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Perspectives on Teacher Quality: Bilingual Education and ESL Teacher Certification, Test-Taking Experiences, and Instructional Practices

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This descriptive exploratory study looked at the certification process, test-taking experiences, and instructional practices of a group of graduate bilingual education (BE) and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teachers to understand why some had problems passing teacher certification tests after completing their degrees. The study surveyed 63 BE and ESL teachers on their certification and test-taking experiences and their perceived instructional strengths. From this group of 63 participants, 15 volunteer teachers were interviewed and observed in their classrooms. Findings reveal most teachers passed certification tests on the first or second attempt. However, several failed tests due to language, content, and time difficulties, which had frustrating consequences for their teaching careers. Teachers' perceived and observed instructional strengths reflected to varying degrees effective research-based practices for English Language Learners. Despite test challenges, teachers persisted, were passionate and committed to students. Study findings call for further research on teacher certification tests and their relationship to teacher quality and the instructional practices teachers implement.

Education research shows that of all the school-related factors that affect student achievement, teacher quality is one of the most important (Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Federal educational policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top, place great emphasis on teacher quality and effectiveness. For example, with NCLB, states are required to define "highly qualified teachers" and report their numbers to the federal government to maintain federal funding. NCLB still requires "all public school teachers in core academic areas be highly qualified by 2012" (Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States, 2010, p. 9). Though each state's certification requirements differ, most teachers must hold a bachelor's degree, have pedagogical and subject area training at the level they teach, and some field and student teaching experience. To work in public schools, teachers typically also must pass background checks and state-mandated certification tests (Goldhaber, 2002, 2007; Rotherham & Mead, 2004). As a result, there is great interest in understanding teacher quality and how certification requirements, in particular the certification tests relate to it. This study explores and describes the certification process and test experiences

of a group of bilingual Education (BE) and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) teachers in becoming certified. As teacher educators and researchers from two private New York City (NYC) universities, for years we heard frustrating stories from some BE and ESL graduate teacher candidates about their difficulties passing certification exams. We knew many were high achieving students and seemingly caring and capable educators. Their frustrations prompted us to want to better understand their certification and test experiences and how these echoed their teaching strengths.

Our perspectives on certification tests and effective teaching of English Language Learners (ELLs) are informed by the more than 30-year careers in the education field and by the scholarly literature. Both influences shaped the three research questions of this exploratory qualitative study: (a) What were participating BE and ESL teachers' certification and test-taking experiences? (b) What were participating BE and ESL teachers' perceived instructional strengths? (c) How were selected BE and ESL teachers' perceived classroom instructional strengths implemented in their own classrooms? This study draws on literature on effective instructional practices for ELLs and teacher certification, principally the certification tests.

Review of the Literature

Effective Instructional Practices for ELLs

Research has consistently documented that qualified teachers and effective classroom instruction are central to improve the education of ELLs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Echevarria & Short, 2009; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Samway & McKeon, 2007; Slavin & Calderón, 2001; Waxman & Padrón, 2003). The following discussion identifies some essential characteristics of effective instruction for ELLs. Committed and well-trained teachers significantly impact student learning through understanding and focusing on language and academic development, using cultural and experiential resources, and creating classroom contexts where learners are actively engaged and guided to take risks in the new language (Echevarria & Short, 2009; Kamil et al., 2008). Pertinent to this study are the practices that effectively increase ELLs' language proficiency, literacy development (oral language, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing development), and content knowledge (Genesee, et al., 2006; Kamil et al., 2008; Waxman & Padrón, 2003).

Teachers of ELLs demonstrate commitment to teaching and care and empathy for students and their families. These behaviors often stem from personal experiences as an immigrant or second language learner (Clark, Jackson, & Prieto, 2011; Nieto, 2004). Such teacher behaviors are reflected in the culturally and linguistically congruent ways teachers interact with students and their families and show their belief in and expectations for children to succeed (Lemberger, 1997; Nevárez-La Torre, 2010).

Language and culture are inextricably linked and central to teaching. Teachers respect and use children's and families' language and cultural "funds of knowledge" resources to create

curriculum and foster learning communities (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2004; Tharp, 1999). Cultural content in curriculum goes beyond the usual “foods, flags, and fiestas” focusing on students’ experiences and extend to a deeper understanding of their own and other cultures.

