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Does Pre-School Education Matter? Understanding the Lived Experiences of Parents and Their Perceptions of Preschool Education

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Abstract

According to the United States Department of Education, approximately 4,172,347 four-year-olds are eligible to attend publicly funded preschool programs. Of this number, only 1,709,607 of those eligible are enrolled in a publicly funded preschool program (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Because of a lack of quantitative and qualitative data regarding parents' positive and negative attitudes and beliefs about preschool, misconceptions arise regarding parental decisions to support or not to support their child's academic, social, and emotional development prior to kindergarten. In a large urban district in the southeastern part of the United States, this qualitative phenomenological study investigated the perceptions of 12 parents, six of who elected and six of whom did not elect to send their children to preschool, and the lived experiences that contributed to those decisions. Unanswered questions linger about why so few children attend preschool. Further, the study examined the relationship between parent attitudes and beliefs about preschool and whether or not their lived experiences contributed to their perceptions of the values of preschool.

Current research reveals that preschool programs have made a positive impact on early

literacy, social emotional learning, and academic success (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, &

Squires, 2012; Cunningham, 2010; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Invernizzi, Landrum, Teichman,

& Townsend, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In 2004, the U.S. Department of

Education conducted an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study that identified a 60% school

readiness gap between preschool-aged children in the highest socioeconomic group and the

lowest socioeconomic group, before entering kindergarten (Robin & Schulman, 2004). The

National Institute for Early Education Research (2015) confirmed that students who start school before kindergarten are more likely to do well academically and socially throughout their educational careers. Don Owens, Director of Public Affairs for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYP) stated

> It is not the same kindergarten we went to. It is not the same kindergarten it was ten years ago. Kindergarten used to be preparation for school, but now it *is* school. That is why school districts and boards of education are paying attention to what happens *before* the kids arrive at school. (2007, p. 1)

The skills obtained from preschool attendance include pre-reading strategies, such as oral language and phonological awareness, and pre-writing skills. Exposure to these skills and practice of them before kindergarten increased the possibility for students to have successful reading experiences in school (Barnett et al., 2012). Educators agree that children between the ages of three and five are in vital phases of academic and social-emotional development (Ahmad, 2015; Burchinal et al., 2010; Cunningham, 2010; Dearing et al., 2009). Additional research supports the focus of preschool programs to include activities that are predictors of future school success (Barnett, 2008; Weber-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

Consequently, school leaders across the United States are looking for ways to promote the importance of getting children ready to learn before entering kindergarten and are seeking parents who have preschool-aged children with whom to share information about the benefits of preschool (Smart Beginnings, 2013; Williford, Downer, & Hamre 2014). Government officials, research companies, school districts across the country, and professionals in many disciplines have collected a myriad of data to support or reject the importance of mandating preschool attendance for all children regardless of economic, social, or racial background

(Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2013). This data has been used to examine the impact preschool has on student achievement, both short and long-term. Additionally, in his 2014 State of the Union address, President Obama called for expanding "high-quality" preschools to improve the outcome of learning and academic success (2014). Gordan et al. (2015) examined the benefits of attending several preschool programs and identified the following results: improves social and emotional development, increases school readiness, and raises school performance. Current research continues to suggest that the impact of preschool attendance on student achievement is significant and a priority for the United States of America to address.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the work of Glasser (1998) about choice theory. Duncan, Ludwig, and Magnuson (2007) found that educators and parents are key components in determining the academic outcomes of children who are enrolled in preschool programs. Additional research conducted by Fan and Williams (2010) noted that parents who are actively involved and inspire their children to excel in academics feel more connected and have a sense of parental fulfillment as it relates to their child's educational journey. Included in this concept is the parents' ability to choose preschool because they do not feel competent in their young child's quality world, which for this qualitative phenomenological study is discussed as a preschool learning environment. Glasser's (1998) choice theory defines an individual's quality world as a "small personal world which each person started to create and re-created throughout life through a small group of specific pictures" (p. 45). Ultimately, these pictures fall into three major categories, including "the people [they] want to be with, the things [they] want to own or experience, and the ideas and beliefs that govern [their] behavior" (p. 45). According to Glasser, "building strong relationships with individuals can only foster the quality world of a person"

(Allison, 2011, p.8). Glasser's theory also concluded that individuals were responsible for their own views and actions.

Desire to own or experience things. When children are born, parents immediately take possession of their children and become part of the experiences they choose to explore with their children. When parents are required to share their involvement with preschool programs, Glasser (1998) notes that feelings of invasion and the need to adapt to a new situation may "go against the basic wants and needs" (p. 51). In a preschool situation, parents must be involved in their child's education, create a home environment conducive to learning, lose their learned behaviors, and partner with educators to whom they may not want to expose their educational shortfalls. In other words, feelings are perceived emotions that are stimulated by experiences that toggle between needs and wants. Therefore, the experiences of parents and their impact on decisions about preschool attendance add depth to the literature by disclosing why parents desire a preschool program for their child or not.

Beliefs that govern behavior. Glasser (1998) notes that an individual's belief system governs who and what a person will or will not tolerate in his or her quality world "core of life" (p. 53). According to Glasser (1998), a person is more willing to believe and adapt to a situation when there is established a benefit for the individual. Otherwise, the person will reject the belief and abandon any behavior that will interrupt his or her quality world.
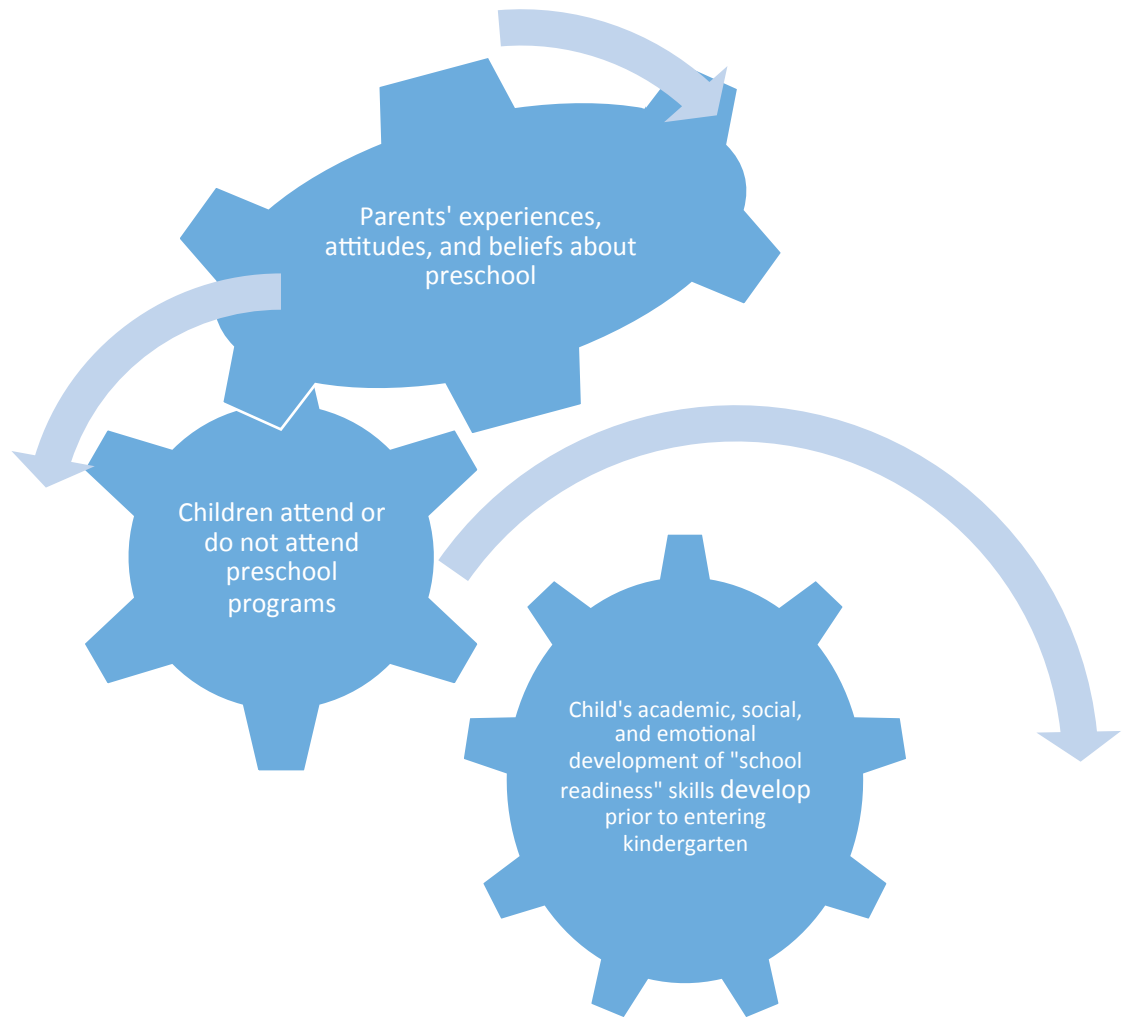
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

In summary, Glasser's (1998) concept of a quality world forms the conceptual framework for this study because Glasser's theory suggests that individuals choose to develop attitudes and beliefs based on lived experiences. Thus, parents' attitudes and beliefs about preschool may be determined by their experiences with the teaching staff, the preschool curriculum, or preschool educators. Glasser's (1998) concept of a quality world correlates to this study because the goal of this study is to understand how the lived experiences of parents influence their choices to allow their children to attend or not attend preschool.

Assumptions

The goals of this phenomenological study are to examine the lived experiences of four parents who did not enroll their students in a preschool program and to describe the daily lived experiences of four parents who did enroll their child(ren) in a preschool program prior to enrolling their child(ren) in a public school kindergarten classroom. The study is based on the assumption that all parents who agreed to participate were open-minded and honest with their responses to the interview questions and were active participants of the focus group. Additionally, I assume that they will represent their point of view with truth.

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Delimitations of the Study

Twelve participants were asked to participate in this study and give their perceptions about preschool. No teacher or educational leader input was sought because the researcher was

only interested in the attitudes and perceptions of parents. The targeted group is delimited because the participants were selected from the researcher's church in the Southeastern area of Virginia.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to parents who attend church in the Southeastern part of Virginia. Thus, the study will not be generalizable to other populations. Twelve parents who agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews with the researcher include six who elected to send their children to preschool and six who elected not to send their children to preschool, but eventually enrolled their child(ren) in a public kindergarten. Simon and Goes (2013) defined limitations of a study as anticipated limits that make it difficult to simplify the findings of the study because of possible weaknesses. Validation of these findings may be limited because parents may be motivated by experiences of other parents who sent their children to preschool, or they may lack the knowledge of what defines "preschool." Additionally, parents may not provide the truth in their responses, or they might not respond fully or at all.

Significance of the Study

Parent involvement (PI) in education is associated with positive outcomes for students; however, little is known about how parents decide to be involved in the early years of their children's education prior to kindergarten. A lack of data exists among quantitative and qualitative data in regards to parents' both positive and negative attitudes and beliefs about preschool, preschool attendance, and parental involvement that is reflective of parents' lived experiences.

<center>**A Review of Literature**</center>

The Evolution of Preschool Education

In the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), President Johnson's "WAR on Poverty" provided additional funding for schools and funded the initial Head Start Program, an early intervention preschool program for economically disadvantaged students (USDOE, 2004). President Johnson stated, "It will offer new hope to tens of thousands of youngsters who need attention before they ever enroll in the first grade" (USDOE, 2004, p. 2). In 1994, Congress supported Goals 2000 by increasing funding to support school readiness (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). The goals for Early Intervention and Reading documented that all children would attend school and be eager and open to learning new skills and concepts that encourage and enhance critical thinking skills. Additionally, Goals 2000 sought for the United States to increase the graduation rate to 90%, and that the United States would rise to first in the world in the areas of science and math (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). Although these goals received wide approval and support, they were not able to be met due to lack of parental involvement and budgetary restraints.

Barnett (2008), a researcher for National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, conducted several studies and completed numerous reports on Early Childhood and Preschool programs in America. In one of his reports, *Preschool Education and Its Lasting Effects: Research and Policy Implications,* Barnett (2008) indicated that ten percent of the nation's three and four-year-olds were enrolled in a preschool program in 1960. The findings from this report suggest that ninety percent of children eligible to attend a preschool program did not attend. Less than fifty years later, nearly seventy-five percent of children who were age four enrolled in preschool early learning programs. Fifty percent of children who were age three also enrolled in a preschool program. Barnett (2008) explains that the growth in

preschool attendance was caused by the "achievement gap." Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, and Schulman (2004) presented significant differences between those students who attended preschool and those who did not.

Current trends in preschool early learning programs in the United States include the following: Pre-K, Kindergarten & Extended Day Kindergarten, and Preschool Children "at risk." According to the USDOE (2011), all of these programs were developed as a result of the following initiatives that were passed by the federal government: HEAD START, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title I, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Universal Pre-K, and Full-Day Kindergarten. Barnett (2008) claimed, "These trends have been accompanied by growth in private preschool education and child care, state-funded pre-K, preschool special education, and the federal Head Start program" (p. 3).

Over forty-five years ago, politicians were knowledgeable about the disparity between children from the middle class and children from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson used the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to establish the Head Start program (Kagan, 2002). This program served over 560,000 children across America. The administrations of President Nixon, President Carter, and President Reagan supported the Head Start initiative and continued the upward battle toward expanding preschool programs. In 2003, The USDOE described Title 1 preschool as a program that served children under age five who suffered from poverty. In 2004, NCLB forced state educational leaders to be accountable for meeting the needs of all students. This act was instrumental in focusing public attention toward underachieving students in kindergarten and forcing school leaders to attend to the achievement gap. Also, legislation required that children be proficient in reading and math by 2014 (NCLB,

2004). Arne Duncan (2013), United States Secretary of Education, stated that Universal

Preschool gives equal access to all three and four-year-olds in America (Duncan, 2013).

In 2013, President Barack Obama encouraged an increased focus to be drawn to the

investments in early intervention and high-quality preschool programs for all. In his State of the

Union address, President Barack Obama stated, "I propose working with states to make high-

quality preschool available to every child in America...Let's do what works, and make sure none

of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance" (Obama,

2011, p.3). Many states agreed to implement President Obama's "Preschool for All" initiatives

and volunteered to participate in grant programs like *The Race to the Top Challenge* to support

early learning by increasing the number and percentage of enrollment in high-quality preschools.

Awards for *Race to the Top* participants go to states that are ambitiously leading the way to

developing plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive early learning

education reform efforts. Forty states participated in the first phase of implementation and more

states are seeking to join the early education reform programs (USDOE, 2009).

Parent Attitudes and Beliefs about Preschool Education

A study conducted by Keen (2005) found that parents' beliefs and expectations of their

children's academic achievement were related to the level of education parents had achieved, as

well as socio-economic factors. Across the globe, researchers gathered data to determine parents'

views and beliefs about preschool. In Turkey, Şahin, Sak, and Şahin (2013) interviewed 35

parents whose children attended private preschool institutions to seek their views about early

childhood education. Four themes emerged: (a) the importance of preschool, (b) age of

preschool, (c) characteristics of preschool institutions, and (d) the expectations of parents. Şahin

et al. (2013) concluded that the majority of the parents believed preschool improved their child's

social skills and understood the characteristics of preschool programs. They did not find a consistent view of the age at which a child should start preschool. Also, data from this study suggested that further research is needed to determine parent views about both private and public preschool programs.

Baroody & Diamond's (2013) qualitative study examined the relationship between parent and child characteristics, such as the parents' level of education as it related to children's literacy interest. Parents in this study indicated they wanted their children to succeed in school and to exhibit positive social behaviors. Parents of 61 preschoolers from predominately low-income families who were enrolled in local preschool completed questionnaires reporting their expectations of preschool. Parents' expectation of their child's achievement in school significantly correlated with their child's literacy interest. Saçkes et al. (2015) suggested that parental beliefs about children's literacy motivation are associated with their literacy practices at home. A sample of 315 parents of preschool-aged children participated in this qualitative study. The results revealed that parental perceptions of their children's literacy motivation were significantly related to their home literacy practices (Saçkes et al., 2015).

Opposing Views and Beliefs about Preschool Education

Huang et al. (2011) investigated the differential and persistent effects of a state-funded preschool program. The study was conducted to determine whether or not preschool program Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) participants have a differential effect and whether or not the effect persists over time. A longitudinal sample cohort of over 60,000 students in 1000 schools from the beginning of Kindergarten through the end of 1st grade was included in the study. Two-level hierarchical logistical regression models revealed that attending preschool was beneficial. Students who attended preschool had a lower likelihood of repeating kindergarten. The largest

benefit of attending preschool was measured in the first half of the school year. However, Huang et al. (2011) also found that "by the end of first grade, the effects' sizes in all ethnic subgroups were relatively smaller than those measured at the beginning of Kindergarten" (p. 42). This data suggests that over time, the effects of preschool begin to decrease and are not sustained. These researchers used the term "fading out" to label the claim that preschool has no measurable effect on children's academic performance later on (Magnuson, Ruhn, & Waldfrogel, 2007). Data from additional studies has revealed that the long-term effects of preschool appear to dwindle as children grow older (Bierman, Nix, Heinrich, Domitrovich, Geist, Welsh, and Gill, 2014; Barnett, 2008). Neither of these reports, however, explore parental beliefs regarding the consequences of preschool on long-term achievement.

Rationale and Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions of parents who have or have not elected to send their children to preschool and the lived experiences that contributed to those decisions. Further, the goal of this study is to explore the attitudes and beliefs of parents who did and did not enroll their child in a preschool program. Parental involvement must be an established principle in the influence of classroom and home environment developmental skills of preschool children (DeMulder & Stribling, 2012). This study is designed to capture the parents' perceptions of preschool and to discover their reasons for sending or not sending their children to preschool school before entering kindergarten. Educators' understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and the role of parents is crucial in making decisions about future early learning literacy programs (Smart Beginnings, 2013). This study is designed to collect data to assist preschool leaders and policymakers in their understanding of parents' involvement in the academic and social-emotional development of

their 3- or 4-year-old child(ren) enrolled or not enrolled in a preschool program. We intended to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What do parents believe are the values of preschool?

Research Question 2: What lived experiences do parents indicate contributed to their attitudes and beliefs regarding preschool?

Research Question 3: What experiences determined whether or not parents enroll their children in preschool?

Research Question 4: Based on their lived experiences, what intrinsic values do parents reflect upon when enrolling their child in a preschool?

Method

A qualitative research approach was followed for this study. The theoretical perspective most often associated with qualitative researchers is phenomenology (Bodan & Biklen, 2007). About the methodology of this qualitative study, the research design of phenomenology was selected as an appropriate method of inquiry because this research design emphasizes the exploration of human experience. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is "the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (p. 26). Therefore, during the data collection process, the researcher conducted an initial interview and follow-up interviews with twelve parents regarding their experiences related to preschool education.

Following the phenomenological approach, the researcher sought to understand meaning in events and human interactions (Creswell, 2013). This method required that the researcher attempt to achieve a sense of the meaning that others give to their situation (Creswell, 2013). The goal of qualitative research is to explore and interpret meaning (Merriam, 2009). A sample is chosen for this design based on the willingness and the proximity of the participants.

Instrumentation

The researcher is often the sole person responsible for data collection in phenomenological research and the design of the instrument that was used to collect the data (Creswell, 2013). The wording or focus of the question determines what is primary in pursuing the topic and what data are collected (Moustakas, 1994). Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggested the use of interview forms or conversational guidelines to help keep the "interview focused and on track" (p.147). Qualitative interviewing "explores experiences and uncovers meaningful structures which can be obtained from participants by designing interview questions that are open-ended" (Hatch, 2002, p. 86). According to Weiss (1994), "interviewing is an especially important means for data collection because interviewing gives us a window into the past" (p. 1). Therefore, both initial and follow-up interviews were conducted for this study.

The interview questions that the researcher designed were based on the research questions, related to the conceptual framework, and aligned with the review of the research literature for this study. The purpose of the questions was to uncover parents' attitudes and beliefs about preschool through the exploration of their experiences and decisions to send or not to send their children to preschool. A copy of the interview questions has been peer-reviewed and confirmed for having the clarity to ensure that the instrumentation was reliable.

  The interview began by asking participants to state their age, ages of children, and the name of school district their children are zoned to attend. The school district was not used in the research but was identified so that the researcher could compare and look for similarities and/or differences in the experiences and perceptions of parents from different school districts. All interviews were recorded using a digital and a backup digital recorder. All dialogues were transcribed into a written document.

Participants and Context

The study took place in a community centrally located in a large urban school district. The participants were solicited from a church population of approximately 1,200 that is located in the community. The Amen Church is the pseudonym that is used throughout the study to maintain the confidentiality of the church. The Amen Church has served the local community for over twenty years and currently provides day care and preschool services to children from birth to age four. Participants included six parents who did not send their children to preschool and six parents who did send their children to preschool. Participants varied in the number of children, ages, racial backgrounds, and socioeconomic status.

Data Sources

Multiple data sources were examined or this study. Parents' lived experiences regarding preschool education were collected through qualitative initial and follow-up interviews. Each data source is described in further detail below.

Initial Interviews. The initial interview began with the background questions related to the participant's demographics of the family. Nine of the initial interviews took place as scheduled. Three of the initial interviews had to be rescheduled due to the participant's personal emergency. The time span of the initial interviews varied from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Next, the researcher asked descriptive questions that had been designed to encourage participants to provide detailed information about their experiences. Participants were asked ten open-ended questions regarding their attitudes and beliefs towards preschool and reflections of how those lived experiences formed their attitudes and beliefs about their children attending preschool. Open-ended questions were asked by the researcher to allow the participant to expand on his or her responses. The interview questions asked allowed the researcher to gather information that described the

parents' understanding of the phenomenon of preschool. Then, the researcher asked questions that explored how the participants' experiences formed their attitudes and beliefs about preschool.

