the case anymore. Not that I expect, if I’m wrong, for someone not to say I’m wrong, I welcome that. But it’s really hard to be challenged every step of the way with everything you do, for someone to be coming at you no matter what’s going on, it’s, it’s tough when all you’re looking for is the best for their child. And a lot of times they don’t see that, and that’s hard.

“Lavender” said, “Sometimes parents can be the worst part of my job because they think we’re out to get them and they that we’re trying to that we’re trying to make their life difficult,” she said, ascribing this issue to the troubled state of the nation’s economy. “They can’t control certain situations, but they think they can control their kid’s teacher.” “Hannah” also spoke of lack of parent support, sometimes caused by situations in which parents do not have time to sit with their children and do homework because they need to work two jobs.

Seven participants named lack of student motivation and accountability as a problem in the classroom. “Violet” stated, “. . . Children don’t have any responsibility for

their own learning anymore. We pass students on to the next level even if they're failing, there's no responsibility on the student to feel that need to succeed." "Ariana" ascribed the lack of student interest to the burgeoning interest in social relationships that is reflective of the developmental level of her sixth graders. However, "Lily" spoke of the difficulty unmotivated students face when education is not a priority with adults in the home.

Five participants stated that it is a challenge to provide differentiation for their students. Participants discussed a wide range of abilities and learning modalities as factors which contribute to challenges in this area. Five discussed the effect of budget cuts in terms of reduced staffing and larger class sizes. Four participants said that classroom management is also a daunting task, and the size of this challenge shrinks and grows from year to year. Several participants readily shared if this was a more or less optimum year in terms of classroom behavior with the current group of students.

When asked if their students faced barriers to learning, the majority of teachers mentioned problems in the students' home lives, including crime, domestic violence, low socioeconomic status, and a lack of parental support due to a host of factors including illiteracy, a language barrier, economic issues, or simple disinterest. Participants relayed stories of hungry students, tired students, students who have had parents who have been arrested, and students who often don't know where they are going to sleep each night. "Bathsheba" named the role of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in student motivation and behavior. "Sybil" said,

The last thing they really want to do is learn. They're not eating, or they're not able to live in their home because of a fight, or no power, and life is too big to

learn about colonial America, or whatever we're talking about at the time.

The role of confidence. Overall, most participants reported feeling confident about their ability to meet the individual learning needs of their students. Many participants spoke of the fact that teaching is something that can always be done better, that being a teacher also means being a lifelong learner, that educators can continually learn and grow. Participants talked about working to differentiate lessons, to be sure that learning activities are varied to offer something for every cognitive level and every learning modality in an attempt to meet the learning needs of all students.

In discussing factors that mitigate confidence, low levels of student achievement as measured by standardized testing were often mentioned. "Fleur" stated, ". . . They'll do well on a test or a quiz, but as far as retaining the information for a test at the end of the year, I don't feel confident that most of them will, even with constant reviewing."

"Violet" said, "I do activities that meet every kid's needs. I meet all the multiple intelligences, and we work on every level of thinking. Does that always show in my results? No. Scores? No, but I do it."

"Olympe" said that she has sought out professional development to address the gaps in her education program. "I'm constantly thinking of new ways to get to these kids, and what I can do for them, and how I can make this real for them, and come alive for them."

Waste of time and opportunity cost. While four participants said they did not believe any courses, subjects, or experiences were a waste of their time, the remainder of the participants named courses that they felt were irrelevant. In an era where so many topics could potentially be included in teacher education programs, this is time that is not

easily afforded. Some participants recalled courses that might have been valuable if not for a poor instructor. Others named the opposite problem, a competent teacher tasked with a curriculum they did not deem valuable.

“Fleur” spoke of a combination of two factors; having to wait for higher class standing to gain entry to some classes, and having to fulfill what she sometimes saw as arbitrary requirements. This sometimes frustrated her, and resulted in an education that included metalwork and jewelry making, welding, and dance appreciation. “. . . They were fun. They didn’t teach me anything,” she recalled.

Some teachers discussed having to take classes in a core area that turned out to be worthless to them because they did not address the grade level they currently teach. Examples included an English class focused on writing term papers, higher level mathematics courses, an astronomy course, and a psychology course focused on the conducting research experiments.

“Helena” talked about thinking her class about teaching middle school was a waste because she originally thought she wanted to teach younger students. However, she now teaches sixth grade, and said she finds much of the information she learned very helpful.

Some students who were not able to major in education also expressed frustration with these types of programs. “Luna” stated that she wished she could take more education classes, but room in her schedule was often taken up by classes to fulfill the requirements of a degree in liberal arts.

“Olympe” stated, “. . . Looking back on it now, I don’t think all of those were the best choices for teachers.” “Violet” said that her program contained redundancies and

overlapping topics in several of her courses.

The best preparation. Although many participants spoke of outstanding courses, several stated that they learned much from their student teaching experiences. “Helena” said that the best thing her program did was to orchestrate her placement with her cooperating teacher. “I learned more from him than I did in the classrooms. I mean, he was the perfect example.”

“Fleur” said she was assigned to student teach in the second and fifth grades. Even though they were different, she said she saw things that she could apply at any grade level.

“Josephine” spoke highly of the time she spent in local schools.

They wanted us to be around kids, they wanted us to be around good teachers, they wanted us to see it, they wanted us to be there. I thought that was very important because a lot of the times hearing it and knowing the information is completely different than being in the room, you know?

Suggestions for improvement. Some participants said that classroom management is a big issue for beginning teachers. While “Violet” said her behavior management class was by far the most valuable, teachers who lacked in this area readily mentioned it in their interviews. Additionally, “Sybil” noted that some student teachers who have taught at her school show deficiencies in that area, strengthening the argument for improvement in this area.

Several participants mentioned the need for more instruction in special education, meeting the needs of English language learners, and focusing more on diversity. In light

of changing issues in education, some said better technology classes, help with grading programs, and a course on data analysis.

Many participants spoke in favor of lengthening the student teaching portion of the program. “Cho” said, “I really think student teaching should be a full year, and you start the year and you end the year with those kids.”

“Bathsheba” did not go so far as to recommend a full year, but she emphasized the importance of student teachers being present at the beginning of the year.

By the time you student teach, (the) teacher’s already gotten all of the, the kinks out of everything, the kids know the routine, they’re quick about it. So when you go observe a class, oh, they all line up in a straight line, they know where to go, they know what they’re supposed to do. Everybody should go observe the first day (laughing). And then if you make it through that, you know you want to be a teacher.

Not everything can be taught. According to several participants, the push to improve teacher education is limited because not everything can be taught in a classroom. The benefit of experience is often needed to complement instruction. “Luna” said of her literacy coursework, “I do feel like they did their best to give me the knowledge, but until I got in and did my PALS testing and . . . my guided reading groups . . . it was just the experience that I needed.”

“Cho” stated that while her student teaching experience helping fourth graders create portfolios gave her a great deal of confidence, it is not possible to learn how to be a teacher as a student, you have to learn by doing. Other participants shared stories of gaining experience to complement the theories and concepts discussed in their education

coursework. “There’s just so much more than a university that contributed to my education,” she said.

“Pomona” said that her education was not comprehensive, but that it gave her “a jumping off point” of basics from which to continue learning. “Ursula” said that her program gave her the background, and the skills to find or learn something if she decides she needs to do so.