First language is nurtured and used to develop literacy, content, and skills and as a bridge to academic English. With purposeful exposure, students see their first and second languages as one system and become aware of how both interact and function (Adler & Rougle, 2005; August & Shanahan, 2006; Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Goldenberg, 2008). Effective use of first and second languages provides students with opportunities to try out, produce, and extend oral and written language individually and collaboratively. Teachers are cognizant of second-language acquisition stages and how to match instruction to different language proficiency levels through a variety of curriculum (August & Shanahan, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2009; Slavin & Calderón, 2001).

Literacy is at the heart of learning, and its development involves a continuum of teaching strategies enabling individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in their community and wider society. Developmentally appropriate reading instruction explicitly addresses the components identified by the National Reading Panel: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension in context of meaningful content (August & Shanahan, 2006; Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation, 2010). Oral language proficiency, leading to advanced vocabulary knowledge, is essential to building reading comprehension (Kamil, et al., 2008; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). To develop academic literacy, teachers guide students to recognize and understand the language demands of academic texts, through talking about texts, analyzing language, vocabulary and text structure, and applying these components to writing (Chamot, 2009; Echevarria & Short, 2009; Schleppegrell, Greer, & Taylor, 2008).

Teachers rely on an arsenal of strategies to meet ELLs’ learning needs, among them: scaffolding, sheltering and contextualizing language and content; using different groupings that allow for meaningful interaction; and providing appropriate materials that make content come alive through: texts, visuals, pictures, charts, real objects, and graphic organizers (Chamot, 2009; Echevarria & Short, 2009). Teachers model and use a variety of language: asking and answering all types of questions, rephrasing, paraphrasing, repeating and clarifying material, simplifying complex tasks, and monitoring comprehension (Echevarria & Short, 2009; Nelson & Stage, 2007). Teachers guide students to solve problems, carry out tasks, practice them, and then apply them to other tasks or contexts (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002). Teachers give comprehensible feedback, which promotes new learning and allows students to connect the known with new information. Teachers also infuse lessons with metacognitive skills so students become aware of their learning process by questioning themselves and one another; and by summarizing and using imagery and memory techniques, and social strategies (Chamot, 2009; Echevarria & Short, 2009; Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer & Rivera, 2006; Nelson & Stage, 2007).

Given the wealth of information on what constitutes effective teaching qualities, we

decided to explore if and how teachers who experienced problems passing the certification tests, exhibited these practices in their teaching. In other words, we wanted to investigate if their problems passing the certification tests suggested a lack of use of research-based teaching practices. Also important was to examine if these teachers, contrary to what their difficulties in obtaining certification might suggest, used effective practices in teaching ELLs.

Teacher Certification and Tests

Currently, 47 states require some combination of teacher certification tests (Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). States use tests to signal or identify minimum quality for beginning teachers and to screen out those not qualified. Two companies dominate the lucrative testing industry: (a) Educational Testing Services, designer of the former National Teacher Examination (NTE) and the present Praxis Series and (b) Pearson Education, formerly National Evaluation Systems (NES), that custom-designs test for states. Most certification tests are designed to be taken during undergraduate studies, with content testing beginning teachers' general knowledge (from the liberal arts and sciences or basic skills), pedagogical knowledge and skills, subject area knowledge, and in a few, but increasing number of states (Darling-Hammond, 2010), teaching performance. Except for performance assessments, tests are timed, with multiple-choice questions and written (and sometimes oral) responses. Each state requires its own battery of tests and sets the cut-off scores for each. Interestingly, scores for the same Praxis test vary across states (Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation, 2010).

Large-scale studies have been conducted to determine if teacher quality as measured by certification exams correlates with student achievement (Angrist & Gurayan, 2008; Buddin & Zamarro, 2009; Goldhaber, 2007; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005). Evidence has been inconclusive in connecting certification tests as a quality indicator with student achievement, except for a slight correlation in the secondary subject area of math (Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010; Harrell, 2009). Another key finding is that tests do not predict teachers' effectiveness well, especially those in the middle score ranges (Goldhaber, 2007). Some researchers have advocated for the design and use of multiple measures to better capture the intangible teaching attributes not measurable by certification tests (Brown, 2005; Goldhaber, 2002; Mitchell, Robinson, Plake, & Knowles, 2001). Other factors, such as the accumulation of more than four years of teaching experience, may influence student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2005). Racial/ethnic congruence among teachers and students also shows potential for higher student achievement, especially in minority schools (Brown, 2005; Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010).

