

**Literacy Teacher Education:
Perceptions of Teacher Candidates and Teacher Educators**

Joy Meyers, Christy Howard, Claire Lambert, and Melissa Adams-Budde

Abstract

This qualitative multiple-case study examines the cross connections between the perceptions of elementary teacher candidates and teacher educators from three different universities. The data analysis specifically focused on candidates' preparedness to teach literacy. The interview data derived from nineteen candidates and three of their teacher educators. The findings suggest various alignments and differences between teacher candidates' and university teacher educators' perceptions of challenges and strengths candidates anticipate facing during their first year of teaching. This study has implications for teacher educators and serves as a reminder for the need to reflect on the content and methods that are being taught in order to create and shape the best possible learning experiences for students.

Keywords: literacy, teacher education, elementary education, teacher candidates' perceptions

Dr. Joy Meyers is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at James Madison University. She can be reached at myersjk@jmu.edu

Dr. Christy Howard is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies at East Carolina University. She can be reached at howardch14@ecu.edu

Dr. Claire Lambert is an Assistant Professor of Education at Highpoint University. She can be reached at claireslambert@gmail.com

Dr. Melissa Adams-Budde is an Assistant Professor of Education at West Chester University. She can be reached at Adams-Budde@wcupa.edu

Teacher education programs help create a “vision” for teacher candidates towards which they can begin to work (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2000). While implementing this vision can be challenging, it often stays with new teachers and resurfaces in important ways later (Britton, Paine, & Raizen, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman et al., 2000). This vision may translate into how candidates imagine themselves in their future classrooms and how they perceive themselves as future teachers. Thus, there is a need to understand what teacher candidates see as their strengths and challenges prior to beginning their careers (Baker, 2005; Hall, Hurst, Camp, & Laughlin, 2015). As these perceptions are explored, teacher candidates need support in reflecting not only on their visions, but also on their goals and expectations. While listening intently to candidates, it is also important to capture the voices of teacher educators and their understanding of candidates’ preparedness (Beck, Kosnick, & Roswell, 2007). This is especially true since existing studies show that teacher candidates and their teacher educators may have vastly different opinions of candidates’ preparedness to teach (Al-Bataineh, 2009; Copeland, Keefe, Calhoun, Tanner, & Park, 2011). These findings suggest there is much to be learned about what candidates are taught in their preparation programs as well as how they plan to enact their visions and reflect on their perceptions of their preparedness to teach (Bainbridge & Macy, 2008; Clark, Jones, Reutzler, & Andreasen, 2013).

This paper highlights the perceptions of preparedness of 19 elementary teacher candidates at the conclusion of their teacher education programs, and three of their teacher educators, from universities in the United States. This study adds to the limited literature on the cross connections between the perceptions of these two groups and focuses specifically on candidates’ preparedness for literacy instruction.

Related Literature

Teacher Candidate Perceptions

Research reveals various perceptions related to the degree to which teacher candidates feel prepared to begin teaching. Imbimbo and Silvernail (1999) used surveys to study 2,956 teachers, with fewer than five years of classroom experience, to determine how well prepared they felt for classroom instruction when they began teaching. The certified teachers, who completed an education degree, rated their preparation at an average of 2.14 on a 4.0 scale. Other longitudinal studies suggest that tools and techniques taught in teacher education programs such as pedagogical understanding (Levin, 2003) and how to bridge theory and practice (Beck et al., 2007) develop slowly and thus candidates do not feel prepared in these areas since it takes time and practice to acquire and use these skills effectively. Some teacher candidates felt unprepared to teach, according to the research, because they were not able to connect the large amounts of theory and research provided in their program to practice (Bainbridge & Macy, 2008; Beck et al., 2007).

In contrast, other studies highlight how well prepared candidates feel after graduation. For example, Bratlein and McGuire (2002) used survey research to examine the levels of satisfaction of 505 graduates from the same education program specific to preparation in: content areas, working with diverse students, developing professional communications and collaborative skills, instructional methodology, specific coursework, and the program over the course of four years. Overall, graduates reported positive levels of satisfaction with three facets of their program: content area preparation, instructional methodology, and ability to create a learner centered community. They also had strong perceptions of satisfaction with their preparation in elementary education, reading, special education, and early childhood coursework. Similarly, in

their study, Clark et al. (2013) found that beginning reading teachers expressed confidence in the training they had received, and felt that their experiences would help them succeed as teachers. The graduates recognized that they had a wide variety of strategies and techniques to employ in their daily reading instruction and they reported that they had received a research-based understanding of how to teach reading.

Risko and colleagues (2008) discuss strong evidence to suggest that the knowledge and beliefs of teachers are “most strongly affected in the context of methods courses” (p. 276). This finding could explain the differences within the findings of these studies in terms of candidates’ feelings of preparedness. However, there is a great deal of variability in the approach, timing, and content of methods courses, even within programs. In the United States, the types and lengths of programs range depending on each state’s licensure requirements. Not only do the programs differ, but Risko et al. (2008) found individual features within individual courses contributed to preservice teachers’ development of stronger belief systems or pedagogical knowledge bases. Since it appears there are discrepancies between the expectations of what should be included in education course content, Honan and Mitchell (2016) posed the question: how is it possible to prepare people to enter the teaching profession, to give them the skills, knowledge and understanding required to work within such a complex context? This sentiment is supported by Copeland et al. (2011) who stress the need for more research on the quality of particular components of teacher preparation programs in order to help education programs better serve teacher candidates.