Follow-Up Interviews. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to allow participants the opportunity to ask any additional questions related to the study, as well as to disclose any additional information that would support the study. Questions for the follow-up interview allowed the participants to share additional information regarding their personal experiences with preschool education and the opportunity to confer any changes in their reflections about preschool. The time span of these interviews ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. The follow-up questions were recorded and transcribed into a written document in the participants' "own words." Participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy by way of the member-checking process.

Data Analysis

The interview questions served as the primary source for interpreting and analyzing data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a member-check is one trustworthiness technique the researcher may use to ensure that data collected during a qualitative study is reliable. Member-checks occur when the "the final report or specific description or themes" are given back to the participants for review (Creswell, 2009, p. 191).

Each participant had the opportunity to review his or her transcribed interview for accuracy before the researcher began to analyze the data. This procedure provided the researcher the immediate opportunity to reflect and make necessary corrections and ensure that the participant's words on the tape and transcript captured exactly what the participant wanted to convey to the researcher.

During the data analysis phase, the researcher used a modification of the van Kaam method of analysis recommended by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological data. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher placed aside her personal prejudgments and preconceptions about preschool, using a process described by Moustakas (1994) as bracketing, which would "assist in the development of universal structures based on what people experience and how" (p.34). Using this method, the researcher described personal experiences. The researcher also identified and listed every significant statement relevant to the topic and gave them equal value, known as horizontalization. According to Seidmann (2006) a more conventional way of presenting and analyzing interview data is to organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories. Therefore, the researcher searched for linking threads and patterns.

The significant statements from the participants were clustered and organized intomeaningful units and themes. Next, the researcher described the themes in forms that were both textural and structural. Finally, the researcher constructed a combined description of the meanings and the cruxes of the experiences.

Findings of the Study

The nine themes identified in the data analysis address the four research questions previously discussed. The results are discussed below.

Finding One. Participants believe that "academic readiness skills" are benefits of preschool. Ten out of twelve participants identified the following elements of academic readiness skills: listening to reading, knowing how to write, and identifying letters and small words, like their name. From interview question one, all twelve participants mentioned that preschool has the potential to develop some form of academic readiness skills in children,

although six of the twelve participants did not send their children to preschool. The other half of participants who did send their children to preschool agreed that the foundation of early learning begins in preschool.

Five of the six parents who did not send their child to preschool indicated that preschool had academic benefits for those students whose parents cannot afford to stay home and teach their children, whereas all of the participants who did not send their child to preschool agreed that preschool supports children in learning appropriate school behavior.

From the follow-up interview responses, nine participants suggested that parents should send their children to preschool to learn basic concepts. Of those nine, six of the participants who did not send their children to preschool noted that parents should send their children to preschool only if they cannot afford to stay home and teach them. Petersen (2012) found that school readiness creates a strong foundation for learning.

Five of the six participants who did not send their children to preschool believed that the skills taught in preschool were redundant to the skills taught in kindergarten. These parents referred to those skills as a child being able to identify their ABC's and letter sounds, write their name, and count and identify numbers.

Finding Two. Participants believed that preschool contributed to a child's social and emotional development. All of the parents who sent their children to preschool and half of the parents who did not send their child to preschool agreed that children develop positive emotions about school. Most of the participants also believed that because positive emotions about school were developed, preschool supports a child's communication skills and the self-management of their emotions. One participant stated that their child did not become a "social butterfly" or begin to speak until their child attended preschool. Another participant felt that "preschool was "only

good for socialization" but made note that it would be good otherwise for "the parents who don't have time to put into their kid's education." The participants in DeMulder and Stribling (2012) study identified the effects of social emotional development in the following themes: increased positive feelings, self-confidence and positive relationships. These data were reflected in the responses from the participants in this study. All parents who did not send their children to preschool noted that learning how to interact with others with positive emotions was the most important skill to learn in preschool. At the opposite position, all parents who sent their children to preschool noted appropriate social interaction among children as a second value in preschool. In fact, one participant indicated that a preschool is a place "where children learn to talk to each other in addition to learning how to act around other children."

Table 1

Social Emotional Development as a Value of Preschool

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Get along/socialize/communicate with others	12	100%
Develop positive emotions about school	9	75%
Exposure helps ease feelings about transitions to kindergarten	3*	25%

*6 of the 7 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool

Finding Three. Participants identify either positive or negative effects preschool can have on children aligned to their decisions to send or not to send their children to preschool.
Şahin et al. (2013) concluded that the majority of the parents believed preschool improved their child's social skills and understood the characteristics of preschool programs. Most participants

agreed that a preschool is a place where children can attend to help prepare them with

foundational skills for learning. All of the participants who sent their children to preschool

indicated that reading, writing, and math skills were benefits of attending preschool. All twelve

participants agreed that preschool provides some form of exposure to reading/literacy skills

which are essential to the development of academic readiness in children.

Table 2

Preparation for Kindergarten as a Value of Preschool

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Prepares children for academics	12	100%
Teaches children how to behave	7*	58%
Prepares kids to transition	8**	66%
Parental involvement in their child's preparation for school	12	100%

*5 of the 7 responses were from those parents who did not send their children to preschool.
**6 of the 8 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool.

Finding Four. Past experiences were predictors of parents' attitudes, beliefs, and decisions

about preschool. All twelve participants indicated that their personal satisfaction and

disappointment with preschool/ kindergarten outcomes had an impact on their attitudes and

beliefs about preschool. Although all twelve participants indicated that their children were

successful in preschool and were prepared for kindergarten, six participants also identified

disappointments with preschool as a result of negative past experiences with preschool teachers.

One participant noted that their "preschool experience was horrible because the teacher was not

teaching anything." "My child was just coloring pictures of blocks." One participant recalled

negative experiences in preschool when "the nuns would bend my hand back and pop it with a

ruler if I got something wrong… man that hurt." Kocyigit's (2015) study supports these findings as it reveals parents' frustration with the bad habits and negative attitudes of preschool teachers and administrators, frustration that derived from the parents' own lived experience. Past experiences of attending or not attending preschool as a child did contribute to the decisions parents make about sending or not sending their children to preschool. Findings from this study suggest that feelings participants developed about preschool were based on prior experiences, influences from others, or negative preschool experiences affect their decision-making. Two of the twelve participants indicated that they started preschool for a short time but were pulled from the school in less than three weeks because their parents' attitudes changed after seeing the inadequacies of their preschool teachers' instruction and classroom management skills. Eight of the twelve participants in this study indicated that they did not attend preschool. Four of the participants who attended preschool for at least a year also sent their children to preschool. Four participants who had positive preschool experiences were receptive to sending their children to preschool. To the contrary, one participant who sent her child to preschool indicated that she did not go to preschool but recognized the benefits of preschool and decided to send her child.

Table 3

Participants' Comments about Parents' Past Experiences of Attending or Not Attending
Preschool

Categorical Variable	# of Participants	% of Participants
Personal success attending childhood preschool motivated parents' decisions to send their child to preschool	4	33%
Personal success not attending childhood preschool, parents taught them at home	6*	50%
Did not attend childhood preschool but wanted child to attend	2	16%
Parents' past experiences influenced parents decisions about sending children to preschool	12	100%

*6 of the 6 responses were from those parents who sent their children to preschool

Finding Five. Participants believe that parental involvement is essential to their children's successful kindergarten outcomes. All twelve participants believe that parental involvement with their children's growth and development at home contributed to their children's successful kindergarten outcomes. All twelve participants indicated that they read with their child. Saçkes et al. (2015) suggested that parental beliefs about children's literacy motivation are associated with their literacy practices at home, like storybook reading. Six participants who did not send their children to preschool indicated they wanted to take full responsibility for preparing their children for kindergarten; however, six participants who did send their children to preschool stated that responsibility for preparing children for school was shared with the preschool teacher. The six

participants who did not send their children to preschool indicated that parental involvement with their child's academic and social development is the reason why their children were well-rounded socially and did well in kindergarten, as well. Current research has demonstrated a lack of understanding between parents and preschool leaders in regards to the values of preschool and knowing what key elements to focus on when trying to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of all preschool-aged students (Fielding, 2009, Fielding et al., 2004, Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). Research also supports the idea that relationships between the parent and the educator have an impact on a child's successful progression in preschool (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison, 2015).

Finding Six. Most participants believed that parents' trusting relationships with preschool teachers contribute to their beliefs about the value of preschool. Seven out of twelve participants believed that partnerships with school leaders and educators also supported their children's achievement in school. Trustworthiness of teachers and school leaders also contributed to the decision of the participants to send their children to preschool. One participant who elected to send her child to preschool and another participant, who did not send his child to preschool, both believe that in order for early intervention to work, preschool teachers and school leaders must maintain open communication with parents and be willing to learn diverse ways of working with white and minority children who have a variety of learning styles and behavioral backgrounds (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, & Harrison, 2015).

Finding Seven. Participants who sent their children to preschool believe the following factors influenced their decision: (a) social skills, (b) money (c) time (d) parent knowledge of readiness skills. Evidence-based research confirms that parents play a major role in making decisions about preschool and early intervention (Zivotic, Tanasic, & Mikanovic, 2013). Most of

the participants indicated that they sent their children to preschool because of low socio-economic challenges, which included the feeling of being poor, lack of time to work at home with their children, being a single parent with only one income, family health issues, and inadequate funding for daycare or preschool. Four of the six participants noted that they receive state assistance to help alleviate the financial strain within the family. Half of the participants reported that they sent their children to preschool to prepare them for school and to provide them with the opportunity to get better jobs than their parents.

Participants in this study indicated that their lack of knowledge in regards to preparing their children for kindergarten contributed to their decision to send their children to preschool. Four of twelve participants noted that they did not have adequate skills to teach and support their children's learning. Hence, the participants sent their children to preschool in hopes of getting them ready for school. A participant, who is a single parent noted that she was "embarrassed that her daughter was not exposed to nursery rhymes and had a difficult time hearing and matching the ending sounds in words." This parent revealed that she was not told that reading rhymes and riddles at home could have assisted her child's development of language (Hart & Risley, 1995). Five of the twelve participants agreed that preschool teachers are trained to prepare children for kindergarten and are more knowledgeable about new instructional strategies. This data indicates that parents feel less prepared to meet the needs of their children than preschool teachers.

Finding Eight. Participants who did not send their children to preschool disagreed with the idea that preschool teachers are skilled with adequate training to meet the needs of all students. Four of these six participants reported that preschool teachers lack the intervention strategies required to support students who struggle with academics and behavior. Also, one of these six participants indicated that the requirements to be a preschool teacher are minimal. One

participant stated that the "parent's role has been to do everything: to be the first teacher, leader, respondent to my children" and that "it is the parents' responsibility to educate their children." Another participant advised parents to "do the research so that it won't be a waste of time…Don't rely on someone else to do it for you. Pre-school teachers are not going to have the same level of engagement that you would have with your child."

Three of the six participants noted that attending preschool was not necessary because what they believe is taught in preschool is repetitive to what is taught in kindergarten. However, five of the six participants who chose not to send their children to preschool indicated that they had to supplement their home instruction with opportunities outside of the home for their children to practice and learn how to socialize and communicate with other children their age.

Finding Nine. Participants who did not send their children to preschool believed that parents are the first teachers and can best prepare their children with foundational skills at home. Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison (2015) concluded that home educational activities were predictors of effective parental involvement and communication strategies for families and are consistent with the academic and social behaviors valued in preschool. Two of the participant who did not send their children to preschool noted that because they were "stay at home moms, they could teach their children themselves." The two participants also pointed out that "not everyone can stay at home as most homes need two sources of income just to survive."

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This research permitted twelve parents to share both their positive and negative lived experiences and how those experiences led to their perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and decisions about preschool. This study also revealed the importance of listening to the voice of parents regarding how they came to value a preschool experience and understanding why the parents

who elected not to send their children to preschool have perceived preschool to be unnecessary or not useful.

Implication One. Preschool leaders should provide support for parents of preschool-aged children. Parent support may also promote positive social change because parents may feel more comfortable with sharing the trials and successes of supporting their children at home with preschools that are welcoming and promoting parents to get involved in the schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2013). Feedback from parents may assist school districts, private and public preschools, and community centers with the effective implementation parent programs that focus on essential "school readiness" skills. Most importantly, Konerza (2012) found that parents' perceptions of their child's school readiness skills were not consistent with the expectations of preschool education programs and recommended support for parents to learn more about school readiness.

The anticipated expansion of parent support programs could create positions within the school division for educators to become liaisons in the community. These supports may help inform parents of the expectations of kindergarten about a child's social-emotional development and their reading, writing, and math skills (Center for Parent Resources, 2015).

Implication Two. Educational leaders should increase partnerships between parents and preschool teachers/leaders. This study contributes to the field of educational leadership as the study sought to explore the lived experiences of parents who elected to send or not to send their children to preschool and how those experience led to their decisions. Most decisions parents make not to send children to preschool are due to negative personal association with the school. Ways to negate this obstacle would be to send personal invitations, openly value parents' input, and build on the strengths that are unique to each family. The findings from this study revealed a

need for educational leaders to provide resources for parents, so that parents are more equipped to help their children learn the key school readiness skills. Paulsell et al. (2015) affirmed that successful preschool outcomes are evident when all stakeholders value increased parent access to services, continuity of caregiving for children, and parental involvement in children's early learning.

Although all of the participants in this study indicated that parental involvement was essential, half of them noted a need for educational leaders to foster a preschool environment that encourages positive relationships between parents and preschool teachers/leaders, such as providing training for parents of toddleraged children (between two and four years of age) to acquaint them with strategies and expectations of the necessary "readiness skills for all subjects" (Peterson, 2012). This training may potentially support increased preschool attendance in all communities, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Implication Three. Educational leaders should provide professional development opportunities for preschool teachers and elementary school principals to enhance their skills in understanding and evaluate "best practices" for literacy and language and social skills development in young children. Professional development opportunities for preschool teachers regarding appropriate behavioral and academic intervention for all children are critical to the successful implementation and expansion of preschools. Leary (2007) suggested that the achievement gap exists when students start kindergarten. Therefore, at-risk students must be placed on a level playing field in preschool.

The Paulsell et al. (2015) study recommended "enhancing capacity to offer high-quality service options, develop strong partnerships, and increase staff professionalism" (p. 15). The findings of this study can support local policymakers such as school boards, superintendents, and

principals in the creation of preschool committees comprised of parents, community leaders,

preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary school administrators that focus on

effective early intervention practices and training. Elementary principals also play an important

role in the success of kindergarten students during their first year of school. Likewise, additional

training may be provided to administrators to assist them in the guidance and evaluation of

preschool and kindergarten teachers. Professional development courses that provide

differentiated practices for social, emotional, and academic intervention for preschool-aged

children can promote social change, and this training may allow educators to feel more confident

and prepared to assess and teach all children the necessary readiness skills and meet their diverse

needs. Current research (Ramey et al., 2011; DHHS & OHS, 2014; Paulsell et al., 2015) supports

these findings as educators agree that further training is needed for preschool teachers in order to

develop and sustain quality preschool programs (Barnett et al., 2012; Duncan & Magnuson,

2013; USDOE, 2014; National Institute for Earl Education Research, 2015).

**Implication Four. Elementary school leaders should increase data collection from parents
and community members regarding the expectations of preschool and kindergarten
through ongoing surveys and other feedback options.** Participants in the study noted that

increased communication with and outreach toward parents and community groups are also

essential to successful student outcomes in kindergarten. Administering surveys to parents every

year to find out what their needs and expectations are for their children may inform elementary

school leaders of parents' diverse needs in regards to their children's education. The Office of

Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families

(ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), also recommends collecting

data from a range of respondents through surveys and qualitative interviews and focus groups

(Paulsell et al., 2015). With this information, preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers can participate in relevant training that will meet the diverse needs of parents and give parents strategies that can be used at home to support student learning (Gallagher, Clifford, & Maxwell, 2004). These levels of support and communication may also minimize potential disappointments and conflicts among parents, teachers, and community members regarding their knowledge of preschool and kindergarten readiness, as well as their attitudes and beliefs towards preschool (Kocyigit, 2015). These findings should be disseminated to community centers, family recreation centers, medical facilities, gyms, churches, and government resource facilities.

Implication Five. School leaders should distribute most current information about school readiness skills and school expectations to parents. Although parents who chose to educate their children, rather than send them to preschool, reported successful kindergarten outcomes, all of them mentioned teaching core competencies that included learning the alphabet, sounds, and number sense. The Office of Head Start (OHS) clearly outlines the social-emotional, and academic expectations for children who are 60 months of age-revealing the need for parents to be aware of the increased complexity of literacy, language, and emotionality of young children (Office of Head Start,2015). Therefore, additional information about what every preschool-aged child must acquire before entering school should be readily available to all parents. Sharing an overview of kindergarten curriculum/expectations and current research in regards to the impact of parental involvement may also be helpful to maintain smooth academic and social transitions into public school.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of parents who have or have not elected to send their children to preschool and the lived experiences that contributed to those

decisions. Further, the purpose was to examine the relationship between parent attitudes and beliefs about preschool and determine whether or not their lived experiences have attributed to what they have determined are the values of preschool. Findings from the study reveal that the participants have encountered both positive and negative experiences with preschool. Although some of their attitudes and beliefs differ about the benefits of preschool, all participants want their children to be successful in school and have made attempts to support their children's growth and development, both at home and at school.

Preschool is a phenomenon of study that continues to stimulate debates among educators, administrators, and policymakers since the 1800's. As current research reveals the implications of preschool, the findings from this study add to the existing body of research, which documents the successful outcomes that children obtain in kindergarten. Additionally, these results are attributed to learning the essential school readiness skills provided in preschool and in the homes where parents are actively involved in their child's social, emotional, and academic development. By developing supports for educators who teach preschool students and for parents of preschool aged children, leaders may increase preschool participation as school districts strive to provide clear expectations of kindergarten benchmarks. Additionally, by providing appropriate resources, educational leaders will supply parents and preschool teachers with the necessary skills to effectively prepare children for success in school.

The findings in this study and current research support the idea that early intervention in preschool matters. While no one place has been found in this study to prepare children for kindergarten, preschool does serve as an inclusive and consistent idea of schooling that links educational leaders, community members, educators, and parents. In a joint effort to close the achievement gap, these stakeholders play significant roles in increasing parental involvement,

improving school readiness skills, and nourishing social-emotional development in young children. By working together, children will not only be promised a great future, but also they will build an educational system where failure to read, write, and compute numbers in kindergarten will not be an option. As data from this study and current research reveals, this idea can become a reality with the support from a high-quality preschool for all children and effective early intervention programs for parents to attend and learn more about school readiness.

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Documenting Preservice Teacher Growth through Critical Assessment of Online Lesson Plans

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Abstract

This research explores the question of how students in a social studies methods course improve skills in analyzing and critiquing pre-existing lesson plans. It utilizes a pre-post authentic assessment tool to measure student growth in key skills of lesson plan critique over the course of one semester's methods instruction. The results support the finding that training preservice teachers in becoming critical consumers of online lesson plans and prepared materials is worthy of focus in methods courses.

As teacher educators, we want to believe that our students are learning and profiting greatly from our teaching (Hawley, Crowe & Brooks, 2012); yet, documenting growth can prove evasive (Gerwin, 2014, Mitton Kukner & Murray Orr, 2015). This study was designed to document the impact of a methods course on the students' development as teachers specifically related to their ability to be critical consumers of existing lesson plans. Developing the use of online lesson plan banks as a resource for training future teachers is an increased necessity to meet the needs of beginning teachers in the digital age (Beyer & Davis, 2012; Greene, 2016; Son & Hu, 2014). Students frequently lack the expertise or the initiative to question what they read on the Internet, including prepared classroom materials (Son & Hu, 2014). Thereby, teacher educators need to create opportunities to train and assess students in developing a "critical stance" toward the prepared teaching materials, especially those most readily available online (Beyer & Davis, 2012; Greene, 2016).

Thus we crafted the following research questions:

- In what ways, if any, did students demonstrate growth in successful lesson planning skills gained over the course of their social studies methods instruction as measured by critique of online lesson plans?

- To what extent can their growth be attributed to their methods course of the current semester?

Literature Review

Situating this study in the existing research on teachers' use of established curricular materials lends the appropriate context to view the findings. Cohen and Ball (1999) assert that teachers' interpretation of the materials they choose to use affects their effectiveness: "teachers mediate instruction: their interpretation of educational materials affects curriculum potential and use" (p. 4). Beyer and Davis (2009) identify two impactful practices of teachers--critiquing materials and making adaptations to them—as a process of "analysis" in their lesson plan design practices. They assert that teachers vary in their "pedagogical design capacity," which they describe as the ability to transform existing resources into usable materials to meet the needs of the context. They further contend that mistakes preservice and beginning teachers make in their adaptations of existing lessons center around "failing to make much needed modifications or making only superficial or counterproductive adaptations to materials lacking scope and depth" (Beyer & Davis, 2009, p. 682).

While studying science preservice teachers' use of prepared curriculum, Beyer and Davis (2012) found that students were limited in their application of best practices discussed in class when asked to revise existing online lesson plans. Students naturally fell back to old perceptions, despite their training, when assessing existing lesson plans. Their study demonstrated that once

students were given specific prompts to recall the frameworks discussed in methods class, they were able to implement more of the course objectives and take a more critical approach to the material.

