THE PERCEPTIONS OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS ABOUT TEACHER-STUDENT

RELATIONSHIPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Tammy Craddock

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Sarah Pannone, Committee Chair and Methodologist

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the perceptions of preservice teachers who are currently enrolled at universities in six teacher education programs regarding their preparation to build teacher-student relationships. For this research, teacher-student relationship was generally defined as an appropriate emotional connection between a teacher and a student. The theory that guided this study was stage-environment fit theory by Eccles and Midgley (1989), as it supports the need for relationships between teachers and students in the classroom setting to fit the developmental stages of the students. The central question of this study was "How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs?" The study was also be guided by sub-questions focused on using teacher-student relationships to create learning environments that meet the academic, social, and cultural needs of students. Answers to these questions were sought through a transcendental phenomenological approach. The goal of the research was to find the essences of 12 students enrolled in undergraduate education programs in six different universities. The data were collected using interviews, a written description of a meme created by the participants, and focus groups. The transcripts went through holistic coding, in vivo coding, and themeing in a search for the essence of the readiness to establish relationships with their future students as perceived by these preservice teachers. In general, the 12 preservice teachers perceived themselves as ready to create and nurture relationships with their students as a result of their training programs.

Keywords: teacher education, preservice teachers, teacher-student relationships, stage-environment fit theory, sense of belonging, self-efficacy, classroom climate

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this research project to my former students who taught me that learning is about so much more than benchmarks, learning goals, and grades. From my students at my first teaching assignment in Okinawa, Japan I learned that rules and restrictions have their place while relationships build the foundation for learning. From my students in Florida, I learned to navigate through relationships to find a way to travel alongside my students while they were learning. From my students in Las Vegas, I learned that teachers are sometimes the only positive influences students have in their lives. From my students in Alabama, I found out what it felt like to be embraced in a community with learning happening at the same time. From my students in Maryland, I learned that building an authentic relationship is the best foundation for successful academics. From my students in Hawaii, I learned that love comes first…even in the classroom. I have loved and learned from each one of my former students. The idea for this dissertation came from what they taught me about teaching: relationships matter. I dedicate this research to my former students who taught me what a teacher should be.

Acknowledgments

My journey to the finish line of this dissertation was not made alone. At all times, I knew that God was standing beside me, guiding me, and pushing me through the frustrating moments. The song *Into the Sea* by Tasha Layton was a constant reminder from God that everything was going to be okay. Whenever I heard that song, I knew God was speaking directly to me to encourage me to complete the journey I had begun.

My husband, Cavan, and son, Everett, were also supporters during this journey. Cavan was there to listen and offer suggestions when I needed support. Everett was very understanding when I needed to write instead of play. I love the way they loved me from the beginning to end of the pursuit of my goal.

Other family members have also supported me along the way. My sister, Milissa, always asked about my courses and progress on my dissertation. She was there to listen and support any time that I needed it. My brother-in-law, Chris, too was a supporter but in a different way. He would often provide distractions so that I could re-focus. My mother-in-law, Katie, was always interested in the topics I was using for my research and writing assignments. She helped me talk about what I was doing in a way that no one else did.

I would also like to thank those directly involved in my pursuit: Dr. Pannone and the participants. Dr. Pannone is the most efficient and consistent person I have ever met. I appreciated her quick and thorough answers to any questions I had along the way. The participants were also amazing. They shared their time and their experiences in a way that made my research possible and fascinating. To Michelle, Darren, Tara, Samuel, Hilary, Celia, Mackenzie, Nicholas, John, Matt, Fiona, and Ava, I say thank you.

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List of Abbreviations

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)

American Dairyland University (ADU)

Armadillo State University (ASU)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Bluebonnet University (BBU)

Council for Accreditation of Educator Prep (CAEP)

Great State University (GSU)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)

Lone Star State University (LSSU)

National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)

Self-determination Theory (SDT)

Show Me State University (SMSU)

Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equality (SCALE)

Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC)

Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Schools across the United States are looking for ways to improve education. Many efforts have been made over the past 20 years, but research suggests that the relationships between teachers and students are the true key to improvement in education (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Marzano, 2007; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016). The purpose of this dissertation was to identify the perspectives of preservice teachers who are about to enter classrooms of secondary schools regarding creating and nurturing positive relationships with their students. Chapter One is written to provide a framework for the study. The chapter begins with background information followed by the situation to self. It continues with the problem and purpose statements before explaining the significance of the study. Chapter One ends with the research questions and definitions that are used in the study, along with a brief summary of the chapter.

Background

Since the beginning of time humans have relied on interactions with others in order to survive their surroundings. Relationships have adaptive benefits to individuals causing people to be motivated to "seek out and maintain close, open, trusting relationships with others" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 294). Classrooms are not exceptions to this need. Students need relationships with their teachers to successfully complete their academic journeys (Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). More specifically, teacher education programs need to prepare future teachers with the tools to create and nurture relationships with their students. These important factors are discussed through historical, social, and theoretical contexts in the following sections.

Historical

For the last 20 years, teachers, schools, districts, and states have been chasing standardized testing numbers due to outside pressures from governmental agencies (Knoester & Parkison, 2017). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made school reform a top priority, instituting accountability systems to provide an equal education for all students in the United States (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014). Education began to focus on subject matter (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014), and this led to standardization of education. Standardization caused a neglect of focusing on students as humans (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014) while trying to increase test scores. Instead of embracing the different aptitudes of the students in classrooms, students were expected to meet specific criteria on a specific day (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014).

This standardization shifted the focus to subject matter and away from the research that supports the need for relationships when learning (Knoester & Parkison, 2017). Fostering relationships in school settings has been labeled as essential (Ellerbrock et al., 2018) and is considered a significant factor in student motivation (Kiefer et al., 2014). Caring relationships make a significant impact in education while standardization inhibits the ability for educators to create these relationships (Knoester & Parkison, 2017). When teachers are focused on making education the same for all the students in their classrooms, they are forced to forget the individual needs of the students in their care (Knoester & Parkison, 2017). Educators, especially those preparing to enter the field, need to understand the need to intentionally focus on teacher-student relationships.

Training teachers began as a focus in the mid-1800s and has been a focus of educational research since that time. Horace Mann created "normal schools" in the mid-1800s, where preservice teachers focused on becoming experts in their fields, learning methods of instruction,

becoming skilled in classroom management, and becoming role models (Gutek, 2011). In the late 1800s through the early 1900s, William Bagley believed that teacher education should include a general education in liberal arts and sciences, methods of teaching, knowledge in philosophies of education, and clinical experience (Gutek, 2011). Moving forward to 1964, Nate Gage (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2016), in a speech to the Associated Organizations for Teacher Education, stated that scientific knowledge about teaching was not readily available and expressed a need for research that would benefit teacher education programs.

By 2020, research had been completed that supported the important role of teacher education prior to entering the classroom (Boyd et al., 2011; Cooper et al., 2018; Dicke et al, 2015; Powers & Nucci, 2017; Suppa et al., 2018). Research has also been completed that supports the importance of relationships between teachers and students (Allen et al., 2018; Booker, 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Chase et al., 2014; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Research studies on the combination of these two ideas were not found during extensive searches throughout this dissertation process. This study seeks to bring the concepts of teacher education and relationships between teachers and students together.

Social

Education is a cultural act and schools are places where students learn to be members of communities (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). A sense of community is established in schools through building rapport with students (Booker, 2018). As students learn to build rapport with others appropriately in a school setting, they acquire the skills needed to navigate their worlds beyond the school walls.

When students enter classrooms, they bring experiences that teachers may or may not

truly understand (Suarez-Orozco, 2017). Some students come from vulnerable caregiving environments where the only positive interaction they have throughout their entire day occurs with a single teacher (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Educators need to understand that one single, positive interaction with an adult at a school has the ability to impact a student's view of their lives (Raufelder et al., 2016). Positive interactions rely on building supportive relationships with students. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of relationship building, as these interactions may be the most important factor in whether a student is successful in life beyond formal education (Prewett et al., 2019).

Education is also about the talents, goals, and lives of students (Noddings, 2012). Students need a space where they feel they can be cared for and be creative (Noddings, 2012). They need to feel confident in their relationships so that they are willing to take risks (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Knoester & Parkison, 2017). They need to feel teachers care about their talents, goals, and lives. This feeling relies on relationships with teachers. Preservice teachers need to be prepared to address these important factors.

Theoretical

Several theories support the importance of relationships in the development of human beings. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory, and stage-environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993) are the three theories utilized in this study. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is a theory that rests on the premise that every human has a set of needs. At the bottom of the hierarchy are basic physiological needs, followed by safety, love, and esteem, leading to self-actualization. Maslow believed that people search for their place in a group with great intensity; they need to have a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging for people is a step toward realizing their full potential.

Three basic needs are identified in self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy refers to the ability of self-regulation. Competence is the human need to feel capable and successful in mastering skills, whereas relatedness is the human desire to feel connected with others. When conditions support rather than thwart the achievement of these three needs, a person thrives. Relationships are essential to success, according to self-determination theory, as they provide a sense of relatedness that allows people to be curious and have a desire to explore new ideas.

Stage-environment fit theory brings Maslow's hierarchy of needs and self-determination theory together. According to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) stage-environment fit theory, the environment needs to adjust to fit a person's developmental stage. Students in elementary, middle, and high school are at developmentally different stages. Teachers need to be aware of their developmental stages and create environments that fit the needs of their students (Eccles et al.,1993). When people feel a sense of belonging through relationships that fit their developmental stages, they have the potential to achieve Maslow's (1943) self-actualization – their best selves. When students feel a sense of belonging in classrooms that are developmentally appropriate, the student's basic need of relatedness is satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Preservice teachers need to be prepared to create and nurture relationships with their students so they feel comfortable enough in developmentally appropriate classrooms to express curiosity as they explore new ideas.

Situation to Self

I was once called the "Pied-Piper" by a colleague at a private middle school, as she said my students would do anything I asked them to do. Another colleague at a different school could not understand why students who were behavior problems for her were very seldom an issue in

my classroom. While at a third school, my students would choose to come to my classroom to hang out rather than go to recess. These examples of my lived experiences were not intentional, but they did lead me to think about what I did that was noticed by my colleagues and students alike that made me different: I built relationships with my students. That was all there was to it. I know that teaching school is not a popularity contest, and I also know that relationships matter in classrooms.

Schooling is not just about making higher test scores or even testing. Education is more than that. It is about teachers building relationships with students. Teachers need to understand who their students are as people and help them develop into who they will become as adults. I have been encouraged by the writings of Nel Noddings (2012), who wrote that time spent on forming relationships between teachers and students is not time wasted; rather, a climate of care is underneath all that teachers should be doing in their classrooms. From my experiences, I have learned that building a climate of care should be intentional. Learning about students and then using that knowledge to create assignments that teach content while also incorporating the interests of the students has proven to be successful for me. When I have taken the time to form and nurture relationships with my students, a caring climate was created that allowed for more learning and less focus on disciplining.

While reading the May issue of ASCD's Educational Leadership publication, entitled *What Teens Need from School* (Rebora, 2019), I was impacted by the underlying message within the writings of each author. In every article from various points of view the focus was the same: Students need relationships as much as they need better GPAs or higher test scores. They need supportive relationships with their teachers and their peers to help them feel a sense of belonging that will fill a void that many of their communities beyond the school grounds are unable to

provide. They need to know that their voices matter when it comes to their goals and futures. The underlying message was that teens need relationships in order to be successful in both school settings and life.

While conducting this study, my goal was to apply three philosophical assumptions. The first philosophical assumption was epistemological, in that the study was conducted in the field, which enabled me to observe the firsthand experiences of preservice teachers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The second philosophical assumption was axiological. I acknowledged that my previous classroom experiences may impact the positions that I took when analyzing the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The third philosophical assumption was ontological. With an ontological paradigm, the researcher studies the nature of reality and understands that multiple realities exist (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While conducting this study, I also applied a social constructivist framework, where researchers understand the positions of the participants and use their realities to construct emerging ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The position of the participants of this study was that they were all preservice teachers. Through conducting the interviews, my goal was to discover the preservice teachers' different realities within their teacher education programs, which revealed both the commonalities and differences between each of their individual experiences. By understanding the reality of the experiences of one participant, I gained insight into the experiences of others. The goal of my research was to discover how teachers who planned to enter classrooms perceived their readiness to create and nurture relationships with their students based upon what they had learned during their teacher training programs.

Problem Statement

Few research studies have been recently completed on teacher-training programs (Darling-Hammond, 2010); however, the relationships between teachers and students have been examined through many research studies with the goal of making an impact on students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016), motivation (Chase et al., 2014; Kiefer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016), social development (Booker, 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016) and even test scores (Chase et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016). There is currently a gap in the literature detailing how teacher training programs are preparing future teachers for the task of intentionally creating and developing supportive relationships with their students. The problem is that it is unknown whether teacher training programs are preparing future teachers to create and nurture supportive relationships with their students. This qualitative study will help to fill a gap in the research by describing the perceptions of preservice, secondary teachers about their preparation to create and nurture relationships with students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to identify preservice teachers' perceptions of how their training programs prepared them to establish teacher-student relationships. For the purpose of this study, teacher-student relationships will be generally defined as an appropriate emotional connection between a teacher and a student. The theories guiding this study are Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and stage-environment fit theory. These theories support the need for relationships between teachers and

students in the classroom setting to fit the developmental stages of the students. These theories promote the success of students inside and outside of the classroom.

Significance of the Study

In recent years, debates have ensued about what teacher preparation programs should have as their focus (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Research studies clearly support what teacher preparation program should have as their primary focus: teacher-student relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Kiefer et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). A significant feature of teacher education programs should be curriculum focused on building quality relationships in the classrooms (Chelsey & Jordan, 2012).

Empirical and Practical Significance

Research studies have shown the importance of relationships between teachers and students (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Research has shown that when preservice teachers are taught a set of skills, they implement these skills in their classrooms (Cooper et al., 2018). Darling-Hammond (2012), Greenberg et al. (2014), and Howell et al. (2016) have written about the need for teacher training programs to use research-based practices as their primary curriculum. This research study combined these factors to better inform teacher training programs about how prepared the 12 preservice teacher participants perceived their readiness to implement the research-based practice of creating and nurturing relationships with students. The findings may impact the development of higher education teacher training programs, which could lead to more successful teaching practices in classrooms. More successful teaching practices have the possibility of retaining teachers for a longer period of time (Greenberg et al., 2014) and reaching beyond the school walls.

Theoretical Significance

This study not only has practical and empirical significance, but also has the potential to further advance the theories bolstering the study. Stage-environment fit theory, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and self-determination theory all reveal the value of relationships to the development of humans (Eccles et al., 1993; Maslow, 1948; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The sense of belonging from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the relatedness in self-determination theory are attained through developmentally appropriate relationships (Maslow, 1948). If preservice teachers are taught to use research-based developmentally appropriate methods in their classrooms to build relationships, then students, teachers, and communities have the potential to be positively impacted (Marzano, 2007; Noddings, 2012). This study identified the essence of 12 preservice teachers' experiences during their teacher training programs with reference to teacher-student relationships.

Teacher education programs should have relationships as a top priority. Although the educational philosophers of the past may have not explicitly stated the importance of this factor, the research today completely supports the value of teacher-student relationships (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Gutek, 2011; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Preservice teachers who are about to enter the profession need to understand how important it is to intentionally form supportive relationships with their students.

Research Questions

This study focused on the perspectives of preservice teachers and how prepared they felt they were to create and nurture relationships with their future students. Using a transcendental phenomenological design along with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory, and stage-environment fit theory as guides, the researcher sought to better understand the

experiences of the participants. The following central question and three sub-questions comprised the foundation of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Central Research Question

How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs? Marzano (2007) devoted an entire chapter to the importance of relationships between teachers and students, writing that the message students should receive is that teachers have a personal investment in each one of them. Allen et al. (2018), Bouchard and Berg (2017), Ellerbrock et al. (2014), and Green et al. (2016) support the important effect that relationships between teachers and students have on sense of belonging and motivation in students. Cooper et al. (2018), Darling-Hammond (2010), and Greenberg et al. (2014) support the idea that when teacher training programs focus on a topic, teachers enter their new classrooms with what they were taught and have the potential to be successful. Teacher training programs should therefore be focused on intentionally training teachers to create and nurture relationships with their future students (Marzano, 2007; Noddings, 2016). This study sought to identify how the training of the participants had prepared them to develop appropriate and supportive relationships with their students.

Sub-Question One

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster academic fit? Preservice teachers need to understand that they play an important role in shaping how students feel about learning in general (Booker, 2018). The learning environment that teachers create will shape those feelings. Studies by Faust et al. (2014) and Kiefer et al. (2014) revealed that learning experiences that are relative to students' lives make an impact on how the students viewed their academic belonging to a classroom. In Haugen

et al.'s (2019) study, the researchers found that as students found their place academically at school, their sense of belonging increased along with their desire to help their peers perform better academically. This study sought to identify what skills the 12 preservice teacher participants had been taught during their training program that would equip them to use their relationships with their students to help students fit academically in their classrooms.

Sub-Question Two

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster social fit? Preservice teachers need to understand that their interactions with their students will affect how students fit socially in their classrooms. Students in elementary schools have different needs than students in middle schools, who have different needs than those students in high schools. Teachers of secondary school students "have a unique opportunity to meet adolescents' needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy by encouraging positive interactions that bolster students' confidence in being a valued member of the school community" (Booker, 2018, p. 12). Preservice teachers need to build relationships between teachers and students and among students to meet the social needs of their students.

Sub-Question Three

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster cultural fit? Preservice teachers need to have training in how to support the diverse group of students in their classrooms. Smith et al. (2016) concluded that the relationships between teachers and students have the ability to reduce the negative impacts of students' cultural backgrounds and motivate students to pursue their education beyond the compulsory years. O'Malley et al. (2015) found that a classroom climate based on relationships

made a significant positive impact on students from all backgrounds. Future teachers need to be trained to meet the needs of students with all backgrounds in their classrooms.

Definitions

1. *Motivation* – "what moves people to action"; "what energizes and gives direction to behavior" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 13)

2. *Preservice teacher or teacher in training* – students of a university or college who are planning to "apply their theoretical knowledge in a practical context" upon graduation from their program of study (Dicke et al., 2015, p. 1)

3. *Relationship* – "an emotional or other connection between people" ("relationship," n.d.)

4. *Self-efficacy* – the belief in the competency of one's self "to organize and implement actions necessary to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels" (Schunk, 2016, p. 498)

5. *Sense of belonging* – a "hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group" (Maslow, 1943, p. 381)

6. *Teacher education programs or teacher training* programs – university or college degree completion programs that "produce graduates who can meet the professional expectations of high-performing schools" (Chesley & Jordan, 2012, p. 41)

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover how 12 students in teacher training programs perceived their readiness to create and nurture relationships with their future students. Findings from several studies (Allen et al., 2018; Booker, 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Chase et al., 2014; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016) support relationships

between teachers and students as a primary focus for preservice teacher training programs. The perceptions of the preservice teachers of this study identified how they had been prepared to create and nurture relationships with their future students. This qualitative study contributed to the discussion about how teacher preparation programs are addressing the topic of teacher-student relationships.

Chapter One explained the purpose of this research study. The chapter began with placing the topic of teacher-student relationships in historical, social, and theoretical settings. The situation to self described how I became interested in this particular topic. The problem and purpose statements clarified the trajectory of the research study. The significance of the study, research questions, and pertinent definitions were clarified in preparation for the understanding of the research. The following chapter will review the literature to further develop the importance of teacher-student relationships as an intentional focus of teacher-training programs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature review for the research topic of teacher-student relationships revealed a focus on how these relationships impact academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit to meet the social needs of students for successful classrooms. The synthesis of research that follows provides a focus on the theoretical frameworks, the current research concerning the relationships between teachers and students in secondary schools, and the current situation in teacher preparation programs. Stage-environment fit theory provided the framework for this study. The theory and its supporting theories will be explained with regards to the topic of teacher-student relationships. The chapter will continue with a review of the literature organized under four main headings: importance of relationships for secondary students, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. The final section will present literature regarding teacher education, with sections that discuss the purpose and scope of teacher education, the current situation in teacher education, the missing components of teacher education, and the connection of teacher education to the topic of this study. The synthesis will conclude with a summary revealing the gap in the literature, which will provide the foundation for this study.

Theoretical Framework

No two students are exactly alike (Parkay, et al., 2014), and this may especially be true in secondary schools. From late elementary to high school, students go through significant developmental changes (Booker, 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Goodenow, 1993). Their bodies, minds, and emotions are changing at a rapid pace (McLeod, 2018; Parkay et al., 2014). Students in this age group (12-18 years) mature at different rates, which makes it imperative that secondary school educators understand the developmental stages

of the students and implement classroom practices that align with their needs (Parkay et al., 2014; Tomlinson, 2008).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1943), a person's ultimate goal is to reach self-actualization. Maslow stated that in order to achieve this, people must fulfill specific needs to achieve maximum potential. One of these needs is a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is very important during the developmental stage of adolescence, and secondary school students rely on this sense of belonging for achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Stroet et al., 2013).

Maslow's (1943) emphasis on a sense of belonging before moving forward to the next stage of human development has been found to be pertinent in classrooms. Various studies have examined this concept by focusing on school climate creating a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2017; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Keyes, 2019; Smith et al., 2016), the impact that belonging at school can have on students from various backgrounds (Berkowitz et al., 2017, O'Malley et al., 2015; Prewett et al., 2019), a sense of belonging from a social standpoint (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al, 2016), and a sense of belonging from an academic standpoint (Green et al, 2016; Haugen et al., 2019; Kiefer et al., 2014).

Self-Determination Theory

According to the extensive research completed by Ryan and Deci (2017), students need to feel secure in their environment before they allow their curiosity to be "robust" (p. 17). Self-determination theory (SDT) research supports the idea that close relationships are a part of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 294). Goodenow's (1993) research on motivation stresses that motivation among young adolescents may be best understood as a phenomenon occurring not only within individuals but as developing out of the continuing relations between individual

students and others in their social environments. Students find motivation in their environment, which is why secondary schools need to find the match between the needs of adolescents and the curriculum (Eccles et al., 1993). When the environment meets the developmental needs of students, they are motivated to excel.

One of the key aspects of self-determination theory is motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research has revealed that relationships between teachers and students may positively impact student motivation (Chase et al., 2014; Kiefer et al. 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016). The evidence for this motivational factor has been seen in student GPA (Berkowitz et al., 2017), student engagement (Goodenow, 1993; Smith et al., 2016), and student self-efficacy (Faust et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Prewett et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2016).

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Stage-environment fit theory posits that developmental stages need to be considered when developing an appropriate environment for adolescents (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). When the developmental stage is considered in creating an environment that respects and responds to the developmental needs of adolescents, a positive result will occur (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). On the other hand, if developmental stages are not considered when creating an environment, adolescents may make behavior choices that impact themselves, their teachers, their families, and their communities (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). As people progress from infants to adulthood, they have different social and emotional needs. If their environments meet those needs, people have the ability to be productive in life (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Stage-environment fit theory stresses the importance of considering developmental stages in conjunction with a person's environment to find the best fit possible (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). The academic, social, and

cultural environments that exist in classrooms need to fit with the developmental needs of the students.

The stages of development that were developed by Erickson (1968) are worth mentioning, as those stages provide background for stage-environment fit theory. Erickson identified eight stages of psychosocial development, which begin with infancy and end with adulthood. During each stage, people confront a psychosocial crisis that shapes their personalities. When people do not successfully complete a stage of development, they may have trouble completing future stages, resulting in unhealthy personalities and an unhealthy sense of self.

Erickson's (1968) fifth stage of development is of particular importance to this research. Adolescence is considered a stage of "Identity vs. Role Confusion" and occurs between the ages of 12 and 18. While adolescents are in this stage, they are searching for their identity and role in society. Erickson wrote that if young people feel like an environment is trying to deprive them of all forms of expression, they may "resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives" (p. 130). Erikson also warned that when students are forced into assuming a role that is forced on them by "the inexorable standardization of American adolescence" (p. 132), they will run away in one way or another. As people transition from childhood to adulthood, they seek independence and need environments that respond to their needs for expression. Standardization forces students to conform to a specific set of standards, which can thwart their expression.

From the psychological standpoint, Erickson (1968) focused on the need for the environment to support adolescents as they search for their identities and roles in society. This psychological view supports the theoretical view of stage-environment fit. Erickson's description

of 12–18-year-old students needing to be able to express themselves as independent people aligns with how the environment of classrooms needs to fit what students need at different developmental stages. Students of secondary schools have specific psychological needs. The school environment needs to meet those needs in order for students to be successful.