Teacher Educator Perceptions

Existing studies reveal that just as graduates of different universities have vastly different opinions of their own preparedness to teach, so too do the teacher educators that prepare them

(Al-Bataineh, 2009). In McFadden and Sheerer's (2008) study of eight public and eight private institutions within one state, 49% of professors thought their programs were doing an adequate job of preparing teachers in that they addressed: what motivates students to learn, adequate attention to assessment, and adequate attention to the real problems of practice. Their data suggests that within that focal state, less than half of the professors think they are meeting the needs of their candidates.

Carter and Cowan (2013) engaged in a study specific to their teacher education program. "Self-study has convinced us ... that listening closely to our student teachers, program graduates, supervising teachers and the principals who hire our graduates proves even richer input about the strength and viability of our program." (p. 48). Their teacher candidates rated themselves highest in preparedness in the areas of: treating all students in a caring manner, communicating respect, and following codes of professional conduct. Carter and Cowan found that in some areas the student teachers felt more prepared than was observed by their cooperating teacher and professors. These findings were used to plan and monitor future groups of teacher candidates.

In another study, Kosnik and Beck (2008) found that what teacher educators presume candidates are prepared to do and what candidates report in terms of preparedness can be different. For example, the new teachers in their study reported learning many things from their preservice program, including the importance of engaging learners, strategies for developing an inclusive class community, the names of high-quality works of children's literature, and a variety of general teaching strategies. However, there were gaps between what was taught and what the new teachers wanted to learn in terms of planning and developing their literacy instruction.

Although there is research related to teacher candidates' perceptions and other studies related to teacher educators' perceptions, few studies consider the groups together to investigate

the intersections and gaps between the perceptions of teacher candidates and those of their instructors.

Theoretical Framework

In addition to the literature related to teacher candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions, a social cognitive perspective (Bandura, 1986) guided this study. The essence of this study is that interaction with others stimulates learning. In this study, the teacher educators served as the more knowledgeable other and their role was to support the teacher candidates in the development of their understanding of literacy methods. In addition to the support of teacher educators, teacher candidates interacted with others through their practicum experiences and learned from these social experiences as well.

This framework was used to explore the following research questions: 1) What are teacher candidates' perceptions of challenges they may face and the strengths they will bring to teaching literacy? 2) What are teacher educators' perceptions of challenges novice teachers face and the strengths they will bring to teaching literacy?

Methodology

Over a two year period, teacher candidates were recruited for this qualitative multiple-case study. This article presents analyzed data from interviews with undergraduate teacher candidates prior to graduation.

Participants

In this multiple case design, each participant represents a separate case. For the purpose of this paper, participant responses are shared that are representative of the themes developed across cases throughout the data analysis phase. All names used to discuss participants are pseudonyms. Convenience sampling was used because cases were, "accessible to us

geographically and immediately” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 32). However, the researchers were also purposeful in their criteria for selecting cases because the candidates exhibited strong performance in literacy courses at the three universities, agreed to participate in the research after graduation, and taught in schools within the vicinity of the researchers’ institutions.

The teacher candidates who participated in this study identified as female and were predominantly Caucasian (95 %) which was representative of the teacher education programs they were enrolled in, but they differed in background, specifically in age. The candidates who completed the initial licensure program already had a degree in another area and were considered “career switchers.”

The teacher educators worked at different universities in three states, but were similar in that they were instructors in the participants’ courses, identified as Caucasian females in their thirties or forties, were former elementary and middle school teachers, had taught in higher education for less than 5 years, and agreed to be part of the study over a three year period.

The three teacher education programs differed primarily in length of time spent both in the university classroom and in the field working with K-6 students as well as with the final degree candidates obtained upon completion of their studies. While all graduates received their teaching license, some of the participants majored in education with a minor in literacy, others completed the initial licensure phase as they continued to work toward their Master's degree, and another group finished a five year Master's degree in education.

Data Sources

Research related to perceptions is often conducted with survey instruments (Allen, Ambrosetti, Turner, 2013; Carter & Cowan, 2013; Helfrich & Bean, 2011). However, in order to

use a new lens to examine perceptions, the researchers chose interview methodology. The data from the 19 candidates was obtained through semi-structured interviews (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), each approximately 60-minutes long, conducted at the time of program completion. The interview questions asked about their preparedness to teach literacy effectively and their beliefs regarding the knowledge and skills necessary for a successful transition into the classroom (see Appendix A). The data sources from the teacher educators included critical reflective responses to a series of questions related to the preparedness of graduating candidates from their programs in the areas of a) disciplinary literacy, b) writing, c) technology, and d) reading. The teacher educators were also asked to reflect on their confidence level and concerns regarding their instruction in any other areas as well (see Appendix B).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed. Data analysis of the interviews and teacher educators' written reflections occurred in three phases, following Miles' et al. (2014) recommendations of data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions. During phase one, participants' responses were open-coded by the research team. The team met regularly through conference calls to discuss thoughts on coding and in order to organize codes in data displays. In phase two, initial codes were refined into common categories and a table was created. The three column data matrix's columns were labeled with the participants' pseudonym, challenges, and strengths. Next, the researchers combed through the data to populate the matrix. When perceptions were found to be highly similar (e.g., differentiating literacy instruction), they were combined in the same row and multiple participants were noted. Then comments were inserted to briefly summarize the essence of perceptions using quotes from the interviews. This led to discussions of themes the researchers noticed in the perceptions of the candidates and teacher

educators. Once data were organized, the researchers carefully read through the matrices and inserted additional comments for clarification. Finally, thematic codes were created by collapsing the categories into major themes (Merriam, 1988) across cases related to candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions of challenges novice teachers face and their strengths specific to literacy instruction.