Many studies assert that teachers rely on pre-printed curriculum materials to meet benchmarks and facilitate their ease of teaching especially in their early years (Beyer & Davis, 2009; Drake & Sherin, 2006; Kang, 2017; Remillard, 2005; Schwarz, et. al., 2008). Creating original lesson plans becomes less feasible with limited planning time and district-wide emphases on common benchmarks across grade levels (Duncan, Pilitsis, & Piegaro, 2010; Grossman & Thompson 2008; Remillard, 2005). In today's teaching environment, the most readily available resources are online (Son & Hu, 2014; Tanni, 2012). The need for teachers to create fully original lesson plans in the digital age is akin to the need of creating meals fully from scratch in the age of the microwave and prepared foods. Thus, it becomes imperative for methods professors to teach the skills of critiquing and improving existing lesson plans, given the almost archaic act of designing lesson plans entirely from scratch (Duncan, Pilitsis, & Piegaro, 2010; Kennedy, 2016).

Training preservice teachers how to assess and modify existing lessons has not generally been a part of the teacher education coursework in many methods classes (Grossman & Thompson, 2008). As Pam Grossman and Cathy Thompson (2008) reported, students were most often expected to create their own, not use the prewritten curriculum. Ball and Cohen (1996) claim that teachers prize those among the field who do not even use textbooks, let alone curriculum prepared by someone else. However, as Kennedy (2016) asserts, teachers are constantly making decisions and filtering appropriate materials and approaches, and thereby teacher education courses "must be designed to facilitate these judgments" (p. 11). Research on

assessing student growth in lesson plan development and adaptation is slim (Kang, 2017). Duncan, Pilitsis, and Piegaro (2010) conducted a self-study based on their science methods course over two semesters which addressed students' thinking during the adaptation of lesson plans. Their intervention incorporated both analysis of prepared materials alongside student creations of their own lessons. This synergy benefitted both skill sets after two full semesters of instruction, according to the researchers. Their research specifically cited improvements on students' ability to critique lesson plans and design inquiry-based revisions.

Another study involved having students annotate their lesson plans with comments attributing their curricular choices to certain theories and methods taught in class. By annotating their original lesson plans, students were able to connect the research in best practice to their own application in lesson design (Hughes, 2014).

In a study of 50 beginning teachers, Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, (2002) found that novice teachers identified additional training in designing and using curriculum as one of their greatest needs. Without more structured guidance with curriculum decision-making, these teachers responded that they were considering abandoning the profession given their feelings of inadequacy and lack of sufficient support. Thus, even the limited existing research suggests the benefit of including the practice of critiquing existing lesson plans in teacher training, yet most of this research stems from single case studies in science or mathematics methods courses. This current study adds to the literature on the use of lesson critique to train future teachers to be critical consumers of ready-made online lesson plans within the context of a social studies methods course.

Research Methodology

This research uses the lens of the self-study as a means to extrapolate best practices and areas to improve for the researchers' own practice, as well as functioning as a model of an effective self-assessment technique for teacher educators (Dinkelman, 2003; Kang, 2017; Schulman, 2000). As Hong and Lawrence state, "[self-study] helps teachers closely examine their practices" (p. 12) and echoing the words of Zeichner (2007), they point to the benefits of using self-study as a methods instructor to model the action research stance for students who will then use it in their own teaching. In his recent article, "Professionally Developing as a Teacher Educator," Loughran (2014) calls for teacher educators to engage in "rigorous self-study" as part of their contribution to the field.

Schulman (2000) offers an eloquent justification and call for more studies in the scholarship of teaching and learning, including self-study of professors of education. He argues we need these studies for three reasons: professional, practical, and policymaking/affecting. "Scholarship of teaching and learning supports our individual and professional roles, our practical responsibilities to our students and our institutions, and our social and political obligations to those that support and take responsibility for higher education." In this vein, we offer this study of a means of assessing our own professional course outcomes, evaluating our students' growth, giving them a means for visualizing their own progress over the semester, and reflecting upon it, as well as modeling good practice with authentic assessment.

Research context and participants

This pilot study was conducted with a class of 25 seniors, 11 males and 14 females, in a medium-sized university founded as a normal school and well-known for its teacher education program. Students take this social studies methods course as part of a pre-professional program

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culminating in a fifth-year Master's in the Art of Teaching degree. All students previously completed an introductory methods course where they are introduced to lesson planning in a non-content specific format. In addition, four students had previously taken a literacy course and all students were concurrently enrolled in a reading course

The methods course of interest for this study is MSSE 470H where students first become aware of the complexities and challenges of being a social studies teacher including cross cultural competencies, global-mindedness, and dedication to social justice. This is also their first introduction to the content-specific domain of writing social studies lesson plans. They emerge with varying degrees of confidence, which grows further and takes root fully over the course of the graduate year in the College of Education. Growth in the skills of lesson plan writing really happens in the first social studies methods course and is clearly underestimated by the students, who self-report low confidence in their abilities and skepticism about their progress. A means to document their growth thus becomes a useful tool to help bolster their confidence and their positive reflection for their growth over this course, since most have developed far greater skills and abilities than they give themselves credit. As Remillard (2005) asserts in her study of mathematics teachers, the success of a teacher's ability to evaluate critically and adapt existing curricular materials reflects their notion of themselves as teachers and learners, suggesting that self-efficacy is a contributing factor in the implementation of successful lesson adaptation.

Procedures

To create this assessment, a lesson plan, which aligned with the content taught at the beginning of the course including the teaching of exploration, empires, and controversial topics like Christopher Columbus, was carefully chosen from ShareMyLesson.com. The lesson plan is a primary source analysis and was submitted by the Gilda Lehr Institute as a sample lesson for

Columbus Day. It was chosen as a solid example in order to provide opportunities for students to identify positive attributes, as well as aspects to improve upon, as is the case for every lesson.

Students were given an overview of the research and gave informed consent to participate. During the second week of the semester, students took the pre-assessment. They had 25-35 minutes to familiarize themselves with the lesson and identify strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. Once they thoroughly analyzed the lesson plan, they were asked to rate it according to a five point Likert scale and decide whether they would use it, or not, including a justification for their choice answering questions such as why?, why not?, and/or how? This same lesson and evaluation format were employed for both the pre and post assessments administered approximately four months apart.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in various lessons to build their skills. For example, the course included three weeks of practical instruction on historical thinking skills. This centered on student-generated presentations on Lesh's textbook (2011), "*Why Don't You Just Give Me the Answer,*" which parses out seven historical thinking skills using an inquiry approach including critical reading of primary sources, exploring historical significance, examining text/context/subtext, employing multiple perspectives/point of view, developing historical empathy, and considering chronology/causation. Further methods for teaching were demonstrated throughout the semester which students experienced and catalogued including: structured academic controversy, interactive notebooks, cooperative grouping strategies, movement, political cartoons, GRASP activities, and geography-focused activities.

It is the goal for the methods course to transform students into teachers as change agents who help bring about a shift in practice toward skills-based instruction, inquiry-based learning, and training for globally-focused, active citizens. As such, lesson plans written throughout are

evaluated based upon their degree of student-centeredness and connection to real world learning and student lives. The objectives of the course, based on best practice, provided a framework for analyzing the effects of the methods course on this transformation over the course of four months.

Data for this study consisted of the pre- and post-assessments, as well as anecdotal class notes kept by the instructor which helped to flesh out the differences in performance and give context to some of the variations. Pre and post versions of the same students' work were de-identified and matched, and individual students were assigned numbers. Through multiple readings, in vivo codes (Patton, 2002) emerged and were organized into themes. The following categories were used to illustrate the findings:

- **Lesson plan components** – The most basic category reflects students ability to recognize the presence or absence of essential components of an effective lesson.

- **Instructional strategies** – This category reflects identification of existing strategies and suggestions of appropriate alternatives.

- **Thinking skills and engagement** –This category reflects recommendations to include higher-order thinking, authentic learning, connections to K-12 students' lives, and use of historical thinking strategies.

- **Self-efficacy** – This category reflects Bandura's (1986) definition of self-efficacy as the belief that one has the knowledge and skills and is worthy of critiquing materials in the public domain. This category includes an analysis of the level of critique students engaged in and how favorably they viewed existing resources.

Results and Analysis

Table 1. Pre/Post Assessment Data by Category

	# Students Identifying Factors in Pre-Assessment	# Students Identifying Factors in Post-Assessment
Lesson components (LC)		
ELL	5	9
Struggling learners	2	5
Differentiation	3	1
Hook	1	9
Movement	1	2
Assessment	1	2 (different from pre)
Objectives		2
Essential Questions		5
Wrap up		1 strength, 2 weakness
Values/Ethics		1
Strategies (S)		
Literacy	9	9
Vocabulary	4 strength, 1 weakness	3 strength, 4 weakness
Skill based	5	4

Teacher v. Student Directed	10 add groups 3 incorrect	3 add groups 6
Active Learning	0	1
Collaborative learning	0	1
Graphic Organizer	0	3
Think-Pair-Share	0	3
GRASP	0	3
Thinking skills and engagement (E)		
Real life application/ engagement	4	12
Higher-order thinking	0	12
Historical thinking	0	17
Self-efficacy (SE)		
Lacks depth of analysis	7	0
Re-order	1	2
Teaching Philosophy	0	2
Star rating	Average: 4	Average: 3.5

Lesson components. This data category encompasses whether students identified lesson components as strengths, weakness, or recommended improvements of the online lesson plan. Key components identified by the students were: Meeting the needs of individual students (differentiation), Hook, Movement, Assessment, Objectives, Essential Questions, Closure, and Values/ethics. As part of the intervention, a values/ethics component was taught as being a mandatory element of a social studies lesson, hence its inclusion in this category.

Of these listed components, only four were identified by students on the pre-assessment: Differentiation, Hook, Movement, and Assessment, with the additional four recognized on the post. While only one student identified the lesson as lacking a hook initially, on the post-assessment nine students noticed the missing hook, even commenting, "[it] lacks *engaging* hook (emphasis mine)". Differentiation was a more widely identified element on the pre-assessment, though few labeled it with that term, emphasizing the need to meet the needs of certain types of students such as ELLs or "struggling learners." This mirrored a general observation of the data that while students may have identified certain components of a successful lesson plan, they did not necessarily use the pedagogical terminology until after their methods class semester (post-assessment).

The total number of lesson plan components identified on the pre and post-assessments illustrates students' growing awareness and ability to recognize and label the essential elements of lesson planning over the course of the semester. In the pre-assessment, 13 were mentioned; in the post-assessment, triple that number (39) were listed.

Strategies. Similarly, the general increase in knowledge of best practice was evident in both the overall number of individual strategies mentioned, as well as the correct labeling of the specific strategy. Prior to grouping the data into categories, there were 21 pedagogical strategies

mentioned by name in the post-assessment, compared to 8 in the pre-assessment. Specific

strategies which were named in the post-assessment were all taught in the course, with the

exception of the word "wrap up". This term was taught in the methods course using the word

"closure"; however, it is possible that "wrap up" was used in a different course.

Literacy strategies were among the most widely reported. Four students cited the

vocabulary building benefit of the lesson, though one pointed out that this element made it "too

young" and recommended deleting the vocabulary focus as it was "inappropriate for middle

schoolers." Three of the same students maintained their position on the post-assessment while

one changed his/her opinion to that of a weakness. In addition, four students described the

vocabulary focus as a weakness on the post-assessment. These results suggest student

ambivalence about whether it is appropriate to directly teach vocabulary as part of an effective

lesson.

Choice of strategies reveals awareness of the difference between student-centered and

teacher-centered strategies. On the pre-assessment, 10/25 students identified the whole-class

instruction nature of the lesson as one drawback and suggested applying a "small group

strategy" to improve the lesson. Surprisingly, grouping was only mentioned by 3/25 on the

post-assessment, perhaps because students found other means of changing the focus to a more

student-centered approach (e. g. employing historical thinking strategies). On the pre-

assessment, three students incorrectly identified the lesson as student-directed and

recommended a more teacher directed approach. By the post-assessment, misconceptions

regarding student-centered compared to teacher-centered appeared resolved.

Thinking Skills & Engagement. On the pre-assessment, students primarily identified

this as a literacy lesson since it involves textual analysis of a primary source. Students thus

credited it with meeting the needs of ELLs and struggling learners through its use of vocabulary instruction. This might be explained by their concurrent reading course. Contrasting this identification with their post-assessment analysis finds their emphasis has moved from literacy to historical thinking skills, which reflects the emphasis in the social studies methods course. Whereas the pre and the post both had 9/25 students mentioning literacy, the post- had 17/25 identifying historical thinking skills either broadly or individually, representing an increase of nearly 100% over the literacy focus.

The use of primary sources was significantly emphasized in methods class due to it being the heart of historical thinking--source analysis--through concept attainment, multiple iterations of analysis, political cartoon strategies, and other primary source experiences. In the final assessment, students mentioned five distinct skills of historical thinking: critical reading of primary sources, asking questions of the source, considering context, point of view, historical significance, and discussing perspective. Adding together those who noticed the lack of higher-order thinking with those who called for more historical thinking leaves only four students who fail to mention these social studies thinking skills.

As noted above, one of the most dramatic areas of improvement was the inclusion of historical thinking skills as part of their expectation for a quality lesson (0/25 to 17/25). This extended to the expectation that the lesson should include higher-order thinking skills, according to the Bloom's model of thinking skills. In the post-assessment, 10 students noted the lack of higher-order thinking skills, while none did on the pre-assessment. In addition, however, two students described the level of thinking in the existing lesson as higher-order thinking, thus demonstrating that they understood the iteration of cognitive load differently; yet they were at least looking for evidence of higher-order thinking, even if they mislabeled some of what they

found. This leaves 12/25 isolating higher-order thinking skills as a necessary or beneficial part of effective lessons.

The need for student engagement in class is a well-documented foundation for best practice in a social studies classroom (NCSS, 2007). No one positively rated the lesson as having a connection to students' lives, either in the pre or the post. Prior to the methods class' emphasis on student engagement, four students recognized the lack of connection to student lives; however, by the end of the semester, nearly half (12/25) of the students suggested adding a real-life application to increase engagement. One of the more creative suggestion to increase engagement included using a text message as a hook to open the study of Columbus's letter.

Self-efficacy. On the pre-assessment, students' analyses lacked depth. Overall, students seemed insecure in their analysis, asking for more fleshing out of the lesson plan, more examples, and more structure. Despite their critiques, students overwhelmingly rated the lesson four stars out of five (a rating defined on the evaluation as "very good") and accepted the lesson plan with minor alterations. Their hesitant criticism revealed an insecure grounding in the skills of lesson planning, not altogether unexpected on a pre-assessment.

Post-assessment results pointed to students' greater confidence in their own abilities to assess and recommended changes to existing lesson plans, even those "published" online. While student appraisal of the value of the lesson plan averaged four stars on the pre-assessment, scores on the post-test averaged lower at 3.5. While students gained a greater confidence in their own abilities to ascertain positive and negative teaching attributes, they remained reluctant to critically evaluate the lesson as a whole.

This category reflected growth and transition from student to teacher. Student comments suggested development of personal philosophies of teaching social studies reflecting their own

individual beliefs and values. In addition, while students remained somewhat hesitant to question online sources, they began to develop creative and innovative alterations and revisions to improve lessons. For example, one student suggested simulating a mock trial for Columbus in order to bring the content to life.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings for the post-assessment are far more revealing of growth in student ability and perception. What was noticed by only a few--often only one--prior to the semester of methods instruction became much more common knowledge by the end of the semester. The data points to an overall growth in the students' ability to assess strengths and weaknesses of lessons, as well as their confidence to critique a printed/online lesson. The inclusion of lesson plan components, higher-order thinking skills and named strategies all demonstrate the effect of the methods on teacher training. Students' critiques centered largely on areas of emphasis from methods such as thinking skills and real world connection to student lives.

Granted, students took other courses simultaneously which also likely contributed to their growth; yet results of this study demonstrated the positive effect of methods course instruction on the professional growth of preservice teachers. This research contributes a valid model for methods instructors, yielding an authentic performance assessment of methods students involving the skills of lesson planning. Furthermore, it offers a practical use of the endless resources of lesson plans online from sites such as ShareMyLesson.com. As methods instructors realize the need to teach more information literacy skills, their students will likely become more savvy consumers and more confident in their ability to transform existing materials into effective lesson plans.

Theoretically, it would follow that as preservice teachers hone their skills of being critical consumers, they will also, hopefully, improve in their development of original lesson plans. The reflective skills enhanced through this process might in turn aid in teacher self-reflection, as well as improve their ability to contribute meaningfully to a professional learning community or team meeting where teachers work collaboratively to develop quality instructional plans and materials. Thus, there is much fodder for future research.

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Building Critical Community in Middle School Learning Environments

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Abstract

Research pertaining to institutions of public education reveals that curricular structures often function to produce and reproduce systemic inequalities. The following personal statement outlines a middle school teacher's attempt to address social reproduction in public education. By situating issues of inequity within a local context of socio-cultural reproduction, the author demonstrates parallels between written works of seminal, critical theorists demonstrating how socially reproductive structures persist under current standardized "high-stakes" educational reform agendas. The review highlights the transformative power of intersectionality, critical discourse, and personal narrative, along with the use of 21st century online platforms to connect students from privileged and disadvantaged communities as curricular structures with the power to interrogate dominant culture norms within public learning environments. Ultimately, the statement concludes with a call for the implementation of such curriculum to create and develop opportunities for new socio-cultural awarenesses in K-12 settings.

My graduate coursework in the Doctorate of Education program at Northeastern University-Charlotte has been a deep-dive immersion experience in intersectionality and vulnerability that has not only left me troubled and forever changed, but also inspired me to develop a curricular initiative entitled "Be the Change" for my eighth grade English students modeled after my graduate coursework. Building critical community has been the heart of my coursework as I've engaged in discourse that transgresses socio-cultural barriers with peers from all over the world (Bettez, 2011; Crenshaw, 1994). I have gained new insight into pervasive

perpetuations of social injustice occurring in our nation's system of public education as I've worked in collaboration with peers from different racial, economic, and cultural backgrounds to tackle problems contributing to and associated with social injustice. My time spent engaging with the personal narratives of classmates uncovered hidden biases and blind-spots rooted in the privileges I've been afforded as a white male from upper middle-class, small-town suburbia. Thus, I built the "Be the Change" project with a teacher and principal from a neighboring urban school district as a means for my students, also from a primarily white upper middle-class suburban school, to engage in a similarly intersectional experience with students across town from acutely different sociocultural backgrounds. It was my vision and hope that students from both schools would gain new social awareness by working in partnership on common projects through "blended" online and face to face learning platforms (Bettez, 2011; Crenshaw, 1994).

Intersectionality Leads to Personal Transformation

As the only white male in my doctoral cohort at Northeastern-Charlotte, my personal transformation and the uncovering of blind-spots to social injustice began on day one. I walked into a high-rise classroom overlooking downtown Charlotte, took a brief look around the room with rolling chairs, adjustable tables, and a room full of faces much different than my own, and quietly wondered if I was in the right place. It took being in the minority for the first time in my educational path to be cognizant of the stark contrast between black and white in an educational setting. It was in this setting that I grew to learn with and love the members of my cohort as we pressed through the grind of terminal academia. Dissonance led to discomfort which eventually led to transformation. Experts like Ladson Billings (1998) describe this as the disruption of white privilege by the personal narratives of others. This was the beginning of a new and better me. My vulnerability engaging with my classmates led me to empathize, listen, and internalize the voices

of others as my classmates described struggles foreign to me because of the invisibility of my white skin (p. 15-16).

The voice of one classmate, in particular, stood out when, during several learning exercises, we had the opportunity to work in collaboration and engage in discourse concerning our life experiences and how these experiences contribute to our positionality as educational leaders. For example, in an exercise to determine what we valued as actions of a leader, we discussed the meaning and power of voting privilege. I stepped to the side of the room that considered voting an act of citizenship and choice, but not necessarily an act of leadership. He, on the other-hand, quickly and boldly stepped to the other side of the room. Silently, I wondered why this was so important. My blind spot was instantly uncovered as he, nearly moved to tears, explained how voting has not always been a privilege for African Americans; therefore, in his rural African-American upbringing, to be a leader was to embrace your voice and vote.

We also discussed the "professional" appearance and actions of a school leader in the middle school setting. I described ways I "dress down" in order to create a comfortable climate for my students, while he described how he viewed "dressing up" and professional appearance as a way to disrupt stereotypes of a successful black man in a predominantly white, affluent setting. Furthermore, I listened to him describe how he advocates for students who attend his school from outlying areas in the name of desegregation. Because these students were often late from being "bussed-in," they were forced to skip breakfast. He described the burden of hour-long bus rides and described how white colleagues in his school failed to acknowledge this as they rushed them to class. He chose to pull these students from class and make sure they were able to eat before the day began. After hearing his story, I reinstituted a practice once done religiously as a new teacher. I restocked my desk with breakfast food. My learning experiences with members of

my cohort led to the realization my naïve illusions and early failures to recognize privileges

afforded me as a white male in America. My positionality stemmed from a stance of race, class,

and gender–blindness rooted in the invisibility of my race, and an inclusion in upper-middle-

class dominant culture (Franklin, 2014).