Some participants referred to teaching as “what you’re getting into,” being “in the fray,” or “the real world.”

“Ariana” stated,

I feel like it gave me a solid foundation to enter into teaching, to meet their needs. But it was never, it was not a done deal when I had my teaching degree. It’s...so to meet their learning needs, I would say it prepared me for more learning. Like when I graduated and I had my teaching certificate, there was never an illusion, no one ever said, ‘This is it.’ They basically said, ‘. . . If you’re going to be a teacher, you’re going to have to enjoy being a student your whole life through because you’re always going to be learning.’ So I went in knowing that was the case.

“Bathsheba” said, “Some things can’t prepare you, you just have to do it.”

Focus Group

For the focus group interview, I gathered four participants, “Ginny,” “Cho,” “Hermione,” and “Hagrid.” I selected seven of the original 28 interview questions to ask them within the parameters of a focus group in the hopes of sparking some discussion and debate.

When asked about the dispositions or qualities a good teacher should possess, flexibility, empathy, compassion, knowledge, and organization were the five qualities that were mentioned by members of the group. “Cho” spoke of the importance of teaching not only content, but spending more time with the students than their parents sometimes do. “Hermione” said that teachers are like other parents because they teach life skills. “Hagrid” talked about the importance of being proactive, and “Ginny” also talked about being forward-thinking, willing to change and learn in a dynamic career field of education.

When asked to describe the biggest challenges of their teaching careers, “Ginny” said that teachers must be able to assimilate new curriculum, new methods, and new technologies constantly. “Hermione” spoke of grade level changes, and she “Cho” spoke of meeting the learning needs of a wide range of learners. Large class sizes, lack of student motivation, and behavior management were also discussed. The group discussed barriers to student learning. Again, problems in the home environment and lack of parent support were two of the top issues.

In assessing their teacher preparation experiences, focus group participants talked about the importance of their student teaching experiences. “Ginny” and “Cho” talked about the fact that their teachers also worked to give them confidence that ultimately was dashed in the real world. “Ginny” said, “It’s sink or swim,” emphasizing the value of life experience.

“Hermione” said that her teacher preparation program could not fully prepare her for the challenges of a teaching career. “I don’t think anything can prepare you,” she said, echoing a recurring theme in the individual interviews.

“Hagrid” pointed out that the thematic units she did with her classmates in college were no longer feasible due to the pace of the curriculum maps and the depth and breadth of the SOL.

When asked if anything was a waste of their time, “Ginny” named an overly subjective professor, a technology class with no Smart Board instruction, and a time-intensive notebook project with no discernible purpose related to student learning.

“Cho” said that when she cleaned out her classroom recently, she came across a similar project for one of her classes that she had expended so much effort on. Still, she was unable to throw it away, even when encouraged by a colleague.

“Hagrid” and “Hermione” talked about the Zaner-Bloser handwriting program, which was supposed to teach students cursive endings as a part of printing. The program was adopted by many divisions and later abandoned by several.

When asked what should have been included in their respective programs, focus group participants focused upon special education and differentiation strategies. Although the group discussed the importance of having strong instruction in behavior management, “Hagrid” said that no matter what they teach, it is still just theory.

“Ginny” said that her mentor and her coworkers were there to answer the questions she had as a first-year teacher.

Possible improvements to the teacher education process sparked a debate about the length of student teaching. As she stated in her individual interview, “Cho” said she thinks student teaching should be a full year. While “Ginny” and “Hermione” agreed with “Cho,” “Hagrid” said she was not sure.

“Ginny” said that she heard that her program used to require two 8-week placements, but now only requires one. She stated that she feels this is a move “in the wrong direction” because she learned a lot in each one of her placements.

Summary

Survey responses indicated strong self-efficacy beliefs among all 25 participants. This was also suggested by data that revealed that 24 of 25 participants felt satisfied with the overall quality of their teacher education programs. Data gathered through the individual interview questions and the focus group questions revealed participants’ perspectives and suggestions about the specific courses and experiences which contributed to their ability to meet individual student learning needs as well as the ones that failed to do so. Some responses support what several researchers and groups have to say about how teachers are and should be prepared, while some run counter to the claims made by some researchers. To hear the voices of the participants, I employed the memoing strategy after each of the 25 interviews to bracket out my personal experiences, opinions, feelings and reactions to the fullest extent possible during the data collection process. This enabled me to find the following significant statements among the participants.

These data indicate that participants felt that coursework did not significantly contribute to their ability to meet individual learning needs of students who receive special education services, English language learners, and students from culturally diverse backgrounds. While participants found coursework related to the social foundations or history of education interesting, they did not appreciably contribute to their ability to teach effectively unless they worked to draft their own personal

philosophies of education. Data suggest that participants ascribe little or no value of testing for teachers as an indicator of teaching ability. Responses indicated that the participants' respective education programs did not teach how to teach higher-order thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis, or how to differentiate instruction for learners of different ability levels. Participants also reported that their teacher education coursework either failed to address or did not adequately equip them to meet student needs in the affective domain, including dealing with bullying among the students they teach, or building relationships with families. Data also suggest that explicit instruction in the area of behavior management was insufficient. Participants' responses indicated that classes in pedagogy or social foundations or history of education did not significantly contribute to their ability to meet individual student learning needs. While teachers were taught to use a variety of basic software programs, only one participant learned how to use technology as a tool for instruction, specifically an interactive whiteboard. However, most participants speculated that this is probably due to the fact that many of these technologies were not widely available when they were earning their degrees and certifications. Overall, teachers who were not allowed to major in education expressed frustration at having to take higher level coursework in other disciplines.

While some participants stated that some of their content knowledge courses, including literacy, mathematics and science, were integral in helping them meet the needs of students, others reported gaps due to poor quality of instruction. The majority of participants stated that their preparation in meeting the needs of learners from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds was strong, and served them well in their current teaching assignments. Participants' responses indicated a strong link between methods

courses in which specific learning activities were taught and their own abilities to meet individual student learning needs. Data also indicate that participants felt that their observation and work during practica or “blocking” experiences were beneficial. While a minority of participants reported negative experiences with their cooperating teachers, most stated that their student teaching experiences were invaluable in the lessons they provided to enable them to meet individual student learning needs. In several cases, participants reported getting the knowledge they did not receive in their coursework through their practical experiences as student teachers.

Responses of the participants indicate a greater need for effective coursework in the areas of special education and differentiation of instruction, and for a longer student teaching experience which included being in the classroom at the beginning of the school year. In Chapter 5, I will examine their textural and structural descriptions of how their teacher education programs enabled them to facilitate student learning in light of the existing literature in a more detailed fashion, and offer an interpretation and analysis of my findings. Finally, I will present a comparison and analysis of quantitative data from the Teachers’ Self-Efficacy Survey and qualitative findings from the 25 individual interviews and the focus group interview.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit and answer the original research questions that guided this study. In order to do this, I will first restate the purpose of the study. Then I will discuss the design of the study. Next, I will discuss the themes observed in a review of the recent and relevant literature. Following that will be a description of the participants in the study and a description of the data collection. This chapter contains a discussion of the findings, limitations and delimitations of the study, and recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to solicit teacher perspectives and suggestions on how the teacher education process can be improved to better prepare teachers to facilitate student learning. Toward this goal, I developed the following four research questions.

First, what are the self-efficacy beliefs of each teacher regarding the ability to perform their job duties?