Findings

The focus of the findings is limited to the candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions of the challenges and strengths novice teachers face specific to literacy instruction. The data revealed trends showing clear alignment and at times differences between the the perceptions of the two groups when discussing challenges and strengths. Examples from the candidates' interviews and the educators' reflections specific to these themes are highlighted next.

Perceived Challenges

Alignment. When asked about challenges related to teaching literacy, teacher educators' and teacher candidates' responses aligned along three major themes across universities: differentiating literacy instruction, teaching writing, and using scripted literacy curriculum materials.

Differentiating literacy instruction. During their initial interviews all of the candidates believed their ability to differentiate literacy instruction might be a challenge. Cate expressed concerns about differentiating instruction specific to small groups. She worried about grouping her students properly and ensuring that she could meet their individual needs. Cate recognized the importance of looking beyond student test scores to a more inclusive view of her students that also focused on getting to know her students as readers and writers. Jasmine shared similar thoughts in her interview, "The thing that worries me the most is grouping kids and making sure each group has appropriate books they're working on each week."

Rachel's concerns related to differentiated literacy instruction stemmed from hearing about techniques in her university class, but not seeing them in practicum. She said:

I haven't had too much practice with different reading groups. Especially in the upper grades...I mean all we've been talking about now is conferencing and I haven't seen that done. So I guess I have all of these ideas in my head, but I've never seen it done. That's what I'm scared for.

The teacher educators also recognized that differentiation was challenging for novice teachers. In fact, all three educators listed differentiating instruction for readers as a top concern for new teachers. Jenny wrote:

As new teachers, they are just trying to hold it together. I think classroom management is probably the biggest focus of all the first year. With time and experience novice teachers start to differentiate because they become more confident in what their students should be able to do at that grade level and can then better understand who needs more support and take action to give it to them.

Across these responses, teacher candidates recognized differentiation as an important piece of literacy instruction and, because they valued this aspect of teaching, were concerned with their ability to implement it. Candidates discussed their basic knowledge of this process, but believed they were lacking the hands-on experience they needed. This concern was shared by their teacher educators, not because this was not taught in their teacher education program, but because differentiating instruction is challenging and new teachers have so much to focus their attention on during their first years such as getting to know their students, their curriculum, and their context. This thought process was similar to other areas in which candidates perceived potential challenges related to their future teaching.

Teaching writing. Another area in which candidates' and educators' perceptions aligned related to challenges was teaching writing. In an interview, Jessie, a teacher candidate, shared, "One thing I'm concerned about is writing instruction. I've learned that reading and writing, that's like the core of everything. If you cannot read and write, you cannot go anywhere. But learning [writing] wasn't stressed as much in my classes." Candidates also expressed concerns about helping students understand the process of writing. Cathy said, "I have noticed that writing is tough for 2nd graders... they want to be perfect, spell everything correctly and you just want to stress, 'No it is just your thoughts that matter.'" Even with seeing writing workshop during 2nd and 4th grade practicums, Rosie said, "So I have really gotten a better look at it over the past couple of years but I'm still kind of nervous about being thrown in and like teaching it."

Jenny, a teacher educator, recognized the importance of writing but felt constrained because her program did not offer a stand-alone writing methods course. She wrote, "Since writing does not have its own course, it is often embedded in reading-specific courses. Depending on who is teaching the course, writing may or may not be heavily emphasized." Similarly, Megan, a teacher educator in a program where all candidates take a methods courses related to teaching writing, wrote:

While our candidates take a methods course on writing and learn a great deal about teaching writing. I worry that what they learn in this class is not always happening in their field placements and in our local school districts where many of our graduates will be getting jobs. They learn about using writer's workshop, focusing on the process of writing, writing for authentic purposes, and giving students choice in their writing. Then they get out into schools and see little writing instruction or a scripted writing program they are expected to follow.

Both teacher candidates and teacher educators saw writing as a potential challenge because it was not a focus across programs or they did not see it enacted in actual classrooms. However, there was a heavy emphasis on reading instruction, both in teaching and in practice.

Using scripted literacy curriculum materials. During student teaching, the candidates in all three states experienced scripted literacy programs. In some schools, they were given more leeway than others. However, in many instances the candidates were expected to follow the program. All of Ann's field placements, despite being in different districts, used the same literacy program. She said, "It was a script, I didn't really have to do any thinking ... what I'm worried about is if I'm going to be in that same situation [when she starts teaching], and have to do that scripted lessons and stuff." Ann was not alone in her feelings that using scripted literacy materials was challenging. Catherine admitted that during student teaching she appreciated the way the mandated literacy program was organized, so she could "just follow along." However, she added that it "didn't leave room for much interpretation. It was very scripted." Madeline, another teacher candidate, said:

I feel in many ways, very unprepared to teach reading. The only reason I feel like I was successful in student teaching is because it was a scripted curriculum. So, I had to follow what they said. I didn't have to design my own lessons or kind of come up with my own stuff. The city or the county picked the books. And then you did that.