Transformation Leads to a New Personal Pedagogy

My growth and development as a scholar practitioner shifted my positionality leading to

a new personal pedagogy. I began to realize when it comes to curriculum, standardized content

should only serve as a "road" map for more authentic learning structures to surface as the empty-

space of that map becomes filled with students engaged and empowered in the process of

transforming their world. If educators fail to shift their gaze from bold content lines to the

implicit "curriculum" found in faces, voices, and experiences that walk through the school's

doors, then we become complicit in what McCombs (2003) labels as an "educational paradigm

or reform agenda [that] puts something other than the learner (e.g. knowledge content standards)

or learning (performance skills and achievement measures) at the center of instructional

decision-making" (p.96). This type of curriculum causes both learners and teachers to suffer

from realizations the system is not about them or responsive to their needs. Individuals become a

sidebar in the learning environment; recognizing who they are and what they need is not factored

into the learning process (McCombs 2003). The tragic consequence of classrooms which take the

form of a factory line is that alienation and disengagement become precursors for

disempowerment. Disempowerment becomes a death knell in the education of many whose lives

exist underneath lines of marginalization (Hooks, 1994). If school leaders continue to ignore

issues of injustice and inequity in curriculum, marginalized students and students of privilege

alike will continue to matriculate in blind ignorance. We will miss opportunities to take our students to points of vulnerability necessary for transformational change.

A Local Problem Emerges Under My New Critical Lens

After gaining new eyes in my doctoral cohort, the need to take my own middle school students to a similar place of vulnerability came forth during a summertime professional development exercise. For this exercise, I was grouped with three female teachers all from the same mostly affluent suburban school district in Southwest Virginia. The goal of the exercise was to engage in a group observation of a physical space to address the following question: What makes a thriving community? We then had to return to the conference and present our findings to the rest of our colleagues. My group and I chose to venture three miles into downtown and interview young "twenty-somethings" in the area to gain a sense of whether they would choose to locate in this area for a career. As we engaged in these interviews, the need and desire to confront locally oppressive structures emerged, as I took notes of interviewee responses and the reactions of my colleagues.

First, we went to a local cafe and encountered a white female in her early 20's who graduated from the area's most affluent high school. She was a Bosnian war refugee whose family relocated to this area in the late 1990's. She described her educational experience as "taken for granted" while at the same time one she was "very proud of." She also discussed a desire to return to this area after college and give back to the community as a social worker. She was inspired by her high school and community college teachers and stated she loved the people and small town culture. She felt this was a place where she had opportunities for success. My colleagues suggested we take her picture to be used in a presentation of our findings when we returned to the high school.

The next person we interviewed was a white male in his late 20's who attended the city schools growing up. "Jake" worked in the market at a Natural Foods Co-Op and also described the area in a very positive light. As he polished beer bottles, he spoke of his interest in the town's "Local Foods Movement" and all of the fun outdoor activities surrounding the area. He felt like there were plenty of opportunities both socially and career-wise. He stated he hoped to become further involved in local non-profit work. My colleagues also suggested we take his picture for our presentation.

In contrast, we interviewed an African American female from the area's least affluent urban high school. The third interview began in much the same way as the first two. The interviewee described how she liked the area, the opportunity, and the people,but then she was interrupted. A male friend, who was about ten years older, had been listening and stated, "You....lying". When asked to elaborate, she stated she didn't feel accepted in the area and felt like she would be more accepted in a city like Atlanta where she felt there would be more opportunity. When the interview was over, no one suggested we take her picture as we proceeded to rejoin the other groups involved in the activity.

After conducting these interviews, my colleagues seemed to shy away from presenting the final interview to the rest of the group composed of teachers from the area's two most affluent high schools. They kept saying things such as, "We want to keep our presentation positive." One teacher even stated how she "took one for the team" by conducting the third interview. She went on to state, "I think she may have been high.." I was shocked and embarrassed by the thoughts of fellow educators laden with prejudice and racial profiling. I began to think herein lies one of the most deeply rooted issues of inequity in my hometown: the failure of those in the "culture of power" to acknowledge, see, and be willing to address obvious

inequity and prejudice (Delpit, 1988). Thus, I decided I'd bring forth the third interview as we presented our observations to the rest of the group. I did not call out my colleague's blatantly prejudiced comments in front of the group; however, I did point out the different experiences and perspectives of those we interviewed. I discussed the difference between the third interview further to suggest we as educators take a hard look at existing social structures, our practice, and the implications of inequity these interviews seemed to reveal. Since the quantity of interviews was limited to three due to time constraints, I wondered aloud whether these were just individual perspectives or perhaps indicative of deeper social justice issues in our community? After our presentation, I sat down and a female colleague who is African American, whispered across the table, "I don't think those are isolated perspectives." I agreed and used the remainder of the in-service to plan and develop a plan for building critical community into my classroom.

"Building the Plane as We Flew": A Curricular Project Designed For Change

I launched the "Be the Change" pilot project over the 2015-2016 school year as a means for students from two local middle schools with acutely different socio-cultural populations to leverage blended online and face-to-face learning environments as opportunities to enhance their socio-cultural awareness, become empowered through intersectional student-driven classroom orientations, and impact local change through their work with mentors from local non-profit organizations.

The planning for this project began with a teacher and a school administrator from an urban school in my local community about two weeks before the school year. Our goal was to facilitate face-to-face as well as synchronous and asynchronous online "third-spaces" (Caruthers and Friend, 2014) as a platform for students to partner and collaborate on common projects. Though the students involved in this project would find commonality living in the same greater

metropolitan area, their socio-cultural backgrounds were vastly different. The majority of my suburban middle school's students came from a position of affluent, white privilege while the majority of the students from the urban middle school came from a position of economically challenged, black, non-dominant culture.

Since this was a pilot project, we built the plane as we flew. We set the context by enlisting educational leaders and mentors from local non-profits as guides through four exercises in vulnerability that ultimately culminated in a project designed to impact local change. Our first two face-to-face meetings were at the new library just down the road from my suburban school, and our last two meetings were held at the new library in the city. This was done intentionally because the libraries are sources of pride for students in both communities. We knew they'd be neutral ground, whereas systemic inequity is evident in both school buildings. The suburban school has millions of taxpayer dollars evident in its aesthetic beauty. The urban school, on the other-hand, boasts new renovations on the inside but still has the appearance of an 80-year-old building on the outside.

The project began with an initial face-to-face meeting with approximately 90 students arranged in 16 groups of five to six. We started with a "people scavenger" for students to become more comfortable with each other and gain a sense of their commonalities and differences, then student groups were asked to research world activists who had taken on "problems of practice" they had shown interest in. Problems ranged from animal abuse and environmental protection to racism and the preservation of women's rights. The persons of interest for this study ranged from Jackie Robinson to Bob Barker. After students began their research in a face-to-face setting, they moved their work to a virtual setting using both district's "Office 365" program to collaborate

and complete power-point presentations highlighting their person of interest. Students presented these initial projects to an audience of classmates at their home school.

The second face to face meeting was initiated with a "circles of character" icebreaker where students shared "I am" poems to describe their family background and customs and culture that defined them as individuals. After the icebreaker, we moved the students back into groups where they would work with mentors from local non-profits to analyze how their chosen problems of practice were manifested locally. Finally, the student groups began to brainstorm ideas for creating public service announcements for their mentors' organizations. After the second face to face meeting, student groups collaborated using Office 365 over the course of a month to develop working rough drafts of their PSAs for their mentors.

The third face to face meeting commenced at the downtown library with the idea of creating a "beautiful work." Students watched the video entitled "Austin's Butterfly." The video demonstrated the power of feedback and how it takes multiple drafts and mistakes for one to create a "beautiful work" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqh1MRWZjms). After watching the video, groups received critical feedback from their mentors concerning what they wanted in a PSA for their organization. The organizations included Feeding America, The Rescue Mission, Angels of Assisi, Co-Lab, Community Gardens Association, Points of Diversity, The Women's Center, and Local Colors. The work continued over Office 365 a final month as students completed final drafts and provided their mentors with the products they wanted to impact local change.

The final phase of the project was a culminating "Exhibition Day" at the downtown library. This phase of the project was an outreach to the public sector and an opportunity to celebrate student work. Students displayed and discussed their work for these organizations

before an audience of parents, faculty and staff, school board members, and local government officials. Ultimately, the project demonstrated that middle school classrooms can be fertile ground for intersectional experience (Crenshaw, 1994) and to establish equitable and empowering classroom orientations.

Audiences and Implications

This project is of high relevance for those interested in the reorientation of classroom instruction from teacher-directed to student-driven learning environments, as well as those interested in using school curriculum to dismantle structures that only support the interests of those in a "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988). Anyon (1981) suggests that "overdetermined classroom productions help to produce social actors who, in their behavior in society, produce and reproduce the 'system'...however, educators can do a great deal to transform cultural expressions of resistance into direct political action to change the economic and social system." Substantiating proof of concept for student-driven, non-reproductive classroom orientations must take place for projects such as "Be the Change" to become the norm rather than the exception.

On a national scale, the insight generated from this project may act as a catalyst for developing new awareness of latent, socially reproductive structures embedded within public school learning environments. It may also further substantiate student-driven classroom orientations as contexts for learner empowerment and the disruption of socio-cultural inequities. Recently, researchers have proposed that counter-discourse and intersectional experiences become common practice for both educators and students if educational equity is to become a reality (Lewis, Ketter, and Fabos 2001; Beach, Parks, Thein, & Lensmire, 2007, Anders et al., 2005).

Locally, teachers and school leaders in the greater metropolitan area could use the "Be the Change" project as a proof of concept for future collaborative efforts between teachers and students in the county and city public school systems. Partnerships consisting of teacher and student collaborations between the two school systems have the potential, through intersectional experience and critical dialogue (Anders et al., 2005; Beach et al., 2007), to expose and change local inequities that reflect a distinct "culture of power" (VDOE, 2014; Ladson Billings, 1998). Such dialogue and intersectional experience between educators and students are essential for establishing curricular platforms to induce individual and collective transformation (Beach et al., 2007). Furthermore, such transformations are necessary for exposing and disrupting "culture of power" influences within classroom environments that perpetuate social power structures in area schools (Delpit, 1988).

Stakeholders and Resources

For the "Be the Change" project to progress into an effort that has a sustaining impact, the venture must continue to involve a variety of stakeholders and be matched with available resources in the community (Smith and Peterson, 2006). Smith and Peterson (2006) categorize these resources into three groups: human capital, financial capital, and intellectual capital. First, any effort seeking social impact must establish a foundation of human capital from across the education, business, nonprofit, and public sectors (Smith and Peterson, 2006). Educators must transcend classroom walls and network to create deeper learning opportunities for their students. By tapping into local resources and forming substantive collaborations with mentors from the community, learning becomes more relevant and exciting, and students engage to a point where they take ownership of the process (Martinez and McGrath, 2014).

This step will be useful for securing the financial capital necessary to maintain the "one-to-one" laptop initiative that makes this collaborative project possible. The financial investments the schools have made to establish their one-to-one programs provide pictures of the financial investments necessary for projects like "Be the Change" to occur. Without such capital, blended learning opportunities that rely so heavily on web-based technologies would be nonexistent. Thus, garnering the support of stakeholders who hold public influence is necessary for securing the financial capital required to move the project from the pilot stages to a sustainable initiative.

In addition to financial and human capital, intellectual capital is also imperative for the "Be the Change" project to be conducted with fidelity. Smith and Peterson (2006) define intellectual capital as the "ideas, practices, and policies that feed entrepreneurs ongoing understanding of where opportunities lie, what lessons can be learned from the work that is already happening, and what changes need to take place to maximize success." Currently, both county and city schools have on-going professional development designed to promote 21st century instructional reform. The focus of these efforts is to promote skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, community building, and critical thinking through student-centered classroom orientations; therefore, projects like the "Be the Change" effort must be conducted with reciprocity. The educators involved in carrying out such projects must continually work as learner-practitioners seeking the intellectual capital to refine and develop their craft so they can enhance the learning experiences for students. They must also simultaneously use their work in such projects as proof of concept to support 21st century reform.

Barriers and Challenges

 In spite of the opportunity the "Be the Change" project provided for empowering students to challenge dominant culture norms, enhancing socio-cultural awareness, and

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developing 21st century skills to impact local change, there were still challenges and barriers due to standardized models of education and pervasive sociocultural disparities. First, efforts to achieve results on state-mandated tests made it quite a challenge for both middle schools to work around formative assessments, test-prep, etc., and to engage in these meetings and take the time to work collaboratively online. Furthermore, if educators are ever to cure the disease of deficient, socially reproductive curriculum on a national scale, they must take local steps to expose the tortuous logic that uses the tragic results of high stakes tests as an argument for their continuation. Local educators must transform the nature of socially reproductive curriculum rather than put measures in place to stop the bleeding. When curriculum is designed with end goals attached to performance on standardized tests rather than the development of autonomous learners, the "standard" for educational reform remains about results rather than empowerment. Curricular structures in the schools should be transformative instruments to empower and promote social justice and equality rather than socially reproductive instruments that perpetuate class and race-based inequalities.

Conclusion

In sum, there has been an observed correlation between socio-cultural disparities and testing data taken from the county and city public schools (Virginia Department of Education, 2014). Partnerships consisting of teacher and student collaborations between the two school systems have the potential, through intersectional experience and critical dialogue (Crenshaw, 1994; Bettez, 2011; Anders et al., 2005; Beach et al., 2007), to expose and change these inequities that reflect a distinct, local "culture of power" (Ladson Billings, 1998). Advancing and establishing proof of concept for projects such as the collaborative "Be the Change" partnership between two middle schools of acute sociocultural difference can be early steps toward the use

of curriculum to impact local change and promote social justice within the institution of education. Ultimately, experiences building critical community in a doctoral learning environment not only revealed my blind spots regarding issues of social justice, but these experiences also had an impact on my instructional practice.

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Developing Mentorship Skills in Clinical Faculty: A Best Practices Approach to Supporting Beginning Teachers[1]

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Abstract

Effective mentoring programs help to recruit new teachers and improve teacher retention rates (e.g. Ingersoll & Strong, 2011, Rideout & Windle, 2010). Many school districts require mentoring programs for new teachers; however, they do not always have the resources to prepare their teachers to mentor beginning teachers. Clinical faculty (CF), who are teachers trained to mentor student teachers, are a resource with existing expertise in mentorship. A curriculum for CF was designed, piloted, and implemented using a best practice utilization-focused approach (Patton, 2008). Its focus is on meeting school division needs to equip CF to better mentor beginning teachers, particularly in identified critical shortage areas. The curriculum deepens and expands CF capabilities to more effectively model, observe, and explore data collaboratively with first-year teachers, moving them from mentoring pre-service to in-service teachers. This paper describes the design of and findings from the implementation of a mentor training curriculum for supporting beginning teachers.

"While not the entire solution, carefully designed mentoring programs can help school divisions recruit new teachers, improve teacher retention rates and help expand the skills and knowledge of new and veteran teachers" (Virginia Department of Education, 2016).

School-based mentoring programs are based on a vision and understanding of good teaching and learning in order to create opportunities to support meaningful experiences for novice teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). These meaningful experiences should help prepare novice teachers for the realities of school-wide instruction, curriculum, and behavior management (Carver, Margolis & Williams, 2013). Research shows that beginning teachers who participate in mentorships with other teachers are less likely to change schools or leave teaching early in their career (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Rideout & Windle, 2010). Feiman-Nemser (2001) noted "mentoring has the potential to foster powerful teaching and to develop the dispositions and skills of continuous improvement" (p. 28).

Student teachers in traditional pre-service teacher preparation programs receive mentor teacher support during student teaching. School boards also require their schools to provide any probationary teacher with a mentor teacher (Education Accountability and Quality Enhancement Act of 1999). Expectations from national higher-education accreditation organizations are to support the continuous improvement of candidates' performance after they have been hired as in-service teachers (CAEP, 2013). Unfortunately, a review of the literature on mentoring has shown that without well-developed mentoring programs and mentor training seeking to increase mentor effectiveness, mentorship alone will not necessarily support and provide new teachers with the benefits that are known to exist (Wong & Wong, 2012). Part of the issue is that school divisions may not have the resources to launch effective mentor programs to help beginning teachers make a successful transition into teaching, improve teacher retention, and ultimately improve student performance (VDOE, 2000). Therefore, our aim is to share the design and findings from a mentor training curriculum developed to support beginning teachers.

Considerations for Mentorship Programs

In many school settings, a principal or central office administrator usually assigns mentors based on content area or availability, but there are multiple configurations for mentor teachers working in school-based programs (Rowley, 2006). Many variables can affect the success of mentorship programs (mentor behaviors, mentor-mentee relationships, and the mentor's instructional expertise), and thus these factors should be considered in an effective program design. Because mentor teachers can have a profound influence on the development of beginning teachers, they should be carefully selected and thoroughly trained (Zimpher & Howey, 2005).

First, mentors participating in a formal mentorship program should be effective communicators, trustworthy, non-judgmental, empathetic, and respectful (Davies & Gibbs, 2011). Other important considerations include the mentor's ability to give meaningful feedback and challenge when appropriate, promote self-reflection, and be an exemplary role model (Cottingham, DiBartolo, Battistoni, & Brown, 2011; Davies & Gibbs, 2011). Successful mentors implement specific practices such as giving challenging and focused assignments, providing exemplary leadership, acting as a role model, and using encouragement and praise (Haliru & Kabir, 2011).

Mentor behavior is critical because mentee outcomes are likely to be a direct result of the mentorship relationship (Allen & Eby, 2003). Productive mentorship relationships occur when a new teacher's beliefs and understandings are perceived as being appreciated and considered by their mentor. Moreover, a mentor must understand that a mentee's needs may be different then his/her own, and he/she must be aware of and consider gender and cultural issues (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O'Brien, 1995; Ragins, 1997). Professional development programs need

to incorporate skills and activities that will prepare mentors to be successful and aligned to meet school divisions' expected mentorship outcomes.

Effective mentorship programs should be developed as a purposeful process through effective systems design. Allen, Eby, and Lentz (2006) found that training alone was not enough to determine mentorship effectiveness, but that the entire mentorship program had to be high quality. They recommended that the outcomes of the mentorship experience should be met through conceptual and theoretical work by examining the process that links a formal design with successful outcomes. Joyce and Showers (2003) advocated that training must allow the mentor to develop knowledge and understanding of concepts and strategies and to demonstrate and practice skills with their peers. Using these research-based practices in effective mentorship programs, the remainder of this paper describes the 6-step process of designing and implementing the mentor training curriculum, reflecting upon the outcomes, and setting follow-up goals for this professional development.

Step 1: Program Design – Partnership and Alignment

The mentor training curriculum was grounded in the work of a long-standing regional partnership of four higher education institutions (IHEs) and seven PreK-12 school divisions. Based on a growing focus on redesigning the connection between teacher education coursework in colleges and universities and PreK-12 field experiences where cooperating teachers assist pre-service teachers to successfully accomplish complex teaching practices (Zeichner, 2010), this partnership helps develop *clinical faculty* (CF) – teachers who are trained through comprehensive programs to mentor student teachers (Childre & Van Rie, 2015; Paulsen, DaFonte, & Barton-Arwood, 2015). CF develop knowledge and skills related to adult learners, observation, and conferencing so that they could better support student teachers in their

classrooms. Therefore, as mentors for pre-service teachers, CF have already been vetted through their schools and partner IHEs to be trained and work effectively with mentees. Based on the existing CF program, school divisions and IHEs identified the capacity to extend mentoring from supporting student teachers to supporting beginning teachers.

Because the intended audience was practitioners, the program design needed to align with school district outcomes. According to Patton (2008), programs will only be evaluated as effective if they are deemed to be useful by their intended users. Therefore, the end-users must be clearly identified and feel ownership for the process. Given that multiple stakeholder input is a best practices approach to determine the variables that need to be considered for planning, revising or evaluating curriculum outcomes (Engel, 2009), the curriculum used multiple stakeholder perspectives, including both PreK-12 and IHE developers, to strengthen the program. The curriculum development was based on the precept that it had to meet school division needs; therefore, a needs assessment completed by school divisions was analyzed. Self-efficacy and an increased sense of mentoring effectiveness as a result of the program were measured through a pre- and post-survey of participants. Finally, to assess the program, expected outcomes and outcome indicators were identified (Patton, 2008; Reisman, Gienapp, & Stachnowiak, 2007), including identifying differences between student teachers and beginning teachers, developing strong mentoring relationships, having effective mentoring conversations, and implementing instructional coaching.

Step 2: Program Development – Needs Assessment and Steering Committee

A qualitative, open-ended needs assessment was sent as an email to central office administrators at the seven partner school divisions. The needs assessment gathered responses to the following questions from the partnership schools:

a) What is the current mentor program for new teachers in your division?

b) What do you like about your current program?

c) What do you dislike about your current program?

d) What would you like to see happen in a new mentor teacher program to use in your division?

e) What are the critical shortage teaching areas for your division?

The partnership's central office contact from each division responded to the open-ended questions via email. Responses from all seven school divisions were compiled and evaluated for consistent themes, as well as for distinct differences. These themes and differences shaped the development of the mentor training curriculum so that it reflected the particular needs of the teachers who would be attending the workshop. Results of the needs assessment showed that all seven of the school divisions assigned an experienced or veteran teacher to mentor a new teacher. In four of the seven school divisions, assigned mentors attended orientation or training meetings annually at the beginning of the school year. In the other divisions, mentors were teachers chosen because they previously participated in a professional development program where listening or coaching skills were emphasized and/or because they were experienced teachers in the same content area as the new teacher. School division administrators indicated that reviewing data and feedback from mentors and mentees, as well as providing training and resources for the mentees, were successful components of their current mentor program. All divisions pointed out that due to limited staffing and budget, it was challenging to provide the supports and mentor training that would meet their goals for developing new teachers. Five of the seven school divisions indicated that additional mentor teacher training would be helpful for their division, and the other two divisions indicated that a follow-up program after the first year

would be helpful if they had the resources. There was agreement that a mentorship program should expand beyond the mentees' first year. The primary critical teaching shortage areas in all school divisions were special education, math, and science teachers.