The main theory that guided and framed the current study, stage-environment fit theory, focuses on how motivation and sense of belonging must also fit with the developmental needs of students. The research cited in the literature review revealed how Eccles and Midgley's (1989) and Eccles et al.'s (1993) stage-environment fit theory supports the notion that relationships play a pivotal role for students at a very crucial time of personal development as students move from elementary to secondary school settings. Researchers stressed the importance of the environment fitting with the developmental needs of secondary students academically, socially, and culturally (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). The research also revealed two types of teacher relationships that impacted student success: student-student relationships (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2014; Haugen et al., 2019; Keyes, 2019) and teacher-student relationships (Allen et al., 2017; Haugen et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2016). The research studies that targeted this topic supported the importance of the learning environment fitting with the developmental needs of the students. Teachers who have intentions to enter secondary classrooms need to understand the developmentally appropriate practices necessary to create learning environments that best fit their students. The current study focused on stage-environment fit theory as it relates to academic, social, and cultural fit of students in classrooms, with stage-environment fit theory serving as a guide.

Related Literature

Teachers are adults in students' lives who have the potential to make a positive impact on student choices (Eccles et al., 1993). Through an investigation of the research that has been completed, it became apparent that teacher-student relationships impact how well students fit in their environments. When teachers are prepared to build relationships with their students, academic and social structures have the potential to prosper (Eccles, 1999; Tomlinson, 2008). To create and nurture relationships, teachers need to know how to help students fit academically, socially, and culturally in their environments (J-F et al., 2018).

Importance of Relationships for Secondary Students

Secondary students include middle, junior high, and high school students. The entire school group ranges from 12 to 18 years. The relational needs for the lower end of that spectrum (12-14 years) are slightly different from those students at the upper end (15-18 years). Middle school or junior high students (12-14 years) are transitioning from a single teacher to having up to eight different teachers with eight different learning environments over the course of their school day. Students of this age group are trying to find people to trust, a place where they fit, and their own voices (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2010; Tomlinson, 2008). They need teachers to serve as guides as they negotiate the impact of puberty on the many facets of their lives: intellectual, social, and emotional (Armstrong, 2006). Middle school students need personal adult relationships and role models to help them navigate the many changes they are encountering during this stage of development (Armstrong, 2006; Buehler et al., 2015; Ellerbrock et al., 2018).

High school students (15-18 years) also need relationships with teachers. Students in this group are developing their own identities and beginning to think about their futures (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Morin, 2020). The role of the relationship with teachers in this age group can be seen as mentor, guide, and/or role model (Stroet et al., 2013). As this age group searches for who they are, teachers need to respect the talents of the individuals and ensure that the curriculum meets their academic, social, and cultural needs (Chase et al., 2014; O'Malley et al., 2015). The relationships that teachers develop with high school students have the potential to impact whether students continue beyond compulsory education (Smith et al., 2016).

All people have a need to feel connected to others (Maslow, 1943; Stroet et al., 2013). This need is even more evident for adolescents (Stroet et al., 2013). Hascher and Hager (2010) concluded through a longitudinal study that a sense of alienation increased with each succeeding school year for the middle and high school students in their study. This alienation can be dissolved when teachers take the time to truly know their students well. Students begin to see themselves as having value and develop a sense of belonging when teachers create and nurture supportive relationships with them (Stroet et al., 2013). When teachers are empowered with the understanding of the developmental needs of their students, students have a greater potential for positive outcomes (J-F et al., 2018).

Academic Fit

Preservice teachers need to understand the important role they play in helping students academically fit in their classrooms (Booker, 2018). In a study conducted by Haugen et al. (2019), the number one factor reported by middle school students regarding their intrinsic motivation in school was academic fit. Haugen et al. noted that when students felt like they were successful in academics, they had a stronger sense of belonging to the school. Academic fit was also supported by the Horizon Report (Freeman et al., 2017) in which the researchers proposed

that classrooms need to provide unique learning experiences to better engage students. These studies pointed to two themes: the learning environment and the learning activities in schools should be appropriate for adolescents (Freeman et al., 2017; Haugen et al., 2019).

Students want academics to be interactive and to be authentic learning experiences (Kiefer et al., 2014; Parkay et al., 2014). When learning tasks connect to the world beyond the school walls, students are more likely to engage (Freeman et al., 2017; Parkay et al., 2014). Faust et al. (2014) noted that the student participants in their study wanted more real-world problems to solve rather than "passive, disconnected, and irrelevant teaching" (p. 44). The authentic learning activities in a study conducted by Kiefer et al. (2014) revealed more motivation in students when they participated in hands-on and relevant activities. Freeman et al. (2017) also stressed that as students learn by doing, they become more active in the learning process and see themselves as having an important role to play in their education and in the world around them.

Zhao (2016), following many research studies, advocated for individualizing instruction, which is a concept supported in other studies (Freeman et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2016). As each student in secondary schools is at a distinct developmental stage, it is important to see the students as individuals with individual talents (Smith et al., 2016). What one student may be able to do with an assignment may be beyond the abilities of the student at the next desk (Buehler et al., 2015). Teachers should be aware that cognitive, behavioral, and emotional factors all play a part in student engagement (Hospel & Galand, 2016). More specifically, educators of secondary school students need to be aware of these differences and have appropriate expectations.

The academic expectations of teachers impact student motivation and sense of belonging. In a study by Kiefer et al. (2014), students reported that just having high expectations was not enough for motivation; the expectations needed to be attainable. When students did not feel as

though their teachers' expectations were realistic, they experienced a decrease in motivation. Hagenauer and Hascher (2010) had similar findings, where fear of failure resulted in negative emotional experiences for students in the school setting. Not only do teacher expectations impact student motivation, but they also impact student sense of belonging. Green et al. (2016) concluded that the student participants in their study experienced a sense of belonging through academic success. For students to feel an academic sense of belonging, they needed to stretch their own capacities; this revelation of competence "provides the energy for learning" (Stroet et al., 2013, p. 67). When teachers communicated their expectations to their students and held them accountable to those expectations while supporting the learning environment, students were academically successful and felt as though they belonged at a high-academic school (Green et al., 2016). The findings of a study by Hospel and Galand (2016) revealed that students had higher engagement in the classroom when teachers provided some autonomy to the students, but with clear structure. In all of these studies, it was made clear that student motivation and sense of belonging are directly impacted by teacher expectations.

In Noddings' (2015) book *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, she presents a scenario of a household with many children who have varied interests, talents, and abilities. Noddings challenged schools to be prepared to meet the needs of this diverse family. O'Malley et al. (2015) conducted a study regarding how students from different types of households performed in schools academically. Students from two-parent households maintained higher GPAs than all other categories, as was expected (O'Malley et al., 2015). However, the study did reveal two major points. The first was that regardless of the type of household from which a student may have come, a positive school environment made a positive impact on student academic achievement. The second point revealed that homeless students who

also had the poorest school climate had the worst academic achievement. Whether students come from the same household or different types of households, schools need to focus on ensuring academic fit for every student from every household (Noddings, 2015; O'Malley et al., 2015). Although schools are unable to overcome outside forces, they do have the potential to make students feel like they academically fit if relationships are established.

Assessments

To be academically successful, students need to do well on assessments. Assessments provide teachers and educational leaders a way to gauge how well the curriculum is working (Parkay et al., 2014). Assessments are often associated with standardized testing, but assessments can and should be much more than that to meet the needs of secondary school students. When students know they can show what they have learned in a variety of ways, they view learning in a more positive way (Parkay et al., 2014). Teachers should strive to create authentic assessments – assessments that require "students to use higher-level thinking skills to perform, create, or solve real-life problems" (Parkay et al., 2014, p. 409). Instead of focusing on a narrow curriculum that so many schools are forced to use based on regulations, secondary schools should look for and foster the individual talents of students (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014). When high school students in a study by Keyes (2019) felt that the teachers were providing academics that focused on who they were and how they could express their learning, the students were engaged and felt a sense of belonging. Smith et al. (2016) noted that as academic requirements were aligned with the people in the classroom, students began to enjoy school Their findings suggested that student outcomes rely more heavily on enjoyment of school more than any other factor "such as socioeconomic status, parental education level, ethnicity, or

gender" (p. 3). By including a variety of assessment types, schools better fulfill the academic needs of their students.

Technology

Students are surrounded by technology, and the use of technology in the classroom contributes to how well students fit. According to the Pew Research Center, 95% of teens say they have access to a smartphone, and 45% say they are "almost constantly" on the internet (Schaeffer, 2019). These statistics make it clear that educators need to become tech-savvy in order to "create a rich, stimulating environment" for their students (Parkay et al., 2014, p. 364). Using technology in the classroom is a way to engage students in meaningful experiences (Freeman et al., 2017; ISTE, 2020).

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed seven standards for students with regard to technology use in the classroom (ISTE, 2020). The standards are written in a way that empower the students and give them control over their learning (ISTE, 2020). Research supports this concept. Whether it is the use of a flipped classroom (Moran, 2018; Shaffer, 2016), the use of iPads across an entire school (Montrieux et al., 2015), or simply using apps as teaching tools (Hutchison & Woodward, 2014; Hoffman & Ramirez, 2018), the research shows that technology has the ability to link what students are doing on their own time with what they are doing in the classroom.

The current population of students is immersed in social media, and this has two sides: a social side and a technological side. It should only make sense to put these two together in the learning environment (Hoffman & Ramirez, 2018). Studies by Montrieaux et al. (2015), Hoffman and Ramirez (2018), and Shaffer (2016) drew similar conclusions: collaboration and sharing with others during assignments increased student motivation. These findings were

available after the use of technology was implemented in these different settings with a social aspect clearly identified as well. The use of technology provides secondary school students the fit they need developmentally to see how their worlds within and beyond the school walls can be connected. When students see the value and the connection between what they are doing in school and what is happening in the real world, education becomes valuable to the students, causing schools to enable a better academic fit for students (Faust et al., 2014; Kiefer et al., 2014).

Social Fit

While academic fit is extremely important, social fit is equally important in secondary schools (Haugen et al., 2019; J-F et al., 2018). The social structure changes dramatically from elementary school to middle school (Eccles et al., 1993; Smith et al., 2016). Students transition from having one main teacher and the same students with them all day long to having up to eight teachers with eight different groups of students during the day. At a time when adolescents are experiencing emotional and physical changes, the structure of their schooling changes as well (Eccles et al., 1993).

Because of these factors, secondary educators need to understand the importance that social relationships have on the sense of belonging for their students (Bouchard & Berg, 2017) and how these relationships impact student motivation (J-F et al., 2018). Maslow (1943) described belonging as a "hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group" and said that people "will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal" (p. 381). Goodenow (1993) defined belonging in school as "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting" (p. 25). A more modern definition of belonging by Bouchard and Berg (2017) used

phrases such as "sense of fit" or "feeling of acceptance" (p. 107). A sense of belonging or social fit is important in life and plays a tremendously important role in the school setting, as shown in many studies (Allen et al.,2018; Bouchard & Berg,2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al.,2016).

Research has supported that finding a sense of belonging in the school setting is very important. In a study conducted by Allen et al. (2018), the results stressed the importance of finding a sense of belonging during the secondary stage of education as it is a time when students of that age are searching for who they will be independently from family influences. Students who are searching for a place to belong need teachers who are willing to accept students as they are (Allen et al., 2018). Similarly, Bouchard and Berg (2017) found through interviews with adolescent students that a sense of belonging was the foundation to everything else that happened in their experiences. When students feel a reciprocal relationship with teachers and peers, students are ready to learn (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Ellerbrock et al.'s (2014) findings stressed the importance of teachers finding ways to enhance student belonging and suggested that teachers intentionally focus on what the students in their classrooms need in order to support the sense of belonging. A sense of belonging was described as crucial in a study by Green et al. (2016). Belonging is a core human need that is especially important for adolescents (Allen et al., 2018; Haugen et al., 2019) and can be satisfied through supportive relationships (Smith et al., 2016). Students rely on peer relationships and relationships with the adults at their schools to find the motivation to succeed (Faust et al., 2014) and socially fit at the secondary level.

Peer Relationships

The experiences students have in classrooms through daily interactions shape who they are (Booker, 2018). The interactions they have with their peers play a significant role in their

sense of belonging, which in turn impacts their success in school (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2016; Green et al., 2016; Haugen et al., 2019). Several studies support the need for positive peer relationships for students in secondary schools to develop a sense of belonging. In a study conducted by Bouchard and Berg (2017), students found a sense of belonging in the friendships they developed with their peers. In findings by Ellerbrock et al. (2014), students said that key elements to success in school included being academically and emotionally supported by their peers. The second most common factor stated by students in a study by Haugen et al. (2019) regarding belonging in an urban middle school was connecting with others. Faust et al. (2016) reported that students who maintained "positive peer relationships" had "greater enjoyment in the school environment" and made "greater gains in academic performance" (p. 44). Green et al. (2016) noted that higher self-efficacy was found in students who had academic help from their peers. These studies suggest that peer relationships are important for students in secondary settings. A sense of belonging is found through "caring, interpersonal relationships" and "respectful peer interactions" (Green et al., 2016, p. 94). When students experience these key factors, they are more productive because they feel secure in their environments (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Peer relationships represent an extremely important component in the informal curriculum of secondary schools, as they provide social fit.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Teacher-student relationships are also an extremely important factor in social fit. These relationships create a sense of belonging (Bouchard & Berg, 2017) and provide motivation for students to be academically successful (Allen et al., 2018; Kiefer et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2016). In secondary educational settings, teachers have an opportunity to

show students how to relate to others, become more competent, and find autonomy (Booker, 2018). Teachers have the opportunity to help students fit socially

The relationships between teachers and students are often overlooked, but research shows their importance (Joyce, 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2016; Raufelder et al., 2016). When students in a study by Haugen et al. (2019) ranked what was important to them at their school, they ranked support from a teacher higher than any other factor. In a study conducted by Ellerbrock et al. (2014), the researchers found that if students had just one positive interaction with an adult over the course of their school day, they were more motivated to perform well academically. The same study cited that students rely on caring connections between teachers and students. Bouchard and Berg (2017) echoed the same sentiment with a slightly different angle: students from low socioeconomic status benefitted greatly from positive teacher-student relationships. These studies highlighted how teacher-student relationships foster a sense of belonging for students.

Not only do teacher-student relationships impact a sense of belonging, but they also impact motivation. Smith et al. (2016) supported the argument that "caring, engaged, developmentally responsive adults are essential to creating environments in which students are most likely to achieve academic and life success" (p. 9). Kiefer et al. (2014) found that when high-quality relationships existed between teachers and students, the "potential to meet students' needs and support their motivation is maximized" (p. 13). This aligns with the findings of Raufelder et al. (2016), who concluded that elevated levels of academic self-regulation were a result of quality teacher-student relationships. In their study a positive relationship with just one teacher made an impact in all of the classes the students encountered. Students who have personal connections with their teachers are more motivated to excel than

those without personal relationships (Allen et al. 2018; Joyce, 2019; Prewett et al., 2019) because they fit socially in their environments.

School Climate

Peer relationships and teacher-student relationships impact social fit while also affecting school climate. A positive school climate has a "significant positive impact on academic achievement" (Berkowitz et al., 2017, p. 457). According to Berkowitz et al. (2017), having a positive climate in a school equals the educational playing field and diminishes the inequalities caused by socio-economic status. Measuring or even discussing school climate encompasses a myriad of perspectives (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Keyes, 2019; Marzano, 2007); however, the consensus of the recent research is that a positive school climate begins with relationships (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015).

When students leave elementary school to enter middle school, they find a drastically different environment (Eccles et al., 1993). Instead of having one main teacher with whom they interact on a regular basis, they now have six to eight. As long as each of those teachers works to create a positive classroom climate by showing students they care, are empathetic, and are fair, then research has shown that students are more engaged (Allen et al., 2017; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Keyes, 2019; Smith et al., 2016).

Teachers have the ability to create positive environments in many different ways. When teachers show that they care, students feel a stronger sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2017; Stroet et al., 2013). Non-academic factors such as being interested in what students do outside of school or what happened during students' weekends (Marzano, 2007; Smith et al., 2016; Stroet et al., 2013) are ways to support a positive learning environment. In a study conducted by Keyes (2019), the results revealed that classroom management practices such as seating arrangements

and peer work were helpful in creating a sense of belonging in classrooms. While these strategies may seem simple, students responded to these actions in positive ways because the actions were showing that teachers cared about their students. Allen et al. (2017) found if students believe that teachers care about them, they felt a greater sense of belonging. In general, if students feel that teachers care about them, they become open to building relationships with teachers (Noddings, 2005). The relationships that are built from these classroom environment factors have been found to be more valuable than other factors, such as peers, when considering student engagement (Berkowitz et al., 2017). The role of classroom climate as created by relationships is not completely clear in the literature; however, it deserves more research as a potential way to reduce the achievement gap (Berkowitz et al., 2017). What is clear is that when students have positive relationships with their peers and teachers, a positive school climate is created. This climate creates the best social fit for students to perform academically.

Cultural Fit

Preservice teachers need to be prepared to meet the cultural demands in their future classrooms. According to U.S. census data, Whites will compose 49.7% of the population, Hispanics 24.6%, Blacks 13.1%, Asians 7.9%, and Multiracial 3.8% by 2045 (Frey, 2018). As the U.S. population changes, the students in American classrooms will reflect that change. Whether the term multicultural education (Chen, 2018), intercultural education (Caetano et al., 2020), or intersectional education (Eager, 2019) is chosen to describe how classrooms need to respond to the diversity within them, the basic premise is the same: students come to classrooms with a variety of backgrounds. To truly teach all of the students in classrooms, teachers need to understand the backgrounds of their students and work to include a positive view of cultures that will foster belonging and motivation (Haugen et al., 2019; Suarez-Orozco, 2017).

Paulo Freire, a historically important figure in education, believed that classrooms should be ideological confrontation zones (Gutek, 2011). Freire wanted classrooms to be places where people from different backgrounds and with different ideas come together to express their differences in respectful ways. As the classrooms in America are becoming more and more culturally diverse, it is important that students are prepared to express themselves within and beyond the classroom walls. Schools should be places of discussion and places of finding common ground. Teachers need to be prepared to lead the discussions while also using the differences to support motivation and belonging for students from all backgrounds. In a transcribed conversation with Beverly Daniel Tatum, a leading figure on the topic of race in schools, Tatum spoke about how teachers are often afraid of saying the wrong things when leading discussions regarding tough topics such as race (Rebora, 2019). Tatum goes on to make the point that silence is not helpful (Rebora, 2019).

Attempts to overcome that silence may be seen in studies by Dwoskin (2015) and Ungemah (2015) – two rare studies on the topic of cultural fit. Dwoskin created a class named Cultural Linguistics, which was an attempt to create cultural awareness. In the class, the cultural biases that the students experienced daily were topics of discussion. Students engaged each other around the ideas of democracy, rights, privileges, gender identity, ethnicity, racial profiling, and exploitation. In doing this, the students realized that the topics were safe subjects – subjects that are worthy of consideration. Inequalities were addressed in a supportive environment that led to instructional change in one school. Students were challenged to become critical thinkers and active participants in their communities rather than accepting the stereotypes placed on them by society.

A narrative study completed by Ungemah (2015) described three different experiences

of teachers attempting to bolster the variety of ethnicities in their classrooms while teaching literature. Two of Ungemah's narrative descriptions are applicable here. The first teacher decided to read a story set in Puerto Rico with her class. The story had several conversations that included Spanish. Ungemah noted that the Spanish speakers in the classroom argued over what the words actually meant; the Black students could not understand why they were reading a novel with Spanish in it; and a Panamanian student asserted that not all Black people speak English. The classroom became exactly what Freire wanted it to be: students were expressing their ideas while the teacher facilitated the discussion.

The second narrative in Ungemah's (2015) study was about an accomplished Black teacher and her students engaging over the use of the word "nigga" in a story. The classroom was comprised of two-thirds Black students. Over the course of two class periods, the teacher and the Black students disagreed on how this word is viewed. The teacher attempted to force the Black students to agree with the negativity of the word; however, the Black students did not agree with her interpretation. The two sides eventually had to agree to disagree.

These two studies conducted by Dwoskin (2015) and Ungemah (2015) represent how classrooms need to value, understand, and accept students for their life experiences. When this happens, students learn to respect other cultures and value their own. Students find a sense of belonging and motivation in school settings where they feel their voices have been heard (Faust et al., 2014). Classrooms have the potential to be ideological confrontation zones.

While the two aforementioned studies appear to be success stories, warnings have been issued about attempts to change the cultural environment in schools. For example, in a study conducted by Chen (2018) on multiculturalism, the findings showed that while multicultural practices in classrooms have the potential to help students understand and accept others as

different, not better, than themselves, the results also have the potential to lead to pressure to assimilate. This concept was echoed by Goski (2019), who warned that events such as Diverse Friends Day actually do more harm than good, as events of this type create "the illusion of diversity appreciation while entrenching inequity" (p. 59). Finding the right cultural fit for current classrooms in America is a difficult task. The goal for educators should be to create opportunities for students to "think for themselves and become more aware of their own cultural references" (Caestano et al., 2020, p. 60). Teachers need to put students in situations where they must face conflicts and make decisions that impact their lives (Caestano et al., 2020). The only way teachers can truly accomplish this monumental task is to begin relationships with their students from the very first day of the school year.

Values

While finding ways to be confrontational without being disrespectful presents a good use of school time, values present themselves as a way to find common ground during the school day as well. Every culture has a set of values, the personal underpinnings of why people act the way they do (Covaleskie, 2016). Both John Dewey and Mohandas Gandhi considered schools as miniature versions of society, and schools need to prepare students for being members of that society (Gutek, 2011). Having common ground – common values – is a way for students to find their sense of belonging in secondary schools. Many people bristle at the thought of schools teaching any type of values to students, as they may think values are about religious practices (Worley, 2017); however, when schools implement the teaching of values to their students, classrooms, schools, and communities are positively impacted (Goss & Holt, 2014).

In a research study conducted by the Search Institute in Minnesota, 40 assets were identified that were necessary in a student's life to avoid destructive behaviors (Harvey et al., 2013). The study used data from 213 towns and cities across America with just under 100,000 sixth through twelfth graders. While the researchers acknowledged that many of the assets come from homes, they also asserted that the school is the second-best chance for students to gain the assets they need to make good choices for their lives. Some of the assets that were mentioned were a caring school climate, positive adult role models, positive peers, caring for others, understanding equality and justice, showing integrity, staying honest, displaying responsibility, and having restraint (Search Institute, 1997). All of these assets relate to creating an environment where students belong – a place where they culturally fit.

Studies by Goss and Holt (2014) and Faust et al., (2104) specifically focused on implementing programs to increase the discussion regarding values in two different settings. In Goss and Holt's (2014) study, the principal implemented a character education program. The principal rallied the community, the families, the teachers, and the students to make positive changes at their school. The entire staff was trained to implement the program and was expected to demonstrate their own character development during the school year. The results showed higher attendance rates and a decrease in disciplinary actions. The overall impact on the climate of the school and the academic progress of the students was positive, and students were able to find their fit within the school setting. Faust et al. (2014) conducted a study of a group of sixth graders who participated in a regular morning meeting throughout the school year. The purpose of these meetings was to allow the students to develop autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging that would reach beyond that meeting and impact the rest of their school days. The core elements in the meetings were respect, relationships, collaboration, and creation of common

ideals. The initial findings showed a positive impact on a sense of belonging and student satisfaction from these meetings based on student and teacher relationships; however, as the school year progressed, the positive impact decreased. The researchers concluded that sustainability of such a program's impact is difficult but is worth considering, and, while the program may have lost its statistical impact, it still served the purpose of reserving a time when students and teachers developed a sense of belonging and worked on finding common ideals. Both of these studies showed how intentionally focusing on values impacted the cultural fit of students.

Each classroom has its own culture that is formed by the combination of what students contribute each day. Each student's contribution must be respected, valued, and heard by teachers and peers in appropriate ways. In addition, schools should be places where a common culture is created through teaching a set of common values that underpin thought processes and discipline (Fisher & Frey, 2019). Secondary classrooms represent an intersection where both adults and students have the opportunity to acknowledge, accept, and seek to understand the various backgrounds of those who abide there. Creating a culture of their own allows students to have a sense of belonging (Eager, 2019). Relationships between teachers and students provide the cornerstone for such an endeavor.