Their experience using scripted literacy curriculum materials left Ann, Catherine and Madeline very concerned about how prepared they were to teach reading in an area that did not use these types of programs.

Megan, a teacher educator, addressed the topic of scripted literacy programs in her reflection, writing:

I think one of the biggest challenges I anticipate for students is making sense of their curriculum which may be drastically different from what they were exposed to in reading practicum and student teaching. I think that this can be learning to navigate a scripted program or learning how to take a broad scope and sequence and turn it into practice, not just for stand-alone lessons, but for overall development in reading. I think during first year it is difficult for them to get a sense of the big picture because so much is new and they are overwhelmed with the small details.

Although Megan described the potential challenge of teacher candidates making the adjustment from authentic teaching to using scripted programs, once in their practicum experiences the majority of candidates actually experienced more scripted programs than not.

Caroline, another teacher educator, shared the schools in which most candidates are placed from her university rely on a scripted reading program anchored in whole-class instruction using a reading anthology with vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension practice. She wrote:

Some schools, particularly those identified as low achieving, use the program exclusively and with fidelity. Therefore candidates placed in those schools never see reading and writing workshop, shared reading/writing, or student choice of literacy activities in their student teaching placements. In other schools the reading program is supplemented with additional literacy instruction and students see a wider range of practices.

These perceived challenges are representative of all teacher candidates in the study and provide insights into their experiences where they felt less confident throughout their program. Similarly, the teacher educators felt these concepts may prove to be a challenge for student participants. Across both groups, the concern of a perceived challenge was related to the lack of focused experiences, specifically related to grouping, writing, and creating authentic tasks

outside of scripted programs. While these similarities emerged, themes related to differing perceptions emerged as well.

Differences. Across candidate and teacher educator data, there were areas in which candidates' perceptions of their challenges with teaching literacy were not aligned with concerns of their teacher educators. These differences were prevalent in the discussion of logistics versus pedagogy and addressing foundational reading skills.

Logistics versus pedagogy. Throughout the initial interviews, candidates seemed concerned with the logistical challenges of implementing literacy instruction, such as managing instructional time and making sense of their school's literacy programs, however, the teacher educators expressed concern with the depth of candidates' literacy pedagogical repertoire. For example, Shannon, a teacher candidate, admitted, "Teaching reading and writing is so complex and I am not sure how I will be able to fit it all in and not overwhelm my future students." Many candidates expressed similar concerns. For example, Jessie shared:

Learning about the different levels and where students are, that is important, but learning how to apply those things into simple lessons, how to apply what we know. How can I create a lesson that will cater to those students to get them to the next level?

Concerns about time and planning lessons plagued candidates from the moment they entered the teacher education program, yet even at the time of graduation, they still verbalized logistics as being a top challenge. Rosie shared, "I'm nervous to see how I set up my literacy centers, my reading workshop. I've seen a lot of examples of how they go [in practicum]." Despite seeing centers and the workshop model in practice, candidates like Rosie were still concerned about the logistics of organizing and running the centers versus the content that would be covered.

Although all three teacher educators believe their programs had a significant focus on literacy theory and pedagogy, the candidates did not mention in any interview how theory

informed their practice. Caroline, a teacher educator, wrote in her reflection, “Candidates are very focused on what to do, but I’m not always sure they connect to why they are implementing certain literacy practices.” This quote is representative of how the teacher educators perceived candidates ability to effectively explore and articulate the rationale behind their instructional decisions. This misalignment reveals a potential issue with “depth of knowledge” held by teacher candidates in that it is not enough to know what to do, but it is equally valuable to understand the importance and implications of engaging in specific literacy strategies and activities.

Addressing foundational reading skills. Multiple candidates expressed concerns about helping young readers despite having experience during practicum in primary grades. Others did not feel confident to help struggling readers with reading skills. “If a student already knows how to read, I feel equipped to help them become a stronger reader. But, in that very foundational level of reading, I feel like I’m not as prepared as I could be, but I know it’s, like, a huge process,” said Catherine. Another example of these concerns was seen in Ellen’s interview. She student taught in 4th grade and said, “I feel very strong with teaching literacy for on-level and above-level students.” However, when asked about students who struggled she said, “I am kind of nervous.”

The teacher educators did not share the same concerns. In fact, they felt strongly that the candidates were prepared to teach foundational reading skills. Megan wrote, “I believe that most of our graduates are competent reading teachers when they leave and have a solid foundation on which to build their practice while in the profession.” Jenny addressed why candidates might not feel prepared, writing, “Reading is complex and despite having multiple classes on teaching reading, they may not feel ready because they have not actually done it enough yet, but I think they know more than they think they do.”

The differences between teacher candidates and teacher educators related to perceived challenges show a disconnect in how teacher candidates view their abilities to teach foundational skills and the logistics of literacy instruction. While teacher educators were confident in candidates' abilities to address these aspects of literacy instruction, candidates did not feel like they had been provided the necessary experiences to confidently embrace these challenges.

Perceived Strengths

Similarly to perceived challenges, the data also revealed examples of clear alignment and at times differences between the perceptions of the two groups when discussing strengths candidates will bring to their first year of teaching.

Alignment. When asked about perceived strengths related to teaching literacy, there were several areas of alignment between candidates and teacher educators. All participants agreed that planning interesting and engaging literacy experiences and having opportunities to implement literacy practices during field experiences were strengths.