Stakeholders from IHEs and school divisions worked together as a steering committee to design a workshop curriculum based on the needs assessment findings. It was determined that the purpose of the workshop was to augment the current division-wide mentoring programs, rather than replace them. Over a period of seven months, the committee met five times for a total of about 12 hours as a full group to plan the development of the curriculum. The group created a shared vision for the project including shared goals, learning objectives, and the outline for the curriculum. Decisions about the curriculum were made through discussion and group consensus. The IHE committee members recognized that the school-based members were both stakeholders and customers as defined by Douglas (2011) in that they are not only affected by the outcome of the product, but their teachers were also the recipients of the service.

Based on the needs findings and the current research on mentorship, steering committee members developed a framework for the curriculum. A two-day workshop was developed so that it aligned with the current partnership practice for CF training. The steering committee identified the topics to be covered: the new teacher experience, mentoring relationships, mentoring conversations, coaching strategies, developing data-driven conversations, feedback, video observation and coaching, and sustaining the relationship.

Step 3: Program Process – Participants and Evaluations

The curriculum of the workshop was designed to provide opportunities to enhance mentoring skills with active CF who were already deemed effective mentors in their school

divisions. Requests for nominations to participate in the initial workshop were sent out to school divisions where teachers with active CF status were currently teaching. Participants had to be approved by both their school principal and a central office designee. Criteria for selection included active CF status, a demonstrated desire to mentor colleagues, effective communication, strong human relationship skills, strong organizational skills, and skills in reflective practice. Additionally, we requested that some of the nominees' assignments reflect the critical shortage areas identified by the school divisions.

Based on nomination responses, 60 active CF members agreed to participate. These participants included 31 PreK-5th grade teachers, eight middle school math, science, language arts, and social studies teachers, 13 high school teachers in social studies, English, math, and Spanish, and seven K-12 specialty teachers including physical and health education, instrumental music, special education, and literacy intervention. Despite the school divisions' indications of critical shortage areas in the needs assessment, only one special education teacher was identified to attend the pilot, whereas nine of 60 participants (15%) were math and science teachers.

These participants completed a pre- and post-workshop survey on self-efficacy and mentor effectiveness and submitted evaluations of the workshop. The surveys were sent with a *Qualtrics* link via email, and the workshop evaluations were completed during days one and two of the workshop. The self-efficacy inventory used was the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale,* which had 24 items across three factors – efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) provided evidence of construct validity and reported a reliability coefficient of 0.94. The *Mentorship Effectiveness Scale* used 12 items based on characteristics exhibited by effective mentors.

All committee members facilitated the two-day workshop. At the end of each day, participants completed anonymous evaluations that separately assessed the morning and afternoon sessions. A final reflection provided information that summarized the participants' overall learning, their critique of the structure of the workshop, and goals and action planning, as well as questions for their administrators. The results of these evaluations were used to inform decisions for revising the curriculum.

Step 4: Program Results – Efficacy and Reflections

According to Darling-Hammond (2006), to make sense of findings when assessing program outcomes, multiple measures and aggregated data should be used to examine trends and allow a comprehensive view. Evaluative data from the initial workshop enabled the committee to make revisions and shape plans for the future of this project. The following section describes the results of data collected to inform curricular revision, as well as the reflection data that describes program outcomes.

Self-Efficacy and Mentor Survey

The curriculum was developed with the belief that mentors who attended the workshop would have increased teacher self-efficacy and/or an increased sense of mentoring effectiveness, which was measured through a pre- and post-survey. Participants completed a self-efficacy survey prior to and immediately after the workshop. Survey questions reflected their beliefs about their impact on children's learning and their beliefs about their ability to mentor a beginning teacher. The scale for each item ranged from 1 to 5. For all items reflecting participants' ability to impact children's learning, the average scores ranged from 3.8 (*How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?*) to 4.9 (*To what extent can*

you make your expectations clear about student behavior?). The average scores for items related

to mentoring new teachers were slightly less, with a range from 3.5 (*I feel that I can challenge

the teachers I mentor to extend their abilities.*) to 4.0 (*I feel that I can demonstrate professional

integrity to the teachers I mentor.*)

Self-Efficacy (SE) scores were summed over the 24 items. Each item had a 1-5 scale so

totals could range from 24-120. A *t*-test was used to determine significant changes from pre- to

post-test. At pre-test, the SE average was 103.25 (*n*=51, actual range 84-119); the mean rose

slightly at post-test to 106.47 (*n*=36, actual range 90-120). The changes were not significant.

Items related to mentoring were then analyzed; the 12 mentor items were totaled with possible

composite score ranges from 12-60. The mean rose slightly from pre-test to post-test, from 44.88

(*n*=51 with scores ranging from 34-48) to 46.08 (*n*=36, ranges of scores 38-48). A *t*-test

indicated that the difference between groups was not significant.

The workshop was evaluated on a 1-5 scale in terms of overall process and for each

session. The average score for day one process was 4.53 (*n*=60) and day two process was 4.64

(*n*=55). The ratings were negatively skewed with no process ratings of "1" or "2" given by

participants for either day. Qualitative comments from evaluations were reviewed by the steering

committee to revise and implement the curriculum. The summative reflection data discussed in

the next section was used to evaluate if outcomes were being met.

Curriculum Reflections

During the pilot workshop, participants were asked to evaluate each session and provide a

summative final reflection. Comments were anonymous and aggregated across three categories –

elementary, middle, and high school. Participants responded to six prompts on the final reflection. Findings presented here will focus on the italicized prompts below:

- *Three important ideas I learned during the two days*

- Two things that facilitated my learning

- *One thing I plan to do with this information*

- Resources or support that would help me be an effective mentor

- *I would personally like to accomplish the following by the end of next school year*

- Questions I have for my administrator to become an effective mentor

The final reflection was completed by all 60 participants (36 elementary teachers, 11 middle teachers and 13 secondary teachers).

Important ideas learned. The workshop was designed to present a number of concepts pertinent to being an effective mentor. From the participants' perspectives, four concepts emerged as most important to them. These included types of feedback, approaches to mentoring, the role of personality in communicating with others, and the difference between coaching and mentoring.

Hattie's (2007) definition of four types of feedback was captured as one of the most important ideas learned from the workshop by 88.3% of respondents: 48% indicating it was the most important idea. Rich descriptions of why this was important were not evident in most responses; however, 22% of participants indicated feedback needs to be specific, timely, and constructive, and another 10% identified praise as an ineffective form of feedback, with one response acknowledging, "Praise by itself is pointless." Additionally, information on the approaches to mentoring, including the direct approach, collaborative approach, and reflective

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approach, was identified as a top three topic of importance in 38% of responses. Although only two respondents listed it first, 14 comments had approaches to mentoring listed as the second item. No one provided additional information other than just listing it.

Personality was covered as a topic through a brief personality survey to create awareness of how people's personalities can impact relationships. Over 25% of the participants listed this exercise as important for their learning. One respondent wrote, "[I learned] my personality traits and how I can better build relationships being more aware, how to approach conversations with my mentee that may be difficult." Another stated, "[I learned to be] thinking about personality types when dealing with my peers." A third comment was, "[I learned] differences in personality types and how these can prove to be obstacles."

Goal-orientation. When participants responded to the prompt *I would personally like to accomplish the following by the end of next school year,* two themes emerged. Their comments could be grouped as either specific or global goal-orientation. About half of the participants (49%) identified specific actions that could be measured or observed, which fell into five categories:

- Giving good feedback
- Developing a survival guide for new teachers
- Observing their mentee's teaching
- Creating a school or division mentoring program
- Using video to capture teaching episodes

Global goals from 51% of participants were general statements of what they hoped to accomplish. Five mentors specifically included retention goals for their mentees to return to their

school division in Year 2. The following sample responses from the reflection suggested mentors wanted to be successful ("I would like to be a mentor/coach that anyone would approach regardless of 'new teacher' status") and to develop strong relationships with their mentees ("Have a successful relationship with a new teacher in a mentor role").

When given the prompt - *One thing I plan to do with this information* - participants identified concrete, specific actions they planned to take. Feedback continued to be a focus of many participants with responses such as "Improve types of feedback I give. Make sure it is meaningful and has the right purpose" and "Provide better feedback. Moving my feedback to the self-regulation stage but recognizing that sometimes it needs to be task-oriented." Five participants focused on the personality activity stating, "Use the animal personality survey to help me know how to approach my mentee and use their strengths." A large number of responses related to advocating for mentoring within participants' schools and school divisions. One participant wrote, "Go to county officials and ask them to put a structured Mentor-Mentee program in place. Help us make this happen."

Step 5: Program Reflection – Explanation of Findings

The mentor curriculum was designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of CF as they move into the role of mentor for new teachers. Overall, outcomes for the curriculum including understanding beginning teacher needs, developing strong mentoring relationships, having effective mentoring conversations, and instructional coaching were met based on reflection data. Whereas the efficacy survey results indicated that the participants did not have an increase in either their self-efficacy or mentorship efficacy, it made sense that efficacy would not necessarily increase. The participants were already identified by their school division as expert teachers and

experienced mentors. They came to the training with strong skills and two days of content and practice would likely not change their sense of efficacy.

Interestingly, feedback was identified as a powerful learning idea and a plan of action. This was a surprising finding from effective, veteran teachers; feedback has undoubtedly been part of their skill set for years. While research on feedback in terms of amount, timing, and mode has been available to teachers since the mid-1980s (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001), the research on types of feedback (task, process, self-regulation, and self) included in the curriculum is relatively new to education (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This was likely new information for participants and therefore salient.

The topic of mentoring approaches was clearly a strong learning point for participants. Marzano et al. (1992) describes the differences between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, and Knight (2013) makes the case that procedural knowledge is powerful because it is what we *do*, not what we *know*. Perhaps, the mentoring approaches were identified as important learning ideas because a scenario activity tied to mentoring approaches required participants to actually use/*do* the various approaches. One could argue that this strategy moved the participants into more complex cognitive thinking, using either Bloom's taxonomy or the SOLO taxonomy.

Participants appreciated the purpose of a personality survey in the workshop to illuminate how communication affects the relationship that develops between mentor and mentee. Business has long acknowledged the importance of mentoring new hires, and research in that field supports the idea that personality and communication are important factors in establishing productive relationships (Dougherty, Cheung, & Florea, 2008; Gibson, 2005; Rock & Garavan,

2006). Purposeful explicitness in the workshop might have helped participants understand how important it is to be aware of one's style of communication.

Mentors reflected on what they hoped to accomplish next school year and how they planned to use the information from the workshop. Given the current focus on developing SMART goals in education, it was surprising that over half of the participants wrote global goals for the next school year. However, some research supports our finding that teachers write global rather than specific goals for themselves (Erffmeyer & Martray, 1990; Hughes, 1995). It may also be explained by the timing of the workshop over the summer; therefore, considering accomplishments for the end of the next school year seemed too distant. However, when asked how they planned to use the information, immediacy was more tangible.

Step 6: Program Review and Future Goals

Members of the steering committee met to debrief about the workshop experience. When not presenting or facilitating, we had been tasked with keeping personal notes about the content and processes used during each day. We shared our observations and comments, noting similarities among the committee members' perspectives. These insights were used to modify the curriculum. In some cases, the recommended allotted time was adjusted, either increasing or decreasing the amount of time for a topic. It was evident from the steering committee's notes that deeper explanations of and practice with the types of feedback would be necessary the next time the curriculum was used. Decisions to use hands-on activities and participant interaction were validated from observations the steering committee members made during the workshop. Even comments about the physical space being inadequate were noted so that they could be incorporated in the curriculum for use at future times.

The workshop was well received by the participants and local school divisions. The school divisions were given a copy of the curriculum, which included the two-day structure, activities, and supporting materials. They can adapt the curriculum to fit their specific needs as they offer support to beginning teachers through mentoring. In addition, the partnership among the IHEs and school divisions decided that one clinical faculty training each year would use the pre-service curriculum and one training would use the mentor training curriculum. School divisions will have a consistent mechanism to develop both pre-service mentoring and beginning teachers mentoring. Both are necessary. The four IHEs routinely have a large number of student teachers each year who need to be placed in the area. Mentors for beginning teachers are also necessary as a significant number of current teachers approach retirement. Each time the curriculum is used, ongoing evaluations will be performed as part of the utilization-focused evaluation process (Patton, 2008). A primary future goal is to share the curriculum with other school divisions to adopt and adapt it to meet their needs. Furthermore, based on the steering committee's feedback, a new training for supporting beginning teachers into their second year was designed and implemented through another VDOE grant. It is hoped that in the future, the trainings can come full circle by developing a curriculum to build the skills of teachers working with pre-service teachers in early field experiences prior to student teaching.

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Preparing Teacher Candidates to Integrate Reading and Writing Instruction: A Conceptual Piece

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Abstract

This piece focuses on increasing writing instruction for secondary English teacher candidates in the form of integrating reading and writing. Often, teacher candidates are not sufficiently prepared in university coursework to teach writing and are left to rely on formulaic writing that merely prepares their students for the end-of-year tests. Using existing research and personal experience, this paper will focus on the importance of blending reading and writing instruction and providing more writing instruction strategies in methods courses. This paper provides a conceptual framework for increasing the integration of reading and writing instruction in secondary English classrooms and provides a template for integrating reading and writing instruction in practice for teacher candidates and practicing teachers.

Teaching reading and writing together can be a difficult task, but if it is tied into students' lives, it can be quite useful. Teaching students to write should involve more than just teaching them how to make specific moves that work for any essay they may write in school or end-of-year test (Smagorinsky, Daigle, O'Donnell-Allen, & Bynum, 2010); however, this is often the case. I distinctly remember referring to essays in high school as b-essays, as a play on the "BS" that I would use to work my way through ideas of which I had little knowledge. I still did well on those essays because I learned the moves to "BS" my way through. Many students are taught writing in this manner and even high achieving students will still write essays in this fashion (Smagorinsky et al., 2010).

As a former high school English teacher, and now doctoral student, I see gaps in how we approach writing instruction with teacher candidates. As a teacher candidate, I was taught

writing instruction in just a few class sessions. Grisham and Wolsey (2011) suggest that "one or two class sessions about writing instruction with teacher candidates will not prepare them adequately to teach writing in [the classroom]" (p. 360). If the research suggests that one or two class sessions does not adequately prepare preservice teachers to teach writing, something needs to change (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2016; Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Stockinger, 2007).

Story of the Problem

My experience with having only a few class sessions on writing instruction made me reflect on my teaching methods course. I do not recall learning, in detail, how to teach writing to high school students. I had a course on adolescent literature, but the focus of that class was teaching literature; writing instruction was not emphasized. I took a course on critical reading and writing, but that was not geared toward teaching writing, instead learning how to develop my own writing skills. I could have taken the skills I learned in that class and taught them to my students in the classroom, but I did not have the talents as a fresh, first-year teacher to take those skills and make them meaningful to young, novice writers. Once I was in the classroom, I discovered that teaching writing to teenagers is difficult. As an English major, writing is second nature, and it was difficult for me to take what I now did naturally and break it down for students to understand. Because of my lack of preparation, I found myself wondering what these students learned about writing in previous courses. When I spoke to my fellow English teachers, they just gave me formulaic (e.g. the five-paragraph essay), generic writing instruction that they had been using for years. I had to teach myself how to teach writing; this should not be what first-year teachers experience.

Over the years, I changed and adapted the formulaic instruction as I reflected on my teaching and found more information about the different ways to teach writing. While I understand it is important for practicing teachers to receive professional development on the teaching of writing, teacher candidates can have the opportunity to learn useful skills and tools, in methods courses, for teaching writing, before entering the classroom. Teacher candidates need lessons and skills they can use when they enter the classroom; whether it be for field experience, student teaching, or their first job, teachers need something in their repertoire to teach writing effectively. Writing instruction is hard and assuming that new teachers will be able to teach writing is inequitable. Many teacher candidates, if not prepared to teach writing prior to their first jobs, will revert to teaching writing the way they were taught—formulaically (Stockinger, 2007). Even if does not happen, the Virginia Standards of Learning separate reading and writing standards for practicality, so many new teachers will interpret that as meaning they need to be taught separately. Moreover, since teacher candidates learn teaching methods from their field experiences, they also often see formulaic writing in their placements (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). In sum, there needs to be more of a focus on writing instruction in methods courses, through the integration of reading and writing instruction.

My exploration of the literature on writing instruction confirmed my belief that more needs to be done to prepare teacher candidates. Morgan and Pytash (2014) reviewed the literature on preparing teacher candidates to become teachers of writing. In this literature review, which spans the literature of two decades, the authors found that teacher candidates feel that they do not get adequate instruction in writing but feel that they need such instruction to be better teachers (Morgan & Pytash, 2014). This problem is significant in an era of education which focuses heavily on standards; those standards include effective writing instruction, even though it

may not inherently foster such instruction. Moreover, since this literature review was published, there is still a significant problem with preparing teacher candidates to teach writing, which indicates that more research needs to be done to better prepare teacher candidates for the classroom.

Conceptual Framework

Research on effective writing instruction at the secondary level is not exclusive to the content of English Language Arts (ELA). Fecho (2011) advocates for the dialogical classroom and that can be achieved in any content area. The dialogical classroom is a classroom that students and teachers enter dialogue with the content and the standards (Stewart, 2010). Moreover, writing is an important aspect of the dialogical classroom because it allows students to work with their own ideas and formulate responses based on their own experiences (Fecho, 2011; Stewart, 2010). The process of inquiry, which suggests that meaning is constructed by questioning what we know, plays into dialogism in that we can provide opportunities for students to question what they know and what is happening in the classroom to construct their own meaning (Dewey, 1938). By tying lessons to an overarching theme or essential question that is relevant to students' lives, more effective learning can take place and students can begin to form their own meaning through thinking, writing, talking, and researching (Smagorinsky, 2008). All of this can be done through the process of dialogue, inquiry, and giving students the opportunity to make meaning in their own, but guided, ways (Fecho, 2011).

Reading and writing are often seen as two separate entities. Some secondary English teachers do not incorporate reading and writing instruction together, even if they believe that a good reader can be a good writer and vice versa (McCarthey, 2008). This often happens because some state standards, such as Virginia Standards of Learning, list the reading standards separate

from writing standards (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This is not done to treat these as separate, but for more logistical purposes. I find the common occurrence of treating reading and writing as separate discouraging because writing and reading are better taught together. Teacher candidates can be taught to integrate writing instruction with reading instruction by preparing them to develop conceptual units, lessons, ideas, and methods to use in the classroom (Smagorinsky, 2008). By doing this, new teachers will have the preparation to teach students writing that is not scientific, formulaic, and generic. Moreover, incorporating reading and writing together opens the opportunity for more focus on the skills students need to develop instead of blanket lessons on skills some students may have already mastered.

In methods courses for ELA teacher candidates, reading and writing need to be given equal weight; however, in those courses, and consequently in the classroom, reading is usually given more emphasis; thus, new teachers feel unprepared to teach writing when they enter the classroom for their first teaching job. However, teaching reading and writing together can help students to think more critically and develop their own meaning (Gallagher, 2011). As a result of poor preparation, teachers tend to tie reading and writing together in arbitrary ways that do not allow students to see the connections that are made between big ideas, literature, writing, and their lives.

I approach writing instruction from a conceptual framework that places great value on integrating reading and writing. Often, teachers treat them as separate; integrating reading and writing is supported by Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011). Moreover, their ideas align with NCTE's Professional Knowledge from the Teaching of Writing (2016). What I learned from my own teaching experience is that students can connect the readings done in class to their lives if they are given the opportunity to write. Moreover, when reading and writing are taught together,

students have a model to use when developing their own writing (Gallagher, 2011). Teaching reading and writing simultaneously gives students the opportunity to find richer and deeper meanings in their lives and the social relationships around them (NCTE, 2016). Whether students are reading poetry or a classic canonical novel, the act of writing while reading will help them to make meaning of the text in relation to their lives. Without writing, students are provided little opportunity to connect what happens in school with their lives outside of school. Dialogism and inquiry through writing can help students make that connection (Fecho, 2011; Stewart, 2010). While opening the text of their lives and exploring what that means, students are also given the opportunity, through writing, to explore and understand the text of others' lives (NCTE, 2016).

Both Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011) believe that writing should be connected to a larger context for it to be meaningful for students. Gallagher (2011) emphasizes the use of mentor texts for students to use when learning to write in a new genre. By using mentor texts in the classroom, students have an example of the ways that writing can be different when it serves different purposes (Gallagher 2011). While Gallagher (2011) and Fecho (2011) have more of a practical application for their writing instruction, this same idea can be used in a methods classroom to help teacher candidates realize the importance of connecting writing to students' lives and using modeling and mentor texts to enrich their writing instruction.

Literature Review

Standardized testing and field experiences have a strong influence on the ways teacher candidates feel about and learn how to teach writing. Beyond field experiences and university coursework, teacher candidates have a strong influence from their background as students (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Lorte, 1975). Many teacher candidates in methods classeshave

grown up with standardized testing and will enter field experiences and student teaching during this era of testing, which can impact their teaching identities.