Differentiated certification test performance patterns across racial and ethnic lines have been noted. For instance, Angrist and Gurayan (2008) documented an alarming finding that Latino teacher candidates have "marked lower licensure scores than Whites or Blacks" (p. 483), which results in disproportionately fewer Latino teachers becoming certified. Since many Latino teacher candidates aspire to work in diverse multilingual schools, this finding has serious implications for the shortage of BE teachers in high-needs schools. It also calls into question the

way these tests define teacher quality and if they integrate into the operational definition the scholarly findings cited above that highlight effective teaching for ELLs.

Black and Latino test-takers have filed lawsuits claiming tests were discriminatory and biased and thus excluded them temporarily or permanently from entry into the profession (Walsh, 2007). In addition, minority candidates who fail the exams must retake them, often repeatedly, which is financially expensive and personally damaging (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006; Brown, 2005; Mitchell, et al., 2001). Tests may be retaken unlimited times, which calls into question their validity and use as a signal of teacher quality (Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). Test failure has caused Black teachers to lose “a bit of the spirit and drive that inspired them to pursue teaching” (Albers, 2002, p. 119). For BE and ESL teachers, test failure has resulted in delays in beginning teaching or dismissal from provisional teaching positions (Flores & Clark, 1997; Lemberger, 2001). Failing the Praxis II, one BE teacher candidate said, “cost her dearly in time and money, and [has] shaken her confidence” (Hones, Aguilar, & Thao, 2009, p. 20). In a study of Oregon’s teacher testing, Brown (2005) found that many highly qualified BE and minority teachers had been unfairly weeded out by tests. She piloted an alternate assessment policy where the minority candidate had to fail the Praxis test twice to be able to submit a portfolio of teaching artifacts, which better showed their teaching capabilities. Flores and Clark (1997) wonder “how many . . . [prospective BE teachers] do not seek assistance or support and simply disappear from the bilingual teaching ranks” (p. 350). Ramírez’s study (2000) of 101 provisionally licensed BE elementary teachers found the New York State Teacher Certification Exams (NYSTCE) not relevant to their work and a major barrier to permanent certification. BE and ESL teacher test difficulties include test anxiety; unfamiliar test formats; liberal arts and science content rather than pedagogy; content not aligned with linguistic, cultural, or educational backgrounds; and distractions during the actual test administration (Hones et al., 2009; Lemberger, 2001).

Despite the documented problems with certification tests, states continue to rely on them and accept their validity in measuring beginning teacher quality. To further examine certification tests and their definition of teacher quality, we shift attention to the certification context of one state, New York, where the study was conducted.

Teacher Certification and Testing in New York State

New York’s teaching certification has evolved in response to teacher shortages and demands for quality. Prior to 1998, NYC Public Schools and the New York State Education Department (NYSED) had separate licensing agencies, requirements, and test policies. The NYSED required teachers to pass the NTE and NYC’s Board of Examiners administered its own certification tests. NYC teachers were allowed to teach without taking the NTE (Tapper, 1995).

With the intent to centralize and standardize licensure policies for all teachers, the NYSED eliminated NYC’s Board of Examiners and contracted NES to design the NYSTCE, which were phased in to replace the NTE. The NYSTCEs are criterion reference tests, designed in accordance

with New York State laws and regulations and informed by educators, administrators, and psychometricians (Pearson Education, Inc., 2006). NYSED requires three tests: the Liberal Arts and Science Test (LAST), Assessment of Teaching Skills–Written (ATS–W) for elementary or secondary levels, and a Content Specialty Test (CST). CSTs are grade-level or subject specific such as, Early Childhood, Elementary, or a Secondary subject (e.g., Social Studies), or the K–12 English for Speakers of Other Languages. BE teachers must also pass another CST: the Bilingual Education Assessment (BEA), which includes assessment of oral and written English, native language literacy skills, and BE theories and practices. Prior to February 2, 2004, certification applicants also had to submit the Assessment of Teaching Skills–Performance (ATS–P), a videotaped lesson (Pearson Education, Inc., 2006).

There are various fees attached to taking the tests (NYSTCE, 2010). For instance, LAST, ATS–W, and CSTs are available in hard copy for \$79 each; LAST and ATS–W are now also administered by computer for \$149 each; the ATS–P costs \$140; and late fees are \$30. Test accommodations, such as time extensions, are provided in only special needs cases and are not available to speakers of languages other than English.