Second, which courses and learning experiences in the respective teacher education program most effectively prepared each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Third, which courses and learning experiences in the respective teacher education program did not contribute to the ability of each participant to facilitate and advance student learning?

Fourth, what improvements do participants believe should be made to each respective teacher education program to facilitate and advance student learning?

To hear the voices of the participants, I selected a transcendental phenomenological approach. To enable the participants to fully describe their how their respective teacher education programs prepared them to facilitate student learning and to be able to derive textural and structural descriptions of the participants' experiences, I utilized the memoing strategy to bracket out my personal experiences as a veteran classroom teacher.

In a review of the recent and relevant literature pertaining to the purpose of this study, several themes emerged. First, the importance of teacher quality to facilitate student learning was established. Teachers are the number one school-based factor contributing to student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Cain, 2005). In light of relatively poor academic performance of students in the United States as compared to students in other developed nations, the federal government has enacted legislation in attempt to raise test scores. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2002, also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). One of the goals of NCLB is to ensure that every child has a Highly Qualified Teacher as of January 2006 (ESEA, 2001). To ensure this outcome, states implemented the Highly Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE).

In the wake of this legislation, a debate has emerged among politicians, philanthropists, and pundits about how to best prepare teachers to meet the demands of 21st century learners. A hotly debated issue is a comparison between traditional teacher education programs and alternative routes to licensure, such as Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, and The New Teacher Project. Another focus of discussion has been how to improve traditional teacher education programs that assist students in achieving

licensure upon graduation. Two official bodies have criteria which teacher education schools must meet in order to achieve and maintain accreditation. These two entities, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Accreditation Education Council (TEAC), merged in October 2010 to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

Researchers have studied several factors related to teacher education which contribute to teacher quality and student learning. The author of one study found that stronger entrance and exit qualifications can improve teacher quality (Allen, 2005). Allowing preservice teachers more opportunities for observation, tutoring, and teaching in local schools earlier in their respective programs and not just in the student teaching portion at the end has been shown to improve teacher quality and student performance (O'Connell-Rust, 2010). Another issue regarding teacher education is the relative importance of pedagogical skill (Ingvarson & Rowe, 2008) versus content knowledge (NCTQ, 2009). The relative value of studying the history and social foundations of education in the United States is another point of debate (Brickman, 1954; Butin, 2005). Researchers have studied the best ways to instruct teacher candidates in the areas of literacy (Phelps, 2009), mathematics (Griffen et al., 2009), and science (National Science Foundation, 2004).

As societal trends continue to affect how students learn, researchers have examined the need for stronger instruction in several areas. Continuing immigration has implications for the academic needs of English Language Learners from a host of different cultures (Czop-Assaf et al., 2010) throughout the country as well as in rural areas (O'Neal et al., 2008). As the recession has continued for several years in the United

States, teachers must also be prepared to meet the needs of students of lower socioeconomic status (Buck & Cordes, 2005). As the number of students who receive special education services continues to grow, teacher education programs must produce educators who are able to meet the needs of this population of learners (Brownell et al., 2010). The growing sophistication and availability of technology with applications for classroom use dictates a need for instruction in these technologies to maximize student learning (Doppen, 2004). Because teaching students involves the affective as well as the cognitive domain, teachers must be prepared to build relationships with families (Baum & McMurray-Schwartz, 2004; Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009) and be able to mitigate the incidence and effects of bullying in the student populations in which they teach (Yoon, 2004). Finally, the growing importance of standardized testing also has implications for teacher education (Barbour & Mourshed, 2007).

To address the purpose of the study, I solicited 25 volunteers to participate in this research. Each participant is a graduate of one of 14 of the 37 accredited teacher education schools in the commonwealth of Virginia. No more than three participants attended any one school. Participants are all females between the ages of 26 and 59. Twenty-four are white; one was Asian-American. All have bachelor's degrees, and seven possess a master's degree. All are Kindergarten through sixth grade teachers in public school in central Virginia who have at least five but no more than ten years of classroom teaching experience. Seven teach in suburban schools, and 18 teach in rural areas. Twenty-three are from one school district, and two are from nearby districts. To protect the identity of the participants, they were assigned pseudonyms. The names of the

colleges and universities where they attended and the schools in which they teach have not been identified in this study.

Three methods of data collection were employed in this study. First, participants completed the Teacher Self-Efficacy Survey to examine their beliefs about their ability to perform various job duties. Next, participants gave one-on-one interviews in which they answered 28 questions about their teacher education programs. Finally, I conducted one focus group interview involving four participants in which seven of the original 28 questions were repeated. This gave participants a chance to have a dialogue about the topics associated with the study and discuss these themes beyond the scope of the one-on-one interview.

Discussion of Findings and Implications

Teachers' Self-Efficacy Survey. Albert Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p.2). According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy beliefs affect an individual’s capability to overcome obstacles presented by external factors. Bandura applied his theory to different situations, including education. He stated that high levels of satisfaction based upon experiences with well-designed teacher education programs lead to greater levels of confidence and self-efficacy, and that this results in the employment of strategies which facilitate relatively higher levels of student achievement (Bandura, 1997).

Using the work of Bandura as a basis, Ralf Schwartz, Gerdmarie Schmitz, and Gary Daytner in 1999 created the Teachers' Self-Efficacy Survey. The survey was designed to measure teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in each of four areas: job

accomplishment; skill development on the job; social interaction with students, parents, and colleagues; and coping with job stress.

All 25 participants agree or strongly agree that they have the ability to positively influence both the personal and academic development of their students. Other areas in which participants' responses demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy were in the ability to overcome skeptical colleagues to complete an innovative learning project (100%), improving capability to address students' needs (96%), being responsive to students' learning needs even on a bad day (96%), and maintaining positive relationships with parents even when tensions arise (92%). In the interview process, only seven participants reported that their respective teacher education programs improved their ability to build relationships with students' families. Of these seven participants, two reported that their cooperating teachers helped them greatly in this area. In an analysis of the discrepancy between the survey responses and the participant interviews, the data suggest that other factors have affected self-efficacy beliefs in this area over time.

Positive ratings were also observed in teachers' perceived ability to overcoming disruptions and maintaining composure to teach (88%), and motivating students to participate in innovated projects (88%). Seventy-six percent of respondents said they are able to develop creative ways to cope with budget cuts and other administrative issues, as well as read even the most difficult students. In the relatively lowest score 14 participants, or 56%, indicated that they were able to successfully teach all relevant subject matter to even the most difficult students. Still, this figure is a simple majority. It is possible that the responses to this question correlate to specific weaknesses participants

reported in their interviews, including perceived deficiencies in the areas of special education, English language learners, and cultural diversity.

In his work, Bandura found that novice teachers from well-designed teacher education programs had high rates of self-efficacy. In this study, 96% of participants reported overall satisfaction with their respective teacher education programs, and all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have the ability to positively influence the personal and academic development of their students. However, it is possible that because these teachers have been in the classroom for at least five years, other factors could correlate to these results.

Satisfaction with teacher education programs. While 24 of 25 participants stated in their interviews that they were generally satisfied with the quality of their teacher education programs, all participants identified areas in which their teacher education programs were either totally devoid of instruction, or otherwise lacking in some way. Participants spoke of poorly planned coursework, ineffective instructors, or overlapping due to disorganization of curriculum. Because participants identified areas of improvement, this supports the attention being focused upon teacher education reform by the federal government, teacher accreditation bodies, independent agencies, partisan entities, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropic groups. Because the participants gave their opinions in specific areas, groups would be wise to heed the voice of classroom wisdom and experience reflected in the data collected from these participants when deciding on how to target reforms of teacher education programs.