Students in secondary schools are in an "ambiguous space between childhood and young adulthood that is fraught with identity issues and intense reality of possible selves" (Booker, 2018, p. 8). Secondary educators need to develop formal and informal processes that fit the students in academic, social, and cultural ways. When classrooms are developmentally appropriate for students, students find motivation and a sense of belonging, which may lead to

better performance with regards to academics and social interactions. Secondary educators need to be sure the environment fits the developmental stage of the students.

Teacher Education

From the first day that teachers enter a classroom, they should be equipped with the necessary skills to teach the students in their care (edTPA, 2020). Teacher education programs bear the majority of the responsibility to equip such future teachers, providing American schools with highly skilled teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). When teacher education programs prepare dynamic instructors who are ready to build rapport with their students, the need for behavior management diminishes (Greenberg et al., 2014). However, when the opposite happens – when teacher education programs do not properly prepare preservice teachers before they enter the classroom, the new teachers face a "rude awakening" to the diverse types of learners sitting in the desks (Stein & Stein, 2016, p. 193) and the behaviors they exhibit. The ultimate goal of education is to do what is best for students (Howell et al., 2016). This begins with the education that preservice teachers receive.

Purpose and Scope of Teacher Education

When teacher education students leave teacher training programs and find themselves fully equipped with the tools they need to be successful in their own classrooms, the new teachers have a greater impact on the learning of their students (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Today's classrooms require that teachers have a wide array of teaching methods and practices at their disposal (Darling-Hammond, 2005). This means that teacher education programs need to have an extremely clear purpose; however, the literature review revealed that the purpose of such programs is basically muddled.

The purposes of teacher training programs are readily available in the literature. Darling-Hammond (2012) identified six teacher training program targets that produce positive results: a vision of what good teaching looks like, defined standards as guides for evaluation, a core curriculum taught in context, clinical experiences that interweave with coursework, application of learning to actual problems in practice, and shared practices from the university to schools. Howell et al. (2016) conducted a study that focused on middle level educators and pointed to four elements they deemed most important for teacher education programs: an understanding of adolescents and their needs, curriculum specific pedagogy, preparation in content areas or teaching fields, and clinical experiences with the age group the preservice teacher intends to teach. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) presented a paper that focused on the importance of research-based strategies being taught during teacher training (Greenberg et al., 2014). The paper presented five requirements for successfully managing a classroom: establish expectations for behavior, build and maintain routines, praise good behavior, equitably enforce consequences for poor behavior, and engage the students with lessons to which they can relate (Greenberg et al., 2014). These examples represent three of the many approaches that teacher training programs should be using to guide their production of quality teachers.

Although the plethora of choices can be overwhelming, numerous studies have shown that teacher training programs do make a difference in successful implementation of strategies (Boyd et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2018; Dicke et al, 2015; Powers & Nucci, 2017; Suppa et al., 2018). A study conducted by Dicke et al. (2015) found that preservice teachers who participated in a special training program on classroom management fared better when it came to stress management than their counterparts who received training in stress management and not classroom management or no training at all. Cooper et al. (2018) used survey data results from

248 teachers across four states and found that of the teachers who had training in classroom structure (77.8%), classroom seating (67%), and presenting choices (78.5%), the use and effectiveness of these trainings were all above 90% in these areas of the study. When the teachers used what they had been trained to do, the teachers found a high success rate in those areas. Cooper et al. (2018) concluded that when preservice teachers are exposed to formal training, they are more likely to use the training successfully upon entering classrooms of their own. The results of studies by Suppa et al. (2018) and Powers and Nucci (2017) concurred with the previous studies by finding that what is taught and practiced during teacher training programs extends into the first years of teaching and beyond. On the other hand, when these topics are not taught, teachers do not have the knowledge and experience to cope with what comes their way (Suppa et al., 2018). These studies have made it clear that the training that teachers receive have the potential to make a positive impact in classrooms.

Some say that anyone can teach; others think teachers should learn by trial and error while in their own classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2015). However, if teachers are going to be successful in the classroom, they need to be prepared with experiences during a training program in order to have the ability to adapt their instruction and classroom management to meet the needs of the students (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Freeman et al., 2014). When teacher training programs have a clear purpose of equipping future teachers with the tools they will need when they enter the classroom, they are preparing a path for success for both teachers and students.

Current Situation with Teacher Education

Teacher education programs have increasingly come under scrutiny. Instead of understanding that schools are extremely complex, reforms and standardization of programs have attempted to simplify the teacher education system (Costigan, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2010).

While most states require some form of training prior to entering a classroom, the requirements differ from state to state (Freeman et al., 2014). The federal government has imposed policy through Title II of the Higher Education Act of 1965 that requires programs to submit specific data annually regarding teaching training programs that receive federal funding (Department of Education: Office of Postsecondary Education, 2016).

Many organizations have been created or reorganized to bolster the opportunity to establish guidelines for what makes a quality teacher education program. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2020) claims to "collaborate to revolutionize all learners" by elevating "education and educator preparation through research, professional practice, advocacy, and collaboration" (np). The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) created edTPA as an attempt to make the process of becoming a teacher more uniform based on 25 years of assessments of teaching (edTPA, 2020). edTPA serves as a nationwide standards-based assessment for teachers who are about to enter classrooms. Institutions in 35 states have adopted edTPA as their standard of evaluation. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) was established in 1954 to become the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) in 1997, to then become the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) in 2010 (CAEP, 2020). This organization's goal is to "increase the value of accreditation" (CAEP, 2020, np). Each of these organizations purports to have the best answer to ensuring that quality teachers enter American classrooms; however, some researchers question if organizations and regulations are really the answer.

Darling-Hammond has written many articles (Darling-Hammond, 2005, 2010, 2013, 2020) about the topic of regulating teacher education programs. The main point Darling-

Hammond (2010, 2020) continues to make is that there is no right answer to the question of which qualifications and preparations are the best. Teacher education programs simply need to understand their purpose and be sure to prepare teachers for 21st century classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Costigan (2018) made reference to an idiosyncratic curriculum. Education systems may look alike to some extent and may follow the same mandates, but the truth is that what happens from place to place is still very different (Costigan, 2018). While policies and organizations work to create and institute more and more policy, they will likely never find a solution that fits all situations. These policies and institutions attempt to simplify an extremely complex system – a system that changes for every classroom (Costigan, 2018).

Freeman et al. (2014) reported that 12% of teachers leave the teaching field within the first two years of experience. Most of these teachers graduated from a teacher education program where they were supposedly given the tools needed to thrive in their classrooms. However, when these teachers entered the classroom, they found that they did not have the skills to manage the students, and subsequently lost motivation to teach (Freeman et al., 2014). Preservice teachers need to be exposed to the realities of teaching throughout their undergraduate program in order to be successful in the classroom (Greenberg et al., 2014; Stein & Stein, 2016).

What is Missing in Teacher Education

When preservice teachers graduate and enter the classroom for the first time, they often experience shock because what they learned during their education program did not prepare them for the realities of the classroom (Costigan, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dicke et al., 2015). The focus of teaching programs is more on theory and product rather than on experience and reality (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Within edTPA's (2020) evaluation methods, three general categories are identified: planning, instruction, and assessment. For these three categories, preservice teachers must produce specific artifacts to prove their mastery of each (edTPA, 2020). To guide the grading of these artifacts, edTPA has implemented 15 rubrics. The goal of edTPA's instrument is to streamline and improve teacher education programs. Once again, the attempt is to simplify something that is too complex. A better approach would be a return to research-driven data of what works in classrooms (Freeman et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2014) and provide preservice teachers with experiences that truly prepare them for the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2014).

As was mentioned in a previous section, NCTQ has developed what they call the "Big Five" (Greenberg et al., 2014). These five guideposts are research-based strategies focused on classroom management (Greenberg et al., 2014). When NCTQ completed their research, they found that although specific classroom management practices have been proven time and time again to be effective tools for successful classrooms, the majority of teacher training programs are not intentionally preparing teachers for this task (Greenberg et al., 2014). Freeman et al. (2014) reviewed teacher training program requirements from all 50 states and found that most programs offered a course or content about classroom management; however, only 60% of the programs had evidence of research-based content. Along the same lines, from the 248 programs that participated in the Cooper et al. (2018) study, only 28 had requirements of classroom management coursework.

Classroom management is a broad term that encompasses an array of possible definitions. Classroom management is about creating a positive learning environment for all students; however, the definition remains vague (Freeman et al., 2014; Greenberg et al., 2014). To make

this term clearer, classroom management is effectively managing student behavior using research-based practices (Freeman et al., 2014). Classroom structure, classroom seating, presenting choices to students, incorporating student interests, and social skills are some of the components of effective classroom management (Cooper et al., 2018; Keyes, 2019). These are the skills that are missing from many teacher preparation programs (Cooper et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2014).

In order for preservice teachers to transition to becoming successful classroom teachers, they need to have knowledge about and experiences with research-based practices that work (Cooper et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2014). Because research-driven data support the skills that are a result of teacher-student relationships, teacher-student relationships become the foundation of successful classrooms.

Connecting Teacher-Student Relationships to Teacher Education

A gap that revealed itself in the literature is how teacher preparation programs intentionally prepare preservice teachers to create and nurture relationships with their students. While the research makes it clear that relationships between teachers and students matter, what is not evident in the literature is whether or not teacher training programs are intentionally preparing future teachers for this extremely important task. The current research study focused on teacher-student relationships through the lens of stage-environment fit theory. Relationships between teachers and students are worth the time and effort (Noddings, 2012), and students in secondary schools need relationships with their teachers perhaps even more than students in elementary schools (Eccles et al., 1993). When students develop new relationships in classrooms, their mindsets shift to a more secure state of mind that allows them to better participate in the learning process (Reeves & LeMare, 2017). Relationships should be a priority in secondary

classrooms, and preservice teachers clearly need to be prepared to create and nurture relationships with their students.

Marzano (2007) stated, "If the relationship between the teacher and the students is good, then everything else that occurs in the classroom seems to be enhanced" (p. 150). The relationships between teachers and students are not about being buddies; instead, they are about teachers understanding the needs of the students in their classrooms enough to give their students clear purpose and guidance to help them grow as people (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Greenberg et al., 2014; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010). Teachers need to be prepared to build a sense of belonging and motivate their students, while creating learning environments that meet the social needs of their students (Darling-Hammond 2005; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Marzano, 2007). To accomplish these goals, relationships are paramount.

Relationships are the foundation to a successfully managed classroom (Greenberg et al., 2014). When teacher education programs produce teachers who are successful in managing their first year in the classroom, the success continues for years to come (Goldhaber, 2016). Darling-Hammond (2005, 2010, 2012, 2020) has repeatedly called for raising expectations for teacher education programs with a common vision. Perhaps that common vision should be focused on the importance of teacher-student relationships in teacher training programs. The research presented in this literature review supports the importance of this facet of successful classrooms, and teacher education programs should be using these research findings to guide their curriculum for teacher training programs.

Summary

For the last 20 years, the system of education has been attempting to find one size that fits all in the United States (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014). The federal government has passed

legislation and established policy forcing schools to become more standardized (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014). This in effect has forced teachers to focus primarily on the cognitive domain while neglecting the social needs of their students (Costigan, 2018; Noddings, 2005). As a side-effect of standardization, students lack a sense of belonging and are less engaged than ever (Costigan, 2018; Noddings, 2005). The only remedy to the maladies that have been created by standardization is the one thing that has remained constant in education since the beginning of time: relationships.

A gap in the literature exists, and possibly, a gap in post-secondary education. How are teacher education programs preparing future secondary teachers to create and nurture relationships with their students? Teachers need to take the lead in this area but need the tools to be successful. Teachers who are preparing to enter secondary classrooms need to be equipped with the tools they need to create classrooms that overcome the obstacles of standardization by focusing on teacher-student relationships – relationships that allow students to fit academically, socially, and culturally in American classrooms. The current research study was an attempt to better understand the experiences that preservice teachers have had during their training programs with a focus on their readiness to create and nurture relationships with their students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to discover the perceptions of preservice teachers with a focus on their preparation to create and nurture teacher-student relationships. Through the use of data collection and data analysis of preservice teachers' perceptions, a better understanding of the essence of their experiences during their teacher training programs has provided an answer to the central research question about how these 12 preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop supportive relationships with their students.

Chapter Three will explain the design of the study, review the research questions, describe the setting and participants, explain the procedures used in the study, and clarify the researcher's role. Following those, the data collection methods and data analysis methods will be explained. The chapter will end with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations used during this study, along with a summary.

Design

Research is a process and has been described as a search for the unknown "to make it known" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 39), or as finding out "what is inside the 'black box'" (Check & Schutt, 2018, p. 154). Qualitative research focuses on the inner experiences of persons (Husserl, 2013) and develops an essence from the lived experiences of individuals or groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In the natural settings of participants, qualitative researchers collect data regarding a single idea or concept – a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018) to then make sense of that data "sifting the trivial from the significant,

identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (Patton, 2015, p. 521).

For this research study, the transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research was employed. First, this study was qualitative because the collection of data focused on the words and experiences of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, this study was phenomenological because the research focused on a specific experience, preservice teacher training with regards to teacher-student relationships, shared by the participants in the study searching for the essences of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, this study had a transcendental approach. With this approach, researchers make an effort to set aside their own prejudgments to fully engage with others who have experienced a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The focus is more about what the participants have experienced rather than what the researcher feels or knows (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomena for this research were the experiences preservice teachers had during their training programs and how those experiences have developed their thoughts and feelings toward creating and nurturing relationships with their future students. In as much as possible, personal beliefs were suspended regarding this phenomenon with bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Husserl, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The focus was "open, receptive, and naïve in listening and hearing research participants describe their experiences of the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22) rather than bringing personal experiences to the data collection. During interviews, the focus was on what the participants said and discovery of the essence of the phenomenon through the eyes of the participants. Their essences were the raw data for this study.

After the collection of data, the focus shifted to using intuition and reflection to lead to a description of the findings (Husserl, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). From transcripts of the interviews,

the written portion of the participants' submissions of memes, and the transcripts from the focus groups, the experiences of the 12 preservice teachers prepared the development of the description. The description was what brought the phenomenon to light, illuminating its presence and accentuating its underlying meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Each set of data was analyzed, searching for the essence of each participant's experience and commonalities among these essences. By the end of the research, a better understanding of the essence of what preservice teachers had experienced during their training programs about creating and nurturing relationships with students was achieved.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs?

Sub-Question One

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster academic fit?

Sub-Question Two

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster social fit?

Sub-Question Three

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster cultural fit?

Sites

An important step in the research process is ensuring that the site will help the researcher better understand the problem and find the essence of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because my research was focused on teachers in training, any university that had a teacher training program had the potential to provide participants. To find participants, I used snowball sampling, which led to a collection of data from six different universities in the United States. Four are located in Texas, one is located in Missouri, and one is located in Wisconsin. The six universities are briefly described as follows.

The first site for this study, which will be known as Great State University (GSU), is located in Texas and began a teacher preparation program in the late 1800s. The graduates from this program have 100% chance of placement in schools with a 97% pass rate on the state licensing exam. GSU houses two specialized institutes within the College of Education that serve as laboratories for teachers in training. This information was sourced from GSU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

The second site for this study, which will be known as Bluebonnet University (BU), is located in Texas and focuses on preparing future teachers for 21st century classrooms. The graduates have had a 96% pass rate on the state licensing exam. The retention rate for students who graduate from their program is higher after one year than other universities. This information was sourced from BU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

The third site for this study, which will be known as Lone Star State University (LSSU), is the largest producer of certified teachers in the areas of math, science, ELA, bilingual education, and special education in the state of Texas. The university has 10 centers and 17 labs

where teachers train before entering classrooms of their own. This information was sourced from BU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

The fourth site for this study, which will be known as Armadillo State University (ASU), is located in Texas and began as a teacher's college in the 1800s. They provide a full year of mentorship to future teachers with over 1,000 graduates each year. ASU has three clinics that serve as labs for their teacher training program. This information was sourced from ASU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

The fifth site for this study, which will be known as Show Me State University (SMSU), is in Missouri and is a small teacher training program with about 100 current students. Technology is integrated into the training. SMSU has a high placement rating and is working to expand its College of Education. This information was sourced from SMSU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

The sixth site for this study, which will be known as America's Dairyland University (ASU), is located in Wisconsin. ASU's teacher training program has 460 partnering schools and has a 97% pass rate on the licensing exam. The Praxis scores of ASU students are higher by 5-10% than the national average. This information was sourced from ASU's website, and URLs have been withheld to mask the identity of the site.

Participants

Participants hold the information and insights for a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). In phenomenological research, a richness of data is the goal (Gall et al., 2007). In order to gain insights and richness of data for this study, two types of sampling were used: purposeful and snowball. Purposeful sampling is used when a researcher seeks a specific group of people who have all experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Patton,

2015). For this research study, students who were enrolled in teacher education programs were interviewed. All of the participants were at least two semesters into their teacher training programs. This criterion was chosen because the participants would have had enough experience during teacher training to provide a deeper essence of their experiences. All of the participants had the intent to teach in secondary classrooms. The focus on secondary preservice teachers was chosen because elementary settings inherently foster a development of relationships, as teachers are with the same students for the majority of the school day. In secondary schools, teachers and students do not spend as much time together, which challenges the ability to create and nurture relationships at a time when students rely on relationships for their development.

Snowball sampling was also employed for this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) described snowball sampling as identifying "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (p. 159). I used my personal contacts to find participants who were within the parameters of my study focus. I used emails, text messages, and conversations to make initial contact with people who knew others who would be able to help me find participants. Many of the initial participants connected me with other participants. Through the use of purposeful and snowball sampling, 13 participants were found.

In qualitative inquiry, there are no rules for sample size (Patton, 2015). For this study, I used 13 participants. Participants were not selected based on their gender or ethnicity; instead, they were selected based upon their volunteerism and the participant criteria described previously. The participants were all over the age of 18, and no one was excluded based on gender, race, or ethnicity. One participant was used in the pilot study to determine whether any changes need to be made to the interview protocol prior to beginning the actual interviews for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). The remaining 12 participants were

interviewed, created a meme, and were part of a focus group. Table 1 provides a summary of the

12 participants' background information.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Gender	University	Subject Area	Doing Coursework (CW) or Student Teaching (ST)
Ava	Female	ADU	Social Studies/History	CW
Celia	Female	LSSU	Special Education	ST
Darren	Male	GSU	Science	CW
Fiona	Female	BBU	Mathematics	ST
Hilary	Female	GSU	Social Studies	CW
John	Male	SMSU	History	ST
Mackenzie	Female	LSSU	Special Education	ST
Matt	Male	SMSU	Mathematics	ST
Michelle	Female	GSU	Communications	CW
Nicholas	Male	ASU	Band	ST
Samuel	Male	GSU	Physics/Mathematics	CW
Tara	Female	GSU	Spanish	CW

Procedures

The procedures for this study began with submitting a research proposal to the IRB of

Liberty University. The purpose of garnering IRB approval was to ensure that the study followed

the research guidelines of the university for completing ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Upon IRB approval from Liberty University (see Appendix A), the search for participants using

purposeful and snowball sampling began. Purposeful sampling is used when a researcher intentionally selects people from a group that will better inform the study, while snowball sampling is when a researcher uses who they know to find qualified participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

With the help of emails, text messages, and personal conversations, I made contact with people I know who had connections to university students. I was connected with the participants using text messages and emails. The text messages communicated email addresses where the remaining arrangements were made. The initial email to each potential participant described the study, gave a brief description of their responsibilities as a participant, and included the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B). After contacts agreed to the study, I sent the consent form using DocuSign (see Appendix C) and made arrangements for an interview using Zoom, a video-conferencing platform. Participants were emailed the Zoom link and access code.

The interviews were recorded using Zoom's ability to record its meetings and then saved. The files were saved on both a laptop and an external hard drive. The laptop was secured using a password, and the external hard drive was and is stored in a fireproof, locked box. Upon completion of the study, the files will be deleted from the computer and the hard drive after three years (Office of Human Research Protections, 2020).

The questions for the interview underwent a pilot study and peer review. The participant for the pilot study was asked to analyze the questions and delivery to make suggestions for improvement. She offered no changes to the questions or the delivery. My interview questions were also peer reviewed during the writing process of this study. The peer review served as another step to ensure the success of the collection of data (Schwandt et al., 2007). Three

professors at Liberty University read my questions and made suggestions until they were approved.

The interview process used an interview protocol to help maintain focus on the research topic and make sure that the questions were the same with each participant (Patton, 2015; see Appendix D). At times, the questions had to be rearranged or re-worded to accommodate what was happening during the interview. When interviews were conducted with a participant who would be teaching a fine art, the questions needed to be adapted. For example, the future band instructor spoke about his training regarding the academic lessons he would teach as a continuous cycle, which caused questions 6-11 to be more difficult to navigate. Nicholas was still able to provide insightful data about his training, but I had to reword the questions to better understand his specific subject area. I asked questions about the band classroom and how he selected music rather than the pre-written questions. Also, when questions were answered at a different point during the interview, this was noted in order to avoid repetition.

At the end of each interview, the participants and I talked about the next steps. I explained the meme assignment and asked that they complete it prior to the focus group session (see Appendix F). All participants completed the meme promptly. I explained that I would be sending them a copy of the transcript of our interview for their approval. I told them they would need to reply to the email acknowledging that they had received the transcript. Finally, I told them possible dates for the focus group sessions. All interviews ended in a positive manner.

Once all one-on-one interviews were complete and memes were collected, the participants were divided into two focus groups with six assigned to each. The focus groups were completed using Zoom to allow easy access for participants from different universities to participate. The Zoom link and access code were emailed to the participants the day prior to the

focus group. The participants were placed into specific focus groups based on two factors. I placed representations of different universities in each group as much as possible and also considered the availability of participants. The questions that were used for the focus groups may be seen in Table 2 and Appendix G. Following each focus group session, I sent a small thank you gift card in the amount of $15 for their time and input to avoid a feeling of exploitation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

I collected and analyzed data from three sources: interviews, memes, and focus groups. I transcribed each interview within a week after completion. I then analyzed each interview using two types of coding and then themeing one participant's data before beginning the transcription of another participant's interview. I transcribed the two focus groups in the week that followed each of them. I analyzed the focus group data using the same coding method used with the interview data. I analyzed the written portion of the memes using the same coding methods used for the other types of data. The findings from the interviews and focus groups, along with the written portion of the memes were used as triangulation of data for each participant.

The Researcher's Role

My experiences in education have impacted who I am and how I view others in educational environments (Patton, 2015). Based on the relationships I shared with teachers while I was a student in grades K-12, I became a teacher. I wanted to be the teacher that students remembered 30 years later. I believe that the relationships that teachers have with their students have the potential to positively impact the lives of students within the school walls and beyond.

To avoid researcher bias, I bracketed my opinions and experiences during the interview process and data analysis (Husserl, 2013). Before I could fully bracket my personal experiences from the study, I practiced self-reflection becoming "attuned to my own being, thinking, and

choosing before I relate to others' thoughts, understandings, and choices" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 62). Once I understood what meanings I attached to the research questions, I was able to bracket those away from the collection and analysis of data (Moustakas, 1994) in order to see the data as it was and not confound it with my own experiences.

As a classroom teacher for 10 years, I have seen the importance of teacher-student relationships and the impact this phenomenon has on the teachers, students, academics, and school community. When relationships are not created and nurtured, students do not feel a sense of belonging, are not as motivated to do their best, and lack the social skills to be successful at school. In my teacher education training program, I did not experience any coursework that would have prepared me to complete this all-important task of relationship-building. This study began with a question as to whether preservice teachers have gained an understanding during their teacher training of how to create and nurture relationships with their future students.

I did not have personal relationships with any of the preservice teachers who volunteered to participate in my research study. I did not have any affiliation with the universities selected for this study. No prior contacts were made with either.

Data Collection

For qualitative research, multiple forms of data are collected rather than relying on one source of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). During this research study, data were collected from three sources: interviews, memes, and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were used with preservice teachers. The interviews used a protocol (see Appendix D) but were not restricted to just the questions on the protocol (Patton, 2015). Follow-up questions were asked if they were needed to better understand the words of the participants (Patton, 2015). Questions were altered at times to meet the needs of data collection from certain participants. At the end of each of the

interviews, the participants were asked to create a meme for teacher-student relationships and write about their choices for the meme, a projective technique. The written portion of the meme was analyzed. The final data collected came from focus group discussions. Using open-ended questions with six participants at a time, I sought further explanations of the participants' experiences. All three types of data were open-ended and were not to be analyzed with a predetermined instrument or scale (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each type of data provided a different vantage point to the study. Data were collected from three different sources from the same participants on the same topic. When all of the data were considered together, it provided a triangulation that improved the credibility of the study (Patton, 2015).