The NYSED Regents' Task Force on Teaching (1998) policy implemented sweeping reforms to raise teacher education standards and established the current certification and testing structure still in effect (Grossman, 2008, cited in Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation, 2010). Initial certification requires candidates to complete a bachelor's degree and pass the three NYSTCE. BE teachers must also take the BEA, adding to the financial burden imposed on those teachers. Permanent certification requires teachers to complete a state-accredited teacher education master's program, and teach successfully for three years. Teachers have five years to complete all requirements. The Regents' policy also holds university teacher education programs accountable to meet an 80% pass rate for their candidates on the LAST and ATS–W or face loss of state accreditation. Graduate schools of education now commonly use test scores as an entrance gate for their programs, an unseen measure that may exclude minority applicants from applying to graduate education programs (Bennett et al., 2006; García & Trubek, 1999). In effort to upgrade teacher quality, NYSED eliminated all provisional licenses in 2004.

In 2008, the state reported a 90% certification test pass rate, which, according to Education Commissioner Steiner, indicates that the "bar is set too low" (Medina, 2009, p. A32). This rate tells little about the test takers, how many times it took them to pass each test, or those candidates who have ceased trying to pass the tests. No one argues against the need for teacher quality, but as can be seen, using certification tests to measure teacher effectiveness is complex and possibly obscures the thorny certification process experienced by teacher candidates, particularly those who want to work in high needs areas, like BE and ESL programs. The literature discussed above suggests that such testing processes may be deterring willing and qualified candidates from teaching. To gain a deeper understanding about the reality of the certification process, the researchers proceeded to explore their BE and ESL teacher graduates' experiences with certification tests and the effective teaching practices in their classrooms.

Research Methods

The exploratory study used descriptive survey research methods within a qualitative research paradigm. In this section, the participant selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and limitations are described.

Participant Selection

An invitation letter and the *Bilingual/ESL Teacher Certification and Instructional Practice Questionnaire* were sent to 250 graduates from the researchers' private universities' BE and ESL teacher education programs. Of the 250 questionnaires mailed, 63 (25%) were completed and sent back. All 63 participants had completed their master's degrees within one to six years before we began the study in 2003. Of the teachers who responded to the questionnaires, 18 (29%) were willing to be interviewed and observed. After a phone screening, a subgroup of 15 (24%) were selected. In the following discussion, we identify the teachers according to their level of participation in the study. *Participants* (63) are teachers who returned the questionnaire. Within the participants, we refer to two subgroups: the *respondents*, the 48 teachers who answered the questionnaire only, and *volunteers*, the 15 teachers who participated in all three data sources (questionnaires, interviews, and observations). Table 1 shows the 63 participants' background characteristics on certification and teaching.

Table 1

Background Characteristics: Certification Area and Status, Grade Level, and Years Teaching

		Teacher Respondents (48)		Teacher Volunteers (15)		Teacher Participants (63)	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<u>Certification Area</u>	BE	28	44	6	10	34	54
	ESL	20	32	9	14	29	46
<u>Certification Status</u>	Certified	40	63	12	19	52	83
	Uncertified*	8	13	3	5	11	17
<u>Grade Levels</u>	Elementary K–5	24	28	8	13	32	51
	Secondary 6–12	23	37	7	11	30	48
	Adult	1	1	0	0	1	1
<u>Years Teaching</u>	1–3	12	19	0	0	12	19
	4–6	16	26	7	11	23	37
	7 or more	20	31	8	13	28	44
	Total	48	76	15	24	63	100

*Also termed Provisional

All the participants completed their master's degrees in BE (34/54%) or ESL (29/46%). The majority (52/83%) were certified and a few (11/17%) were not yet fully certified when they answered the questionnaire. However, all participants were quite experienced with only 12 (19%) teaching 1–3 years, 23 (37%) for 4–6 years, and 28 (44%) teaching more than 7 years. Six

of the most experienced respondents also taught in their home countries prior to immigration. The participants' linguistic, cultural, and racial backgrounds mirrored NYC's student diversity with 33 (52%) Spanish speakers (both U.S.-born and immigrants from Caribbean, South and Central America); 18 (9%) European Americans; 5 (0.08%) African Americans; two (0.03%) each from Russia and Korea; and one (0.01%) each from China, West Africa, and a U.S.-born East Indian.