The concept of a good teacher. Participants in this study cited patience and flexibility as the top two characteristics a good teacher should possess, followed by being

knowledgeable, understanding, caring/nurturing, compassionate/empathetic, willing to learn, able to provide discipline for students, and having a strong sense of organization. Sixteen participants stated that their respective teacher education programs did examine their own personal characteristics or dispositions as a condition of admissions to or graduation from their teacher education program while nine did not. If teacher education programs are going to look at personal dispositions or characteristics as a condition of admission to or graduation from teacher education programs, the characteristics named by the participants in this study should be considered by the institutions who prepare our nation's teachers.

Instructor more important than course. Several participants in this study described experiences in their teacher education program where an excellent instructor did a good job of teaching a course they would not have otherwise considered valuable, or situations in which a poor instructor ruined course content that they deemed relevant. The responses of these teachers support the implications of the work of Allen (2002) who suggested that the teacher quality is the number one school-based factor in student achievement. As the issue of K-12 teacher quality is one being discussed and debated, the data suggest that this issue should also be meaningfully addressed by colleges and universities, particularly those with teacher education programs.

Hands-on and learning by doing. Ten participants specifically cited the importance of hands-on learning in their interviews. When courses in their respective teacher education programs were taught in this way, students were able to learn better as well as gain experience by having this style of teaching modeled for them to enable them to adopt it in their own classrooms. According to the data I collected from the

participants, using these techniques to engage more learners who favor kinesthetic learning modalities is a good idea for higher education as well as K-12 education. It makes no sense for teacher education programs to tout the importance of multiple intelligences, while continuing a heavily lecture-based format with little opportunity to work in local schools until student teaching at the end of the program. Several participants ascribed so much of their learning experiences to observations, practica, and blocking experiences. This supports the argument for the Professional Development School (PDS) model to be instituted in teacher education schools, in which candidates get more opportunities to observe and work in local schools beginning earlier in their respective programs.

Test-taking and preparation. While there are entities including the National Council for Teacher Quality who support more rigorous licensure exams, all 25 participants in this study reported that they felt that their Praxis testing had little or nothing to do with their ability to meet students' individual learning needs. Participants instead cited the importance of their education and experience over the ability to pass a test. Some participants cited test anxiety as an obstacle to overcome when taking an assessment; two participants discussed having to review material they had forgotten specifically for the test, then not referring back to it again. One participant posited that the tests are meant to "weed out" teaching candidates with subpar intelligence levels. Another participant expressed her belief emphasizing pedagogy over content knowledge. Several participants were moved to laughter in their interviews at the notion that the tests for licensure may have improved their ability to meet their students' individual learning

needs. The data collected in this portion of the study does not support a movement toward increased testing rigor for prospective teachers.

Majoring in education. Only three participants in this study majored in education, three majored in child or human development, and one double majored in these two subjects. Education majors were required to earn specializations in two other areas; a content area such as English or math; and another discipline such as psychology or sociology. The rest of the remaining participants earned degrees in other areas. Seven earned degrees in liberal arts, curricular studies, or interdisciplinary studies.

Several participants were not allowed to earn an undergraduate degree in education, even though they were enrolled in the teacher education program at their respective schools. This is perhaps related to the research suggesting an emphasis upon content knowledge over pedagogical skill. However, several participants reported frustration at having to take higher level courses in another discipline, particularly because this specialized knowledge did not contribute to the facilitation of student learning within their own classrooms.

Two participants, one who majored in English and one who majored in history, report that they are not using the knowledge gained from this coursework because they are teaching other subject areas. However, one psychology major and one criminal justice major report that they draw on the knowledge gained from coursework in these areas on a regular basis in their own classrooms.

The implications from this data are mixed, and therefore I can neither clearly make a link to existing research nor suggest a change in current practice for teacher education programs. This seems to be an area in which we continue to struggle to find the

correct answers as we strive to improve teacher education programs to facilitate student learning.

Social foundations and history of education. Although most of the participants recalled having taken a social foundations or history of education course, most participants stated that while they often found this class interesting, it did not directly impact their ability to meet their students' individual learning needs. The four participants who did ascribe some value to the course said it was helpful because it forced them to think about individual and changing student learning needs, and how to meet them in different ways in the classroom. One of these participants stated that the end-of-course activity in which students had to draft their own philosophy of education led her to engage in these thought processes focused on student learning.

Because teacher education degree programs are very limited in terms of time, and so many competing topics present a scheduling dilemma as well as a question of opportunity cost, perhaps this course can be truncated, or offered as a component to another course in the teacher education program.

Pedagogy vs. methods. Data collected in from participant interviews indicate that teachers in this study have a wide range of opinions about the impact of their pedagogical coursework about how students assimilate information upon teaching and learning. Some participants said they were beneficial, which others said they were not, or only marginally so. One participant said that it was "pie-in-the-sky" theory which would not be tested until she got into a classroom and began to teach.

Overall, participants reported a much stronger opinion supporting the value of their methods coursework, which taught specific learning activities. Some participants

acknowledged that time constraints, curriculum limitations, and a vast array of teaching styles may mean that not every learning activity can be successfully integrated into each teachers' repertoire. Others reported that gaining experience with these teaching methods was valuable, and their personal array of teaching strategies was trimmed and added to as they progressed throughout their teaching career, within the constraints of their current teaching assignment.

These data suggest that pedagogical coursework can potentially be improved with the addition of an observation component to complement instruction in learning theory. It further suggests the value of methods coursework. Because participants found that some of these learning activities are not feasible within the parameters of a normal school day in a public school division, their responses suggest the value of partnerships between institutions of higher learning and local school divisions. This way, specific learning activities promoted in these schools can be taught in teacher education programs in these areas, and this could prove to be mutually beneficial to both entities to facilitate student learning.

Higher-order thinking skills and differentiation. Several participants reported gaps in their education in the areas of higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis and evaluation, and in differentiation of instruction for their students. Fourteen participants reported that their respective teacher education programs either failed to address, or did not adequately provide instruction in these areas. While several participants said that Bloom's Taxonomy was mentioned and discussed in terms of its importance, but only six said they received instruction on specific ways in which to implement it in the classroom, such as with rubrics and journals.

Several participants stated that they have trouble with differentiating instruction, or altering the process, content, or product assessed to meet their students' individual learning needs. Since becoming classroom teachers, several participants reported having made gains in these areas.

Although professional development for teachers is designed to be ongoing, data suggest that teacher education programs could help novice teachers a great deal by addressing these areas more comprehensively in their programs.

Technology. While many participants in the program said their teacher education programs provided them with explicit instruction in programs like Microsoft Word, Excel, and Power Point, most noted that they did not gain exposure to the use of interactive whiteboards or document cameras because those technologies were not as prevalent or readily available as they are today. Only one participant recalled receiving instruction in how to use a Smart Board. One participant noted that her class benefitted her simply because it promoted a willingness to try new things for classroom application to facilitate student learning. She noted that she has adopted this attitude when learning new things.