Interviews

The purpose of an interview is to understand another's story – to understand another person's feelings, attitudes, and perceptions (Patton, 2015). Husserl (2013) wrote about how important it is in phenomenological research to truly "grasp the essential insights relating to experiences" (p. 3994). In order to do this, researchers need to interview participants to allow their lived experiences to shed light upon a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). A phenomenon, which will be the result of the experiences of the participants, will be revealed. Interviews make it possible to collect data that would not likely be revealed in any other method of data collection (Gall et al., 2007).

Asking appropriate questions is essential. The researcher must then rely on the participants to truthfully and honestly describe their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). Interviews are interactions (Patton, 2015). Researchers need to be fully aware of how they present themselves and also be fully prepared for an authentic experience for both the interviewee and the interviewer (Patton, 2015; Schwandt et al., 2007). When more than one

participant is interviewed, the researcher is able to find themes connecting the experiences of the participants to better understand the essence of the phenomenon under study.

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve asking a series of pre-planned questions but leaving room for the interviewer to probe more deeply in order to understand what the interviewee means by a statement (Gall et al., 2007). A protocol was used as a guide so that the same areas of inquiry were covered with each participant (Patton, 2015). The questions were meant to be open-ended but clear so that the participants understood the questions and were able to share their stories (Patton, 2015). When something a participant said was not clear, I gently asked probing questions while avoiding the mistake of making the participants feel as though they had answered incorrectly (Patton, 2015). Throughout the interview, the physical demeanor of the participants was observed and changes were made to questions based on what their body language was saying (Patton, 2015). For example, if a person was truly struggling with answering a question, I offered to return to that question later. Additionally, I reworded or reorganized questions based on the answers of the participants to ensure the richest collection of data and to not be redundant.

I interviewed 12 preservice, secondary teachers for the study, plus an additional participant for the pilot interview. The pilot interview allowed a test of the interview protocol to determine if the wording of the questions was clear and guided me to make any potential changes before using the protocol as part of the data collection (Gall et al., 2007). The pilot interview participant had the same criteria as the other participants and did not suggest any changes to the interview protocol. The interview questions also underwent peer review before being finalized (Schwandt et al., 2007). Three professors at Liberty University made suggestions and agreed upon the final set of questions that were used.

The interviews were scheduled and conducted at the convenience of the participants and researcher. Zoom allowed for video conferencing and the recording of the interview. Each interview was saved as a file on a computer, which was protected by a password. The interviews were also copied to an external hard drive and stored in a fireproof, locked box. The files will be deleted from the computer and the hard drive after three years (Office of Human Research Protections, 2020).

The questions that were created for the interview protocol reflect the focus of the three sub-questions for this study: academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit as they relate to relationships between teachers and students. The interview questions listed in Table 2 and Appendix D; the explanations of the questions follow Table 2.

Table 2

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Opening Questions

1. Thank you for joining me today. Please tell me a little about yourself – where you grew up and what caused you to pursue a degree in education.

2. Describe your overall experience in [insert university's name] education department.

3. That was great. Thank you for sharing. Now, please walk me through what you plan to do after you graduate from [insert university's name] with your degree in education.

Questions Related to Academic Fit

4. Please describe the first week of school in your classroom.

5. How have you been trained to use your relationships with your students to be sure students feel they belong academically?

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6. If a student does not feel challenged by an activity that you have selected, how have you been trained to use your relationship with the student to encourage the student to complete it?

7. If a student decides that completing assignments is just not for them, how has your teacher training program taught you to use your relationship with the student to complete the assignment?

8. How has your teacher training program taught you to use your relationship with your students to understand what technology interests them?

9. How has your training program prepared you to use relationships with your students to ensure that the activities you implement in your classroom truly fit the academic needs of your students?

Questions Related to Social Fit

10. Think back to when you were in middle school and high school. What would you say were your top five priorities?

11. With those in mind, what do you think is the most important factor for a learning environment?

12. How has your teacher training program taught you to help students feel a sense of belonging in your classroom?

13. Describe the role you have been prepared to play when navigating through peer relationships in your classroom.

14. What are some ways your training program has prepared you to build relationships among your students?

15. How has your teacher training program prepared you to create relationships with your students?

Questions Related to Cultural Fit

16. Students come from a variety of backgrounds into a single classroom. What are your plans to be sure that every person with every background feels like they belong in your classroom?

17. When discussions arise from the curriculum about equality issues, describe the tools you have learned that will help you lead the discussion?

18. How has your teacher training prepared you to understand the central values of your students?

19. What has your teacher training program taught you that will help you create a sense of belonging for all students?

Closing Questions

20. What overall impact do you think positive, supportive relationships between you and your students will have?

21. In what ways have your education studies prepared you to create relationships with your students?

22. You have done a great job answering all of my questions, but I have one more: Do you have anything more you would like to say regarding what you have shared during this interview?

The first two questions were meant to put the participants at ease with a more informal set of questions and engage them in describing their life experiences (Patton, 2015). The first one

asked participants to reflect on how they made their choice to enter an education program. The second asked them to reflect on their time in their university's education department, something that did not have a right or wrong answer. The third question asked participants to ponder their future, which was not likely to be very reliable (Patton, 2015) but did provide participants with the opportunity to say what was on their minds. All three questions were meant to engage the interviewee in providing descriptive information to prepare them for the other questions in the protocol (Patton, 2015). These questions also began a rapport between the participant and the interviewer that fostered openness, honesty, and authenticity (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

Questions 4-9 focused on building relationships with students through academic fit. The learning environment should help create a sense of belonging; "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). When students in a study conducted by Haugen et al. (2019) felt like they were successful in academics, they had a stronger sense of belonging to the school. Bouchard and Berg (2017) noted that this sense of academic belonging is the foundation to everything else that happens in the experiences of a student. In a study conducted by Keyes (2019), the findings suggested that a positive learning environment held more value than the role of peers in students finding a sense of belonging. This set of questions targeted the degree of preparation the preservice teachers had in order to create a classroom climate where relationships with their students would build a sense of academic fit.

Questions 10-15 focused on teacher-student relationships and how these relationships impact social fit. Secondary students have different social needs than elementary students (Eccles et al., 1993). During this stage of development, students begin depending on people outside their families for strong relationships (Booker, 2018; Goodenow, 1993; Smith et al.,

2016). Teachers play a role in not only their own relationships with students but also in the relationships students have with other students (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). The relationships that are built in classrooms have the ability to make a positive impact on factors inside the classroom and beyond, such as sense of belonging with peers (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). These six questions allowed the interviewees to describe their personal experiences and then expound on how they had been prepared to meet the social needs of their future students by developing positive relationships with them.

Questions 16-19 focused on cultural fit. Preservice teachers need to be prepared for the multicultural classrooms they will face (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Students come from varied backgrounds and benefit from a positive classroom environment, especially those from non-traditional home lives (O'Malley et al., 2015). When teachers are ready to understand and discuss difficult topics such as cultural differences and diversity of lifestyles, students find a sense of belonging, as their backgrounds are respected (Dwoskin, 2015; Ungemah, 2015). The purpose of this set of questions was to gather data about how prepared these preservice teachers were to face these challenges.

The closing questions (20-22) were meant to be open-ended, allowing the participants to broadly define and describe the focus of the interview (Patton, 2015); how prepared they felt to create and nurture relationships with their students to help them fit academically, socially, and culturally in their future classrooms. The final question allowed the interviewees to have the last word of the interview (Patton, 2015). As the interviews closed, the participants were thanked and asked to create a meme, which will be explained in the following section. Each participant was emailed a thank you along with the meme assignment.

A meme can be considered a projection technique. Projection techniques have been mainly used in psychological assessments; however, they may also be used in educational research (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000; Patton, 2015). Projection techniques are extremely versatile and allow participants to tap into "feelings, perceptions and attitudes that can be difficult to access by more direct questioning techniques and can be a rich source of new leads and ideas for researchers" (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000, p. 247). The use of projective techniques is ambiguous by nature and allows the participants to use their own frame of reference to answer questions (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000). The general idea is to have participants "react to something other than a question—an inkblot, a picture, a drawing, a photo, an abstract painting, a film, a story, a cartoon, or whatever is relevant" (Patton, 2015, p. 485). Because there are no right or wrong answers, researchers have the potential to access information that conventional questioning may not be able to reveal (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000).

For this research study, a construction technique within the projection methods of inquiry was used. With this construction technique, participants were asked to construct a representation of the research theme (Catterall & Ibbotson, 2000). The participants were asked to create a meme (see Appendix F) that represents teacher-student relationships. A meme is "a cultural item in the form of an image, video, phrase, etc., that is spread via the Internet and often altered in a creative or humorous way" (dictionary.com, n.p.). After the participants created the meme, they wrote a written description of it through the use of a paragraph, bullet points, or a list of words that explained why they chose that particular meme to describe the relationships between students and teachers.

The participants were asked to create the meme and send it via email after the interview and before the focus group. This activity was completed after the interview for several reasons.

First, the interview provided an opportunity for the participants to directly reflect on the importance of creating and nurturing relationships with their future students. Once the interview was complete, they were better equipped to create a meme. Second, creativity takes time for some people. I did not want the participants to feel undue pressure to come to the interview with something in-hand or be asked to create something during the interview. Third, a rapport was established during the interview, which fostered motivation for participants to create the meme. It was important for the meme to be completed prior to the focus group to be sure the participants' views were their own and not necessarily someone else's.

The written descriptions of the memes were analyzed independently first, alongside the respective participants' interview data second, and finally compared to the data from the focus groups. Central themes and meanings within the memes were sought as they related to the findings in other data regarding the perceptions of relationships between teachers and students for the 12 preservice teacher participants.

Focus Groups

Focus groups have become a widely used tactic in research (Patton, 2015). Focus group questions are open-ended and create a forum where views and opinions of the participants may be revealed in a different way than by other types of qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). When participants express their experiences within a group, the quality of data may be enhanced, as the engagement with others may allow the participants to defend or explain their experiences in a clearer way (Patton, 2015).

For this study, two focus groups were created. Six participants were assigned to each focus group to maintain a smaller number of participants, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Patton (2015) in order to better allow the voices of all participants to be

heard. The focus groups were facilitated using Zoom in order to have participants from each site involved. I based the groups on availability and variability. Arrangements were made by emailing the participants with two possible time slots, and the participants shared their availability. I then selected which participants would attend which focus group based on availability and the least amount of homogeneity (Patton, 2015). I wanted to avoid including too many participants from the same university or the same subject area. I then coordinated the focus group times with the participants via email. The open-ended questions used may be found in Table 3 or Appendix G.

Table 3

Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

Questions

1. Briefly describe your experience during your teacher training program for everyone.

2. How do you feel about relationships with your students?

3. During your teacher training program, describe what you were taught about creating and nurturing relationships with your students.

4. Describe the tools you have acquired during teacher training that will allow you to create and nurture relationships with your future students.

5. Explain how you have been prepared to help students academically fit in your classroom.

6. Explain how you have been prepared to help students socially fit in your classroom.

7. Explain how you have been prepared to help students fit culturally in your classroom.

8. What has been the single lesson you have learned during your teacher training program that has had the greatest impact on you as a future teacher?

The first focus group question gave the participants an opportunity to introduce themselves to the group. Patton (2015) recommended that focus group participants be homogenous in background but have different perspectives on the topic. The first question encouraged an understanding that the participants were at similar stages in their journeys to the classroom and allowed them to share with the group. Question 2 was a transition question to the research topic. It was an open-ended question that asked the participants to search through their entire repertoire of feelings to find the most salient to then answer the question (Patton, 2015). The participants had the opportunity to share their perspectives regarding relationships with students, a topic the literature has shown is a valid consideration for teachers (Armstrong, 2006; Buehler et al., 2015; Ellerbrock et al., 2018; Greenberg et al., 2014; Marzano, 2007; Noddings, 2005). Questions 3-7 focused on the teacher training programs at the participants' respective universities. The purpose was to target the experiences of the participants in a search for real data and a true understanding of the experiences the participants have had (Patton, 2015). Preparation and understanding of what is expected of teachers once they enter classrooms has been found as a reliable way of ensuring success for beginning teachers (Boyd et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2018; Dicke et al, 2015; Powers & Nucci, 2017; Suppa et al., 2018). Question 8 ended the focus group sessions with a general question that allowed participants a time to share their experiences. This question served as an attempt to resolve any disagreements or differing of opinions that may have occurred during the discussion and again solidified the similarities shared by the participants (Patton, 2015).

Six participants were assigned to each focus group; however, eleven, not 12, participated in the focus groups sessions. One participant, Fiona, did not attend either focus group although she was scheduled to do so. In place of her participation, she completed a questionnaire with the

same questions that were used in the focus groups. Her written responses replaced the data that likely would have been collected had she attended the focus group session.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

Analysis in phenomenological studies seeks to find the essence of the lived experiences of a person or a group of people (Patton, 2015). Taking into account the entirety of the data collected, clarity about the experiences of the individuals who participated in the study is the goal (Husserl, 2013). For this transcendental phenomenological study, the analysis of the data was completed using methods from both Moustakas (1994) and Saldana (2016). The analysis began with bracketing (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015) and then moved to a series of coding (Saldana, 2016). The coding led to horizons, as the words that had been expressed by the participants gave textural meaning to their experienced worlds (Moustakas, 1994). Using coding techniques described by Saldana, the data went through iterations to determine the emerging patterns or themes as possibilities that were connected with the essences of the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Using the text from the interview transcriptions, the written portion of the memes created by the participants, and the focus group transcripts as the textures and structures of the findings, "meanings and essences of the phenomenon of this study" were gleaned (Moustakas, 1994, p. 119) to reveal the perceptions of the 12 preservice teachers.

Bracketing

Bracketing is a process of leaving a person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences behind while looking at the data with new eyes as if seeing it for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). As much as was possible, my past experiences were removed from the analysis of data to investigate the findings just as they were – no more and no less (Moustakas, 1994). With each set of

information, the data were viewed purely – trying to not color the data with my own experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Interview Analysis

Each interview was first transcribed by me. During transcription, I was immersed in the data and truly developed an understanding of the essences of experiences of the participants (Patton, 2015). After transcription, the participants were asked to participate in member checking. They were offered the opportunity to read the transcript of their respective interviews to be sure the transcript truly depicted what they said (Schwandt et al., 2007). The text then went through three iterations of analysis to find the essence of the perceptions of the individual preservice teachers.

First, the data underwent holistic coding. Holistic coding is used when the "researcher already has a general idea of what to investigate in the data" (Saldana, 2016, p. 166). Because the literature review on the topic of teacher-student relationships provided three distinct categories (academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit), these categories served as the units of data as a starting point prior to a more detailed coding (Saldana, 2016). The fonts of the transcripts were color-coded to match the three units. Orange represented background information, purple represented general thoughts about teacher-student relationships, red represented academic fit, blue represented social fit, and green represented cultural fit. What remained (black) was put aside and only used as contextual data.

The next cycle of coding was in vivo. In vivo coding is used to place the participants' voices at the forefront – to use the exact words of the participants rather than the words of the researcher (Saldana, 2016). To complete in vivo coding, the transcripts were read a second time, looking for the words and/or phrases used by the participants that stood out (Saldana, 2016).

These words and/or phrases were copied to a second document staying within the headings of background information, general teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit.

The next reading of the data completed the process of themeing the data. A theme "is an extended phrase or sentence that identifies what a unit of data is about and/or what it means" (Saldana, 2016, p. 199). After the holistic coding and the in vivo coding, I searched for the meanings in the data. These themes helped develop the overarching essences depicted in the transcripts under each category. I copied the themes to a new document named Final Data for each of the five sections for each of the 12 participants to better understand the data (see Appendix H). I then wrote paragraphs using direct quotes from the participants to shape the overall concepts and provide a type of summary. The themes from each interview were then studied alongside the data from the memes and focus groups for individual participants before being considered with the same data from the other participants.

Meme Analysis

Husserl (2013) wrote about how phenomenology brings essences into consciousness. The purpose of the meme assignment was to allow participants to creatively represent the essence of the phenomenon of this research study (Patton, 2015). Saldana (2016) wrote, "Today's mediated and visual cultures seem to indoctrinate and endow all of us by default with visual literacy – heightened awareness of images and their presentation and representation" (p. 65). The memes allowed the participants to express their perspectives in a visual way. While the researcher acknowledges, along with Catterall and Ibbotson (2000), that analysis and interpretation of projection techniques deserve some skepticism, the results of this technique, when analyzed

alongside other forms of data, help provide a thickness and depth to a research study that may not be otherwise attainable.

To analyze the meme, I first looked at the memes and described them in my own words (Saldana, 2016). Next, the written portion of the meme was coded in the same way as the transcripts, using the same colors of font. The data were then added to the appropriate sections (teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, cultural fit) in the Final Data document, but the font was changed to bold to identify that the data were derived from a different source (see Appendix H). The data stayed in vivo because it was often one or two sentences per participant. The responses were compared and contrasted with the other data from the same participant and then to the other participants' responses.

Focus Group Analysis

Each focus group went through a similar analysis to that of the individual interviews. The discussion was transcribed by me and then was separated by participant. For example, all of the words for Nicholas were put in one document separate from the other participant responses. The transcripts then went through two of the same rounds of coding as the interviews. The first round divided the collected data into five groups (holistic coding): background information, general teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit (Saldana, 2016) using colored font. The second round used in vivo coding where the words and phrases were pulled from the data so as not to lose the true voices of the participants (Saldana, 2016). The in vivo coding was then copied to the Final Data document and placed in its respective category (teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, cultural fit) and was italicized to make it clear that it was derived from a different source (see Appendix H). The responses from Fiona's questionnaire were treated in the same manner as the focus group data. At the end, the goal was

to have found an essence or essences of how the training programs at these six universities had prepared the 12 preservice teachers to create and build relationships with their students.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability all work together to bolster the trustworthiness of a study. Credibility refers to the goal of accurately using the data to reach appropriate findings (Patton, 2015). Dependability and confirmability focus on the rigor of the research, as the goal is to ensure the research is "logical, traceable, and documented" (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Transferability refers to the ability to transfer what is found in one research situation to another (Patton, 2015). Each of these will be further defined and discussed as they pertain to this study.

Credibility

Credibility is about accurately describing reality (Patton, 2015). In this qualitative study, three different methods of data collection were used that support the credibility of the findings. Each method revealed its own aspects of the phenomenon, but an essence(s) was sought from each data source and compared across all of the data (Patton 2015). The combination of data sources created what is known as triangulation, with the purpose of demonstrating that what was found in one source was also found in another source (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Beyond triangulation, this study demonstrated credibility in other ways. I acknowledged my own experiences and strove to analyze the data without bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). I also ensured credibility by recognizing contradictions. If evidence from one source was found that ran contrary to another source, it was recognized and discussed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, as data were collected and analyzed, I understood that each participant and each piece of data had its own story to tell. Each piece of data was seen as

belonging to that participant, and I tried to find their essences first before comparing them to other essences (Schwandt et al., 2007). All of these practices lent credibility to the study.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability are about performing a rigorous research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). I used advisors, member checking, direct quotes, and revisits to the themes to ensure the rigor of the research. Two advisors oversaw the study, as they helped maintain the focus and checked presentations of information for errors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The 12 participants were given the opportunity to review the essences identified from their interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This member checking allowed the participants to determine if the researcher had properly represented them (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Direct quotes were used to provide rich, thick description to be sure the readers understood the themes found in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schwandt et al., 2007). Finally, to ensure dependability and confirmability, I continually returned to the research questions and definitions to be sure the research remained focused and did not drift into something that it was not intended to be (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability is about whether a finding can be used by others in a different context (Schwandt et al., 2007). In order for the research to be as transferable as possible, full descriptions of the site, the participants, and the methods have been written. The descriptions have been amply presented so that another researcher could design a study in a similar fashion using different sites, which is the purpose of transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Before, during, and after this research study ethical considerations were made to protect the participants and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). Prior to collecting data, my plan met the standards for IRB approval from Liberty University. The IRB approval ensured that the study followed ethical guidelines while respecting others and practicing justice with concern for their welfare (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

During the study, I also implemented ethical considerations. Pseudonyms were used to identify the universities and the participants to protect their identities. Only I know which pseudonym is attached to each university and to each interviewee. Each participant signed an informed consent (see Appendix C) that explained the study and made clear that participation was voluntary. The interviews were stored on a password-protected computer with a copy in a locked box. Any emails that were exchanged with the participants were completed using a Liberty account and not a personal account as a privacy precaution for both the researcher and participants. All interviews took place using Zoom, which ensured the confidentiality and safety of the participants.

The audio files will remain on a computer and thumb drive for three years (Office of Human Research Protections, 2020), after which time the files will be deleted. All of the aforementioned measures were efforts to be ethically considerate during this research study.

Summary

For this research study, I collected raw data, analyzed it to find significant patterns, and then created a framework that will communicate the essence of what the data revealed (Patton, 2015). With the purpose of the study as the foundation and the research questions as the guide, I pursued the essence of what these 12 preservice teachers at these universities in Texas, Missouri,

and Wisconsin perceived as their readiness to create and nurture relationships between teachers

and students as a result of the training they received at their teacher training programs. The

findings of the study will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

According to Moustakas (1994), the purpose of a transcendental phenomenological study is to engage in "systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated" so that a researcher may be "completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 22). The purpose of this study was to identify preservice teachers' perceptions of how their teacher training programs prepared them to establish teacher-student relationships. I set aside my own experiences and perceptions and focused on what the participants had experienced in their teacher training programs. The goal was to find the essence of the experiences of these 12 participants. This chapter will discuss the findings from the interviews, memes, and focus groups that all 12 participants completed. It will begin with a brief portrait of each participant followed by a discussion of how the themes were developed during the analysis portion of the research. The themes will then be discussed as they relate to the research questions. A final summary explaining the findings of the research will end the chapter.

Participants

Twelve college students participated in this study. All participants were found through snowball and purposeful sampling, and they understood that their participation in the research study was voluntary. Nine of the participants attended universities in Texas while two attended a university in Missouri and one in Wisconsin. Five of the participants were from Great State University (GSU), two were from Lone Star State University (LSSU), two were from Show Me State University (SMSU), and one was from each of these universities: Bluebonnet University

(BBU), Armadillo State University (ASU), America's Dairyland University (ADU). Seven of the participants were female, and five were male. A brief portrait of each participant follows.

Ava

Ava chose to pursue teaching at a public university in Wisconsin (ADU) as a result of her experiences as an elementary and high school student. When she was in school, she changed schools often and found disparities among schools. She said her goal as an educator is to make her classroom feel safe and comfortable for all students, but especially for those who have just moved to the school. She chose social studies because she loves history and thinks her travel experiences will bolster her teaching of that area. Her teacher training had been impacted by the pandemic. Ava said that almost all of her education classes did not seem as interpersonal as they would have been had the pandemic not played a factor. Due to the pandemic, Ava chose not to student teach for a semester. She wanted to be sure that she would be able to complete her student teaching in person rather than virtually, so she decided to take a few classes that would help her gain confidence in her interpersonal skills, such as an acting class and a special education class. Upon graduation, Ava planned to move to a city where she wants to substitute first to be sure she can build a rapport with the students in an inner-city school. She hoped this would lead to a job opportunity.

Celia

Celia was a junior at a public university in southeast Texas (LSSU). Celia began college as a kinesiology major with a plan for physical therapy. After some courses for her major, she remembered how much she enjoyed the time she spent in the life skills room at her high school and switched her major from kinesiology to special education. Her time in the education department had been very different from her time in the science department. At first, she was

scared and felt out of place with such a big change, but Celia had settled in and enjoyed the assignments in the education department: "I don't know – like putting myself in the shoes of being in the classroom. So, I kind of like the assignments better – like, not just math homework, you know?" Upon graduation, she planned to go where she would be offered a job. Because she intended to pursue a master's degree soon, she was going to try for a teaching job near the program that she selects so that she would not need to keep moving.

Darren

Darren's path to the classroom was not a direct one. He had worked in several different industries and found himself volunteering at the school where his relatives attended. He eventually became a substitute and then a long-term substitute. The business world attempted to lure him back, but Darren decided that teaching would be his career. He planned to complete his master's degree at the same private, Christian university (GSU) where he was attending before going back to the school district where his relatives attended. Darren said that the school system where his relatives attended is where he felt like he belongs and where he wants to make a difference.