Planning interesting and engaging literacy experiences. Across multiple teacher candidates, the theme of being able to successfully plan interesting and engaging literacy experiences was apparent. However, it was interesting to examine in what ways they thought this happened. For Ann, she believed in the importance of connecting students with engaging texts. She shared:

I feel strong knowing children's literature and knowing how to help students find books for themselves for independent reading. I did that a lot in my practicum ... there's a lot of students who are really below reading level. They just weren't finding books that were manufactured by companies and it's not exciting. So, I tried to find them books that they would actually want to read. So, I think that's one of my strengths when it comes to literacy is getting them interested in reading.

Similarly, during her practicum experience, Connie had the opportunity to engage her students in literacy activities by using read alouds to foster engagement. She shared:

I feel like we constantly heard about doing read alouds with the before, during, and after model. I have just seen it a million times in the field so that is just something that I will use...using a read aloud to introduce concepts, even if it is in a different subject like math or science, using that read aloud to kind of get them ready. It is so helpful because they start thinking about it, they start getting engaged with what we will be talking about.

Instead of just jumping in with hey, what do you know about this or something like that, I feel like they just connect better when there is a story involved in it.

In focusing on the importance of planning engaging activities for students, some candidates faced tensions in implementing their ideas. Margo anticipated the tension between school system demands and her commitment to research- and theory-based practices sharing, “I’ll meet those [curriculum] requirements, but I’m gonna be creative and ... make it fit my individual students’ needs.”

In Megan’s reflection as a teacher educator, she hinted at some of the constraints Margo mentioned about planning engaging lessons writing:

I would say that most of the lessons I observe do include fun and engaging activities (particularly those in K-2). At times students in 3rd and 4th grade placements are given more restrictions around their lesson planning and need to stick more closely to what the teacher would regularly be doing. I would imagine this all comes back to testing.

Megan continued later in her writing to add:

I would say that my only area of caution related to this is that sometimes they find the cute activity, but it is not the best or most effective way to teach their lesson objective or is too simplistic for their students. I am all for engaging and interesting instruction, but I

want my students to always keep their lesson objective in mind when planning and make sure they are pushing their students.

Both teacher candidates and teacher educators viewed candidates' ability to plan engaging lessons as a strength. This was something candidates seemed to prioritize in their teaching and educators recognized as an asset.

Implementing literacy practices during field experiences. Having opportunities to implement literacy practices during field experiences was a strength perceived by both candidates and educators. Reflecting on her field experiences, Ellen shared, "I feel really good with comprehension strategies because I feel that is mainly what I have been working on with my 4th graders... So I feel like I am very good at that [comprehension strategies]." Similarly, Jenny, a teacher educator wrote, "If they have lots of opportunities to teach various aspects of literacy, which they have read and heard about through classes, I believe there is a stronger chance they will try what we are teaching in their future classrooms."

During Jasmine's student teaching placement, she saw her cooperating teacher make changes to best meet students' needs. She said, "My teacher changed things around a lot. Something would work for a few weeks and then ok this isn't working anymore, we need to do this." During this time Jasmine also saw how the reading specialist collaborated with her cooperating teacher while reworking the reading groups in order to help the more advanced readers move onto more challenging texts. Although her teacher education program had stressed the importance of seeking support, Jasmine found it helpful to see her cooperating teacher actually do that.

Some candidates mentioned the role of particular courses impacting their preparedness. Cathy stated:

My reading minor courses have helped me. Not to say that my others didn't. Because I

wouldn't be who I am today without those other courses. But I think just having that extra knowledge on reading, especially on the assessments. Knowing how to use a running record and just analyze data and miscues.

Cathy learned these types reading assessments in a course and then was able to apply them once in the field working with K-4 students.

In Erin's 5th grade practicum, she saw students enjoy reading informational texts, something she doubted when she heard it preached in her university classes. However, when her students read articles about the inauguration past and present she said, "It [using magazines] is a really cool way to teach kids."

The amount of time each teacher candidate spent in the field really varied between the three institutions, however all teacher educators valued the importance of practicums and the time in schools during student teaching. Caroline, a teacher educator, described the gradual progression of these experiences:

They work in multiple classrooms observing and assisting. Prior to student teaching, most students have done a read aloud, taught one whole class or small group literacy lesson, and done minimal tutoring. They must rapidly expand their practice once they enter the student teaching semester.

While Megan, another teacher educator, also described a gradual release model used in her program, writing:

Students experience different levels of fields. The initial field experiences are about getting out in schools and mostly observing. But in later fields, students are expected to teach a lot. In our reading practicum, a course many students take prior to student teaching, most students teach at least one lesson every single day they are in the field.

This gradual release model transitions the candidates from just observing the teaching to

eventually doing most of the teaching and helps their confidence and skills grow at a steady rate over a period of time.

Differences. While findings revealed several differences between teacher candidates and teacher educators related to the perceived challenges candidates might face, there was only one difference between the candidates and teacher educators related to their strengths as they entered the classroom. Specifically, the data revealed differences related to the preparedness of teachers to effectively integrate technology in future classrooms. While teacher educators felt teacher candidates needed to deepen their knowledge and use of technology, teacher candidates felt confident in their abilities to integrate technology in their future classrooms.