Because these teachers have had to assimilate knowledge about how to use these technologies on the job, teacher education programs can help facilitate student learning by staying aware of new trends in technology to the greatest extent possible, making the necessary budgetary allocations to acquiring enough of these technologies for widespread student use, and to make sure that staff is proficient in the use of these technologies to the extent that they can teach it to their own students.

English Language Learners and multicultural diversity. The overwhelming majority of participants reported that they received little or no formal instruction as to how to meet the instructional needs of English Language Learners (ELL). Two participants reported that the extent of the training they received in this area was being advised to form a strong partnership with the English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at their schools. The four participants who did gain exposure to this topic in their teacher education program did so during time observing or working in local school districts with a high concentration of ELL.

Similarly, many participants stated that their programs either failed to address or did not adequately address meeting the individual student learning needs of a multicultural student population. One participant talked about an event called “Festival of Lights” in which pairs of education students were each assigned a country and given the task of how that country used the element of light in their winter celebrations. While she reported that the metaphor was that teachers are the light for their students, she did not report this impacting her daily instruction in any meaningful way. Therefore, even this experience seems to support the literature which states that activities designed to foster multicultural awareness and understanding in teacher education programs are often shallow and superficial in scope (Czop-Assaf et al., 2010).

One participant noted that perhaps her program might have done a better job of providing instruction in this area if this region were more diverse. As literature describing demographic trends indicates that ELL population in rural areas is projected to rise, teacher education programs would do well to plan to meet these individual learning needs to promote student learning.

Socioeconomic status. In contrast to lower populations of ELL and multicultural students in the areas where participants teach, educators in this study report that they have many students in their classrooms from a low socioeconomic background, and that this number has risen throughout the nation's recession. Fifteen participants said that this area was addressed within the scope of their teacher education programs, either through coursework and/or in observation, blocking, practica, or student teaching experiences. One participant cited specific instruction in Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. Another spoke of the benefit of assigned readings in her coursework including *The First Days of School* by Harry Wong and *Among Schoolchildren* by Tracy Kidder. Several participants cited professional development in the Ruby Payne program after they were hired as classroom teachers. Some teachers also relayed stories of the dire economic situations many of their students currently face.

While it is unlikely that the recession could not have been predicted, teacher education programs could help their candidates by being sensitive to this need in our country, particularly in areas where the poverty rate is relatively high. Gaining knowledge in this area, as well as strategies to help students who are hungry and/or homeless would then help teachers serve student needs in the cognitive domain.

Special education. Data reflect a wide range of responses among the participants about how well their teacher education programs prepared them to meet the individual learning needs of students who receive special education services. While some participants rated their programs as very poor in this area, others noted gaining a basic competency in this area or a more comprehensive body of knowledge. While some participants reported taking a special education class, the scope of that course varied from

program to program. Three participants remember receiving instruction in Individualized Education Plans (IEP) while three other participants studied the range of reasons why a student might qualify for special education. Two participants were simply told to form a good relationship with the special education staff, but did not receive guidelines as to how to work cooperatively with these staff members to serve individual students' needs. Some participants stated that more observation or volunteering in a special needs or inclusion classroom would have helped their ability to meet the learning needs of these students. One participant did have this exposure, and she stated that it was very helpful.

Because the literature indicates that this segment of the student population is growing, and that inclusion is now the norm, the data support a need for improvements to the teacher education in this area. At the same time, I do not interpret the data to inconclusively support an assertion by researchers that all teachers should receive dual certification in general and special education (Sindelar et al., 2010).

The affective domain. When participants were asked to describe how well their respective teacher education programs addressed dealing with bullying and forming relationships with students' families, few teachers in this study said they received instruction in either area. Six participants reported discussion of bullying, primarily within the scope of a behavior management course or section. However, nine participants noted that the issue of bullying has increasingly entered the forefront of issues in education.

Thirteen participants reported that their program did not touch upon building relationships with families. Three of the remaining participants cited the importance of the role of the cooperating teacher in this area. While three participants participated in

role-playing experiences, they reported that they did not prepare them in a meaningful way. One participant said that dealing with the issue theoretically is ineffective because teachers do not know how they will respond until they are placed in that situation. Another participant stated that one of her professors emphasized building relationships with students, as faculty, staff, administration, and parents as stakeholders in the education process.

As a result of Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*, we are aware that the affective domain must be addressed before learning goals in the cognitive or academic areas are achieved. Because the data suggest that teacher education programs have deficits in these areas, the responses of the participants call for improvements to be made to facilitate student learning.

Challenges of teaching and learning. When participants were asked to name the challenges they have faced throughout their teaching careers, the number one answer was not being given enough time to teach the required curriculum. Participants named problems in dealing with parents as the second most prevalent challenge they face. The third obstacle cited by participants was lack of student motivation and accountability, followed by problems with being able to differentiate instruction, the effect of budget cuts in terms of staffing and increasing class sizes, and behavior management issues.

The majority of participants identified problems in students' home lives as the top barrier to learning in their classrooms. These included crime/parent incarceration, domestic violence, low socioeconomic status, and a lack of parental support due to factors including illiteracy, language barriers, or a lack of interest. Teachers spoke of

students coming to school hungry and tired, which are less than optimum conditions for learning.

By sharing the day-to-day realities in our public schools, participants have shed additional light onto obstacles in the teaching and learning education process. Although the number of the sample of this study was 25 teachers, teacher education programs could potentially benefit enormously from encouraging this type of dialogue, or from monitoring journals, blogs, and other information sources to lend a more responsive ear to educational grapevine. While several specific recommendations have been suggested by the data, the overarching lesson is for teacher education schools to be more responsive to teachers who work with our nation's schoolchildren.

Student teaching. By posing seven of the original interview questions to one focus group of four participants, an interesting topic that arose was a debate about lengthening student teaching to a full year. This supports a recommendation made by the National Council on Teacher Quality in a study of the student teaching process (2011). In further accordance with the study, participants expressed a need for student teachers to be present at the beginning of the school year to see how routines are established and how teachers launch the school year with the students in their classrooms as well as their families. Because many participants ascribed so much importance to the role of student teaching in their education, this underscores the importance of this recommendation. Several participants also noted the important role played by their cooperating teachers in their education. This also supports the work done by the NCTQ (2011).

Limitations

Because teacher education and student learning are related topics that I feel very

passionately about, it was difficult for me to bracket my personal experiences. As the researcher, I utilized the memoing strategy to give the participants in this transcendental phenomenology the opportunity to voice their lived experiences. I used a sample population of 25 kindergarten through sixth grade certified teachers in Virginia who have been teaching between five and ten years and have graduated from one of 37 accredited teacher education programs located throughout the state (Virginia Department of Education, 2011a). Because the participants will be volunteers rather than paid participants, this will also pose a challenge to solicit the target number of volunteers for this study. Additionally, since some of the participants may have graduated 10 years ago or more, their respective recollections of their teacher education programs may not be as accurate due to the passage of time.

In terms of research design, I believe I made the best possible choice in selecting a transcendental phenomenology. In this study, participants were able to give textural descriptions of their experiences as students in their respective teacher education schools. These 25 participants were able to describe what ultimately helped them facilitate student learning, what was a waste of their time, what was lacking, and suggestions for improvement. However, the design, sample size, and the setting of this study, resulted in a lack of generalizability of the findings.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although the data collected throughout this study have implications for improving the teacher education process to facilitate student learning, it also indicates suggestions for further research in this area. I believe that replication of this study would yield a larger amount data, which would then be more statistically significant. This study could

also be repeated in different geographic locations, including different states, regions, and in suburban and urban areas. This study could be replicated with participants who are teachers of grades 7-12, who are teachers in specific secondary disciplines, who are men, and who are members of minority populations. If this research is conducted, a comparison of the data may yield similar or conflicting suggestions for improving the teacher education process.