Fiona

Fiona was in the student teaching phase of her teacher preparation at a university in north Texas (BBU). When she was growing up, she went to her successful mom's office regularly and knew that an office job was not what she wanted as a career. In her high school years, she was able to visit elementary schools and teach mini-lessons, where she realized that she really enjoyed helping others understand things. This became even more apparent when she was in college algebra, where she found herself explaining problems to other students. Her experiences

led her to the path of studying to be a secondary math teacher. Upon graduation she planned to pursue her master's degree prior to entering the classroom.

Hilary

Hilary was in the final semester prior to student teaching at a Christian university in Texas (GSU). When she was a child, she wanted to be a nurse. However, when she volunteered at a hospital while in high school, she realized that nursing did not interest her. A short while later, Hilary was asked to share her love of horses with the daughter of a family friend through riding lessons. As she taught riding lessons, she realized her love of teaching and decided to pursue a career in education. Upon graduation Hilary planned to complete her master's degree before entering the profession of teaching.

John

John's first career path was civil engineering. When that did not go well for him, he took some aptitude tests and found that his interests and abilities aligned with teaching. Because he "had never had a bad history class," he decided to study to become a history teacher at a public university in Missouri (SMSU). John was in the student teaching phase of his academic journey and was actively applying for jobs for next school year. He hoped to use the skills that his teacher training had taught him at the high school level rather than the middle school level because he believed the discussions would be of higher quality. John felt like his university had prepared him to enter the classroom.

Mackenzie

Mackenzie knew from a young age that she wanted to be an educator and found her focus on special education after having friends with special needs. She attended a junior college before going to a large, public university in Texas (LSSU) where she was in her final semester.

Mackenzie was student teaching at the time of the research study and was actively interviewing for teaching positions for the 2021-2022 school year. She had not chosen which area of special education truly captured what she wanted to do and was taking in all of her experiences while going through her training program to help her find the right route for her professional career.

Matt

Matt always knew he wanted to be a teacher. His father and his past teachers inspired him to pursue the profession. During the research study he was in the student teaching phase at a university in central Missouri (SMSU) and had already secured a teaching position for the following school year. He had a contract to teach mathematics at a high school near the university. Matt said that his training program had "been great in general." During a course that he said was their "biggest education course where we go into classrooms and teach lessons," the pandemic impacted their ability to actually enter classrooms. He said that the education department began to "think outside of the box," which he really enjoyed.

Michelle

Michelle began college as a communications major but realized that her "happy place is teaching middle school children" and "teaching high school level kids." She believed that words have power and that it was important that students understand, harness, and use words properly to express themselves. She was in her second semester in the education department at a private, Christian university in Texas (GSU) and found the education department very structured. Upon graduation, Michelle was considering pursuing her Master's in Communications or entering the classroom.

Nicholas

Nicholas began college at a large, public university in Texas (ASU) in pursuit of a degree in music composition. He quickly realized that he did not need a degree to compose music, but he did need a degree in something that would provide job stability. After attending music education classes, Nicholas decided he would consider teaching band as his profession. As his training continued, he found a love for what his future holds in a band classroom.

Samuel

Samuel had two semesters to complete before graduation from a private, Christian university in Texas (GSU). He began his studies in the physics department but realized that he could make a difference in the lives of students if he became a teacher. He had a moment when he remembered how one of his teachers took the time to help him understand science in a different way. His desire was to be that special teacher for students. Upon graduation he planned to teach sciences and mathematics in the United States for a few years before teaching in other countries in high school settings.

Tara

Tara was in her junior block of studies at a private, Christian university in Texas (GSU). She had always had a love of learning and working with people. Tara planned to teach Spanish at the secondary level upon graduation. She was researching the idea of working on her master's degree immediately following graduation rather than going straight to a classroom. During her time in the education department of her university, she "had really solid professors" who taught her theoretical topics but had also given her practical situations. She made the comment that "at the end of the day, even if I know all of the fancy, big words, I'm going to need to be able to teach students. So, I feel like it's really preparing me in that way."

Results

Data were collected from the 12 participants through interviews, written portions of a meme assignment, and focus groups. Each participant was asked the same questions (see Table 2) with follow-up questions for clarifications in the interviews and focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed by me, and the written portion of the meme remained in the words of the participants.

All data were analyzed using Saldana's (2016) coding methods for a transcendental phenomenological study with Moustakas's (1994) focus on bracketing and a search for an essence in mind. The purpose was to gain a clear understanding of what these 12 preservice teachers had experienced during their teacher training programs that had prepared them to create and build relationships with their students. I began with the four research questions that served as guides for the data collection. The questions focused on teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. For teacher-student relationships, I found 19 codes. For academic fit, I found nine. With regard to social fit, I found 12 codes, and for the for the research question about cultural fit, I found 10 codes. From the 54 codes, I discovered themes for each research question: four for teacher-student relationships, three for academic fit, three for social fit, and two for cultural fit. The codes and themes may be found in Table 5. From the themes, I arrived at the essence of the 12 participants' experiences during their teacher training programs regarding their preparation to create and nurture relationships with their students.

Theme Development

Saldana (2016) stated that coding in qualitative research "is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act" (p. 4). He also said that coding is a cyclical process that may take several iterations to find precise themes. In this study I first coded each transcript individually

using the four questions that guided my research: teacher-student relationships, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. I then transferred from coding to themeing by taking central ideas that were found from data from each participant to form main ideas that I wrote in the margins (Saldana, 2016). After completing this process for each of the 12 participants, I found the themes were overlapping with the themes of other participants. I began listing all of the codes that I found from all participants, keeping them organized in my four headings. Patterns that emerged in the codes and summaries of those patterns produced themes for all of the participants. A table of questions, codes, and themes may be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Themes

Central Research Question: Teacher-Student Relationships

    Codes: respect, background, joy, understanding, comfortability, interest, foundation, boundaries, mentor/modeling, not explicitly taught, cheerleader, beyond school, caring, consistency, connection, safe space, listener, reliable, relatable

        Theme 1: Relatability

        Theme 2: Understood but Not Explicitly Taught

        Theme 3: Supporter

        Theme 4: Importance of Environment

Sub-Question One: Academic Fit

    Codes: relevancy, differentiation, preparations, formative assessments, depth of understanding, lesson extensions, awareness, state standards, technology as supplement, using apps, technology confusion

        Theme 1: Relevancy

Theme 2: Technology Use Variance

Theme 3: Differentiation

Sub-question Two: Social Fit

Codes: growth mindset, collaboration, physical classroom, respect, classroom

management, comfortability, connections, inclusivity, family life, humor, no teaching on

peer relationships, space

Theme 1: Classroom Physical Environment

Theme 2: Classroom Emotional Environment

Theme 3: Lack of Peer Relationship Training

Sub-Question Three: Cultural Fit

Codes: openness, safe place, awareness, fairness, comfortability, stereotypes, acceptance,

equity, reality v. idealism, recognition, inclusivity

Theme 1: Awareness

Theme 2: Inclusivity

Teacher-Student Relationships

For the main research question about teacher-student relationships I found 19 codes. The

codes were then clustered into themes and meanings (Patton, 2015). The codes of respect, joy,

relatability, and listener were all grouped together in the theme of relatability. Being relatable

included respecting others, finding joy in relationships, and being a good listener. The theme of

not explicitly taught was also a code because it did not fit with any other category, but was

significant to six of the participants. The codes of understanding, cheerleader, beyond school,

caring, and listener were themed under the heading of supporter. Each of the codes were about

supporting at the core of what the data showed. The remaining codes of comfortable, interest, foundation, boundaries, and safe place were grouped together to form the theme of environment. Each of the codes related to the environment of the classroom.

Relatability

All but two of the participants spoke or wrote about the concept of being relatable with their students. Michelle emphasized the importance of being relatable by developing a connection with others to truly understand them. Celia shared a story during the focus group about how one of her professors encouraged them to know the names of students' pets and use them in sentences. She said students learned that their teacher cared about them when the teacher used their pets. Samuel spoke about a similar idea when he described training that included making lessons about students or student interests as a way to show the students you care. Ava also mentioned taking an interest in students' lives by wanting to be "invested in what is happening with them outside of class." Just asking questions about what students did on the weekends or what video game interested them were mentioned by participants as ideas of how to relate to students.

During the focus group Hilary said, "I think like all of you have been saying that it's important to relate to your students and make sure they know that like we were saying that you're human too." Matt said something similar when he said, "…it's all about giving them [the students] a chance to show like I'm a person too." These participants had been trained to show that teachers need to relate to their students by showing their own personalities.

During the focus group Nicholas made it clear that when teachers depend on power point presentations, they lose some of their ability to relate to students and praised the ability of fine arts classes to make relationships very intimate while also being professional. Samuel simply

said the word "joy" when he was asked about the importance of relationships between teachers and students. He talked about how he thinks "everybody likes a person that's willing to learn [about them]." The code and then theme of relatability was also mentioned in two other ways.

Part of being relatable was talked about in terms of respect. Fiona said, "Along with a good relationship comes mutual respect, and with respect comes a sense of obligation to not let the other person down." John, Michelle, Celia, and Tara all made similar statements. John said that it is important to teach "how to be respectful along with the actual content knowledge" during the focus group. Michelle, also in the focus group, said,

> Respect in the classroom is something that is so important because if your students don't respect you, or you don't respect your students, then there's going to be the clash there, and work's not going to get done, and you're not going to learn the material, and they're not going to want to be there.

During Celia's interview, she said, "I think [relationships] can promote mutual respect, which is super important," and went on to say that if any type of tension is present in a classroom it impedes learning. In the written portion of Tara's meme, she wrote, "Teachers model positive behaviors to students. They show students how to accomplish academic goals while exemplifying strong character and encouraging students to treat one another with respect." For these participants, part of being able to relate to students was being able to provide mutual respect.

Michelle, Ava, and Tara approached being relatable from the listening perspective. Michelle mentioned the importance of having a connection with people in order to "truly listen" to what they have to say. Ava echoed that when she described how she wants her classroom to be

a place where students' voices are heard even within the creation of the classroom rules. Tara shared that her training had taught them to be good listeners rather than advisers to students:

> So, if a student comes to me with their high school drama of whatever it is, I can be there, and I can listen all day. When it starts to get trickier is when I, like, 'Well, this is how you should respond to your boyfriend breaking up with you' or something like that. That is where it gets a lot more fishy, so being open and available but not to the extent that you're best friends with them.

All three participants had been taught and believe that listening is a significant factor in relating to students.

Understood but Not Explicitly Taught

Seven participants stated that their training programs did not explicitly teach them how to create and maintain relationships with their students. John said his school was a very scientific institution and that almost everything they were taught "focused on the psychology of it, the scientific study of it. And, relationships were not explicitly taught, but they were most definitely modeled." Ava expected to find some ideas about teacher-student relationships in her course on classroom management, but stated the concept had not been present in her program. Matt said,

> I think it's [teacher-student relationships] something our school could have hit a little more because most of my training as far as interacting with students and getting to learn students was kind of based off me rather than our school's teaching us how to do that, and I kind of think it is something that should be up to the teacher, but I feel like maybe we could have had a little more guidance in that area.

Samuel, Tara, and Darren all attended the same university and said that the concept of teacher-student relationships had not been a focus. Samuel said, "I think the classes that we are taking

sprinkle it in enough that I think I have a fairly good idea of what I would utilize and what I wouldn't." Tara said, "I think it's something [teacher-student relationships] that here at the College of Ed they would say that, 'Yes! Rah-rah, relationships!' but it's not something that I've been explicitly taught a lot." During the focus group, Darren said, "Yeah. We touched on it [creating and building relationships with students], but I can't say they've put a lot of emphasis on it – it's an underlying kind of connection that you're building without actually saying that you're building, if that makes sense." Michelle, who is one semester ahead of Samuel, Tara, and Darren at the same university, told them during the focus group that they would eventually have a class that would focus on teacher-student relationships.

Supporter

Nine participants talked about the importance of supporting students to build relationships, and focused on that support in different ways. In John's meme he wrote, "I think caring for the student and showing an interest is one of the most important aspects of a student-teacher relationship." John, Hilary, Celia, Matt, Tara, and Darren all spoke to the idea of understanding what students are doing beyond the school walls. John has been trained to simply ask how they are doing. Hilary said that her courses had taught her to get "inside their worlds" to find out what excites them, what makes them upset, and then building that relationship from there." Celia, Matt, Tara, and Darren all said they had been trained to know what activities students choose to do when they are not in the classroom.

Three of the participants talked about being a cheerleader to show that they care about their students. In Mackenzie's meme she wrote,

My students love when you [the teacher] are excited because they know there is a

purpose to what we are doing. They thrive off of excitement and praise, and so when we

do goal work, we do a lot of cheering them on because they are making progress in the

goals of their academics. Students want the love and recognition from their teachers so

that they feel like they have the capabilities to succeed.

Tara said almost the same thing when she wrote in her meme, "Teachers cheer students on and

motivate them to grow. By exuding excitement and a desire to learn, teachers encourage students

to live similarly." In Fiona's meme, she wrote about how a teacher plants a seed of content, then

cares for the "student as a whole by getting to know them. This does not mean becoming a

friend, but being an adult who knows what's going on in their life and can empathize and support

them so they get what they need to succeed in the classroom." These three participants explained

their role of supporting as cheering on their students.

Only Darren mentioned the concept of mentorship when talking about relationships with

students, but he used the term in two different data sets. In his meme he wrote, "mentor my

students and to lead by example." During the focus group, he said,

Kind of building off of what everybody is saying – relationship, of course, is important to

create a positive environment, but I take it more into a mentorship type

thing…mentorship for a lot of the students is very important. They may not have a

household that is quite as positive, so we're the ones guiding them toward a better future.

Importance of Environment

Eight participants spoke about how the classroom environment impacts relationships.

Celia, Nicholas, and Tara used the idea of being comfortable repeatedly in their data. Celia

talked about how a lack of tension between the teacher and the students makes a classroom

comfortable. Nicholas spoke about how his current student teaching supervisors had created

"comfortable" environments for their students. He also used the word comfortable as it related to

constructively criticizing both his teaching methods and their own performances. For Tara's Spanish classroom, her goal was for students "to get comfortable in the classroom" so that they are free to speak in Spanish with her and their peers.

Another aspect of comfortability that emerged in the data focused on foundations that are established and then maintained in the classroom. Michelle talked about how relationships are the foundation when she said this about a course called Studies in Exceptional Students: "I knew relationships with students and teachers and just how important that was in the classroom because if you don't have that, what's the point in those kids wanting to show up?" Ava echoed this sentiment when she wrote this with her meme: "Building bonds with students is an important step in being able to effectively teach and share content." In the focus group session, Ava again related something similar, but added, "If they don't like you, they probably won't care to pay attention. So, yeah, I think it's really important to build those interpersonal relationships and find things that you have in common with the students and they have in common with each other." Also in the focus group, Tara said, "We need to build relationships with them [students] because that is the beginning."

Establishing boundaries was another concept that emerged as part of the classroom environment. Four participants mentioned this concept. John said that it is important to keep "a professional relationship while also modeling what is appropriate." During her interview Celia talked about boundaries as being a necessary part of relationships between teachers and students. She also wrote this in her meme:

> I chose to depict the 'fine line' between being the authority figure and friend to your
> student. As a teacher, this line can often become confusing in certain situations. It is easy
> to be the friend, but at times, you must remember that you are the adult and you are

responsible for this child. I think a good teacher knows this line and can properly balance

being a friend as well as authority figure in their students' lives.

Matt also mentioned the concept of boundaries twice in his responses. He talked about the

importance of making clear boundaries in the first week of school and also about how students

need to understand that teachers are supporters but not friends. Tara's data showed that she

agrees with the others about boundaries while saying one of her classes discussed the "boundary

between being friends with your students and being their teacher."

The idea of a safe space was mentioned by two participants. Darren mentioned having a

safe space for learning two times during his interview. He said that it is important "to set the

environment for learning and maybe even a safe space type of thing" at one point during his

interview, and then mentioned how teachers can become a "safety net" for students. Michelle

talked about a safe space, but more in terms of having fun, allowing students to be themselves,

and giving space to grow.

Academic Fit

The data for academic fit had 11 codes that were then grouped into three themes. The

first theme, relevancy, was also a code. Relevancy was mentioned repeatedly; however, when I

was synthesizing the data, it became apparent that it was also a theme. Two other codes became

a part of the theme of relevancy: awareness and standards, because these relate to making the

academics in a classroom relevant. The second theme for this category was technology use

variance. The participants all talked about the use of technology in different ways, as the codes

of technology as a supplement, use of apps, and technology confusion imply. The third theme,

differentiation, was formed from differentiation as a code but also from the codes of preparation,

formative assessment, and lesson extensions. The participant data showed that these codes supported this theme.

Relevancy

Eleven of the 12 participants used relevancy in their descriptions of their teacher training. In Hilary's meme, she wrote, "They [teachers] must present materials to their students in a way that captures their [the students'] attention and keep them engaged." Michelle wrote almost the same idea in her meme: "A teacher's job is to find a way to connect to their students in order to have each party achieve a shared meaning." Ava said in her meme that she had a "goal of empowering them [students] with historical context and skills to use in processing the world around them." She also mentioned during the focus group session the importance of making content relevant to the immediate world around students, such as city information. Celia, Samuel, and Darren talked about making content relevant to the students in the classroom by acknowledging their aptitudes and interests. Nicholas took a slightly different stance on relevancy by commenting in the interview that while his courses had encouraged him to select music that related to students, the actual practice of that was discouraged because the focus was on meeting University Interscholastic League goals.

Another type of relevance that was found as a theme was awareness. Nicholas explained that in band, grades should be "all about making sure that progress is taken into consideration." He explained how one student may start at a higher level than another, but what is relevant to grading is the progress that students make. Teachers need to be aware of student levels at the beginning in order to gauge their progress. Michelle explained how her class on public speaking would put people out of their comfort zones. Her training taught her that teachers need to be aware of these differences as they relate to their subject areas.

Academic state standards were a topic for 11 of the 12 participants. In the focus group Matt talked about how his school stressed the importance of teaching all of the standards to prepare students for the end of course exams. Samuel said his training had focused on the state standards and their importance, but had not taught him how to make those standards relevant to his students. Tara explained during the focus group that she had been trained to begin with the state standards every time she made a lesson plan. Nicholas, Tara, and Michelle all said that the state standards did not really help when planning their subject areas of band, Spanish, and communications, respectively. State standards were considered relevant by eight participants, but not relevant by three.

All 12 participants talked about technology use in their future classrooms from a variety of vantage points. Tara commented that the training she had would likely be useless because different tools would be available when she enters the classroom. In Matt's interview he referred to technology as a "supplement" to teaching materials. Celia had a course that included asking students to use different apps to create lessons and present them in their classes. Michelle and Mackenzie also had courses where they were introduced to different apps and technology trends in the classroom. Fiona spoke about being exposed to the technology options available but said her training never focused on using it in the classroom. In John's training, his courses had "hammered home" that technology is "very useful but don't rely on it too heavily." Ava explained that some of her professors said that technology "can get students more engaged because they interact with technology all of the time outside of school," while other professors said that technology serves as a distraction to students. The responses to the use of technology as an academic tool varied greatly among participants.

Differentiation

Nine of the 12 participants spoke or wrote about differentiation. Matt said, "We have to try to come up with ways to reach them [students] – every student" in the interview, and revisited the topic during the focus group by saying, "Another thing they talked about is trying to incorporate differentiation and trying to break the mold of being forced to teach to the standards and finding different ways for students to share their knowledge." Ava talked about how her training had focused on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, and described this teaching method as "making sure there are a lot of different ways that can express their knowledge and a lot of different ways for them to present what they already know." She revisited this topic during the focus group and explained UDL as project-based curriculum that allows more "leeway in the level that you're teaching." For Mackenzie, who will be teaching in a special education classroom, differentiation was the key to helping students achieve their specific goals. John explained in his meme, "If a student does not have the motivation to find school interesting, as a teacher I need to discuss why with the student and help them find solutions such as differentiating instruction or asking them about topics that they find interesting like activities they are involved in." Michelle said in her interview and during the focus group that one of her classes called Exceptional Students explained how to offer assistance to those needing help but also how to challenge the gifted students.

A depth of knowledge rather than a focus on content was another type of differentiation that was mentioned by several of the participants. In Darren's meme, he wrote, "I hope to be able to inspire and motivate students to be able to make their own duplicatable experiments to unlock the secrets of the universe not just memorize and repeat." Samuel used his meme to explain that "Actual teachers…are there to pass on knowledge not just evaluate." Matt said that his training

encouraged him to extend his lessons and go "deep in the knowledge by asking them [students] more questions if they finish early." Ava noted in her interview that school is about personal growth more than a letter grade; she mentioned that students need to have a "growth mindset over a fixed mindset." Nicholas's interview and meme focused on this topic as well. His goal for his students was for them to have passion for music more than leaving his classroom with an UIL rating. In his meme, Nicholas wrote, "There is a massive difference between presenting and educating. Anyone can sit behind a desk and play a video, or read off a PowerPoint."

Social Fit

I found 12 codes for the category of social fit in the data. From these 12 codes, three themes emerged: classroom physical, classroom emotional, and lack of peer relationship training. The first theme, classroom physical, was a code in and of itself; however, the codes of comfortable and space were also included in this theme. The second theme was classroom emotional. This theme was formed through the codes of growth, collaboration, respect, classroom management, connections, inclusivity, family life, and humor. The final theme for the category of social fit was lack of peer relationship training. This was a code as well as a theme because no other codes supported the idea, and the idea was repeated by six of the participants.

Classroom Physical Environment

Seven of the 12 participants spoke about the physical classroom environment. In Tara's meme, she wrote, "Teachers build a welcoming 'home-y' environment for students." John said that the learning environment needed to have "comfortability." Michelle mentioned, "What posters you have on the wall is super important, just how you situate your desks so that students can have different groups," along with how changing the room could signal to students the type of lesson that was going to happen that day. Matt shared a story from his student teaching

experience that he felt changed the social dynamic of the classroom. His supervising teacher did not allow students to use their phones while in class; she vowed not to use hers as well. When this device was removed from the environment, more social interactions took place. Samuel mentioned that one of his education classes talked about how some research is explaining the effects of having classrooms with windows. Darren and Ava talked about creating a safe place for learning for students who are coming from environments that may not be safe.

Classroom Emotional Environment

All 12 participants spoke or wrote about the classroom emotional environment. The word "comfortability" was used by John when he described his future classroom. He said he wants his classroom to be free of judgment and insults so that students are comfortable in the learning space. Respect was mentioned by Hilary as a "good way to build that kind of atmosphere in the classroom so that they know that you respect them as learners and then from there we can move on and learn with the knowledge that I respect you and you respect me." Some activities that Ava had been trained to do to make students comfortable in her classroom focused on finding common interests and connections. In her interview she described an artifact activity where students were assigned to bring something from home to share with the class, and in the focus group Ava shared another idea of moving desks each day to help students interact with different people.

Collaboration was mentioned by several of the participants. Samuel said that his training had "definitely promoted group work." He went on to explain how group work does not always work out as it is intended. Matt said,

We talk about collaboration and are given a lot of ideas for different collaborative

teaming and different ways to put students together and have different opportunities,

different settings for them to work together.

Tara, too, said that her courses mentioned the importance of students engaging with the teacher

but also the other students "in collaborative works." Michelle explained how one of her classes

focused on the importance of collaboration and the idea of checking in with peers to see if

students are completing assignments in the same ways.

Inclusion was another repeated idea in discussions on social fit in the classroom.

Mackenzie was trained and had seen during her student teaching the positive impact inclusion

had on all students when special education students were included in general education

environments. During the focus group Mackenzie said,

It's so different because we really emphasize an inclusive environment and getting our

students into general ed. classrooms and having students who are neurotypical interact

with students of different abilities…it's such a big deal…to have my students go into

general ed. classrooms and specials with these kids and see that they're making friends

and have these students understand that they have different abilities, but they are just as

good a friend as they are.

Celia agreed with Mackenzie about inclusion and added that not advocating for inclusion has the

potential to "harm them [special education students] a lot socially."

Lack of Peer Relationship Training

Half of the participants said that they experienced little or no training on developing

relationships among students. Fiona, Tara, Darren, and Mackenzie all blatantly said that they did

not remember any training on peer relationships. Hilary said, "I don't know that I've ever been

specifically told, 'Here's how you should have students engage with one another' other than group work, small discussions. I'm not sure we've ever gone in depth about those interactions." Matt stated that his training did not include a focus on peer relationships but added, "That's just stuff that I feel like happens naturally, so I don't feel like I need to actively try…I feel like that kind of stuff breeds on its own."