Technology. Cate felt comfortable and confident with technology saying, “I have learned so many things here about using technology and from student teaching, so I think that is going to be a big strength of mine, not being afraid to try something new.” Samantha became more confident using technology during student teaching saying, “I was able to teach in a variety of ways and use technology. I got to experiment with it.” Jessie saw technology as a way for students to enjoy literacy in a new way when students in her practicum class used iPads to create book talks. Her school is part of an iPad pilot program, so Jessie had more experience than some candidates using technology on a regular basis. In contrast, Shannon did not see much technology used while in practicum, so she decided to choose that as a topic for her Inquiry project stating:

So, I do feel more familiar with the aspects that we focused on in our inquiry project.

We’ve looked at technology and different apps and things like that to use, which has been good knowledge to gain.

Through Shannon’s research, she also gained information about different websites that lists books, suggestions and strategies. Like Cate, Samantha, Jessie and Shannon, other candidates

said that one of the many strengths they would bring to their future teaching positions was related to the use of technology.

Although many candidates mentioned feeling strong in the area of technology and comfort using technology in the classroom, the teacher educators wanted to see a more nuanced instructional focus with technology use. Megan, a teacher educator, wrote:

I rarely see the teachers or the students utilize smartboards as more than a tool for projection. I think most of our candidates are proficient with technology for their personal and professional use, but I think an area that could be strengthened is how to use technology to enhance student learning.

Jenny, another teacher educator wrote:

I often think about the differences between students using the technology and teachers teaching with technology. I think that as faculty we often have candidates use technology to present or to annotate or something class specific so they are exposed to different tools. I don't think we give enough opportunity for students to play with the technology they could use with students. There just doesn't seem to be enough time.

Caroline also expressed concerns related to technology, "Candidates do have some experience with technology as instructional and assessment tools, but limited focus specifically on literacy."

So while candidates viewed technology as an area of strength in their practice, educators viewed it as a need for continued development, particularly in terms of candidates getting technology into the hands of their students and using it to enhance and transform their literacy teaching.

Discussion

Examining the literature on candidates' perceptions of their preparedness to teach literacy, the voices of students are often heard (Baker, 2005; Beck et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2015).

However, this study provides insight into teacher educators' perceptions as well, which is needed since candidates construct professional knowledge alongside and with the support of teacher educators (Goodfellow & Sumsion, 2000). Furthermore, examining how teacher educators' and candidates' perceptions of preparedness align or do not align adds to a growing body of evidence connecting candidates' level of preparedness to how easily they manage challenges during their first years of teaching (Barber & Mourshed 2007; Clark, et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006) and to how they are able to work towards the "vision" of teaching crafted during their teacher education programs (Britton et al., 2003; Grossman et al., 2000). Thus, this study brings into sharper focus the need to examine teacher educators' and teacher candidates' perceptions in concert.

The findings of this study revealed close alignment between the candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions of what might be areas of strength and specific challenges for novice teachers. For example, both groups identified differentiating literacy instruction, teaching writing, and navigating prescribed, scripted literacy curriculum materials as challenges. The two groups also agreed that planning interesting and engaging literacy activities and having opportunities to implement literacy practices during field experiences were strengths novice teachers would bring to their first year of teaching. This finding revealed that candidates and teacher educators, when reflecting on their own experiences either teaching or participating in a teacher education program, felt confident and/or concerned about similar things. These areas of alignment may reflect the strengths and gaps within each institution's program of study and commonalities across programs. As teacher educators revise and shape course offerings and course content within their departments, they may use candidate perception data to help identify and address needs as well as to continue effective practices.

However, there were also several areas in which the candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions did not align. For example, candidates focused heavily on the logistics of literacy, rather than theory or pedagogy, which their teacher educators would prefer. This misalignment between teacher educators' and candidates' perceptions may reflect the disparate spaces they occupy along the continuum of learning to teach literacy. The teacher educators were themselves once novice teachers, but they have since gained expertise in K-12 classrooms and through advanced graduate work in literacy. Although teacher educators sometimes questioned candidates' focus on logistics and activities rather than on research and theory-driven pedagogy, they may need to acknowledge candidates' concerns as reflecting a more concrete point in their development as opposed to the teacher educators' more developed vantage point.

In the area of technology, the candidates felt more prepared than their teacher educators thought they were. Perhaps candidates are more skilled at using instructional technology than their instructors perceive. A second possibility is that teacher educators and teacher candidates perceived this question differently. Whereas teacher candidates seemed to focus on identifying websites, apps, or software and their comfort with navigating those tools, teacher educators appeared to consider the instructional purposes and learning outcomes for which technology might be deployed. Therefore, while teacher candidates' confidence related to technology use, teacher educators' concerns related to instructional design.

In contrast, specific to addressing foundational reading skills, the candidates felt underprepared. However, their teacher educators did not agree. It is unclear from the data if the candidates lack these skills or if they just have low confidence in their ability to support young learners or struggling readers and writers in the upper grades. Both teacher educators and candidates seemed to recognize that supporting novice and struggling readers with initial acquisition of reading skills is a complex task that may take extended time to perfect. Therefore,

the low confidence of teacher candidates may be related their developing understanding of this complexity.

Depending on the structure of the particular university, teacher educators may or may not have the opportunity to see candidates teach. Thus, their perceptions of candidates' strengths and challenges are framed only by their interactions with them in class. The data shows clearly what the candidates and teacher educators value, but it also reveals in some instances what the candidates do not feel comfortable teaching. Just as teacher candidates are often advised to "meet students where they are," teacher educators may need to solicit candidates' perceptions and attend more carefully to their responses in order to help them apply course content.