Two specific areas of the teacher education process should be researched further. The first is the desirability and feasibility of offering a dual general education and special education certification to all education graduates. The second is the desirability and feasibility of lengthening the school year, and the prospect of having student teaching start at the beginning of the school year.

Conclusion

In this transcendental phenomenology, 25 participants shared their perspectives and suggestions for improving the teacher education process. The results of the survey indicated a high level of self-efficacy in their ability to positively influence the personal and academic achievement of their students. This correlates to an overall satisfaction reported by 24 of the 25 the participants about their teacher education programs. In individual interviews and one focus group interview, I questioned participants about how myriad aspects of their education programs contributed to their ability to meet individual student learning needs in a variety of areas.

When asked about specific components of their education, all participants identified areas in which their preparation was nonexistent or insufficient to enable them facilitate student learning. These areas include meeting the needs of students who receive

special education services, English language learners, and students from multicultural backgrounds, populations which have each demonstrated significant growth in recent years. Participants also noted deficiencies in their education related to differentiating instruction, implementing higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and analysis, dealing with bullying, and building relationships with students' families. Data also suggest inadequate coursework in the areas of behavior management and the use of instructional technology.

While several participants reported that their content knowledge coursework in the areas of teaching reading, mathematics, and science were very valuable, some reported that these courses were not helpful due to ineffective instructors. These data suggest a need for more effective professors in schools of education. Many participants reported a strong correlation between methods courses in which specific learning activities were taught and ability to meet individual student learning needs. Several participants ascribed much importance to kinesthetic learning, which supports the employment of this modality at the college and university level. In individual interviews and the focus group interview, several participants expressed a desire for a longer student teaching experience. However, data did not conclusively indicate a prescribed length of time. Moreover, some participants noted that it would have been more beneficial to have their student teaching experiences start at the beginning of the school year in order to observe how classroom routines are established. Many participants expressed strong praise or harsh criticism of their cooperating teachers. Those with positive experiences stated that the instructors they were paired with bridged gaps in their coursework and

assisted them with practical matters. These suggestions may have implications for the scheduling of these experiences as well as the selection of cooperating teachers.

In naming the top challenges to teaching, the number one answer was not being allotted enough time to teach the required curricula. Contentious parent relationships and a lack of student motivation and accountability were also mentioned by several participants. When asked to identify barriers to learning, participants spoke of students who did not come to school ready to learn for a variety of reasons. These included hunger, fatigue, stressful home lives due to domestic violence, parents who have committed crimes or who are incarcerated, and homelessness. A lack of parental support for a variety of reasons, which include parents who work more than one job, language barriers, or simple disinterest, was also named as an obstacle to the learning process. These responses may inform planning of coursework and impact the scope of what is taught in schools of education. By volunteering to participate in this transcendental phenomenological study, these participants expressed their self-efficacy beliefs, discussed what contributed to their ability to facilitate student learning, and shared what was lacking in specific components of their respective teacher education programs. While several participants acknowledged that not everything can be taught in even the best teacher preparation programs, careful analysis of their perspectives and suggestions has the capacity to inform the improvement of teacher education to facilitate student learning.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Timeline

February-June 2011 – Develop dissertation proposal

June-July 2011 – Schedule and prepare for proposal defense; defend proposal

July-October 2011 – Submit IRB applications and receive IRB approval

October-December 2011 – Execute the research

December-January 2011 – Develop dissertation manuscript

February 2012 – Prepare final dissertation manuscript for defense

March 2012 – Schedule and prepare for dissertation defense

April 2012 – Defend dissertation; complete final edits of dissertation

May 2012 – Obtain final approval of dissertation; publish dissertation via the library;
complete graduation paperwork

Appendix B: Interview Procedures

Individual interviews and the focus group interview were conducted in person with digital video and audio recording.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time.

The purpose of this study is to listen to how teachers feel the quality of their respective teacher education programs has contributed to their ability to facilitate student learning in their classrooms. The questions will also focus upon challenges and barriers to student learning. It will be a qualitative study with a transcendental phenomenological design.

Data collection will involve an online self-efficacy survey, face-to-face interviews; and the possibility of taking part in a focus group interview. Both interview formats will utilize digital video and audio recording of experiences associated with your teacher education and teaching experiences.

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. However, your name will not be associated with the findings in any way. The names of your alma mater and your current employer will be kept in the strictest confidentiality, and your identity as a participant will be known only to me as the researcher. In the event that you participate in a focus group interview, you will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement promising that you will not reveal the identity of any of the participants.

The level of risk and/or discomforts associated with this study is no greater than those posed by every day activities. The expected benefits associated with your participation are the opportunity to share information about the experiences associated with your education and teaching practice, the opportunity to participate in a qualitative research study, and the potential to inform and improve of the teacher education process to facilitate student learning.

Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and the purpose of the procedures. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Signature of participant

Date

Dina Linkenhoker, MEd, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix D: Teacher Self-Efficacy Survey

The following survey was developed by Ralf Schwarzer, Gerdamarie Schmitz, and Gary Daytner in 1999 with the work of Albert Bandura (1997) in mind. It was copyrighted by the original authors and is available for use free of charge. It was retrieved from http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~health/teacher_se.htm

- 1) I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to even the most difficult students.
- 2) I know that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when tensions arise.
- 3) When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.
- 4) I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.
- 5) Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.
- 6) I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs even if I am having a bad day.
- 7) If I try hard enough, I know that I can exert a positive influence on both the personal and academic development of my students.
- 8) I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.
- 9) I know that I can motivate my students to participate in innovative projects.

10) I know that I can carry out innovated projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.

Participants responded using a Likert scale with the following options: strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; and strongly agree.

Appendix E: Interview Questions

The interview will begin by focusing on the participants' identifying characteristics, including gender, age, ethnicity, years of teaching experience, grade level(s) taught, level of education, location of teacher education program, and current school setting, such as urban, suburban, or rural. The interview questions will then focus upon the participants' teacher education, the challenges they face in their current and respective teaching assignments, and how the content and quality of this education has affected their teaching experiences. The questions will also focus upon suggestions for improving teacher education programs to enable teachers to meet the individual learning needs of their students.

- 1) In general, were you satisfied with the quality of your teacher education program?
- 2) Were you prepared in conjunction with a Professional Development School (PDS) in which you had opportunities to work in a local school district throughout your program, not just at the end? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 3) Please list and describe which dispositions or personal characteristics you believe a good teacher should possess.
- 4) Did your teacher education program examine your dispositions or personal characteristics as a condition of admission to or graduation from your program? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

- 5) Please list and describe the tests you were required to pass in order to become a licensed teacher. How do you feel these tests relate to your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 6) What was your undergraduate academic major? Does this major relate to any of the subject matter you teach? If so, how do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 7) Did you take a history of education or social foundations of education course as part of your teacher education program? How do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 8) How do you feel that your pedagogical coursework (i.e., classes in which theories about how students learn were taught) improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 9) How do you feel that your methods coursework (i.e., classes which taught specific learning activities) improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 10) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of literacy?
- 11) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of mathematics?
- 12) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of science?
- 13) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' higher level thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis?