Standardized Testing

Methods courses at many universities tend to focus heavily on reading literacies. According to Grisham and Wolsey (2011), "in teacher preparation programs, a strong emphasis on teaching reading has relegated writing instruction to a less important status" (p. 348). Reading comprehension is important in the secondary classroom, but that does not mean writing instruction is less important. This emphasis on reading can be attributed to the strong emphasis on standardized testing and the decline of the writing workshop in English classrooms (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011). Moreover, teachers spend more time preparing students for the state reading test, especially in states which have abolished end-of-year writing tests or do not use the scores of the end-of-year writing tests for their school report card (McCarthey, 2008).

Recently, congress has abolished No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and replaced it with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The changes in this act reflect what is happening with standards-based instruction and its effect on school funding. Most important to this change is that the federal government has handed over control of accountability from testing to the state and local governments. The state of Virginia's Standards of Learning for 9-12 English separate the standards for communication, reading, writing, and research into their respective categories (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). This separation may cause teachers to see each of these standards as separate, linear entities in the way that math standards are linear because each skill builds on the previous. However, the standards for English are not meant to be taught separately. The standards for English may be separated for convenience of organization and planning, but the curricular framework prepared by the Virginia Department of Education

suggests that reading and writing can and should be taught together (Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia, 2010).

While well-written prose is what is assessed by the state-mandated tests, it does not have to be separate from reading. Moreover, extended-response essay questions are effective in assessing higher-order and complex thinking skills (Miller, Linn, & Gronlund, 2009). Standardized tests in writing can measure these complex skills, but when teachers focus on one genre (the five-paragraph persuasive essay, for example), it becomes an ineffective way to teach writing. If methods courses do not demonstrate the ways teachers can incorporate writing into their lessons, we run the risk of teachers only teaching to the test because they have no other basis on which to teach writing (Miller et al., 2009).

Additionally, Hillocks (2002) asserts that the more teachers focus on teaching to the test, the less inquiry plays a role in the classroom and the less students learn to deal with situations outside the classroom. When teacher candidates enter into field experience, they may be paired with cooperating teachers who have fallen into what Hillocks (2002) refers to as "the testing trap." Without a pedagogical foundation for writing and language instruction, teachers will gravitate toward the culture of the school—emphasis on test scores—and will rely on their own judgment based on their perception of students' needs. (Hillocks, 2002; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011). When students are given the opportunity to write, they are given the opportunity to think and question, which is what the standards express but are not blatantly obvious unless they are unpacked and deconstructed (Hillocks, 2002).

Field Experiences

Methods courses are only one place where teacher candidates are given exposure to writing instruction. However, many teacher candidates believe that they get more useful information about teaching while in the field (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). When teacher candidates are working in the field, they gain more experience with writing instruction, but the writing instruction learned during these experiences may not be the best way to teach writing. What many preservice (and in-service, for that matter) teachers do not typically realize is that students write, and they write every day (Kist & Pytash, 2015). Students do not see what they do as writing because tweeting or posting a Facebook status does not fit their idea of "in-school writing," but tapping into that resource is useful in the writing classroom and field experience in schools that use these modes of discourse can provide teacher candidates with that experience.

When teacher candidates are in the field, whether they are teaching or observing, they are taking in all that they can to prepare themselves for their first jobs (Grossman, et al., 2000). When cooperating teachers are focusing on the tests that students are expected to pass, this instills in teacher candidates that this will be what is expected of them when they get their own classrooms. However, the success of preparing teachers to teach writing is dependent on their ability to implement what they learned in methods courses (Grossman, et al., 2000). Field experiences allow for just that—teacher candidates can practice what they have learned and learn new teaching methods for writing instruction. Additionally, Smagorinsky et al. (2011) found that field experiences can intensify the way new teachers are influenced by the school in which they work and the environment of that school. Field experiences are impactful in giving teacher candidates more tools to use in their classrooms, and many new teachers will rely on the tools they have seen and used in field experiences (Smagorinsky, et al., 2011).

Integrating Reading and Writing

The integration of reading and writing instruction is often done using writing workshops and bridging in- and out-of-school literacies (Daniels, Hornby, & Chen, 2015). The use of writing workshops allows teachers the opportunity to give students more time to develop their writing, emphasize that writing is a process, and reiterate that writing and reading go hand-in-hand (Gallagher, 2011). When teachers use the writing workshop that includes writings they do out of school (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, journals, etc.), the dialogue about writing begins to develop (Worthman, Gardner, & Thole, 2011). Furthermore, writing workshops can provide opportunities for students to learn to write as readers and read as writers (Hansen, 1987). The connection between reading and writing becomes blurred through workshopping, and students begin to understand that these two entities are not separate, but infinitely connected (Hansen, 1987; Gallagher, 2011; Daniels, Hornby, Chen, 2015).

By understanding the state of the field, it becomes ever more important to have a model or template of integrating reading and writing instruction in the classroom. By developing a template, teachers, both new and veteran, can implement and modify units and lessons to fit their students' needs. When veteran teachers adopt this model of integration, teacher candidates have a better chance of seeing the theoretical and ideal classrooms discussed in methods courses in practice.

An Example of Teaching Reading and Writing Simultaneously

When preparing teacher candidates to teach above and beyond the standards and state-mandated tests, it is important to prepare them with lessons and ideas they can use in their student teaching and eventual teaching experience. By using the ideas of Fecho (2011) and

Gallagher (2011) and their emphasis on making writing instruction meaningful to students' lives, methods courses can incorporate more dialogical conversations. In conjunction with Gallagher's (2011) use of mentor texts, methods courses can model what they are teaching. When teacher educators model in methods courses what they expect teacher candidates to do, the ideas become more concrete (Clark & Marinak, 2011). Additionally, methods courses can model ways new teachers can connect the seemingly dull and uninteresting texts and standards to students' lives. In this section, I provide an example of a strategy that can be used by practicing teachers to emphasize the preparation teacher candidates need before entering the classroom, and to also give them something to use as a template or for direct implementation in their future teaching experiences.

To begin, not all writing has to be high-stakes writing assignments (Jensen, 2009; Smagorinsky, 2008). Some writing can be an ongoing process to be used to further develop students' writing skills. One of the hardest aspects of teaching writing for ELA teacher candidates is writing has become second nature. I struggled with this as a new teacher because I had forgotten what it was like to learn how to write; I had to re-learn how to write to teach my students. Often, this sentiment is left out of teacher education methods courses because it has become seemingly understood that if you are a writer, you can teach writing. Many ELA teacher candidates are experienced writers who have forgotten what it feels like to struggle with seemingly simple writing tasks (Rush, 2009). In order for teacher candidates to remember that struggle, they need to experience what their students will be doing (Reid, 2009). One way to do this is through a narrative workshop that can run for however long or short is appropriate for your classroom and students.

Tying in with Fecho (2011), Smagorinsky (2008), and Gallagher's (2011) idea that each lesson should be tied to an overarching theme that students can relate to their lives, this narrative unit asks the essential question: "Where can beauty be found in the ugly?" Using this essential question and Fecho's (2011) example of students making more meaning of history lesson on the Holocaust, readings can be chosen that are both narrative in nature (tell a story) and where a character learns to find the beauty in the ugly that is the Holocaust. There are two easily accessible texts that are prefect for this unit: *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Even though the latter has a sad ending, Anne Frank still is able to find the beauty in the ugly through the family that allows them to hide in their attic. Elie Wiesel finds the beauty in the ugly by focusing on taking care of his elderly father and fighting to stay alive until he is rescued by American soldiers. These two memoirs can serve as a mentor text for students (Gallagher, 2011) for them to develop their narrative which discovers the beauty in the ugly. Using these memoirs as mentor texts for students' own narratives acts as a scaffold for students who struggle with writing and for students who may need help getting that first sentence started. When students write while reading these memoirs, they will be able to connect to their lives something that seems disconnected and irrelevant.

To begin the unit, you can discuss the essential question with students. Beginning with a discussion will open dialogue in the classroom and shows students that they have valuable ideas to bring to the table (Fecho, 2011). This discussion will help students to understand that there is something greater than just reading a book and writing an essay. To begin a discussion of what a narrative is, you can use movie clips, such as a clip from the holiday classic *A Christmas Story*. The scene where Flick sticks his tongue to the flag pole after the dreaded triple dog dare is an easily accessible scene. Students connect well to this scene because most have probably seen the

movie and will enjoy being able to work with something they enjoy while in school. After the clip, ask students to write the story from the perspective of one of the students watching (none of the main characters, though, because that perspective is too easily seen from the clip). This is an example of a low-stakes writing assignment. There does not need to be any grade attached to this story and student do not need to be given length requirements (unless that is what they need), but instead, teachers can use this as a formative assessment to gauge where students are in their understanding of a narrative (Jensen, 2009). This piece is the catalyst to enter into storytelling. Once you give students five to ten minutes of writing time, you can ask students to share their retelling of the movie clip to show the variations in the perspectives and writing styles the students use to retell the story. This will create a rich conversation on what makes a story. Moreover, this will, once again, open the dialogue needed to have a meaningful experience in your classroom. This dialogue can also begin to scaffold what you expect from students when they are discussing the stories they will read and write—the teacher is able to take a backseat and let the students construct their own learning through dialogue (Daniels, Hornby, & Chen, 2015). Once class guidelines for the elements of a story are developed, give students the prompt on which they will write.

In direct connection with the essential question, the following prompt can be used: Write about something ugly--war, fear, hate, cruelty, etc.--but find the beauty (silver lining) in it. Once you present the prompt to your students, open the dialogue once more, so students can discuss other fears that are more relevant to their lives. Students may come up with fears and ugliness such as ignorance, spiders, and death. Once you have a strong list of fears/ugliness, students can be given time to start brainstorming ideas for their narratives. Since the writing process is different for every writer (Fecho, 2011), expectations for length do not need to be given at this

point but can be useful for some students who may need that structure; you can modify the instructions and length requirements based on the needs of your students and individual classes.

While reading one or both memoirs mentioned above (I suggest choosing one, as two may be too much to do in one instructional unit), you can have students free write about the ways that beauty is found in these novels, free write about the ideas they have for their narratives, free write about ideas that come to mind that is personal to them, and draft their own narratives over time. Moreover, these free-writes can be used for students to develop their ideas before entering a class dialogue about the connection between the story and the essential question. Since this is a narrative workshop, you can allot time in your weekly and daily schedules for students to work on their writing periodically, and they should be able to write in their own style (Jensen, 2009). I have learned that forcing students into a formulaic box only hinders their personal writing styles, and they create pieces that are devoid of interest and passion; this is unideal and counterproductive to the ideas of dialogism and the writing workshop. Using the workshop format, students will be able to develop their stories on their own schedules and in their own ways.

Additionally, you can incorporate interviews of grandparents or other family members and extend the opportunity for students to write about the history of their lives (Fecho, 2011). Students can use these interviews in their narratives or as their narratives. Most of the time grandparents and older family members tell the stories of their lives to teach the younger generations to overcome the bad and find the good, which ties directly to the theme of the narrative unit. Having students talk to their own family members or close family friends gives them the opportunity to connect the reading and writing done in class to their lives (Rush, 2009).

Since this is a narrative workshop, students should have the opportunity, throughout the length of the unit, to develop their own narrative. You can assign flexible guidelines that give students the opportunity to develop their stories in their own ways, so that it is meaningful to their lives (Rush, 2009). As you work your way through the unit, mini-lessons can be used to provide students with instruction on writing skills (it may be different for each class and for each student) to help them develop their narratives. Giving students the opportunity to work on this over time emphasizes that writing is a process and that process is different for everyone (Jensen, 2009). Moreover, this will give you the opportunity to grade students on each step and not necessarily on the entire final product, so students see that writing is not just for a grade but also for the reader and the writer (Stockinger, 2007). The use of dialogue and free writing throughout and allowing students the opportunity to develop their writing over time can be used as formative assessments for the aforementioned mini-lessons, but the final product, even if it is not given a grade, can be used as a summative assessment of all the ideas discussed throughout the unit.

Discussion and Conclusion

The ideas of the dialogical classroom and essential questions are not new (Fecho, 2011; Gallagher, 2011; Smagorinsky, 2008). However, more often than not, teacher candidates are only introduced to these ideas in a theoretical manner (Smagorinsky, 2008). Instead of presenting these ideas as a theory, this narrative unit provides a template for methods courses that practicing teachers can use and modify to their needs. Moreover, by presenting teacher candidates with a template, they can put the theory into practice, which is essential in the classroom (Smagorinsky, 2008).

To battle the problem of students learning to write B-essays (Smagorinsky, et al, 2010) and generic pieces of writing, teachers can tie literature to writing and tie the lessons to students'

lives using the essential question. Just as Fecho (2011) and Gallagher (2011) assert, students will find little meaning in the lessons if they cannot find a way to connect them to their lives. When students can connect what they are learning to their lives, it teaches them the critical thinking skills they will need to be active citizens outside of school (Eisner, 2003). Since we are teaching in a standards saturated era, it has never been more important to show students that there is more to school than just passing a test. Essentially, if teachers want to reform education, they must do it at the ground level—in their classrooms (Eisner, 2003).

Methods courses are one place where education reform can begin. If we better prepare teacher candidates to integrate the teaching of reading and writing, they can enter schools with innovative strategies they can share with their colleagues. Moreover, teacher candidates will have more confidence in their teaching of writing because they will have something to implement immediately and a model to follow for future units and lessons (Smagorinsky et al., 2011; Daisey, 2009). Since standards and standardized testing are such important aspects of education, I do not advocate for completely ignoring the standards or the tests students must pass to advance to the next grade or to graduate. What I do advocate for is teaching above and beyond the standards, so that students are able to think and problem solve in ways they will be expected to once they leave school (Eisner, 2003).

What I have provided is a conceptual framework and template for the integration of reading and writing instruction; however, the ideas are there for any teacher candidate or practicing teacher to be changed and implemented as needed for different teachers and different classes. Just as Eisner (2003) asserted, educational reform cannot happen at a theoretical level; it needs to happen in the classrooms.

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Behaviors of Teachers and Their Students in Schools With and Without an Achievement Gap: An Observational Study

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Abstract

This research shares findings from a year-long observational study to determine if there were significant differences in the identified behaviors of teachers and students in fourth and seventh grade classrooms in schools with an achievement gap versus those with no achievement gap. Specific research questions addressed types of instructional grouping patterns, instructional strategies employed, number and types of questions asked by teachers, and specific interactions observed during instructional and management episodes. The researchers found that instances of teacher normative control, student rebellion, and student off-task behavior were more prevalent in learning environments *with an achievement gap.* Perhaps, more importantly, the research revealed that teachers across all classrooms relied predominantly on the use of low level questioning in whole group, teacher-directed settings.

Although achievement gaps have existed in schools for decades, these learning gaps have become a hot topic of discussion in a variety of settings; therefore, it is important that all stakeholders use a common definition. As noted by Harris and Herrington (2006), concerns regarding educational disadvantages of minority students were first identified near the end of WWII. These concerns led to historical changes in American public education. A major action

was the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision of 1954 which focused on ending racial segregation in American public schools. Decades later, the Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education published its seminal work, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (Gardner, Larsen, Baker, & Campbell, 1983). This document focused on making U.S. schools accountable for equalization of educational resources and content for all students and also offered recommendations related to standards, time, teaching, and fiscal support. More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 was enacted under the Bush administration and established *adequate yearly progress* (AYP) requirements designed to expose achievement gaps while encouraging schools to increase efforts to close these gaps over time.

For the purpose of this study, *achievement gap* has been defined as a significant difference in performance on standardized tests when comparing students of different gender, race, socioeconomic status (SES), and disability. The intent of this investigation was to determine if the learning environments in fourth grade and seventh grade classrooms where achievement gaps existed were significantly different than the learning environments of similar classrooms in schools with no achievement gaps. Specifically, the researchers wanted to discover if differences existed in the way teachers created learning environments as related to instructional patterns, instructional strategies, number and type (cognitive level) of questions, and number and type of interactions between teachers and students. The importance of these variables in the development of quality learning environments can be seen through an examination of the literature (Hamre et al., 2013; Harris & Harrington, 2006; Stronge, Ward, Tucker, & Hindman, 2007).

The Achievement Gap

A review of the literature identified a number of factors associated with the achievement gap. Factors such as student home environments, educational systems, student behaviors, and teacher behaviors have all been shown in the literature to impact the size and duration of achievement gaps. However, as Anderson, Medrich, and Fowler (2007) have reported, trying to isolate and accurately measure the factors that cause achievement gaps is a difficult endeavor. As previously noted, AYP requirements were put in place to address achievement gaps and motivate educators to put their efforts into closing these gaps; however, achieving AYP is not the same thing as closing achievement gaps. Schools closing the achievement gap are not necessarily making AYP, and schools making AYP are not necessarily closing the achievement gap (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007).

Outside Factors

Some researchers, such as Lee and Bowen (2006), found that home environments and parenting techniques can either positively or negatively impact the achievement gap. Viadero and Johnston (2000) reported that all students, regardless of their SES, tend to perform less well when attending schools where at least 25% of the student body lives in poverty, as compared to students attending schools in more affluent communities. Gorey (2009) completed a meta-analysis of factors related to school reform and student achievement and discovered that between 25% to 50% of the black-white achievement gap can be attributed to parental, home, and community factors. This finding supported the work of Bowen (2006) who found that lower achievement test scores were made more often by non-white students living in poverty with less educated parents. Interestingly, Benner and Mistry (2007) reported that educator perceptions may be a factor impacting the findings such as those of Gorey (2009) and Bowen (2006) because

several studies have reported that students from low SES families are perceived as less capable compared to more advantaged students (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Jussim, 1991; 1986; Hamilton, Sherman, & Rulvolo, 1990). Similarly, researchers have found that when asked about causes for the achievement gaps, teachers frequently state that two major contributing causes are parenting techniques and level of parental education (Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Crane, 1998). Additionally, Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) surveyed African American and Caucasian teachers and found that all participants, regardless of race, tended to support the belief that family income and parenting techniques were important contributing factors to the achievement gap.

Learning Environments

As is true with the current study, a number of researchers have collected and analyzed observational data to better understand how teachers and their students interact, both instructionally and behaviorally, in learning environments to promote academic achievement. Legewie and DiPrete (2012) reported that gender and socioeconomic status interact to explain why some males have more difficulty functioning in learning environments. These authors suggested that as the number of males from low SES families increased in a classroom, the greater the variance between male and female performance. These authors suggested that this appeared to be due to the fact that low SES males often view classroom expectations for behavior as un-masculine; therefore, low SES males tend to misbehave more frequently and are more frequently off task. Additionally, several researchers have studied the dynamics of the classroom environment and have determined that the amount of unwanted student behavior impacts the achievement gap (Dee, 2005; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). For example, classroom climates have been shown to affect student behavior in ways that can negatively

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impact student time-on-task behavior which often results in negative academic achievement (Dee, 2005, 2007; Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2007; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Reyes, Bracket, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Specifically, Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, and Pianta (2007) found that many children in at-risk groups demonstrated higher rates of off-task behavior when teachers employed either large group instruction emphasizing rote memorization or assigned individual work. These findings echo those of Harris and Harrington (2006) who reported that instruction for at-risk students should be conducted in small groups and should focus on analysis and inference, not rote memorization. Moreover, Jones, Yonezawa, Mehan, and McClure (April, 2008) noted, to improve schools in a way that consistently leads to increasing achievement for all students, one must first focus on changing educators' beliefs, values, and attitudes related to how best to enrich the learning environment.

The current study was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in the identified behaviors of teachers and students in fourth and seventh grade classrooms in schools with an achievement gap versus those with no achievement gap. This research will add to the existing literature by identifying differences within the learning environments of specific classrooms existing in schools categorized as having an achievement gap compared to those having no achievement gap based on NCLB testing results. The following research questions guided the study.

1) Do teachers in schools with an achievement gap and teachers in schools with no achievement gap differ in any of the following ways:

   a. the types of instructional grouping patterns they employ with their students,

   b. the instructional strategies they use with their students,

c. the number and types of questions they ask their students,

d. how they interact with students during instruction, and

e. how they interact with students while managing behavior?

2) Do students in schools with an achievement gap and students in schools with no achievement gap differ in any of the following ways:

  a. how they interact with their teachers during instruction,

  b. how they interact with their teachers in response to teacher management behaviors, and

  c. the amount of time-off-task behavior they exhibit?

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 31 fourth and seventh grade teachers and their students from four elementary and four middle level public schools in a large school district located in the southeastern United States. Two of the elementary and two of the middle level schools were categorized as having an achievement gap, while the remaining two elementary and remaining two middle level schools were categorized as having no achievement gap. The schools were selected by school district personnel based on the noticeable difference in achievement between students in different subgroups. These differences in achievement were based on the results of state-mandated testing.

District personnel requested that fourth grade elementary teachers and seventh grade English/language arts and math teachers participate in the study because students in their classrooms were required to take end of year state-mandated tests. All fourth grade teachers (15 total) in each of the four elementary schools were selected to be observed during literacy

instruction. In each of the four middle schools, two English/language arts and two math teachers were observed. These 16 teachers comprised the total population of seventh grade English/language arts and math teachers in each middle school (Table 1).

Table 1 *Number of teachers by classification in elementary and middle level classrooms*

	Elementary Teachers (15)	Middle Level Teachers (16)	
		Language Arts	Mathematics
African-America Females	1	0	0
Caucasian Females	10	7	7
African-American Males	0	0	
Caucasian Males	4	1	1

The researchers observed 656 students in these 31 fourth and seventh grade classrooms. The students in each of the classrooms were coded according to gender, race/ethnicity, special education status, and socioeconomic status as defined in Public Law No. 107-110, § 115, Stat. 1425 (NCLB, 2002). Table 2 shows the total number of students in each subgroup and the percentage of total females or males that subgroup represents at each level.