It is erroneous to assume that candidates leave teacher education programs ready to perform at the same level as experienced teachers (Clark et al., 2013), yet this begs the question, how prepared do candidates feel to teach literacy? Thus, LaBoskey's (2004) statement is relevant to this study: "Research in teacher education is attempting to answer questions about how best to prepare new teachers and facilitate ongoing teacher development. Typically, when teacher educators raise such questions, we are deriving them from our practice" (p. 818). At each of the institutions, the teacher educators in this study actively participate in program revision and improvement. Critically reflecting on their teacher education programs and on their own teaching revealed areas of instruction that may need to be adjusted to include more hands-on, real-world experiences. In addition, more time and value on certain topics such as differentiation and writing might prove to be beneficial across programs. Teacher candidates value these literacy concepts, but lack confidence in future implementation. While these reflections prompted plans for revisions, they also recognize that new teachers will still encounter challenges within different teaching situations (Korthagen 2010; Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006). In the

following sections, based on these findings, several implications for practice and research are discussed.

Implications

Presumably all teacher educators want their courses and instructional practices to be meaningful and applicable for the teacher candidates in their classrooms. This study suggests that overall the teacher candidates and teacher educators agree that teacher candidates understand, embrace, and feel confident about applying the concepts they learn on campus in their K-12 classrooms. However, the study identified several other areas in which teacher educators' intentions or program content did not align with teacher candidates' perceived needs. When teacher education programs address the discrepancies in perceptions between candidates and instructors, thoughtful action can be taken. We draw two key recommendations that teacher educators should consider as they refine their practices and their programs.

First, taking time to engage candidates in conversations about how prepared they feel to teach should happen throughout their teacher education programs (Hsiung et al., 2003). This self-reflection is a skill that will be necessary in their future as a classroom teacher (Carter & Cowan, 2013). This can begin by allowing time for candidates to reflect throughout the process of designing and implementing lessons. Often, within methods courses, after a lesson has been taught, candidates are asked to reflect. This encourages candidates to focus on the logistics; how the content was taught, how the class was managed. Less time is typically devoted to reflection on how prepared they felt prior to teaching and then considering their growth and areas of continued need afterwards.

Second, teacher educators must realize that candidates consistently crave more real-world examples and experiences with pedagogical approaches. Concepts that seem straightforward to teacher educators often remain abstract or unfocused to teacher candidates. Although it may not

always be practical for teacher educators to spend extended time in the field with candidates, teacher educators should consider ways to bring real-world examples into the college classroom. Teachers might consider analyzing video of exemplary teaching and of less effective teaching alongside teacher candidates in order to guide them to notice the nuances in instructional approaches. Teacher educators might also bring in more artifacts from elementary classrooms such as lesson plans, teacher-created literacy materials, and student work samples in order to discuss the theory and research connections that support various practices. These practices might address teacher candidates' desire for more real-world examples while also supporting teacher educators' need to connect instructional practices to research and theory bases. While we do not want to suggest that these ideas can replace the need for experiences in real classroom, they may serve as a supplement to classroom experiences and can be used in educational courses that do not have a field component. In essence, real-world artifacts might bridge the distance between novice and experienced teachers' perceptions of what constitutes literacy instruction.

Future Research

This paper highlights data from the initial interview with the teacher candidates, but the researchers' conversations did not stop there. They are continuing to follow the teachers into their first three years of teaching. Clark et al. (2013) found that beginning teachers expressed a desire for more interaction, feedback, and consultation with their teacher educators once they secured full-time employment.

The researchers recognize that perceptions are not always accurate portrayals of observed behaviors (Zimmerman et al., 1995). Thus, the data from this study offers beginning insights, which the researchers plan to build upon by the addition of observations during the teachers third year in the classroom. Interviews continue to provide insight into the teachers' perceptions of

their literacy teaching, and observations will allow further exploration of how closely their perceptions match the observed behaviors related to teaching literacy.

In addition, future research could use a wider variety of data sources, beyond teacher candidates and teacher educators, such as principals and cooperating teachers to further add to the findings of this study. This research would add to the work of Carter & Cowan (2013), who argue that cooperating teachers' perceptions should be specifically examined since they most closely with candidates during student teaching and have the most opportunities to observe their practice. Furthermore, the data in this study focuses on teacher candidates' and teacher educators' perceptions of novice teachers' preparedness to teach literacy, however, data related to their preparedness in other areas such as math or science could be another avenue for future research.

Conclusion

Teacher preparation programs influence the perceptions, abilities, and understanding of literacy teachers at the very beginning of their teaching career in a myriad of ways (Clark et al., 2013). This study prompts educators to not only examine candidates' perceptions but also their own perceptions as teacher educators. Educators must be willing to critically reflect and answer questions about the purpose and impact of their work in order to determine how to best prepare teachers to effectively teach literacy skills. What better place to start that reflection than with the community they serve on a daily basis, teacher candidates?