- 14) How do you feel that your teacher education program contributed to your ability to meet the individual learning needs of English Language Learners?
- 15) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a multicultural student population?
- 16) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a socioeconomically diverse student population?
- 17) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the learning needs of students who receive special education services?
- 18) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to utilize technology in the classroom as a tool to meet your students' individual learning needs?
- 19) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to build relationships with your students' families?
- 20) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to deal with bullying in the student population you teach?
- 21) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to help your students to be successful on high-stakes standardized tests?
- 22) Describe your biggest challenges to facilitating student learning during your teaching career.
- 23) Do you feel there are any barriers to learning among the students you teach? If so, please describe them.

- 24) How confident do you feel about your ability to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
- 25) In what other ways, if any, do you feel your teacher education program has prepared you to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
- 26) Do you feel that some courses in your teacher education program were a waste of your time? If so, which ones?
- 27) Do you feel that some courses, subjects, or experiences should have been included in your teacher education program to further prepare you to teach your students before you began your career as a classroom teacher? Explain.
- 28) In what ways, if any, do you feel that your teacher education program could have been improved to further enable you to meet your students' individual learning needs?

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

- 1) Please list and describe which dispositions or personal characteristics you believe a good teacher should possess.
- 2) Describe your biggest challenges to facilitating student learning during your teaching career.
- 3) Do you feel there are any barriers to learning among the students you teach? If so, please describe them.
- 4) In what ways do you feel your teacher education program has prepared you to meet the individual learning needs of your students?
- 5) Do you feel that some courses in your teacher education program were a waste of your time? If so, which ones?
- 6) Do you feel that some courses, subjects, or experiences should have been included in your teacher education program to further prepare you to teach your students before you began your career as a classroom teacher? Explain.
- 7) In what ways, if any, do you feel that your teacher education program could have been improved to further enable you to meet your students' individual learning needs?

Appendix G: Sample Interview

1) *In general, were you satisfied with the quality of your teacher education program?*

Yes, I was very um, very satisfied and felt as prepared as I could be.

2) *Were you prepared in conjunction with a Professional Development School (PDS) in which you had opportunities to work in a local school district throughout your program, not just at the end? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?*

Yes, that is I think that is one thing that I think (University X) had a strength of. We were in the classroom in some shape or form, um, a variety of lengths of time, from freshman year to senior year. Freshman year, I think we did a 3-week summer internship. Um, sophomore year I did an after school program with a local elementary school. Junior year was more intensive. Um, we did what they called partnership. We were in the schools for half the day, and then had, actually some classes the second half of the day so you could, um, you know, very immediately ask questions of the professor, very soon after it happened that morning or whatnot. That was very valuable, and then of course student teaching senior year, so that was something at the time we felt was, I guess different than other schools were providing, so, that was... You at least knew, okay, I think I want to do this until waiting until senior year and finding out.

Incidentally, were the classes on site?

Yeah, it was on site, so it all wove together very well.

3) *Please list and describe which dispositions or personal characteristics you believe a good teacher should possess.*

Okay, um, I think they should be open to ideas and um, trying new things. They should be flexible and understanding and knowledgeable.

4) Did your teacher education program examine your dispositions or personal characteristics as a condition of admission to or graduation from your program? If so, how do you feel this improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

I think that (University X) um, valued certain characteristics in their teachers and had a...expectation of professionalism they wanted from us, and that was definitely a piece of your student teaching evaluation. Um, I don't know that it was specific to personalities in, in that way, but there was certainly, I guess a, a bar we needed to be at to be professional and show that in the classroom.

5) Please list and describe the tests you were required to pass in order to become a licensed teacher.

Lots less than now (laughing) Praxis, I guess it was Praxis I. It was three parts; the math, the writing, and, um...gosh, I guess there was a reading part or something, But, uh, I believe that was it, I believe it was just Praxis at the time. / I am not a good test taker and I felt like I could teach and relate to the kids. Being an average student felt like I could bring that much further than just my book knowledge of whether I could answer A, B, C, or D. Um, I felt like a lot of weight was placed on that just to student teach, and maybe turned away some really good candidates just because they couldn't pass the test.

6) What was your undergraduate academic major? Does this major relate to any of the subject matter you teach? If so, how do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

Yeah, it was, at (University X) I think it was a liberal studies, um, degree, so you had a little bit of everything. Um, and it was a bachelor of science elementary education and I had pre-K through 8 as my certification. / Um, I think by maybe taking of, a large spectrum of classes with the liberal studies, it certainly opened my eyes to where I could find my information, and what was out there, and how to present sciences and maths in different ways um, not that I'd be teaching botany, or those things, but it certainly, I guess made me aware of what was out there, how to approach it.

7) Did you take a history of education or social foundations of education course as part of your teacher education program? How do you feel that it improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

I think, um, I think it was a sociology of education course we took, yeah. / Um, I think by growing up in a very homogeneous area, it opened my eyes to areas I hadn't traveled to or been to or lived in and um, at least made me aware, and understood more what with other kids are dealing with and how to meet their needs.

8) How do you feel that your pedagogical coursework (i.e., classes in which theories about how students learn were taught) improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?

Um, I think it forced me to think, like other, um, others um... Even now, I tend to teach where I, or how I learn and what my strengths are, and not every kid responds to that, and so, it's good even now to have reminders of, oh, they learn this way or that way and, and so, and then tools to do that, you know. Those classes helped with, this is how you meet that kid, or um, different applications of that.

9) *How do you feel that your methods coursework (i.e., classes which taught specific learning activities) improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs?*

Um, I think again, it just added to that toolbox of, of things to pull from. No class is the same, no kid is the same year to year and some things work great, and some things just totally fall apart and so it's good to have those different strategies and activities, based on what you have, and what you're being expected to teach.

10) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of literacy?*

Literacy. Um, I think I remember most, and maybe it was heavy on literacy, um, we had a children's literature class and um, lots of the focus in the partnership I did my junior year was, um, we did literature circles and saw how that worked, and, um, there was a lot of focus on reading and not just in literature, but then how you can use literature in areas, in science, in math, to bring that across, um, the different areas, um, so that was definitely the focus of (University X).

11) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of mathematics?*

I, I took a variety of math classes, and they were geared to teaching math in elementary education. But I don't think they focused as much on the application or the tools to teach them. I saw that much more in the reading, um, I guess than in the math, so I guess maybe that's an area to be strengthened.

12) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' individual learning needs in the area of science?*

Science. Again we took, we took um, courses I don't find myself teaching in elementary, um, in that area, maybe if I did middle school, the other end of my certification, maybe it would be more applicable, but, um...I guess it, it prepared me more on the knowledge end rather than the tools or applications or how to teach science, um so it brought in my personal knowledge to be a better teacher.

13) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet your students' higher level thinking skills, such as evaluation and analysis?*

There was a lot of focus throughout the four years, of um, using those higher-level thinking, and being sure your questions were not just always the lower, just, um, you know, spitting back facts. Um, so that was an expectation to have them in your lesson plans and in your um, your testing and thing like your lesson plans throughout the coursework.