Table 2: *Number of students by subgroup in elementary and middle level classrooms*

Student	Definition	Elementary Females	Elementary Males	Middle Level Females	Middle Level Males
Total		(155)	(166)	(167)	(168)
Subgroup 1	Non-white, low SES, disability	1 (0.6%)	8 (5%)	5 (3%)	14 (8%)
Subgroup 2	Non-white, low SES, no disability	50 (32%)	46 (28%)	62 (37%)	44 (26%)
Subgroup 3	Non-white, not low SES, disability	9 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1%)
Subgroup 4	Non-white, not low SES, no disability	16 (10%)	18 (11%)	8 (5%)	6 (4%)
Subgroup 5	White, low SES, disability	3 (2%)	12 (7%)	5 (3%)	7 (4%)
Subgroup 6	White, low SES, no disability	46 (30%)	33 (20%)	50 (30%)	53 (32%)
Subgroup 7	White, not low SES, disability	1 (0.6%)	1 (0.6%)	7 (4%)	6 (4%)
Subgroup 8	White, not low SES, no disability	29 (19%)	48 (29%)	30 (18%)	36 (21%)

Procedures and Operational Definitions

The researchers used observational methods to collect data on the identified teacher and student behaviors. Each classroom was observed four times for a period of 30 minutes per visit, equaling a total of 120 minutes. During each visit, students were identified by codes known only to the researcher. Teachers were informed the morning of each visit so that students would have the appropriate identifier when researchers arrived. The observers were unaware of which schools were categorized as having an achievement gap and which schools were categorized as having no achievement gap. Data from the observations were entered into SPSS as quantitative data for analysis. One-way ANOVAs were employed in an attempt to identify differences between groups of students previously identified in Table 2. The data were analyzed to provide a description of what occurred during the classroom observation. In particular, the researchers analyzed the frequency of teacher and student interactions and the percentage of time students spent off-task.

The researchers operationally defined specific teacher and student interactions which have been shown to have an impact on classroom climate (Schlechty, 1976). A coding system was developed to record these interactions, and training was developed and implemented to assure validity and reliability. Teacher behavior was classified as being either instruction- or management-focused. The major teacher instructional behavior, *teacher task interaction,* was defined as the teacher providing instruction to the students (e.g., asking and answering questions or giving information). Teacher behavior management interactions were classified in one of the following four categories: *teacher normative control*, when the teacher asked students to change their behavior; *teacher remunerative control,* when the teacher manipulated a reward system to control student behavior; *teacher coercion,* when the teacher threatened or actually used physical

force and/or took away property or freedom; and *teacher retreatism,* when the teacher failed to react when student rebellion occurred. Student behavioral interactions included: *student task behavior*, the asking and answering of content related questions and discussing content; *student conformity*, student compliance with a teacher's behavioral management interaction; and *student rebellion*, when a student overtly failed to comply with stated rules for behavioral conduct.

In addition, using the aforementioned operational definitions, the researchers recorded the instructional grouping pattern, type of instructional strategy, and both the frequency and cognitive level of teacher questions. Instructional grouping patterns were coded as whole group, small group, or individual. The types of instruction were coded as direct instruction or indirect instruction. *Direct instruction* included lecture, drill, modeling, brainstorming, and teacher-led instruction. *Indirect instruction* included learning centers, cooperative learning, inquiry, and laboratory (Hunt, Wiseman, & Touzel, 2009). Using Gallagher and Aschner's (1963) classic model as a guide, the researchers combined cognitive memory and convergent questions into one category labeled as *low level questions*. These low level questions typically have only one possible correct answer. Divergent and evaluative questions were combined into a second category labeled as *high level questions,* which typically can have more than one possible correct answer.

Two observers gathered data during each visit using an observation form created by the researchers. During each 30-minute observation, one observer recorded all teacher and student data related to female students while the other observer recorded all teacher and student data related to male students to ensure accuracy of the observations. Each observer collected data on both males and females throughout the study by randomly assigning gender prior to each observation. Each interaction was recorded by noting the number of the student subgroup the

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teacher addressed or student task observed. For example, if a teacher directed a question to a white, low SES, male with no disability, a 6 was recorded as a teacher task by the researcher assigned to observe male interactions. If a non-white, not low SES, female with a disability asked a question, a 3 was recorded as a student task by the researcher assigned to observe female student interactions.

Prior to beginning each observation, the researchers recorded the total number of students by subgroup for their gender. These data were used when observers scanned the classroom at the end of each 10 minute segment to note the number of students who were off-task for each subgroup and gender. Time-off-task was recorded as the number of students by subgroup and gender who were off task over the total number of students by subgroup and gender in the classroom when the scan was completed.

Data were collected by college faculty who were trained during a half-day workshop in which they reviewed and discussed operational definitions and recorded observations of a classroom videotape to determine a baseline inter-rater reliability score. Moreover, prior to actual data collection, the observation instrument was used by all researchers in classrooms in a school not selected for this study to obtain additional inter-rater reliability data. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by dividing the total number of behaviors recorded in agreement by that number plus those recorded in disagreement, then multiplying by 100. Training continued until data collectors demonstrated inter-rater reliability at or above 90 percent.

<center>**Results**</center>

Grouping Patterns and Instructional Strategies

The results from a series of one-way ANOVAs indicated that there were no significant differences between the instructional strategies or grouping patterns employed at either the elementary or middle level at any of the schools. This was due to the fact that teachers overwhelmingly employed direct instruction in the context of whole group settings.

Teacher Questioning

As shown in Table 3, Subgroup 4 females and Subgroup 4 males (non-white, not low SES, no disability) in middle level schools with no achievement gap were asked significantly more low level questions than their peers at schools with an achievement gap. It is important to note the total number of high level questions asked across all student subgroups ranged from zero to seven, with zero being the most commonly observed number. Therefore, the prevalence of high level questions was so low that statistical analyses could not provide any meaningful information. There were no other significant differences found in either elementary or middle level classrooms regarding teacher questioning.

Table 3: *Significant differences in low level teacher questions*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Middle School Student Subgroup 4 Females	62	8.52**	0.12	.005
Middle School Student Subgroup 4 Males	62	5.77*	0.02	.019

*Significant at p<.05
**Significant at p<.01

Teacher Task Interactions with Students

Table 4 shows the five subgroups of elementary students where there was a significant difference in the teacher task interactions with students at schools with an achievement gap and those with no achievement gap. In these five groups, students in schools with an achievement gap had significantly more teacher task interactions than their peers in schools with no achievement gap. There were no significant differences in teacher task interactions directed toward any of the subgroups of students at the middle school level.

Table 4: *Significant differences in positive teacher task interactions*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Elementary Student Subgroup 2 Males	58	5.54*	0.087	.022
Elementary Student Subgroup 4 Females	58	8.03**	0.12	.006
Elementary Student Subgroup 6 Females	58	4.20*	0.07	.045
Elementary Student Subgroup 8 Females	58	6.13*	0.10	.016
Elementary Student Subgroup 8 Males	58	8.92**	0.13	.004

*Significant at p<.05
**Significant at p<.01

Teacher Normative Interactions

Table 5 shows the significant differences found with teacher normative control interactions at both the elementary and middle level in schools with an achievement gap. In the elementary schools, Subgroup 6 (white, low SES, no disability) females experienced

significantly more teacher normative control interactions, whereas Subgroup 2 females (non-White, low SES, no disability) experienced more teacher normative control interactions in middle level schools.

Table 5: *Significant differences in teacher normative control interactions*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Elementary Student Subgroup 6 Females	58	4.20*	0.07	.045
Middle Level Subgroup 2 Females	62	6.25*	0.092	.015

*Significant at p<.05

Teacher Retreating

Table 6 shows the significant differences found in teacher retreating behaviors. There were significantly more teacher retreating behaviors with Subgroup 8 males (white, not low SES, no disability), as well as all non-low SES males in middle schools with no achievement gap, than with their peers in schools with an achievement gap.

Table 6: *Significant differences in teacher retreating*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Middle school Subgroup 8 Males	62	4.50*	0.06	.045
Middle school all not low SES Males	62	5.08*	0.08	.028

*Significant at p<.05

Student Interactions with Teachers

Table 7 shows that in schools with an achievement gap, Subgroup 4 females (non-white, not low SES, no disability) at both the elementary and middle level, Subgroup 8 (white, not low SES, no disability) females in middle level schools, and Subgroup 8 males in elementary schools interacted with their teachers significantly more than their peers at schools with no achievement gap. However, in middle schools with no achievement gap, Subgroup 4 females and Subgroup 4 males as well as Subgroup 7 (white, not low SES, disability) females interacted with their teachers significantly more than their peers at schools with an achievement gap. All statistically significant findings related to student interactions with teachers occurred with not low SES students regardless of the existence or non-existence of an achievement gap.

Table 7: *Significant differences in student interactions with teachers*

	df	F	η^2	p
Elementary Student Subgroup 4 Females+	58	5.9*	0.08	.028
Elementary Student Subgroup 8 Females+	58	4.52*	0.07	.038
Elementary Student Subgroup 8 Males+	58	4.60*	0.07	.037
Middle School Student Subgroup 4 Females^	62	11.27**	0.15	.001
Middle School Student Subgroup 4 Males^	62	7.11*	0.10	.010
Middle School Student Subgroup 7 Females^	62	5.00*	0.08	.013
Middle School Student Subgroup 8 Females+	62	5.28*	0.08	.025

*Significant at p<.05

**Significant at p<.01

+significant differences schools with *an achievement gap*
^significant differences schools with *no achievement gap*

Student Rebellion

Table 8 shows the significant differences found in student rebellion at the middle school level. There were significantly more student rebellion behaviors with the following student subgroups at schools with an achievement gap: all non-white females, all non-white males, and all low SES males. There were no significant differences found at the elementary level.

Table 8: *Significant differences in student rebellion*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Middle school all non-white females	62	4.83*	0.07	.032
Middle school all non-white males	62	4.70*	0.07	.034
Middle school all low SES males	62	8.50**	0.12	.005

*Significant at p<.05
**Significant at p<.01

Off-task Behavior

Table 9 shows the significant differences found in student off-task behavior between two subgroups of elementary students and one subgroup of middle school students. At the elementary level, all Subgroup 4 students (non-white, not low SES, no disability), both females and males, in schools with an achievement gap had more off-task behaviors than their peers in schools with no achievement gap schools. In comparison, at the middle level, Subgroup 6 males (white, low SES, no disability) were significantly off task more frequently in schools with no achievement gap.

Table 9: *Significant differences in student off-task behavior*

Student Subgroup	df	F	η^2	p
Elementary Student Subgroup 4 Females+	58	9.30**	0.14	.003
Elementary Student Subgroup 4 Males+	58	4.71*	0.08	.034
Middle School Student Subgroup 6 Males ^	62	7.15*	0.10	.010

*Significant at p<.05

**Significant at p<.01

+significant differences schools with *an achievement gap*
^significant differences schools with *no achievement gap*

Discussion and Implications

The intent of this study was to determine if the identified behaviors of teachers and students of selected fourth and seventh grade classrooms in schools with an achievement gap were significantly different than the identified behaviors of teachers and students of similar classrooms in schools with no achievement gap. An analysis of the data led the researchers to agree with the position taken by Anderson, Medrich, and Fowler (2007) that it is difficult to isolate factors that contribute to the achievement gap. However, the researchers were able to isolate some factors that helped us better understand how teachers and students interacted with one another in learning environments with and without an achievement gap.

The researchers believe that one of the most important findings of this study was that there were no significant differences in the learning environments of fourth and seventh grade classrooms in schools with an achievement gap and schools with no achievement gap related to the use of instructional strategies, instructional grouping patterns, or the level of teacher

questions asked. Overwhelmingly, teachers used direct instructional strategies along with low level questioning in the context of whole group settings in all classrooms at both the elementary and middle school levels. High level questions were so rarely asked that statistical analysis could provide no meaningful information. Obviously, the fact that there was an achievement gap in some schools and not in others seemed to have little impact on how teachers grouped students for instruction, the instructional method they employed, or levels of questions asked. Teachers in all schools, both with an achievement gap and with no achievement gap, offered the exact same style of instruction. These findings raise concerns when compared to studies related to effective instruction for at-risk students. For example, Harris and Harrington (2006) found that instruction for high risk students is most effective when delivered in small groups using higher level questioning strategies that encourage higher levels of thinking, not memorization of facts. Additionally, Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta (2007) found that students at risk function better when teachers avoid both large group instruction and the use of low level questions that lead to rote memorization. The findings discussed above are both powerful and alarming since they describe how educators related to the learning needs of their students.

The overreliance on whole group instruction and low level questioning may have impacted the instructional interactions that took place between the teachers and their students. Teachers in elementary classrooms in schools with an achievement gap were attempting to interact with students categorized as low SES (Table 4); however, those students were not responding to their teachers (Table 7). In fact, students who interacted significantly more with those teachers were all categorized as non-low SES. These teachers were interacting with their students using predominantly low level questions in large group settings. However, as noted in the literature review, teachers who ask more open-ended questions and employ small group

instruction are more likely to generate meaningful student responses (Downer, Rimm-Kaufmann, & Pianta, 2007; Harris & Harrington, 2006).

Finally, significant differences related to the teachers' management of student behavior in the learning environment deserves attention. The data revealed that instances of teacher normative control, student rebellion, and student off-task behavior were more prevalent in learning environments with an achievement gap (Tables 5, 8, 9). When teachers ask students to behave (normative control) but students behave either inappropriately (rebellion) or are not academically engaged (off-task), there is less time for instruction. This loss of instructional time impacts the quality of the learning environment for *every* student in the classroom because teachers and students are being distracted from learning experiences.

Jones, Yonezawa, Mehan, and McClure (April, 2008) concluded that if schools are going to improve, educators must create the best possible learning environments for all students. Teachers who work with students at risk must be able to create learning environments that keep students actively involved and on-task. Literally, all instruction in this study occurred in teacher-directed, whole group settings with predominantly low level questions. Rather than bolster student performance, and thereby narrow the achievement gap, such strategies are likely to maintain the status quo. Thus, the researchers believe that the teachers' failure to provide small group instruction and ask high level questions when working with at-risk students had a consistent negative impact on the quality of the learning environment.

High priority must be placed on using techniques and grouping strategies that promote student engagement while maintaining on-task behavior. The implications for both public school teachers and administrators as well as university teacher educators seem clear: in-service and pre-service teachers need training that prepares them to differentiate instruction to meet the

needs of these students. The teachers in this study attempted to engage low SES students in whole group settings through the use of low level questions; however, these students did not respond to their teachers. Educators working with students in high risk categories must provide small group instruction characterized by questions that require critical thinking and analysis as opposed to one correct answer. Research shows that high risk students engaged in small group instruction are much more likely to stay on task. Moreover, when small group instruction is implemented, teachers are better able to monitor student behavior and more effectively keep students on task. The proposition that all children should be taught alike in whole class settings runs counter to what research has shown to be best practice in narrowing and eventually eliminating the achievement gap. Not only must educators be prepared to implement appropriate instruction, they must also be able and willing to advocate for best practice in meeting the needs of all students.

Further observational studies must be conducted to determine if research-based instructional strategies are being used to create learning environments that provide all students the opportunity to achieve. Specifically, observational research in classrooms where teachers implement a wide variety of effective instructional strategies as compared to those who do not should be conducted to determine if there are significant differences in the resulting achievement of their students.

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How the Economy Influences Pedagogy: The Great Recession's Influence on Elementary Teaching Practices

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Abstract

From 2007 to 2009, the United States experienced one of the greatest economic declines reported in the previous decades, known as the Great Recession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). While a great deal of media attention focused on the immediate financial effects of the recession, little discussion was made about the influence of this crisis upon students' lives and education (Isaacs & Healy, 2012). Therefore, I investigated what happened to the education of these students. In this case study, three elementary teachers who taught over 10 years identified how the Great Recession affected their teaching practices. This investigation highlights how economic situations change how teachers address students' emotional, physical, and academic needs and how educators can assist teachers in these changing environments by providing differentiated strategies to reach their evolving student population.

Every day, Americans are waking up to headlines such as"Bond King Says the U.S. Economy Is Headed for Recession" (Fortune, 2017), hinting to an uncertain economic future while the country is just recovering from its last great decline. The Great Recession from 2007-2009 changed the face of modern society by changing the stock market and the lives of millions of citizens. The Great Recession most notably influenced individuals' incomes causing a widespread impact on family's lives (Luhby, 2010). People lost jobs, homes, and their way of life in a short period of time, yet media coverage primarily focused on the recession's effect upon businesses and currency (Issacs & Healy, 2012). However, the Great Recession also had a large influence on other areas like education.

When education was covered in the media, it was focused on how teachers were affected economically and personally, and it did not explore how the changing economy would affect the demands and needs of students (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013). Therefore, the following questions remained:
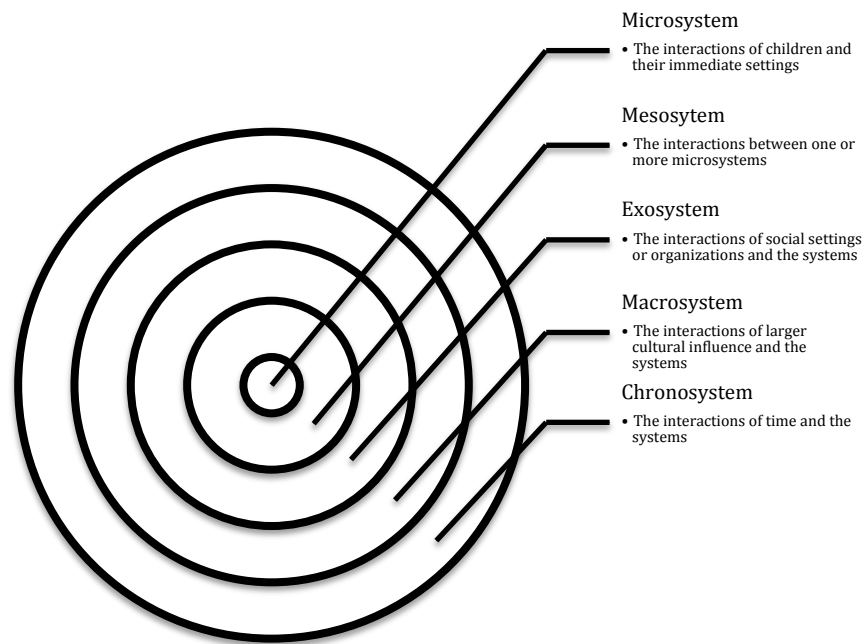
- What happened in the classrooms when the recession hit?
- How were elementary teachers' teaching practices influenced by the recession?
- What should elementary educators do in the aftermath of the recession?

The purpose of this case study was to answer these questions to determine the influence of the Great Recession on three elementary teachers teaching practice. Each teacher identified the Great Recession as affecting their interactions with their students, and they described how economic situations influenced their pedagogy. With the ever-changing economic environment in our current government landscape, educators must become aware of these answers to help meet the needs of future students.

Bronfenbrenner's Approach to Development

Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a bioecological approach describing the interaction of children's development in the context of their environment. Interactions include students' one-on-one relationships with other individuals to how students are influenced by the passing of time. Bronfenbrenner's approach takes a contextual perspective considering the relationships created by the individual and their cognitive, personal, and social environment (Feldman, 2014). This approach to development offers researchers a way to view factors influencing the development of children. In this paper, the interconnected nature between the students' economic situation and their education was explored through this lens.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach breaks into five levels with each level nested in the previous interaction as seen in Figure 1 (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Each layer has interactions that can have rippling effects causing developmental changes for the child. Layers influence each other and are not independent.

Microsystem
- The interactions of children and their immediate settings

Mesosytem
- The interactions between one or more microsystems

Exosystem
- The interactions of social settings or organizations and the systems

Macrosystem
- The interactions of larger cultural influence and the systems

Chronosystem
- The interactions of time and the systems

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Approach to Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998)

The inner level is called the microsystem. The microsystem describes the child's relationship with their immediate environment including family, school, or neighborhoods. Layers have bi-directional influence. For example, in the microsystem, a student's family can influence their behavior, while at the same time the student can influence the family's behavior. The interactions with other layers can also influence the impact of the inner structure.

The next ring is called the mesosystem. The mesosystem is defined as the interactions created between the microsystems. These interactions include any direct influence on a child created by a relationship or activity with another part of the child's environment. The ring

encircling the mesosystem is the exosystem involving the interaction of social elements and the individual. The operation of the microsystem and mesosystem can be influenced by the child's place of worship, parent's workplace, social media, and extended family. Children feel the positive and negative influence of their parents and extended family's interaction in this level.

The next level includes the macrosystem, which goes beyond the individual's direct social elements into the influence of the larger cultural factors. Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem *is an abstract concept,* "referring to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the *economic*, social, educational, legal, and political systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Because of their abstract nature, macrosystems can be difficult to investigate. For example, the macrosystem considers the influence of the type of government, religious value system, and cultural values. This also includes how individuals are influenced by being associated with specific subcultures.

The outer layer of Bronfenbrenner's approach is called the chronosystem. This layer encompasses the influence of time, and it describes the interaction between the passing of time and the child's life.

In this investigation, we focused on two interactions: he microsystem's interaction between the students and their teachers through the teaching practice andthe macrosystem's interaction between the Great Recession and students' learning. This study demonstrates how the microsystems interaction was influenced by the macrosystem. The macrosystem's influence has been especially difficult to investigate because it must show that social changes can impact the development of a single student. This influence became observable after the drastic change in the United States' economic climate. Because it includes economic influences as an influencing factor, the study described in this paper offers a way to show evidence of how Bronfenbrenner's

macrosystem influences children's development and explores what happened to students during this time.