Cultural Fit

The third sub-question that addressed cultural fit revealed two themes from 10 codes. The first theme, awareness, was a summary of the codes of openness, awareness, fairness, reality versus idealism, recognition, and equity. Awareness was a code initially but became a theme when other codes began to support it as a larger concept. Inclusivity was the other theme for this category though it began as a code. In the responses, the idea of inclusivity was repeated, but it was also a general theme that included two codes: safe place and comfortable. The data that supported these two codes also supported the theme of inclusivity.

Awareness

Some type of cultural awareness was mentioned by every participant. John explained how his training had taught him to "put the person first as opposed to the disability," and he said that applied to the many "labels associated with most students." Michelle echoed this sentiment when she shared this in the focus group:

> …we're talking about different students and different abilities – understanding that we're not going to generalize these students even though this is a level that they have. They are so much more than that, and they are an individual…Being able to know your students and being able to know where they're at and then being able to overcome whatever labels they may have on them to just better serve them.

Ava's meme description said, "Multiple diverse individual narratives, group perspectives, primary visuals, and other resources stack up to create the most complete image of history possible." Darren shared a story told by one of his professors about how a teacher from a city environment does not always understand what is happening if she chooses to teach in a rural environment. Fiona shared how during her student teaching she had learned the value of being aware of how her students are named and the value they place on the pronunciation of their names. During the focus group she supported her ideas that she shared in the interview by saying, "The biggest pieces of advice we got was to do your research. Make sure you learn about the culture so you can understand certain things they may do that are different." Both Matt and John stated that they were very aware that where they lived had not exposed them to many cultures. However, Matt said that people need to open themselves up to "different cultures, different ways of thinking, different norms," and John noted that his focus on history had helped him understand different cultural backgrounds. For Samuel, one of his classes warned him to be aware that not all cultures greet each other in the same way. He also shared a story that was given as an example of being aware of differences:

> There was a story I was told in one of my classes about how they were in American history for one of their classes and a student comes in and he's from another country. You know, he's doing really great in math and other classes, but this American history class is tripping him up. And, then they realize, 'Duh, this isn't his history. He doesn't know about it.' So, I think it's important that we meet the students where they're at and part of that is culture.

During the focus group session Tara and Mackenzie reiterated Samuel's last sentence almost exactly. Mackenzie mentioned in both the interview and the focus group how different cultures

view teachers. Some cultures value a teacher's professional opinion over another's, while other cultures value their own opinions above a teacher's.

Inclusivity

The concept of inclusion as it relates to including all students regardless of labels was prevalent in terms of creating a safe space by Matt, and a comfortable learning space by Tara and Michelle. Matt was enrolled in a seminar class on cultural diversity at the time of the interview and shared that the focus of that seminar was creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment. Tara's training had included a class named the Study of Exceptional Students where they talked about including students with all sorts of abilities, needs, and cultural backgrounds to create a comfortable classroom. Michelle mentioned the same course in her interview and talked about how she learned to give students a comfortable space for them to be themselves and talk about who they are.

For an inclusive environment to be attainable, three of the participants spoke about avoiding stereotypes. Nicholas spent several minutes during the interview and the focus group explaining the stereotypes that are present in a band classroom. Some of them he maintained are cultural and acceptable such as, "Asian and Indian populations are attracted to the woodwind family because the flute is a very common instrument in that part of the world, while brass is more commonly associated with Europe due to its origin, and African Americans due to Jazz." In a course entitled Schools, Curriculum, and Societies, Michelle said the focus was on not stereotyping someone based on their outward appearance. She made mention of this same concept in the focus group when she said, "…identifying the difference is putting away different things you might think about – stereotypes or biases or things you might have against that – and throwing those away because those are social constructs and understandings. I'm going to get to

know this person as an individual and not generalize things." Hilary's training also had included discussions about stereotyping. In the focus group she said,

> I know that we've talked about that [cultural awareness] in our classes too – just being aware culturally how you're viewed, how your students view you, and making sure to try to get to know your students' cultures but in a superficial way, if that makes sense. Having an understanding that not just this culture has X, Y, and Z but understanding how this influences your life.

Research Question Responses

The central research question for this study targeted how preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs. The three sub-questions focused on academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. Information from the interviews, the written portions of the memes, and focus groups led to the themes that were seen as a synthesis of the experiences of the participants (Saldana, 2016). The abstraction of their experiences provided an understanding (Patton, 2015) of their perceptions of their preparation to create and develop relationships with their future students.

Central Research Question

How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs? The participants of this study had been trained to develop relationships with their students by being relatable, being a supporter, and creating positive learning environments. In the first theme, relatability, the participants described ways that students could see their teachers as humans and be personable with their students. With the second theme, being a supporter, the preservice teachers explained how showing an interest in what students do both at school and outside of school can make a

positive impact. The third way the participants described their training was focused on how creating a positive learning environment is really important to teacher-student relationships. They had been trained to create comfortable spaces with solid foundations and clear boundaries.

Seven of the 12 participants stated that their training programs had not specifically focused on the topic of teacher-student relationships. For instance, during his interview John talked about establishing respect in the first weeks of school, but he did not have ideas about how he would do that. He explained in his interview and during the focus group that his training program focused on the science and data rather than the personal aspects of teaching. As an additional example, Ava said that she felt ill-equipped to deal with the interpersonal expectations of being a teacher.

Textural Description. Moustakas (1994) described the "construction of a complete textural description of the experience" as the "final challenge of Phenomenological Reduction" (p. 96). After considering the lived experiences of the participants of the current study, I formulated a composite description. The participants in this study, whether they were intentionally or unintentionally trained to create and develop relationships with their future students, all understood the importance of relationships with their future students. Additionally, they all had ideas of what they could do in their classrooms to foster these relationships. Every participant expressed how important relationships would be with their future students, and every participant had some ideas about how to develop those relationships.

While John, Ava, Matt, Samuel, Tara, and Darren said they had not been explicitly taught how to create relationships with their future students, each of them had ideas of how to do so. John spoke about creating a respectful environment during the first week of school. Ava talked about being interested in what students do on the weekends. Matt planned to be very personable

from the beginning of the school year by sharing stories about himself. Samuel shared that he would make lessons about the students. Tara talked about how she had been trained to be a good listener, and Darren shared many ideas about creating a place of trust in the classroom. These six participants may have not been intentionally trained according to the textual evidence, but they did understand the importance of teacher-student relationships and had been equipped by their training programs to establish those relationships.

The participants who said that they had been trained to create and develop relationships with students shared many ideas. Michelle and Celia focused on how relationships and respect complement each other in the classroom. Mackenzie and Fiona talked about being a cheerleader for their students and how this could impact relationships in the classroom. Hilary and Nicholas both talked about being approachable to their students as a way to not make a student feel intimidated but welcome to voice their ideas. With each of these six participants, it was clear that their training programs had prepared them to develop relationships with their students.

Structural Description. The next step in data analysis is Imaginative Variation, where the task is to "seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). While the participants did not all agree on how they had been trained to create and develop relationships with their students, they did all agree that relationships between teachers and student are extremely important for a successful classroom. Hilary said that relationships between teachers and students "can make a large impact on students' lives." Nicholas said one of his courses taught him that "The relationship comes first and then the learning comes as a result of that." Fiona said, "If you create a relationship, then they come to you." Michelle summarized the importance of relationships in this way: "…if you

don't have that [relationship with students], what's the point in those kids wanting to show up?" In every data set, it was clear that the participants had been taught that relationships are important in the classroom.

   Synthesis of Textural and Structural Descriptions. According to Moustakas (1994), the final step in the phenomenological research process "is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (p. 100). To answer the central research question, I arrived at a final synthesis. The 12 preservice teacher participants perceived that they are prepared to develop positive relationships with their students as a result of their training programs because all of them had been trained to care about their students. The term care was derived from the themes of relatability, supporter, and environment. It is only when teachers care about students that they can relate to them. It is only when teachers care about students that they are willing to support them. It is only when teachers care about students that they want to create a positive learning environment for them. The ultimate essence was that these participants had been trained to care for their students. Mackenzie mentioned putting her heart into her teaching and loving her students. And, while all of the participants did not use the word care, it was obvious that they were being trained to care about their future students.

Sub-Question One

   What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster academic fit? The focus of this sub-question addressed the perceptions of how the preservice teachers had been trained to be sure students academically fit into their classrooms. The first theme that emerged was that of relevancy. Ava talked about relevancy as helping students develop "context and skills to use in processing the world around them" in her

meme. For Michelle, relevancy meant that students and teachers "achieve a shared meaning."
Many of the participants had been trained to focus on the learning standards for their state.
However, Michelle, Tara, and Nicholas expressed how their subject areas were not represented
well in their state standards. Others commented on how state standards were the focus when they
planned lessons for classes. The use of state standards seemed relevant for some but not for all
the participants. In the final analysis for this theme, the training programs of these participants
had focused on making academics relevant to their students.

The second theme focused on how the training on the use of technology as an academic
resource was ambiguous. When the participants were asked about how they had been trained to
use technology as an academic tool in the classroom, the answers were varied. For example, John
and Matt, who both attended a university with technology in its name, had similar responses to
the use of technology. They both said that they had been trained to use technology as a
supplement. However, Celia and Mackenzie, who both attend LSSU, had different training on
the use of technology. Celia's training had focused on websites and interactive resources, while
Mackenzie said she remembered some training on apps, but the focus of her training was in the
accommodations area of the university. The five participants who attended GSU did not have the
same training on technology. Darren and Samuel said they had used technology but had not had
specific training yet. Hilary and Tara talked about a course on digital literacy. Michelle
mentioned a course on the current trends and apps that were being used in classrooms. The
training of these participants had not consistently taught them how to use technology to help
students fit academically in their classrooms.

The third theme, differentiation, was a subject that had been taught to the participants in
their programs. Ava's training had focused on UDL which allows students to express their

knowledge in many different ways. The participants from GSU who had taken the course called Exceptional Students mentioned how that course focused on reaching the lowest and highest students in their future classrooms. Nicholas had been trained to understand that students learn in different ways. Mackenzie and Celia both talked about how their future classrooms will be focused on individual progress and goals. Matt and John had both had training about offering choices and fresh approaches to their lessons. Throughout the data collection process, it was clear that these participants had been trained to differentiate instruction to help students fit academically in their classrooms.

Sub-Question Two

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster social fit? Sub-question two focused on how these preservice teachers perceived their readiness to foster social fit in their classrooms. The first theme that emerged during the analysis was how these participants had been trained to focus on the physical environment of the classroom. Matt talked about removing the use of phones during class and how this physical change during his student teaching impacted the social environment of the classroom. Darren noted how important it is for students to feel safe in their classrooms. When students are able to feel safe, they are more ready to learn, according to Darren's training. Samuel said his training had shared some research supporting the importance of windows in classrooms. He had been taught that the physical aspect of being able to see outside made a positive impact on the social interactions in the classroom. Michelle discussed how she had been trained to really consider what posters were placed on the walls as this impacts the learning environment. The participants had been trained to consider how the physical classroom impacts the social fit of their students.

The second theme that emerged as an answer to sub-question two was the emotional aspect of the classroom. Ava, Nicholas, Samuel, and Darren all talked about the importance of making connections with their students. Ava, Celia, and Mackenzie said their training had focused on creating an inclusive environment where all students feel like they socially fit in the classroom. Michelle, Ava, Hilary, and Darren said they had been trained to have mutual respect as a central focus in their classrooms. For this theme, the participants had been trained to create positive emotional environments for students to feel like they socially fit in the classroom.

While many of the participants had training on how to use the physical and emotional settings to help students socially fit in their classrooms, one theme was not taught clearly. Six of the participants plainly stated that their training had not focused on the teacher's role in fostering peer relationships in the classroom; however, each mentioned ways to foster these relationships. Mackenzie said she did not recall receiving training on peer relationships, but her data was replete with stories of how she had been creating peer relationships during her student teaching. As an example, she shared a story about helping one of her students find friends on the playground. Darren also noted he had had no training on creating peer relationships but then shared a touching story about how his students were his "minions" who form a bond that then caused them to stand up for one another outside of the classroom. Tara said she had not been trained but later said that student collaboration had been a focus in one of her classes. Matt said that peer relationships just happen naturally but also mentioned collaboration and the development of interpersonal relationships. Hilary said that she had not been specifically trained but mentioned a few ideas regarding group work and small discussions that her courses had taught her. Fiona said she had no official training on peer relationships and then said that one of her classes mentioned how to group students together. The participants whose responses

represented this theme also had responses that refuted this theme. The final analysis is that even though some of the participants were not intentionally taught how to develop peer relationships in order to foster social fit in their classrooms, their training programs had equipped them with some ideas of how to do so.

Sub-Question Three

What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster cultural fit? The third sub-question sought to understand the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding how their training had prepared them to help foster cultural fit in their classrooms. Two themes emerged from the data: awareness and inclusivity. During teacher training, cultural awareness had been taught to all participants in some way. Fiona shared a story about her supervising teacher making her think about what the students' names meant based on their cultural background. That situation caused Fiona to think more deeply about being aware of her students' cultures. In the focus groups, Mackenzie, Darren, Celia, Samuel, Nicholas, Michelle, Tara, Fiona, and Matt all talked about how their training programs had focused on making them aware of the differences that students may have in their classrooms. These differences may be cultural, socioeconomic, or academic. They had been taught to expect these differences and to accept students for who they are and what they have to offer as individuals.

The second theme from sub-question three, inclusivity, was closely related to the theme of awareness, but had a slightly different approach. Celia had the point of view of a special educator when she said, "I just want the whole feel of the classroom to be inclusive because we are a special education classroom. That's about as inclusive as you can get. It's the most important factor." Mackenzie, also a special education major, talked about inclusivity by helping regular education students understand that special education students have the potential to be

really good friends. Fiona took the idea of inclusion to yet another place when she described how her training had taught her to avoid biases towards people who may not make the same life choices as she would. Her example was about how even if a teacher is not gay and does not believe that being gay is acceptable, teachers need to accept the student as the student is. Michelle, Hilary, and Nicholas focused on stereotypes. Michelle mentioned a class entitled Schools, Curriculum, and Societies and said that she was taught to not generalize others but accept and include all types of people. Hilary expressed the same idea in the focus group: "Having an understanding that not just this culture has X, Y, and Z but understanding how this influences" the lives of students. The preservice teachers in this study had been trained to help students culturally fit in classrooms with awareness and inclusivity.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the interviews, memes, and focus groups that were conducted to answer the central research question: "How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training programs?" The answers to three sub-questions were sought as well: "What are preservice teachers' perceptions of how teacher-student relationships foster academic fit?" "What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of how teacher-student relationships foster social fit?" "What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of how teacher-student relationships foster cultural fit?" Twelve preservice teachers participated in the three types of data collection methods and common themes emerged after coding was performed.

For the category of teacher-student relationships, four themes were found: relatability, understood but not explicitly taught, supporter, and environment. The responses from the participants revealed that teachers need to be able to relate to students in various ways, such as

knowing what students are doing outside of school. The research showed that relationships between teachers and students are considered understood and not necessarily taught at more than one institution. Being a supporter of students in their academic pursuits was found as a way of building relationships between teachers and students. The participants also said that the classroom environment plays a role in relationships.

In the category of academic fit, three themes were found: relevancy, technology use variance, and differentiation. The participants shared how their training had focused on making content relevant for some while other participants did not find using state standards as relevant to their classrooms. The focus on using technology in the classroom to help students relate to the curriculum was not the same for all participants. Some training programs promoted the use of technology while others discounted its effect. The final theme for this category, differentiation, was shared by almost all of the participants. Many of the preservice teachers had been trained to meet students where they are and offer different assignments to show learning.

Social fit was the topic of the second sub-question. The three themes that became apparent for social fit were classroom physical environment, classroom emotional environment, and lack of peer relationship training. According to some of the participants, their training had included suggestions that the physical environment plays a role in a successful classroom. Nine of the 12 participants spoke about how their training had focused on the importance of the emotional environment of a classroom. Training on creating and fostering peer relationships was a concept that was not explicitly experienced by all participants.

The final category was cultural fit. Two themes emerged for this category: awareness and inclusivity. The participants mentioned that they had been trained to be open and accepting of others through awareness of various factors, such as cultural backgrounds and disabilities. The

participants had also been trained to promote an inclusive environment where stereotypes are not accepted but inclusivity is.

This chapter provided thorough details of the findings. The themes that emerged were from the rich data collected from 12 preservice teachers through interviews, memes, and focus groups. The goal was to identify how the participants perceived their readiness to build and maintain relationships with their students. The next chapter will present a discussion and a conclusion of the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of 12 preservice teachers regarding how their respective training programs had prepared them to create and build relationships with their future students. Research studies have shown the positive impact relationships between teachers and students can have (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Research has also shown that teacher training programs are effective because what preservice teachers learn prior to entering the classroom impacts the choices they make once they have classrooms of their own (Cooper et al., 2018). The goal of the current study was to understand the perceptions of 12 preservice teachers regarding how they had been prepared to create and build relationships with their future students.

This chapter will summarize the findings, succinctly discuss the findings as they relate to the empirical and theoretical literature, and address the implications of the study. It will then focus on the delimitations and limitations, along with recommendations for future research. A final summary will encapsulate the entire study.

Summary of Findings

The central research question was "How do preservice teachers perceive their readiness to develop positive relationships with their students as developed during their training program?" Some of the participant data revealed that their training had focused on them being able to relate to their students in a variety of ways, including asking students about their weekends. Other participant data showed that not every training program intentionally focused on preparing future teachers to have positive relationships with their students. Many of the participants felt that their role was to be a supporter and a cheerleader for their students. The final theme that related to the

central research question was how many of these preservice teachers had been trained to make the environment a place where students felt a sense of belonging.

The first sub-question was "What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster academic fit?" After multiple iterations of coding, three themes emerged. The first theme was relevancy. Many of the preservice teachers had been trained to make their curriculum choices relevant to their students. Several of them talked about how their training encouraged them to find activities that included student interests. The use of technology was not a consistently taught element of the training of these 12 participants and served as another theme. Some had training on how to use specific apps while others were encouraged to use technology as a supplement. A third theme regarding academic fit was differentiation. Participants mentioned using differentiated instruction and options for assessments. One participant specifically identified the instruction she had received regarding use of the UDL framework.

The second sub-question for this research study was "What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster academic fit?" As the data were analyzed, three themes emerged: classroom physical environment, classroom emotional environment, and a lack of training on peer relationships. For classroom physical environment, a few of the participants talked about how they had been trained to think about student desk placement and what they would choose for the classroom walls. The participants who talked about the training they received regarding how to create a positive emotional environment mentioned words like comfortable, inclusion, and collaboration. The majority of participants acknowledged that they had received little to no intentional instruction on how to foster peer relationships in the classroom.

The third sub-question for this study was "What are the preservice teachers' perceptions of their readiness to use teacher-student relationships to foster cultural fit?" During data analysis, the themes that were found were awareness and inclusivity. The participants spoke about awareness as understanding the cultures and backgrounds of students in their classrooms. Most of the participants said that this had been part of their teacher training programs. The concept of inclusivity focused not only on special education students but also on understanding that every student needs to be included not based on stereotypes. The majority of the participants said that their training programs had focused to some extent on this topic.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to identify preservice teachers' perceptions of how their training programs had prepared them to establish teacher-student relationships. In this section, the findings of the study will be related to the theoretical and empirical information that was found during the literature review. An explanation of how the findings developed the current theories and literature will be discussed.

Theoretical Literature

One of the theories that provided a framework for this study was Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This theory suggests that a person's ultimate goal is to reach self-actualization through meeting a specific set of needs (Maslow, 1943). One of these needs is a sense of belonging which is very important during adolescence. Maslow wrote, "He will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal" (p. 381). Secondary school students rely on finding a sense of belonging for achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Stroet et al., 2013). The participants of this study were studying to become classroom teachers in the secondary setting. This study focused on how

these preservice teachers had been trained to foster a sense of belonging, which is a step to self-actualization in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The majority of the participants had been taught how to develop a sense of belonging in their classrooms. The idea of inclusion along with creating a comfortable and safe place to learn were concepts taught during their respective teacher training programs that focused on creating a sense of belonging. Michelle mentioned that she had been trained to not judge students who do not have the same beliefs as she had and to focus on creating a space for students to be themselves. Fiona talked about accepting all students in her classroom. Two other tools these participants were taught to use to create a sense of belonging were showing interest in students' lives and making the academics relevant. Darren said that he had been taught to understand the students' lives beyond the classroom and be able to "use that information to connect the students to the lesson." Matt said that teachers "have to try to come up with ways to reach them – every student" in his interview. How to create a sense of belonging was a focus of many of the respective training programs; however, two of the participants expressed that their teacher training did not really focus on creating a sense of belonging.

The second theory that guided this research was self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci's (2017) self-determination theory states that close relationships are a part of motivation: "Because close relationships have so consistently yielded significant adaptive benefits to individuals, [people] have evolved to be intrinsically motivated to seek out and maintain close, open, trusting relationships with others" (p. 294). When students find motivation from the people and things in their environments, they are more likely to succeed.

To motivate their students, these participants had been trained to build a foundation for positive relationships during the first weeks of school and to continue that for the school year.

Matt talked about how he wanted students to understand he was a person and not a "robot or zombie up there" in the first week of school. He had been trained to share personal stories at the beginning to create connections with his students. Many of the participants spoke about establishing respect from the very first day and maintaining that throughout the year. Celia summarized this idea when she said, "I just think everyone can learn better if there isn't any weird tension between the teacher, or if the kid doesn't like the teacher." In Michelle's meme, she described how a teacher's job includes finding a shared meaning as a part of motivation: "When our brains interpret the context of a topic and see through the noise in order to uncover the shared meaning, learning takes place. A teacher's job is to find a way to connect to their students in order to have each party achieve a shared meaning." The participants had been trained to use their relationships with their students to motivate the students to be active members in the classroom.

The final theory bolstering this study was stage-environment fit theory. Stage-environment fit theory stresses the importance of considering developmental stages in conjunction with a person's environment to find the best fit possible (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Secondary school students have specific developmental needs that must be considered alongside the environment and academic choices in a classroom. Eccles et al. (1993) "produced evidence of the negative effects of the decrease in personal and positive relationships with teachers after the transition to junior high school and have argued that this decline is especially problematic during early adolescence when children are in special need of close relationships with adults outside of their homes" (p. 98). Students at this age are looking for role models and for people beyond their families to influence the choices they make. Schools become places where students find their individual identities and depend on others to shape that identity.

The participants spoke about many ideas related to making their classrooms fit their students and respond to this stage of development.

Several talked about setting boundaries between friendship and being a teacher. During a focus group, John said it well when he said, "So, to me, the most important thing is keeping a professional relationship while also modeling what is appropriate." The participants had been trained to find the line between being a teacher and a friend to their students. Many participants also said they had been trained to be good listeners and cheerleaders for their students while being taught to avoid becoming too involved in the personal decisions of their students. Mackenzie shared a story about a mentor teacher who had built such a strong bond with a particular student that the teacher became the one to help the student through difficult times at school. She found this "interesting" and saw how important relationships are to students through that experience. Matt's meme spoke to the idea of teachers supporting their students. In his depiction of the game Uno where a teacher chose to draw 25 cards, he wrote, "By taking the option to 'draw 25' [teachers] are putting it on themselves to make meaningful connections every day and not just give up on a student who struggles or harder to reach. Every teacher should take on the challenge rather than give up on students." The participants also talked about how simply making connections and creating a respectful, trusting environment is very important for secondary school students. Darren went as far as to call himself a mentor and explained how teachers are often the only positive role model in students' lives in the area where he had had experience in schools. Through the development of relationships with their students, the majority of the preservice teachers had been given ideas to help the classroom environment fit the emotional and academic needs of their students.

Empirical Literature

The research on teacher-student relationships is abundant (Allen et al., 2018; Booker, 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Chase et al., 2014; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). From these studies, four categories emerged that aligned stage-environment fit theory with the recent research: teacher-student relationships in general, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. These four categories became the research questions for the current study. They served as the framework for the data collection and will serve as the outline for the following discussion.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Research supports the importance of teacher-student relationships (see Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Students in secondary schools have specific needs that can only be understood and then met through relationships with their teachers (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). All the preservice teachers who participated in this study stated the importance of relationships. They used phrases such as "so very important," "make all the difference in the world," and "good foundation." While some of the participants said that what they understood about relationships between teachers and students came from life lessons, all shared situations during their coursework where they were either explicitly taught about creating relationships with their students or were exposed to modeling behaviors that would develop those relationships.