References

- Al-Bataineh, A. (2009). An examination of pre-service teacher preparedness: A cooperating teacher perspective. *International Journal of Learning, 16*(5), 231-249.
- Allen, J. M., Ambrosetti, A., & Turner, D. (2013). How school and university supervising staff perceive the pre-service teacher education practicum: A comparative study. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(4), 108-128.
- Bainbridge, J. M., & Macy, L. (2008). Voices: Student teachers link teacher education to perceptions of preparedness for literacy teaching. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 35*(2), 65-83.
- Baker, E.A. (2005). Can preservice teacher education really help me grow as a literacy teacher?: Examining preservice teachers' perceptions of mulitmedia case-based instruction. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 13*(3), 415-431.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best performing schools systems come out on top*. McKinsey & Company.
- Bratlien, M. J., & McGuire, M. A. (2002). *Teachers for Our Nation's Schools*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Phi Delta Kappa District III, Tulsa, OK.
- Britton, E. D., Paine, L., & Raizen, S. (2003). *Comprehensive teacher induction: Systems for early career learning*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publications.
- Beck, C., Kosnick, C., & Roswell, J. (2007). Preparation for the first year of teaching: Beginning teachers' views about their needs. *The New Educator, 3*(1), 51-73.

- Carter, P. J., & Cowan, K. W. (2013). Confidence and preparedness to teach: Conflicting perspectives from multiple stakeholders. *Metropolitan Universities, 24*(1), 47-59.
- Clark, S. K., Jones, C. D., Reutzler, D. R., & Andreasen, L. (2013). An examination of the influences of a teacher preparation program on beginning teachers' reading instruction. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 52*(2), 87-105.
- Copeland, S. R., Keefe, E. B., Calhoun, A. J., Tanner, W., & Park, S. (2011). Preparing teachers to provide literacy instruction to all students: Faculty experiences and perceptions. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 36*(4), 126-141.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 57*(3), 300-314.
- Goodfellow, J., & Sumsion, J. (2000). Transformative pathways: Field-based teacher educators' perceptions. *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy, 26*(3), 245-257.
- Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2000). *What makes teacher community different from a gathering of teachers?* (occasional paper). Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- Hall, C., Hurst, B., Camp, D., & Laughlin, J. (2015). Preservice teachers' perceptions of their literacy practicum experiences. *Journal of Reading Education, 40*(2), 13-18.
- Helfrich, S. R., & Bean, R. M. (2011). What matters: Preparing teachers of reading. *Reading Horizons, 50*(4), 241-262.
- Honan, E., & Mitchell, E. (2016). Preparing teachers of English and literacy: Conflicting expectations. *Literacy Learning: The Middle Years, 24*(3), 19-22.

- Hsiung, Y. L., Arvold, B., Johnson, N., & Wojtowicz, P. (2003, April). *Students' and cooperating teachers' perceptions of the secondary teacher education program*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Imbimbo, J., & Silvernail, D. (1999). Prepared to teach? Key findings of the New York City teacher survey. *Policy and Research Series*.
- Kosnik, C., & Beck, C. (2008). We taught them about literacy but what did they learn? The impact of a preservice teacher education program on the practices of beginning teachers. *Studying Teacher Education, 4*(2), 115-128.
- LaBoskey, V. K. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. K. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817–869). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Levin, B.B. (2003). *Case studies of teaching development: An in-depth look at how thinking about pedagogy develops over time*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Liston, D., Whitcomb, J., & Borko, H. (2006). Too little or too much: Teaching preparation and the first years of teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 57*(4), 351-358.
- Korthagen, F.A. (2010). How teacher education can make a difference. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 36*(4), 407-423.
- McFadden, C., & Sheerer, M. (2008). Faculty members' perceptions of teacher preparation programs, *The Educational Forum, 70*(1), 61-74.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Risko, V. J., Roller, C. M., Cummins, C., Bean, R. M., Block, C. C., Anders, P. L., & Flood, J. (2008). A critical analysis of research on reading teacher education. *Reading Research Quarterly, 43*(3), 252-288.
- Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews, and questionnaires* (Vol. 2). New York, NY: Rowman Altamira.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zimmerman, R. S., Khoury, E. L., Vega, W. A., Gil, A. G., & Warheit, G. J. (1995). Teacher and parent perceptions of behavior problems among a sample of African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic white students. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(2), 181-197.

Appendix A

Undergraduate Teacher Candidate Interview Questions Prior to Graduation

1. Tell me about your teaching identity? Tell me about who you are as a teacher? How does this influence the instructional decisions you make?
2. Describe your ideal teaching situation?
3. What are your aspirations for yourself and your students?
4. What challenges do you expect to encounter during your first years of teaching? (What about challenges related to teaching literacy?) How do you plan to overcome these challenges?
5. What do you think your strengths will be during your first years of teaching? (What about strengths related to teaching literacy?)
6. Describe what quality literacy instruction means to you.
7. How has your view of teaching reading changed now that you have completed practicum and you are almost finished student teaching?
8. How has your view of teaching writing changed now that you have completed practicum and you are almost finished student teaching?
9. What ideas, concepts, strategies, and specific tools from your teacher education program do you think will be useful to you in teaching literacy?

Appendix B

University Instructor Reflection Questions

1. How prepared are graduating PSTs in teaching
 - a. Disciplinary literacy
 - b. Writing
 - c. Technology (Student use and teacher use)
 - d. Reading
2. Describe your confidence level and any concerns related to 4 areas above.
3. What challenges do you expect PSTs to encounter during your first years of teaching (specific to literacy)?
4. What is the role of practicum in teacher education (specific to literacy)?
5. Which ideas, concepts, strategies, and specific tools related to literacy do you think PSTs find the most valuable and why?