Researching Recession

The recession was a completely unexpected element influencing my participants' teaching practices that could not have been predicted in their teacher education programs and was not connected to teacher education, professional development, or any other usual influences on teaching. Researchers studying the impact of the recession have focused on how they affect teachers' incomes rather than how they affect teachers' teaching practices. The term ecession refers to "a general slowdown in economic activity, a downturn in the business cycle, a reduction in the amount of goods and services produced and sold" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, p. 2). With such titles as "Teaching: No longer a Recession-Proof Job" (Luhby, 2010), "Will Teaching Face a Recession" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008), "The Recession's Impact on Teachers' Salaries" (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013), and "Recession Upended Teachers' Dreams, Created A 'Triple Tragedy' In Schools and Education" (Collins, 2011), the media has documented the impact of the recession on teachers' incomes because the career was once thought of as a secure profession. Collins (2011) wrote, "But the Great Recession and its ripple effects on the state and local tax dollars that fund public schools have upended the conventional wisdom that a teaching job is a golden ticket to career stability" (p. 1). The media has noticed that teachers' incomes were influenced, but the consequences for teachers' practices have not been investigated.

The recession caused the nation's unemployment rate to peak at 10 %, which was the largest spike in unemployment since 1982's stock market crash, and it caused the highest recorded percentage of individuals suffering from long-term unemployment. The U.S. Bureau of

Labor Statistics (2012) reported, "The employment decline experienced during the December 2007–June 2009 recession was greater than that of any recession of recent decades" (p. 7). Thus, the recession had a widespread influence on millions of families.

Because many parents were out of work and could not find employment for extended periods, the United States experienced an increase in the number of children living in poverty. The Urban Institute (2012) reported that the state in which this study was conducted, over 20 percent of children were living in poverty, higher than before the recession. As of the Urban Institute's 2012 report, the overall pictures for many families had not changed since the start of the recession. It explained, "The economy has begun its slow recovery, but hard economic times are not over for millions of children and families" (Isaacs & Healy, 2012, p. 14). Because parents were subjected to mass layoffs, the student populations of many schools changed during this time, reflecting this economic downturn.

As a result of the recession, the student populations in teachers' classrooms changed in one of two ways. Either the students remained the same while their economic situations changed, or the student population changed due to students moving (Isaacs & Healy, 2012). Both types of change affected the teaching practices of participants in this study.

Methods

Participants

I sampled my participants from a previous study on teaching practice. In that study, titled Learning to Teach Elementary Mathematics, two cohorts of elementary education students were followed through two years of their teacher education program and into their first two years of teaching (Spangler et. al, 2012). At the start of the study, the participants were in their junior

year of college. In their second and third semesters, they participated in 4-week field experiences in local schools. Their final semester of the teacher education program consisted of a traditional student teaching experience. After they graduated, the participants were hired at elementary schools, and they were followed through their first two years of teaching.

I chose three of the fifteen participants with pseudonyms Laura, Jayne, and Jennifer from the original study to investigate how their teaching practices had changed since the end of the initial study. As shown in Table 1, I selected Laura, Jayne, and Jennifer because they displayed three different patterns of teaching practice during the prior study (Sawyer, 2014).

Table 1

Participants' Teaching Practice

	Stage	Laura	Jayne	Jennifer
Teacher's Role	Initial	Instructor	Explainer	Explainer
	Second Year	Facilitator	Facilitator	Explainer

The three participants were white females in their early 30's. They taught for at least 10 years and were teaching in schools in the same southeastern state in the United States at the time of this study.

Across the 10 years, Laura taught in the same district in two different schools. She taught at an elementary school for 4 years in fourth grade, and she taught at a primary school for 6 years, 5 of which were in first grade and one of which was in kindergarten. Her elementary school had Title 1 status since 2003 and experienced an increase in the number of students eligible for free and reduced lunch across the 10 years as shown in Figure 6. During the 10 years,

she earned her master's degree in Early Childhood Education, was married, and had two children. During the semester I observed her class, she was a first grade teacher with a class consisting of 7 white students, 9 Hispanic students, and 3 African American students.

Since leaving her teacher education program, Jayne taught first grade in the same school for 11 years, experiencing change in both her community and students. Her school gained Title 1 status in the 2007 - 2008 school year, and the school's students eligible for free/reduced meals had drastically increased each year since 2003. During that time, she was married, had two children, and earned a master's degree in Early Childhood Reading and Literacy. I observed her first grade class consisting of 3 white students, 5 Hispanic students, and 12 African American students.
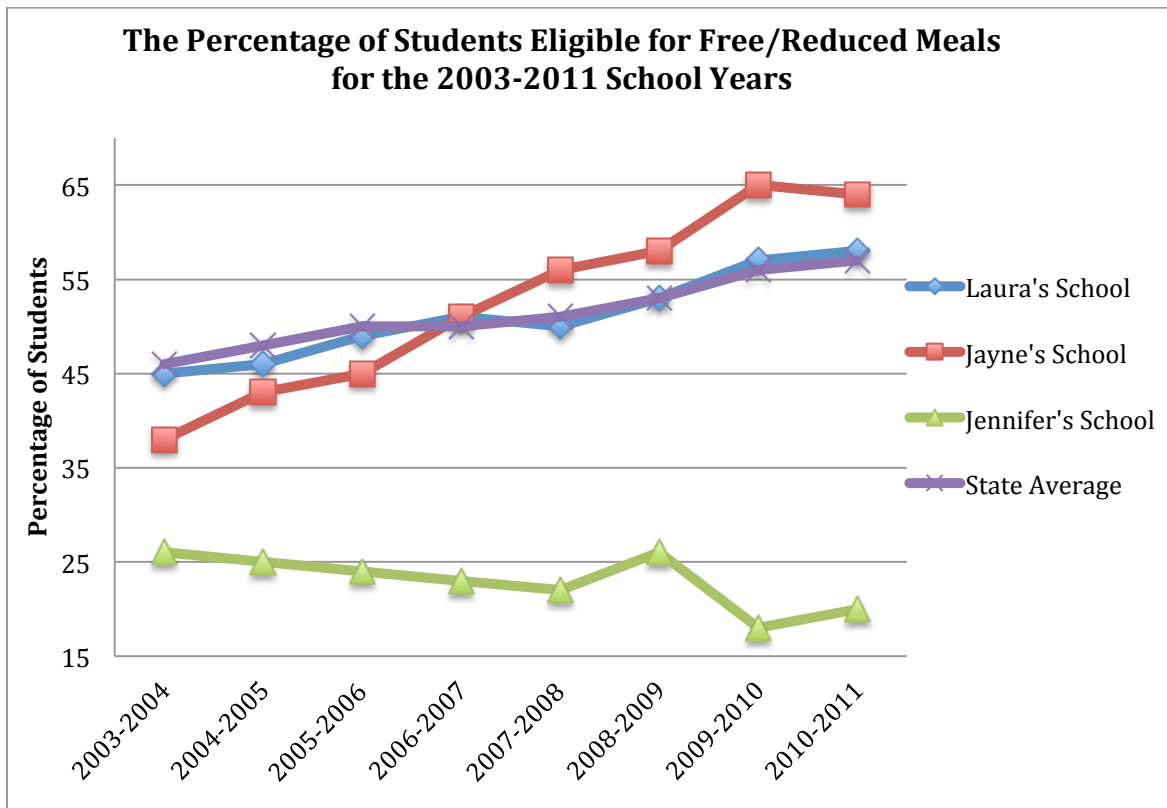
The Percentage of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Meals for the 2003-2011 School Years

Figure 3: The percentage of students eligible for free/reduced price meals for the 2003-2011 school years (Georgia Department of Education, 2014).

Over the 10 years, Jennifer lived in three different states, teaching elementary school in second through fifth grade. She was married, had a child, earned a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, earned a specialist in Educational Leadership, experienced job transfers, was divorced, and moved back to her home state. During this study, she taught at the same school she taught in during her first year of teaching. The school had a decreasing trend in the percentage of students eligible for free/reduced meals as shown in Figure 3. The semester she was observed, she was the fifth grade mathematics teacher for the school. I observed her teaching one fifth grade class consisting of 17 white students and 3 Hispanic students.

Data Collection

Individuals often are not aware of their teaching practices; thus, researchers must ask teachers questions to help them better understand the influence on their views (Rokeach, 1968). To determine the teachers' influences on teaching practice, I use multiple strategies. I collected data on each individual by conducting:

1. three face-to-face interviews

2. one focus group meeting with all participants

3. three 1-hour classroom observations

4. Known Factors Affecting Teacher Change Survey

Data collection proceeded as follows. First, I conducted an initial hour-long classroom observation of each teacher. Beliefs are asserted to be a strong predictor of classroom practice (Cross, 2009), so I used classroom observations to help infer my participants' beliefs. Leatham (2006) argued that beliefs are constructed in a sensible system for each teacher even if they do not appear sensible to an outsider, so when I found a contradiction between a person's beliefs and practices, I continued investigating to better understand the participant's perspective.

After each classroom observation, I conducted an interview. Each face-to-face interview focused on understanding how the teachers have changed since the original study. The purpose of the first interview was to elicit the teachers' current views of their teaching. In the second interview, the participants were asked to elaborate from their own responses from the KFABC survey, and in the third interview, the participants were asked to describe their views on my initial findings from this study.

Between the first face-to-face interview and the second classroom observation, the participants took the Known Factors Affecting Teacher Change (KFABC) survey. Spangler,

Sawyer, Kang, Kim, & Kim (2012) developed the survey to collect data about the participants'

backgrounds. Research in mathematics education identified some influences that could affect

belief development (Raymond, 1997; Richardson, 1996), and Spangler et. al (2012) coupled

these findings with a study to create the survey. The survey investigated the factors influenced by

the following areas:

1. Personal Experiences (past and present events that occurred outside of school)

2. Schooling Experiences (past events that occurred in K-16 schools outside of their teacher

   education program)

3. Teacher Education Experiences (past and present events that occurred in a teacher

   education program, graduate program, or professional development experience)

4. Teaching Experiences (past and present events while teaching students in the school

   environment).

   From each of the four categories, the participants were asked questions to understand the

impact of each event. For example, the participants' teaching experiences were discussed using

the following questions from the survey:

1. How have your students influenced the way you view how people learn mathematics?

2. How did your school administration affect the way you teach?

3. How has standardized testing affected your teaching of mathematics?

To ensure validity and reliability, Sawyer (2014) tested the instrument with twelve former

teachers and had the group help to analyze the data to determine if the instrument collected data

it was designed to find. The Known Factors Affecting Teacher Change Survey was a web-based,

20-item, open-response questionnaire, which took about an hour to complete.

The initial analysis of the data was conducted to construct a story of each participant's change over time, and I presented my participants with a copy of my interpretation. Finally, I conducted the third interview as a member check. I gave the participants the opportunity to respond to my interpretation of their teaching practices.

Data Analysis

After collecting field notes from the classroom observations, the transcripts of the interviews, and the results of the survey, two analysis techniques were used to understand the data. First, the four categories of factors affecting belief change as described in the KFABC were investigated. By using the constant comparison method, I coded the factors that affected the participants as personal experiences, schooling experiences, teacher education experiences, and teaching experiences. I constructed another code when a part of the data did not fit into one of these four categories. For example, the participants identified a factor relating to the recession that did not fit into one of the four categories. Thus, a fifth category of factors was created called economic experiences to accommodate these factors identified by the participants.

Second, the researcher created a 5-10 page summary of each participant's factors affecting her teaching practice. Each participant was asked to read the summary and indicate whether it reflected her views. The participants generally said the summaries were an accurate reflection of their views. As a result of this member-checking, I only changed one participant's word choice from her interviews at her request.

Findings

  Laura. Laura identified the recession as an influencing factor on how she taught her students. Laura taught in the same district in which she grew up, which gave her a unique perspective on how the community changed over the years. She explained:

> It used to be that [her county] was more affluent then [neighboring county]. [The neighboring county] is huge. They have like 13 elementary schools, and we have one. So [her county] has always been tiny, and [the neighboring county] has been big. They have 3 big high schools, and we have 1. Because of the recession, families that lived in [the neighboring county] had to move to our county because [the neighboring county] has no apartments. They had no subsidized housing. There was no cheap housing in the county. Also in the [neighboring county] a lot of the dirt roads are not serviced by the school bus, and so they had to move to the city so that their kids can catch a bus to go to school. (Focus Group)

  Laura explained there was a big boom in the economy in the early 2000's. The building she taught in originally held kindergarten through eighth grade. However, because of the large influx of students into the area, the building could only accommodated kindergarten through second grade. In 2003, she started working for the district, which at the time continually hired new teachers and had few students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. However, since the recession started in 2008, the school and community had undergone a change. Laura explained, "Now we are 58% free and reduced lunch," and "a lot of kids don't go to school with the basic needs met" (Focus Group).

Because of these changes brought about by the recession, Laura felt that she had to assess the students' emotional and physical states, as well as assessing their learning. This changed Laura's teaching practice. For example, if a student needed sleep because he or she did not feel comfortable sleeping at home, then she would accommodate his or her needs. Laura did this by creating a sleeping center. She brought pillows and blankets from home to create a comfortable quiet area for her students.

Laura stated that she no longer could depend on parental involvement in her class because parents had other more pressing concerns. Laura changed her homework policy to require only one 15-minute assignment that did not require parental assistance to be completed each week, and she implemented a center where the students would come to her to receive one-on-one assistance. Thus, Laura's teaching practices were influenced by economic situations in her community.

Jayne. Jayne taught at the same school for over 10 years, allowing her a unique insight into the community. Because of the economic situation, she observed parents having less time with their children because they needed to work. The recession hit her community very hard. Jayne explained:

> I really think situations have changed. I feel like parents who might not have had to work are now working one or two jobs. When I first started teaching here, I would say like a majority of my kids in my class came from a two-parent home where they weren't at daycare in the morning or daycare in the afternoon. Their homework was done with someone, and a lot of my kids now, their parents are working one to two jobs. They are working long hours. Their kids are spending more time in daycare. They're getting up early to go to daycare. They are leaving here and going to daycare. It is all parents can do

to get their kids fed, bathed, and in bed. I feel like the recession played a big part in it. (interview #3)

As a result of the recession, her school became a Title 1 school because it had a high percentage of students from low-income families. When asked how her teaching changed because of this influence, she stated, "I feel like I don't take for granted thinking that they already know things" (interview #2). She implemented many activities to assess her students' understanding of basic concepts, and then she determined where she should begin the lesson from that point. Or, she pulled specific students aside to work on the basics. Because of the recession, Jayne believed, "They are coming in with less background knowledge and needing more from us" (interview #2); thus, her teaching was influenced by the national economic situation.

Jennifer. Jennifer identified the recession as an influence on her teaching practice. Jennifer experienced a change in her student population that she attributed to the nation's economic problems. Jennifer said:

[Her current county] is such an expensive place to be that if you lose your job or if money gets tight, they have to leave [the county]. They can't afford the houses there. They can't afford the rent there. They can't afford to stay there. The families that we are losing are the lower income families. The new students that we get, it's like, "Oh her dad is the new gymnastics coach at [the university]" or, "Oh her dad is head of the new [manufacturing] plant in [the county]" or, "His dad is the head surgeon at [the local hospital]." Every kid that is coming in is coming into the million-dollar houses in [the expensive subdivision]. (Focus Group)

Jennifer's student population changed, making it necessary to change how she taught. The students had more resources available to them such as computers and tutors. If students were having difficulty with concepts, their families would fund outside assistance to help their students learn the concepts. Therefore, Jennifer observed a rise in the number of students in her higher-level classes. To meet the needs of these new students, Jennifer implemented different forms of differentiation by enacting more tasks with a high-level of cognitive demand. By differentiating, Jennifer was still able to meet the needs of her lower-level students but also focus instruction on the higher-level students' development.

Discussion

All three teachers stated that the 2007-2009 economic recession caused them to change how they taught their classes because their student population changed. The data showed that the teachers needed two specific types of knowledge to be able to help the students in this changing economic time. Jennifer needed the ability to determine the level cognitive demand to reach students. Jane and Laura needed to be able to differentiate instruction to help the students at every level. Therefore, understanding the level cognitive demand and differentiation techniques helped the students in this changing economic time.

Jennifer saw a rise in higher-achieving students because her community attracted families with more resources. She explained that she increased the cognitive demand of her activities in her class. Smith, Stein, Arbaugh, Brown, and Mossgrove (2004) described how mathematical tasks can be categorized by their cognitive demand as either being high or low level. Tasks involving memorization and procedures without connections were considered having a low level of cognitive demand, and tasks involving procedures with connections and doing mathematics

were considered having a high level of cognitive demand. Jennifer needed this understanding of higher level tasks to help increase the cognitive demand for her students.

Laura and Jayne saw a decrease in students' basic knowledge, which they believed was caused by lower parental involvement. The teachers had to focus on meeting their students' emotional and physical needs before they could meet their students' academic needs. When they did focus on the content, they needed to assess their basic skills first. They no longer could assume the children received background knowledge about specific topics at home. Once they understood the students' academic needs, they differentiated their mathematical instruction. By creating activities like learning menus, Laura and Jayne used what the students knew mathematically to develop their understanding of new concepts.

My participants' views of the recession's effects were consistent with the findings from the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Because of the increase in unemployment, more children were living in poverty (Isaacs & Healy, 2012). As of the Urban Institute's 2012 reports, the overall poverty levels for many families had not changed since the start of the recession. With many parents subjected to mass layoffs, the student populations changed, reflecting this economic situation.

Implications

The study had three main implications for the educational community. First, the study demonstrates the importance of teacher educators becoming aware of the influence the economy has on pedagogy. Second, the findings from this study clearly show how we can assist teachers by providing differentiated strategies to reach diverse learners in their classrooms. Third, the

study showcased how Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem had a noticeable effect on students' development.

Awareness

Forgasz and Leder (2008) stated elementary teachers hold similar beliefs about holistic learning. Like Laura and Jayne, other elementary teachers are focusing on meeting the needs of all their students both physically and mentally. Because many elementary teachers hold similar beliefs about learning, this suggests the recession's effect might be more widespread among elementary teaching populations. Professional developers and district administrators should be aware of the potential influences of future economic events and be ready to provide support to teachers as they deal with changing student needs.

Recessions have a cyclical nature (Applebaum, 2014). Our society will be faced with similar circumstances in the future. Therefore, teacher educators must be concerned with what happened to teachers during this recession to be prepared for the future.

Assistance

Inservice teachers need assistance working with these changing student populations. Tankersley (2013) believes the economy has recovered as much as it can. With many parents subjected to mass layoffs, the student populations continue to change. Teachers will need professional development-focused differentiation techniques. Teachers must understand the importance of differentiating math content so that all students have an equal opportunity to experience mathematical thinking and develop a relational understanding of content, based on their own motivation, engagement, and voice (Bray & McClaskey, 2013). To do this, professional development could focus on instructing teachers to organize lessons that differ by

content, product, and/or process: the fundamental areas that lead students to acquire mathematical relational understanding (Andreasen & Hunt, 2012; Bender, 2013). Also, professional development could focus on developing multiple strategies to make sense of mathematical content, demonstrate knowledge, and practice with material (Andreasen & Hunt, 2012). Effective mathematics instruction does not occur while using a "one-size-fits-all" teaching style. Lessons must be flexible to fit the needs of all ability groups within a classroom (Vigdor, 2013).

These techniques could also be used to prepare future elementary teachers to counter these effects in the schools. Elementary educators can make their preservice teachers aware of these changes. By focusing on how to address diverse learners across the same school year, the preservice teachers will go into the classrooms prepared for the evolving teaching environment.

Visible Macrosystem

The participants in this study provided evidence demonstrating how Bronfenbrenner's macrosystem influenced children's learning. Because of their abstract nature, macrosystems can be difficult to investigate (Feldman, 2014). Students learn through social interaction from their teachers and their parents; however it is difficult to see how economic influences cause children to learn differently. The Great Recession allowed the macrosystem to become visible in a way that previously had not been explored. In this research study, the changes in student's learning was observed and explained. Therefore, teacher educators need to openly look into how the macrosystem affects development, and this research also suggest that the influence of the macrosystem might be more influential than many have viewed in prior studies.

Future research should be conducted to see if the recession influenced other teachers and in what ways. Such studies might look at teachers in different settings and subjects, such as rural

and urban areas, teachers of different ages of students, such as middle and high school, and teachers in different areas of the country where the recession was felt more and less acutely. When future economic events occur, researchers should be poised to investigate their effects on teachers, and professional developers could use this information to plan for changes in teaching practices as a result of economic change.

Closing

With today's ever changing economic and political environment, teachers have a societal mandate to physically, emotionally, and academically support their students. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory predicted that economic situations could influence children's development, and this study showed how these large forces have rippling effects on teaching and learning. The Great Recession influenced individuals in a large capacity, and teacher educators need to be aware of these influences to address how to help others who are affected by these changes. Therefore teachers cannot ignore the macrosystem's influence on students.

Economists warn we are in "secular stagnation" because:

> The U.S. economy just can't catch a break. It has been poised time and again to rocket back to a growth rate that would recapture all the ground lost in the Great Recession, while delivering big job gains. But every time, some outside event scuttles things. (Tankersley, 2013, p. G01)

Since the economy consistently had "bad luck" in recovering, teachers will continue to see these effects in their classrooms. As the student populations change, so do elementary teachers' teaching practices. Therefore, elementary educators need to be aware of the impact of the macrosystems to better serve the needs of their future students.

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