Hascher's and Hager's (2010) findings showed that with every succeeding year in middle school and high school, students become more and more disconnected. When teachers respect the talents of individuals and ensure that the curriculum meets their academic, social, and cultural needs, students respond in a positive way and find motivation to engage in their

education (Chase et al., 2014; O'Malley et al., 2015). Overall, the concept of creating relationships was confirmed as a topic that was taught in the five teacher training programs represented by the 12 participants, and research supports the importance of creating relationships as a topic in teacher training programs.

Academic Fit

Academic fit, which was a key concept that guided this research, is based on research regarding how the learning environment and activities in schools should be appropriate for adolescents (Freeman et al., 2017; Haugen et al., 2019). Studies by Kiefer et al. (2014) and Parkay et al. (2014) revealed that students want academics to be relevant and authentic. The future teachers in the current study talked about how making choices for their classrooms that would allow "everybody [to] apply [these choices] to their outside lives and experiences," and "be able to connect with the student and be able to connect the student to the lesson." Seven of the participants mentioned a type of relevancy in their responses. Many also mentioned authentic learning as it relates to state standards. The future teachers of band, Spanish, and communications shared how they really do not have state standards to follow while their training programs force them to use them in every lesson plan. Others talked about how they use the state standards as a guide but then must find a way to make the standards relevant to their classroom. A disconnect between the requirements to adhere to specific state academic standards was apparent for many of the participants. They understood the role the standards had to play but questioned the authenticity within the actual implementation.

In the literature, another aspect of academic fit was the use of appropriate assessments (Keyes, 2019; Smith et. al., 2016). When students are given a variety of ways to show their understanding of a topic, they are more motivated to produce (Parkay et al., 2014). When the

participants spoke about assessments, some resorted to talking about formative and summative assessments while others talked about differentiation. One made reference to her program's focus on the UDL framework, which makes use of choices for students. Two participants repeatedly mentioned how their programs were focused on collecting data and the importance of at least one formative assessment each day. The participant who will be teaching band talked about how grading should be based upon personal progress rather than an arbitrary scale. It was obvious that the teacher training programs represented by the 12 participants had focused on assessment, but the programs focused on assessment in different ways.

Because students are surrounded by technology, the literature revealed that a final aspect of academic fit was based on how technology is used in the classroom. The research showed that technology has the ability to link what students are doing on their own time with what they are doing in the classroom (Freeman et al., 2017; Hoffman & Ramirez, 2018; Hutchison & Woodward, 2014; ISTE, 2020; Moran, 2018; Parkay et al., 2014; Shaffer, 2016). The participants did not have similar training on technology use in the classroom, even at the same universities. Two of the participants attended a university with technology in its name, and they both reported that they were taught to use it as a supplement rather than a principal method of instruction. The participants who attend GSU did not uniformly agree on what they had been taught. Two mentioned a class that required them to use apps in their coursework while others mentioned a course about digital literacy. One participant shared that her program not only focused on applications that were current and useful but also provided an experience where they could see the technology available for students with learning disabilities. Another participant, Ava, explained how her professors did not all agree about the use of technology in the classroom as some said it was helpful while others said it was a distraction. Tara, who attends GSU, said,

"Frankly, I don't know how helpful [training on specific technology tools] would be because in two years, I doubt it's going to be the same tools." The data revealed a wide range of preparations for the use of technology as it relates to academic fit in the classroom. The wide range of preparations suggests that the writings of Darling-Hammond (2005, 2010, 2013, 2020) and Freeman et al. (2014) are correct, in that teacher training programs are not training in the same ways. In the current study, the data collected about the use of technology in the classroom supported these researchers' conclusions.

Social Fit

Studies by Allen et al. (2018), Bouchard and Berg (2017), Ellerbrock et al. (2014), and Green et al. (2016) showed the impact of social fit on students in secondary schools. In these studies social fit encompassed the relationships between teachers and students and also the relationships among students. The result of positive relationships with teachers and peers creates a sense of belonging that then impacts the ability to learn (Faust et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). All of the participants in the current study had been taught ways to create relationships with their students; however, half of the participants mentioned they had no training regarding how to create and maintain relationships among students.

The participants talked about social fit by way of discussing the physical classroom and the emotional classroom. For the physical classroom, two participants from GSU shared ideas about student desk placement and how windows impact how students feel in a space. In a study conducted by Keyes (2019), the students mentioned the importance of desk placement as well. Four other participants spoke about creating a comfortable physical and emotional environment so that students feel welcome and want to be in the space. These discussions led to specific ideas that would work to create an emotionally appropriate classroom. Research by Allen et al. (2017)

suggested that when students feel like they belong in a space, they are more motivated. The participants shared classroom management tools they had learned about in their coursework. These strategies would make decisions seem fair to all students and would also connect social activities outside of class to what is happening in the classroom (Marzano, 2007; Smith et al., 2016). All 12 participants had been trained on some level in how to prepare their classrooms to meet the social needs of their students.

This was not the case with the concept of peer relationships. The interactions among students play a significant role in their sense of belonging, which impacts their success in school (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Faust et al., 2016; Green et al., 2016; Haugen et al., 2019). Six of the participants blatantly said that their training had not directly mentioned how teachers are to intentionally help develop peer relationships. One participant said, "That's just stuff that I feel like happens naturally." Several participants mentioned how their teacher training professors talked about group work and collaboration, but they did not tie that to how it could promote peer relationships. The overall essence from these participants was that peer relationships was not something that was intentionally taught in the five teacher training programs they represented. Research by Bouchard and Berg (2017) and Ellerbrock et al. (2014) showed the significance of teachers supporting peer relationships to create a more productive classroom.

Cultural Fit

America's classrooms are filled with students from a variety of backgrounds and circumstances. Research by Haugen et al. (2019) and Suarez-Orozco (2017) showed how important it is for teachers to understand the backgrounds of all their students in order to foster belonging and motivation. To understand their backgrounds, teachers need to have relationships

with their students so that students are comfortable sharing their experiences. In the current research study, the concepts of awareness and inclusivity were consistently mentioned by the participants. Ten of the participants shared how their teacher training programs taught them to be aware of differences but to not allow differences to be a blockade to academic or social success. Fisher and Frey (2019) wrote that schools should be places where a common culture is created by teachers. The participants in this study had been trained to do that in several ways. Tara said that differences should be celebrated. Fiona talked about being aware of the importance that cultures place on names. She said that understanding that had helped her relate to her students more in her student teaching assignment. John mentioned that his training had taught him to consider the demographics of the schools where he was applying to teach. Nicholas spoke about understanding how different cultures view musical instruments. The participants had been trained to accept the students for who they are and make all students feel welcome but in different ways.

The idea of inclusion was also prevalent among the participants. While the two participants who are going to teach in special education classrooms described inclusivity differently from the rest, the premise was the same: regardless of the outward appearance, these participants had been trained to get to know students for who they are. Eager (2019) wrote about how classrooms are an intersection where teachers and students have an opportunity to acknowledge, accept, and seek to understand the backgrounds of those who are in that classroom with them. These preservice teachers had been trained to create this opportunity. Whether the participants talked about avoiding stereotypes or creating a comfortable space for everyone, it was obvious that their teacher training programs had prepared them to create environments of acceptance and belonging, regardless of backgrounds.

Implications

Teacher education programs have been under scrutiny recently for a lack of consistency and focus on research-based practices (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Research has shown the importance of relationships for academic and social successes in schools (Allen et al., 2018; Kiefer et al., 2014; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Research linking these two topics was not found when the literature review was conducted. This research study sought to identify the perceptions of 12 preservice teachers regarding how their teacher training programs intentionally prepared them to create and develop relationships with their students. This section will focus on the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for all who are involved in education but especially for university teacher training programs. Teacher training programs are the beginnings of educational success for students, parents, teachers, schools, and society.

Theoretical Implications

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-determination theory as it relates to a sense of belonging, and stage-environment fit theory all served as theories supporting this study. Maslow's hierarchy of needs and self-determination theory provided the idea of sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The preservice teachers who participated in this study had been trained to understand the importance of a sense of belonging in the classroom for the most part. They mentioned the importance of creating connections with students by asking about their weekends or attending activities in which students participate outside of school. To help students have a sense of belonging in the area of academics, the participants had been trained to make their assignments relevant to student interests and include differentiation to allow students to express who they are. Many of the participants talked about having a

connection with their students that would help them feel a sense of belonging. These preservice

teachers also shared the importance of acceptance of all types of students in their classrooms.

They all understood the importance for students to feel a sense of belonging; however, some of

the participants noted that their training did not intentionally focus on creating a sense of

belonging. One participant even stated that he wished his program had given him more tools to

use in an actual classroom. While these statements were made by half of the participants, the data

supported the opposite. Even though they did not recollect specific training on creating a sense of

belonging, they shared ideas about how to do so in their data sets.

The third theory that bolstered this study was stage-environment fit theory. This theory

states that the environment needs to fit the person in order to achieve maximum potential (Eccles

& Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). The needs of secondary students are different from those

of elementary students, and the participants had been trained to create learning environments that

would meet the needs of their secondary students. They talked about their classrooms being

places filled with trust and connections. They expressed how they want to be relatable to their

students, which is crucial for adolescents as this age group is seeking adults outside their families

who can serve as mentors and guides (Eccles et al., 1993). The participants shared training

experiences that encouraged them to make learning relevant.

Empirical Implications

Teacher-student relationships have been shown to be beneficial to the academic setting

(Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Green et al., 2016; Kiefer et al., 2014; Smith et

al., 2016). This study showed that the participants had been taught through various ways the

importance of the relationships they will have with their students. They had been trained to be

relatable, to seek understanding rather than basic knowledge, and to be a supporter. The literature

review highlighted the importance of academic fit. Students need to feel that the activities they are doing in the classroom relate to them (Freeman et al., 2017; Haugen et al., 2019). The participants had been trained to provide relevant learning opportunities but were confused by the enforcement of state standards and the appropriate use of technology. The idea of social fit was also highlighted in the review of literature. Students who feel that they socially fit in their classrooms are more likely to be successful (Haugen et al., 2019; J-F et al., 2018). The participants in this study had been given many tools to prepare the social aspect of their classrooms for success by creating a physical and emotional environment that supports learning. However, many of them lamented that their training lacked a focus on peer relationships. The final category that became apparent in the literature review was cultural fit. Students need to feel that their backgrounds and true selves are welcome and accepted in a classroom environment (Haugen et al., 2019; Suarez-Orozco, 2017). Teachers should be ready and able to promote awareness and acceptance. All the participants in this study had been trained to be aware of the cultural differences that may be present in their future classrooms in different ways. They were taught to view students as individuals and to create an inclusive environment.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this study are relevant to students, teachers, parents, schools, and society; however, this study was mainly focused on teacher training programs. Teacher training programs bear the majority of the responsibility to equip future teachers, providing American schools with highly skilled teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2010). If teachers are trained to follow the research that points to relationships being the most important factor in an educational setting (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Marzano, 2007; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et

al., 2016), classrooms could become places full of authentic learning rather than focused on completing assignments or discipline zones (Greenberg et al., 2014).

The intentional focus on relationships in teacher training programs would be combining two sets of researched data. One set of research has shown how what is used in teacher training programs prior to entry into a classroom truly impacts the choices that the new teachers make (Boyd et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2018; Dicke et al, 2015; Powers & Nucci, 2017; Suppa et al., 2018). The other set of data shows the positive impact that teacher-student relationships can have on classrooms (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Marzano, 2007; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al., 2016). This research study fused these two ideas and found that the 12 participants had been taught how to create relationships with their students, but many of them did not express that the training had been intentional. The training had been sprinkled throughout their programs and lacked clarity. Teacher training programs should consider making teacher-student relationships an intentional focus.

Delimitations and Limitations

This transcendental phenomenological study had a delimitation. The delimitation was that I searched for participants who were either in the student teaching phase of their training programs or more than two semesters into their training programs. This decision was made so that the participants were far enough into their training programs to be able to add rich data to the research topic. If participants had been in the very early stages of their training programs, they would not likely have had the ability to answer the questions. Because the participants were farther along in their training, they were able to use examples from their coursework and their classroom experiences to answer the questions.

This study also had limitations. One limitation was that the study involved the use of snowball sampling. The participants were found based on personal connections and could not be controlled. The participants were not evenly placed from the various universities or evenly placed in student teaching or coursework sections of their training. Five students were from one university, and all were still enrolled in coursework. The other seven had completed their coursework and were from five different universities. Those seven participants were in the student teaching phase of their teacher training. The participants who were in the student teaching phase were more focused on what was happening in their respective classrooms than on what their coursework had included. If all participants had been in the student teaching phase or all the participants had been in the coursework phase, the findings may have been different. The decision to use participants from both categories was made to ensure a richness of data.

Another limitation to this study was that it only included 12 participants from five universities. This is a small number compared to the number of people in teacher training programs and the number of universities with teacher training programs. Because of this, the generalizability of this study is limited, although five different universities from three different states provided a rich data set. The third limitation was the participants' ability to remember minute details about what they had learned during their coursework. Because the questions focused on the full experiences of the participants over at least four semesters of education, the participants may have not remembered specific concepts that were discussed or taught. A final limitation was that all the participants had obviously attended schools as students. Their perceptions and examples often intertwined their personal experiences during their own secondary schooling with what was taught in their teacher training programs. While I diligently tried to separate these two and emphasized the importance of the participants sharing only what

they were taught during their teacher training programs, the separation was a difficult one for many of the participants. The demographics of the participants may have also impacted the findings. Five of the 12 participants were male and 10 were White. Because I used snowball sampling, I did not have control over the demographics of the participants. If this had been controlled in some way, the results may have changed.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this study's findings, delimitations, and limitations, recommendations for future research are focused on teacher preparation programs. The first recommendation is for additional studies that follow the same procedures in this study but using different universities. This study had only 12 participants from six universities. To better inform teacher training programs, additional studies with participants from other universities may provide a better picture of what is happening in teacher training programs. With this knowledge, it may become apparent that a course intentionally focused on teacher-student relationships needs to be implemented in all university teacher training programs.

Another future research study may explicitly focus on student teachers rather than those who are still enrolled in coursework or vice-versa. Because this study mixed the two levels, a better set of data may be available if one group of participants was used rather than both. A study that included the same number of participants for each scenario may also be better.

A third research idea would be to implement a course in a teacher training program that focuses on teacher-student relationships. The research could then follow those participants for at least one year after they entered the classroom to see which practices they implemented and whether or not the concept benefited their classroom environments. This could be compared to data from a group that did not have a course on teacher-student relationships.

A fourth research idea would include examining the coursework of teacher training programs from a large number of universities. An analysis of what is being taught in the curriculum would provide an understanding of whether or not the research-supported teacher-student relationships is a significant factor in the written curriculum of training programs. This would help guide teacher training programs to add coursework that intentionally focuses on teacher-student relationships.

Lastly, a study conducted using quantitative measures may be able to provide a larger set of data than what a qualitative study necessarily allows. A survey could be used and sent to thousands of teacher training programs that would reach a significant number of preservice teachers in a way that a qualitative design cannot. This could reach a larger audience in a short amount of time to then impact decisions in teacher training programs.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify preservice teachers' perceptions of how their training programs prepared them to establish teacher-student relationships. After a thorough literature review, four significant guiding factors were used in the data collection: teacher-student relationships in general, academic fit, social fit, and cultural fit. Through interviews, the written portion of a meme assignment, and two focus group sessions, a triangulation of data was achieved for 12 participants. After multiple iterations of coding, 54 patterns were found that resulted in 12 themes. The overall essence is that the 12 participants had been trained to care about their future students. While most explained how their teacher training programs intentionally trained them in some respects, others described how their experiences had been lacking. Not a single participant had a class that was singularly focused on preparing these future teachers to create and develop relationships with their students, which is exactly what research

has shown is the most impactful tool a teacher can have in the classroom. Teacher training programs need to take a look at what tools they are intentionally giving their future teachers to develop teacher-student relationships. If teachers were to enter classrooms with the tools needed to create and develop relationships with their students, classrooms could focus more on learning rather than discipline, schools could change into places where students feel secure and ready to try new ways of thinking, and communities could change into more caring and supportive environments. Relationships matter in life and especially in classrooms.

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APPENDIX A: LU IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 12, 2021

Tammy Craddock
Sarah Pannone

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-177 The Perception of Preservice Teachers about Teacher-Student Relationships: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Tammy Craddock, Sarah Pannone:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46: 101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B: Volunteer Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

The Perceptions of Preservice Teachers about Teacher-Student Relationships: A Phenomenological Study

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Are you in the student-teaching phase or about to enter the student-teaching phase of your degree completion?
- Do you plan to teach on the secondary level?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a research study.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding how prepared they feel to create and develop appropriate relationships with their students. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview, create a meme, and participate in a focus group.

Participants will also receive a $15 dollar Amazon gift card.

The study is being conducted using Zoom. A link and password will be sent through email along with a consent document upon contact with the researcher.

Tammy Craddock, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study. **If you would like to participate, please contact Tammy Craddock at xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu for more information. Or, if you know someone who might be eligible to participate, please share this information with them. Thank you.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

APPENDIX C: Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: The Perceptions of Preservice Teachers about Teacher-Student Relationships: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Tammy Craddock, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age and a preservice teacher who intends to teach in a secondary school. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore the views of preservice teachers who are about to enter classrooms with regards to the relationships they will have with their future students. Research supports the importance of relationships, and this study explores what your perception of your preparation has been to create and nurture relationships with your future students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an interview that will last about 30-45 minutes. The interview will cover how your training has prepared you to create relationships with your students. The interview will take place at time and in a format (either in person or using Zoom) that works better for you. The interview will be audio recorded. You will have the opportunity to view the transcription and analysis of your interview.
2. Create and describe a meme that will take 15-30 minutes. You will be asked to create a meme that represents your perception of teacher-student relationships. You will then describe the choices you made for your meme using a paragraph or bullet points. Clear instructions will be given following the interview. You will have three days to complete the meme. You will have the opportunity to view the analysis of your meme.
3. Participate in a focus group that will last 30-45 minutes. The focus group will bring together other participants from your university and other universities using Zoom to further discuss the topic of teacher-student relationships. The focus group will be video recorded. You will have the opportunity to view the transcription of your focus group session.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms for the participants and their respective universities.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive a $15 gift card to Amazon upon completion of the interview via email.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your respective university. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Tammy Craddock. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Pannone, at xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

Opening Questions

1.   Thank you for joining me today. Please tell me a little about yourself – where you grew

up and what caused you to pursue a degree in education.

2.   Describe your overall experience in [insert university's name] education department.

3.   That was great. Thank you sharing. Now, please walk me through what you plan to do

after you graduate from [insert university's name] with your degree in education.

Questions Related to Academic Fit

4.   Please describe the first week of school in your classroom.

5.   How have you been trained to be sure students feel like they belong from an academic

standpoint?

6.   If a student does not feel challenged by an activity that you have selected, what have you

been trained to do?

7.   If a student decides that completing assignments is just not for them, what has your

teacher training program taught you to do about that?

8.   How has your training program prepared you to use your relationships with your students

to ensure that the curriculum decisions you make truly fit the academic needs of your

students?

9.   What has your teacher training taught you to do with regards to technology in your

classroom?

10.   If a student says, "This is boring," how will you react?

11.   If a student says, "This is too easy," what will you do?

Questions Related to Social Fit

12. Think back to when you were in middle school and high school. What would you say were your top five priorities?

13. With those in mind, what do you think is the most important factor for a learning environment?

14. How have you been trained to create relationships with your students?

15. How do you plan to help students feel a sense of belonging in your classroom?

16. Describe the role you have been prepared to play when navigating through peer relationships in your classroom.

17. What are some ways your training program has prepared you to build relationships among your students?

Questions Related to Cultural Fit

18. Students come from a variety of backgrounds into a single classroom. What are your plans to be sure that every person with every background feels like they belong in your classroom?

19. What has your teacher training program taught you that will help you create a sense of belonging for all students?

20. When discussions arise from the curriculum about equality issues, how prepared do you feel to navigate through those?

21. What central values do you think are important for a classroom?

22. How has your teacher training program prepared you to focus on common values?

Closing Questions

23.   What overall impact do you think, positive, supportive relationships between you and

        your students will have?

24.   In what ways have your education studies prepared you to create relationships with your

        students?

25.   You have done a great job answering all of my questions, but I have one more: Do you

        have anything more you would like to say regarding what you have shared during this

        interview?

APPENDIX E: Thank-you Note Template

Dear (name of participant),

Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and thoughts with me today. I realize that time is extremely valuable, and I appreciate your willingness to give some of that to me. When I began my journey in this doctoral program, the part I looked forward to the most was the interviews. You helped make that possible. Thank you.

Enclosed is a small token of my appreciation. I wish you all the best as you continue on your journey in the wonderful world of education.

Sincerely,

(signature) Tammy

P.S. I can't wait to see the meme you create!

APPENDIX F: Meme
(Projective Technique)

Please do me one more favor. Before the focus group session, please create a meme that represents your unique perspective on teacher-student relationships. This will help add a dimension to my research study that I would greatly appreciate.

For the meme, you may draw something or use a digital image. That is up to you. Below the meme, using a paragraph, sentences, or bullet points, explain what you chose and describe how it depicts your concept of relationships between teachers and students.

Thank you!!!

Email the meme and explanation to tcraddock1@liberty.edu.

No pressure, but I can't wait to see what you create!

APPENDIX G: Focus Group Questions

*Open-Ended Focus Group Questions*

Questions

1. Briefly describe your experience during your teacher training program for everyone.

2. How do you feel about relationships with your students?

3. During your teacher training program, describe what you were taught about creating and nurturing relationships with your students.

4. Describe the tools you have acquired during teacher training that will allow you to create and nurture relationships with your future students.

5. Explain how you have been prepared to help students academically fit in your classroom.

6. Explain how you have been prepared to help students socially fit in your classroom.

7. Explain how you have been prepared to help students fit culturally in your classroom.

8. What has been the single lesson you have learned during your teacher training program that has had the greatest impact on you as a future teacher?

APPENDIX H: Ava's Meme

In this image of Shrek and Donkey from *Shrek,* Donkey listens to Shrek passionately describe the similarities between himself and onions. While the onion is made of many physical layers, Shrek is metaphorically composed of layers of experience, skills, personality traits, goals, fears, etc. History is also metaphorically like an onion. Multiple diverse individual narratives, group perspectives, primary visuals, and other resources stack up to create the most complete image of history possible.
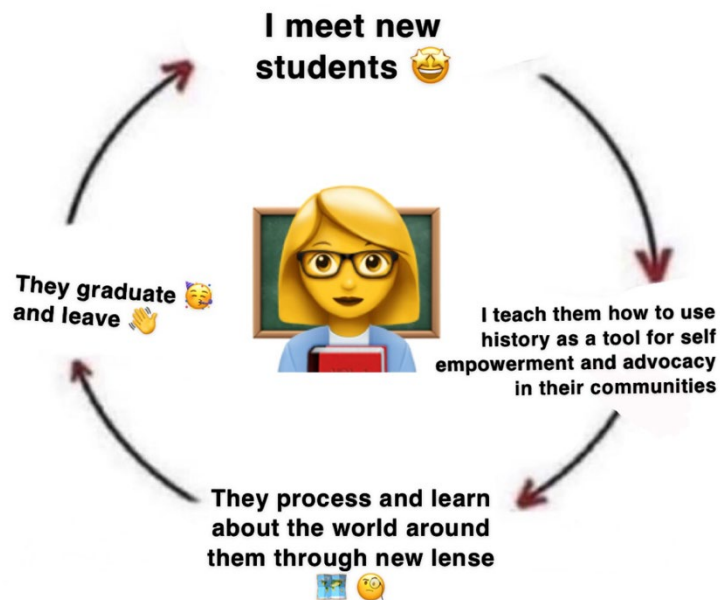
The relationship between me and my students is focused on the goal of empowering them with historical context and skills to use in processing the world around them. When they ultimately are able to advocate for themselves and their communities, I am happy to see them progress past the need for my class. Building bonds with students is an important step in being able to effectively teach and share content.