14) *How do you feel that your teacher education program contributed to your ability to meet the individual learning needs of English Language Learners?*

Um, that's one thing I've learned on the job. I didn't have much exposure um, with, with ESL in undergrad and have really had to learn that, just on the job.

15) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a multicultural student population?*

Probably similar as um, the ESL preparation...not a lot of focus was placed on that, and so that's been, especially moving to this school from my previous school. That's definitely a variable that I hadn't had experience or exposure to.

16) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the individual learning needs of a socioeconomically diverse student population?*

Um, I guess um, my placements in, in, throughout my college um, time, they were, that area was socioeconomically lower income and so I kind of got um, in the field experience with that. It wasn't maybe directly intended for Longwood to teach that, but I certainly got my experience with that, and have that very quick feedback from professors because that is the area Longwood is in. I had a better idea of that than ISL or multicultural student population

17) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to meet the learning needs of students who receive special education services?

Okay, um, I remember being a little more prepared than the ESL and the multicultural, um, populations, but I was still disappointed it wasn't, I think it could have been more. We had a maybe four-week class right before student teaching, and they jam-packed the spectrum of special ed., um possibilities and, and kind of what you might face and um, it was nice to have, but I think it could have been much more.

18) How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to utilize technology in the classroom as a tool to meet your students' individual learning needs?

They, they were (University X) was very, um, proactive as far as being on the cutting edge, that was sort of what they bragged about, preparing their teachers. And technology was one thing that, that not only did we have technology classes, to try different software, and programs, but also it was expected as a student in different classes, in our science and math classes to do those, to integrate those in our um, projects and things. So we're learning about it, but we're also having to use it as a student as well.

19) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to build relationships with your students' families?*

I don't know that that was um, a strong focus. I maybe saw it modeled for me in my placements, and that, I think, went further than maybe what was taught in the classroom, but it was certainly modeled in my placements.

20) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to deal with bullying in the student population you teach?*

Um, again, we had a behavior management class, um the four-week class, they called it a module before we went to student teach. And I often think of those strategies and use those as my discipline in the classroom to manage discipline. But it um, it didn't go as far as bullies, and um, that's...something even now, it's something I'd like to know more about.

21) *How do you feel that your teacher education program improved your ability to help your students to be successful on high-stakes standardized tests?*

Um, we were, we did take again, one of the four-week modules. One of was, I guess for a lack of a better name test taking or creating...I guess assessment it was called. And we did talk about creating a fair test, and what you are really trying to ask or glean from the student. Um, and, so creating that test. Um I don't know that it focused a lot on what I would for my kids to prepare them for high-stakes testing, but we, um, talked about different types of tests and including that in your zone of the development, and what you want the, the taxonomy, what you want the kids to, I guess, show they know.

22) *Describe your biggest challenges to facilitating student learning during your teaching career.*

I think my biggest challenge in teaching, even now has been meeting a wide range of student needs. I have had inclusion classes um, for several years and no matter the needs in the classroom, I find it very difficult to meet um, a first grade reader while I have seventh grade readers in my classroom, and the same goes for math. Kids that are ready for multiplication, division along with kids that are still trying to um, improve their number sense and rounding, much less skip counting to multiply and divide. It's very difficult, not only prepping for that, just the manpower to meet the needs of those kids, and bring them up to where they need to be, and not lose the higher kids. Um, it's a lot of management even if you do have some support staff. It's difficult to keep all that balanced.

23) Do you feel there are any barriers to learning among the students you teach?

If so, please describe them.

Um, I do feel there are barriers to the students I teach. Um, I'm thinking...Um, and this school not so much as my previous school, but they still have barriers, whether it's home life that's keeping them preoccupied or just their view of their student learning, that they are not confident. Um, again, sometimes just having the time for those small groups, or the support to meet those kids can be a barrier for them. I don't get as, I don't feel like I get as far with them as I could have if you have everything perfectly in place. At my previous school it was, you know, you didn't have parent support, they were working hard to provide for their families and you were on your own and um, to make things happen, and education wasn't maybe a priority for all the families so you were kind of doing what you could for six hours and hoping that it was enough (laughing).

24) *How confident do you feel about your ability to meet the individual learning needs of your students?*

Overall, um, I feel like I do an average job, I always feel like I could do better um, but I think with things um, in place like reading groups and, you know, working as a team with your reading specialists, I think we do a better job of meeting those students' needs. But it certainly isn't excellent on my own.

25) *In what other ways, if any, do you feel your teacher education program has prepared you to meet the individual learning needs of your students?*

Not off the top of my head, I guess.

26) *Do you feel that some courses in your teacher education program were a waste of your time? If so, which ones?*

I guess in hindsight some of them um, may have been a waste of my time knowing now that um, you know, behavior management or assessment or special ed. would have been a nice semester long class. Having all the liberal arts classes maybe was a waste. We could have done a little more in those education-focused classes.

27) *Do you feel that some courses, subjects, or experiences should have been included in your teacher education program to further prepare you to teach your students before you began your career as a classroom teacher? Explain.*

I guess mostly like I said just expanding on or building off of what they did do the semester before, or the few weeks before student teaching in in the areas of special education, behavior management, and assessment. Those were very valuable, but they were so short.

28) *In what ways, if any, do you feel that your teacher education program could have been improved to further enable you to meet your students' individual learning needs?*

I guess nothing that I haven't already said.

Appendix H: Sample Memo

It was great to revisit (School Y) and talk to “Dolores,” she helped me so much when I first made the move to Virginia. Even though I was an experienced teacher, making this move showed me that I had much to learn to meet the learning needs of a new population of learners. We got the opportunity to speak because “Dolores” has a student teacher. An award-winning teacher, “Dolores” is recognized on her campus as a teacher leader. Although her manner is unassuming, it would be a mistake to underestimate her formidable teaching abilities. “Dolores” trusts me, so I think she was very honest with me in her assessment and critique of how she feels her teacher education program enabled her to meet the individual learning needs of her students.

“Dolores” raised an issue that has cropped up in these interviews, that the low population of English Language Learners and lack of multicultural diversity in our classrooms has perhaps caused programs in this area of the state to move their focus away from these areas. It would be interesting to track the mileage of how far away these programs are from the schools. Not many teachers I have talked to have been educated more than a few hours away from where we sat for our interviews. The one demographic that (School Y) does have to address is a largely low socioeconomic student population.

Like many other teachers in the study, “Dolores” did not see a correlation between the tests she was required to pass in order to become a teacher and her ability to deliver instruction. It was interesting that she chose to cite the format, multiple choice, as ineffective to measure knowledge. I found that fascinating because that is largely how we choose to assess our students, even though now we have recognized that and are slowly changing the process.

“Dolores” also observed that technology and bullying are two trends that have grown exponentially since we have been in school. This indicates a need for more professional development to support teachers’ proficiency to support student learning in these areas.

“Dolores” also alluded to the transition between being a student in the classroom and taking over as a teacher, that sometimes this transition can be very challenging. This emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive student teaching experience.

As “Molly” is thinking about writing a book about transitioning to the first year of teaching, “Dolores” stated that she felt there should be a class designed specifically to prepare teaching candidates for their first year in the classroom. But while participants have discussed the need for more preparation, many have questioned the feasibility of addressing every issue beforehand, acknowledging that some knowledge could and should transpire on the job as a result of experience.

I’m glad “Dolores” has such a generous heart. Her interview was scheduled on very short notice, and I thanked her for her assistance and generosity.