APPENDIX I: Celia's Meme
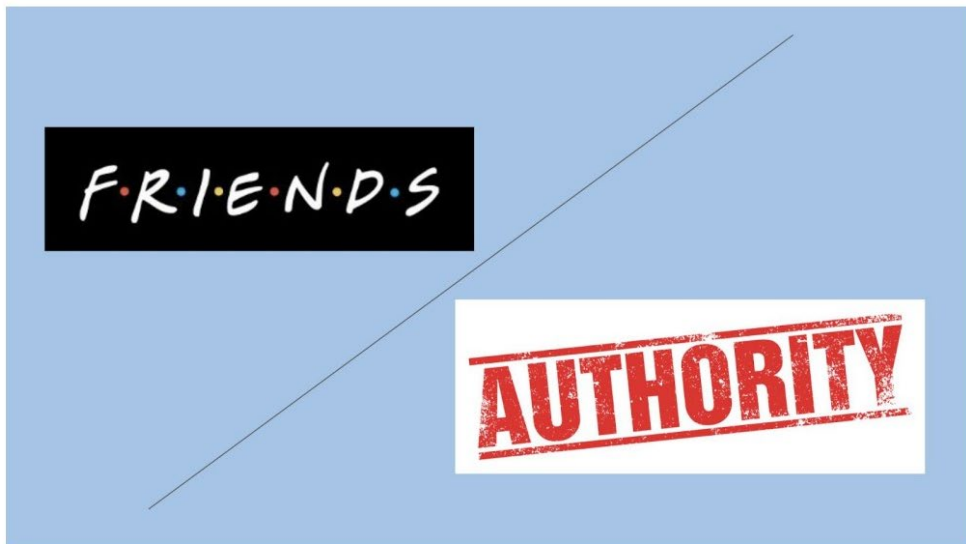
For my meme, I chose to depict the "fine line" between being the authority figure and friend to your student. As a teacher, this line can often become confusing in certain situations. It is easy to be the friend, but at times, you must remember that you are the adult and you are responsible for this child. I think a good teacher knows this line and can properly balance being friendly as well as the authority figure in their students' lives. This will hopefully promote mutual respect.
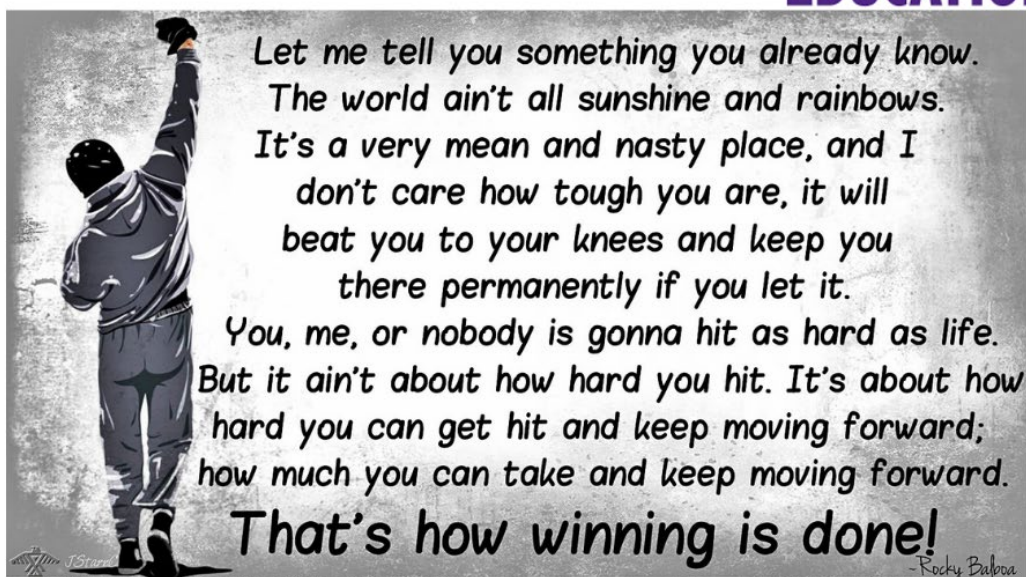
APPENDIX J: Darren's Meme

"Some people can read 'War and Peace' and come away thinking it's a simple adventure story. Others can read the ingredients on a chewing gum wrapper and unlock the secrets of the universe."

Lex Luthor at the end of Superman (1978)

TCU
COLLEGE OF
EDUCATION

Let me tell you something you already know.
The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows.
It's a very mean and nasty place, and I
don't care how tough you are, it will
beat you to your knees and keep you
there permanently if you let it.
You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life.
But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how
hard you can get hit and keep moving forward;
how much you can take and keep moving forward.
That's how winning is done!
~Rocky Balboa

#PrimeraGeneración#teamnoquit

- The Lex Luthor quote reminds me to look deeper and see there are lessons and things to learn everywhere. My students will know that we all have different way to see and interpret information and this is okay. I see this quote represents to me different learning styles.
- I also like to encourage thinking outside of the box and believe it is important for students to know that we can get to the solution in different ways. As a Science teacher it is important to be able to duplicate results for it to be a valid experiment. I hope to be able to inspire and motivate students to be able to make their own duplicatable experiment to unlock the secrets of the universe not just memorize and repeat.
- The TCU College of Education is not only connected with the obvious of Education it is a reminder to my students at Castleberry TCU is not just for the rich it is for anyone willing to put in the work. Our circumstances are different, but we all have them and some of us will need to work harder to succeed but this makes us stronger and better. I have struggled financially and

was not the greatest student in high school. The struggles I have faced will give me the experience to help my students to mentor my students and to lead by example.

- The Rocky quote follows my theme of life can hit you in the mouth it can knock you down, but success depends on picking yourself up and keep moving. This is for the students like me that are not having easy success that life has given extra hurdles to overcome. These students need to know that they will be better prepared for the challenges that continuing education will present and those that life will hand them. Those that have had it easy struggle when a challenge presents itself.
- The Rocky quote also reflects that success sometimes find us when we get up one more time.
- The two hash tags are my moto and heritage. Here I want to make sure students of color see that we can be successful someone that looks like them has done it and is doing it at a high level in a major university. My no quit attitude has got me through those tough study days and can get them tough theirs.
- Primera Generation is first generation I hope to make a path for my first gen students so they do not have to struggle like I did.

APPENDIX K: Fiona's Meme

This represents teacher- student relationships because a teachers jobs is to teach students. In order to do that we must plant a seed, or teach content. Then we care for the student as a whole by getting to know them. This does not mean becoming a friend, but being an adult who knows what's going on in their life and can empathize and support them so they get what they need to succeed in the classroom. Lastly, we hope they listen and accept the support we provide to grow in their education and in life.

APPENDIX L: Hilary's Meme

       I chose this meme as I feel it represents what teachers must do very often in their jobs. They must present material to their students in a way that captures their attention and keep them engaged. Students, in turn, are asked to give their attention to the teacher in order to receive the information they need to know.

APPENDIX M: John's Meme
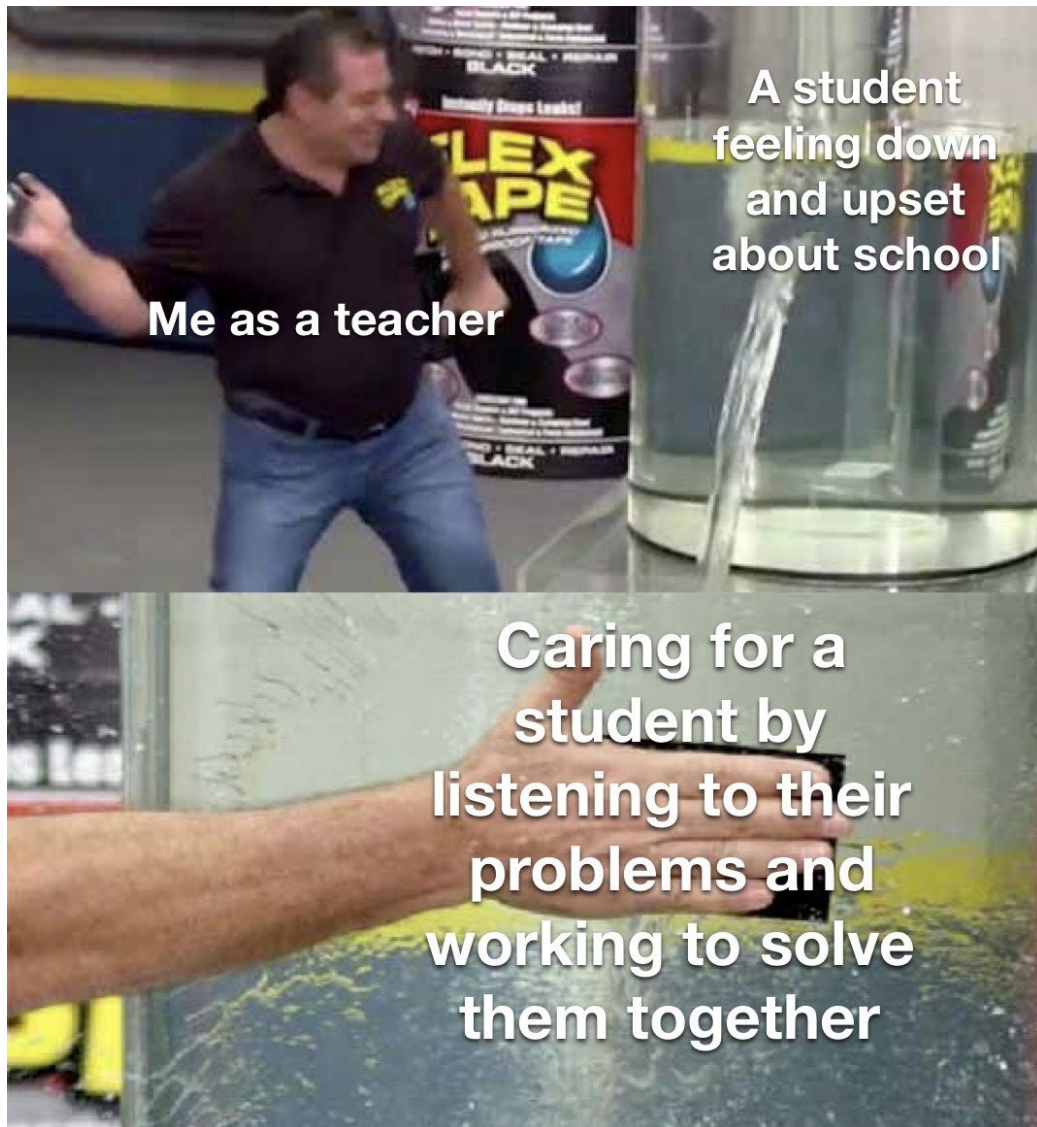
To describe what I mean, the meme is sharing how a teacher should interact with a student. Many students today have mental health problems and do not want to put in work at school when they have other items on their mind. As a teacher, I believe it is my job to care for all my students and understand how they view the world. If a student does not have the motivation to find school as interesting, as a teacher I need to discuss why with the student and help them find solutions such as differentiating instruction or asking them about topics that they find interesting like activities they are involved in. I think caring for the student and showing interest is one of the most important aspects of a student-teacher relationship.

APPENDIX N: Mackenzie's Meme


ME WHEN MY STUDENTS MASTER THEIR GOALS

My students love when you are excited because they know there is purpose to what we are doing. They thrive off of excitement and praise and so when we do goal work we do a lot of cheering them on because they are making progress in the goals of their academics. Students want the love and recognition from their teachers so that they feel like they have the capabilities to succeed.

APPENDIX O: Matt's Meme

The reason I choose this meme is because I feel it really displays how teachers should feel

regarding teacher-student relationships. Teachers should take the choice that is more work and

puts more of a burden on themselves. By taking the option to 'draw 25' they are putting it on

themselves to make meaningful connections every day and not just give up on a student who

struggles or is harder to reach. Every teacher should take on the challenge rather than give up

on students. I hope you enjoy the meme. I know I find it funny.

APPENDIX P: Michelle's Meme
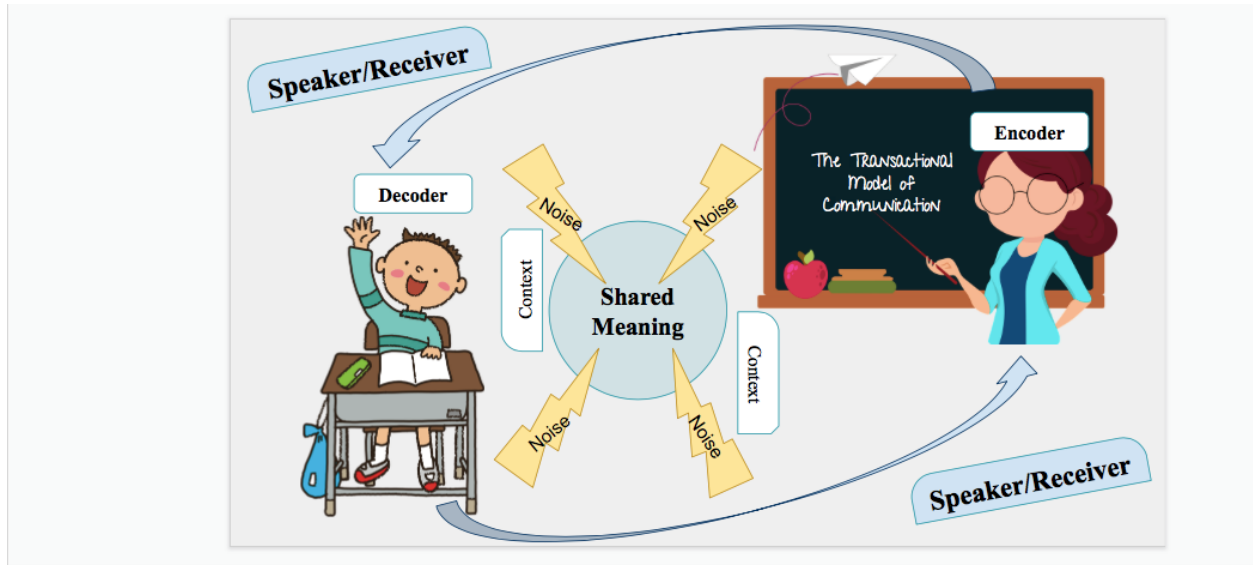
As a communication major, I find the models of communication to be very interesting. Thus, I wanted to use this model to explain how teachers and students have the capability to be both **speakers** and **listeners**; I did so using the Transactional Model of Communication. In this meme, I have a teacher speaking to her class about the transactional model, while the model is being played out in the image. For example, important concepts in regard to this model are **meaning**, **context**, **noise**, **encoders**, and **decoders**. I think that in order for a positive relationship between students and teachers to develop, both parties must be **active listeners** when communicating. This model acts as a cheat code for how to accomplish just that!

For my meme, I wanted to show a student who is engaging with the teachers lesson. When our brains interpret the **context** of a topic and see through the **noise** in order to uncover the **shared meaning**, learning takes place. A teacher's job is to find a way to connect to their students in order to have each party achieve **shared meaning**.

APPENDIX Q: Nicholas's Meme
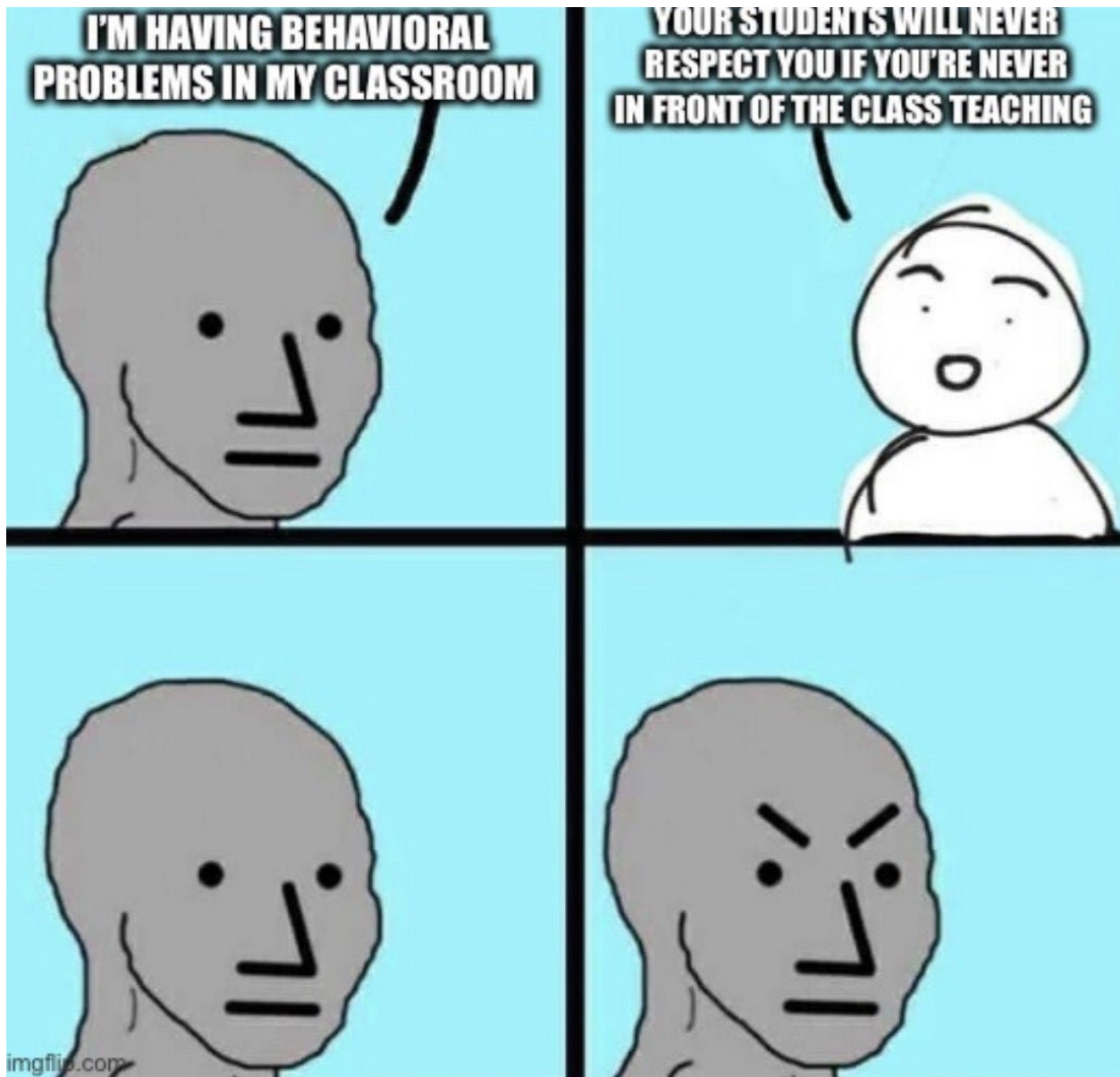
I decided to make a meme about an all too common occurrence while I was in high school. Because of the development of the internet, there is an infinite amount of educational content online. Because of this, teachers will incorporate this content in their classrooms. Unfortunately, too many teachers have taken advantage of this, and just simply sit behind their desk during the class while students watch videos and complete accompanying worksheets. Instead of getting an interactive and engaging experience with their teachers. students are stuck watch cheesy, boring, and mostly outdated videos. This leads to a disconnect between the two groups, and often results in tension that eventually explodes in the teacher's face. The best relationships I had with teachers occurred when the teacher presented the information in front of the class in a fun and engaging manner. On the other

hand, a majority of my teachers would sit behind their desk while we had to watch videos. Most of the students participating in those classes disliked those teachers because of this. We as educators need to realize the following:

1) There is a massive difference between presenting and educating. Anyone can sit behind a desk and play a video, or read off of a PowerPoint.
2) The use of technology can effect the classroom in so many positive ways. Playing videos or reading a PowerPoint to a class full of kids is not positive; students can do that on their own time. We need to find new ways of utilizing technology that are engaging, interactive, and will not prevent us from building relationships with our students.

APPENDIX R: Samuel's Meme
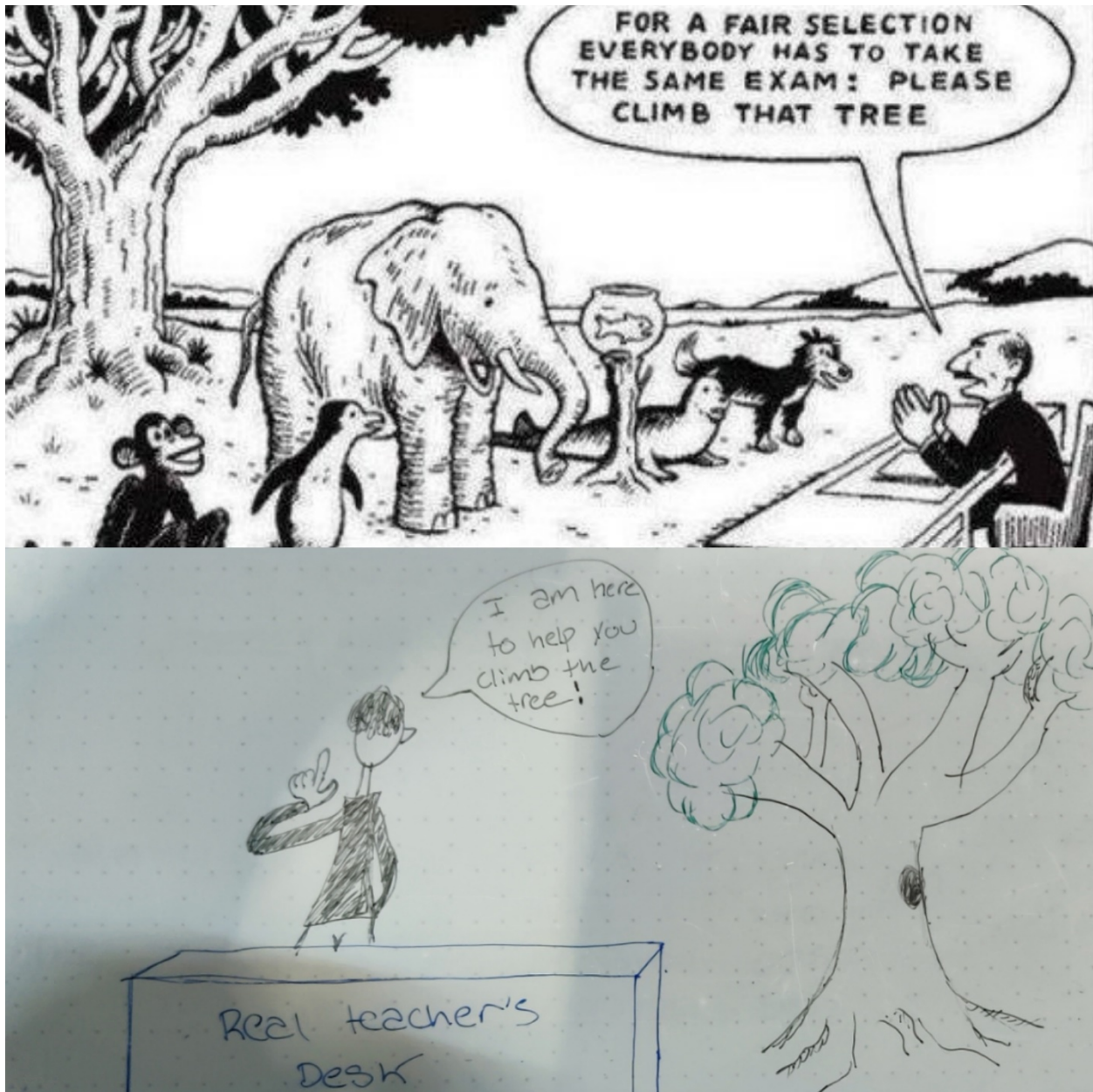
I believe I grew up in the school system that was zero tolerance (OSS, kicked out for fighting or low grades). I was fortunately not one of the kids in danger but I often struggled with some subjects. There was no alternative way of learning things, it was just recommended to try harder and put in more time. The system reminded me a lot of the first picture with all the animals. If you didn't learn the way the school wanted you to learn, you were left behind or labeled lazy and unwilling to put in the work. Midway through highschool things did change and new teachers were being taught different methods of reaching students. All my C's turned into B's and A's with a little help from a couple of willing teachers. This is the second picture, actual teachers who are there to pass on knowledge not just evaluate.

APPENDIX S: Tara's Meme

Here is my explanation, starting from the top left:

- Champion: Teachers point out the strengths of students first to the students themselves then to others. They champion students' accomplishments and encourage them to continue working hard and discovering what they love to do.
- Welcomer: Teachers build a welcoming "home-y" environment for students. There is a family aspect to education that is fostered through relationship-building between teachers and students.
- Exemplar: Teachers model positive behaviors to students. They show students how to accomplish academic goals while exemplifying strong character and encouraging students to treat one another with respect.

Cheerleader: Teachers cheer students on and motivate them to grow. By exuding excitement and a desire to learn, teachers encourage students to live similarly.

APPENDIX T: Liberty University Fair Use Checklist Form

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY FAIR USE CHECKLIST FORM

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