Data Collection Sources

The initial data were collected during the 2003–2004 academic year. We continued to follow up with 4 uncertified volunteers' certification status via e-mail until 2010. The extended period of data collection was the result of the long time it took some teachers to complete their certification process. The researchers used three data collection sources reflective of the descriptive survey research method: an open-ended questionnaire, interview, and a classroom observation checklist. The development of the instruments was grounded on the scholarly literature discussed above. Three BE/ESL experts provided feedback on the content, language, and format of the data collection sources, which was incorporated in the final versions. The three sources were piloted on 12 teachers from another university, who shared similar demographic characteristics with the participants of this study and yielded meaningful data.

The open-ended *Bilingual/ESL Teacher Certification and Instructional Practice Questionnaire* consisted of five questions on participants' backgrounds and teaching information; four questions on certification and test taking-experiences; and three questions about their teaching effectiveness. To demonstrate the open-ended nature of the questions asked, a question on teaching reads: "Briefly describe one past classroom experience you encountered while teaching that provides evidence of your teaching strengths."

The researchers conducted interviews with the 15 teacher volunteers (all referred to by Mr. or Ms. and the first letter of their last name). The *Bilingual/ESL Teacher Certification and Instructional Practice Interview*, which asked open-ended questions, was used to further probe the questionnaire responses. For example, Ms. D., a BE teacher, indicated on the questionnaire that one of her strengths was using the native language to activate prior knowledge. In the interview, she was asked to provide an example of how she did this and how she knew that it was an effective strategy. Volunteers provided specific examples about their testing experiences and teaching strengths. Interviews lasted about an hour, were conducted before or after the observations, and usually took place in volunteer's classrooms. Both researchers wrote detailed notes during the interviews that were later discussed during the post-session debriefings.

The *Bilingual/ESL Classroom Observation Checklist* was designed according to Anderson and Burns's (1989) work in naturalistic settings, as a tool to observe the volunteers' instructional practices and confirm the teaching perceptions expressed in the questionnaires and interviews. The checklist included five areas: (a) classroom environment (i.e., tone, classroom materials, and student work displayed); (b) delivery of instruction (i.e. lesson goals, tasks assigned, strategies used, grouping, and student engagement); (c) use of native language (L1) and/or English (L2) to

develop literacy (i.e., use of L2 in context and L1 to bridge L2); (d) attention to diversity (i.e., respect for diversity, inclusion in curriculum, and classroom as a community); and (e) the teacher's personal qualities (i.e., mastery of curriculum and empathy for students). As both researchers were on sabbatical, they were able to be present in all 15 volunteers' classroom observations, which lasted 1–2 class periods. Besides filling out the checklist, they wrote notes describing the classroom environment and interactions. Immediately after each session, the researchers met to debrief and discuss the observations, compare them to the results of the interviews, and to come to a consensus on the volunteers' teaching practices.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was divided into three stages. In the first stage, the researchers reviewed all 63 respondent questionnaires and organized responses by background information and certification test-taking experiences and preparation strategies. Tables 1 and 2 were created, which summarized the data in the form of percentages. The literature on certification testing guided the coding of categories on testing challenges, which emerged from several readings of participants' responses to the questionnaire.

Stages 2 and 3 focused on the 15 volunteers' teaching from all data sources. In Stage 2, the researchers culled volunteers' questionnaire, interview responses, and debriefing notes to code the data focusing on teaching themes. The scholarly literature on effective teaching was used to guide the coding process. As Table 3 shows, the data was organized into three categories: teaching commitment, role in working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, and delivery of instruction. Evidence of each volunteer's perceived instructional practices, which corresponded to one of the categories, was tallied by frequency and percentage.

Stage 3 focused on a deeper exploration of the volunteers' practices based on the observations. The researchers reviewed the checklists, observation notes, and post-session debriefing notes several times to identify indicators of effective teaching. The data was scored by frequency and percentages. Then these indicators were compared to the categories of effective teaching analyzed in Stage 2.

The qualitative analysis of the data for the 15 volunteers allowed for data triangulation. Rich comparisons were done across data sources and to the scholarly literature. Each data source informed the other. In the first stage, questionnaire answers were compared to the interviews responses. In Stages 2 and 3, we verified what volunteers said with what we observed and was discussed during the post-session debriefings.

Study Limitations

Given the 25% response rate of the questionnaire, this exploratory study is not meant to be representative of all the BE and ESL graduates of the two participating universities. Rather it represents the general certification process of 63 participants and the voices of a smaller group of 15 volunteers, who provided detailed accounts of their certification experiences and

classroom practice. To be clear, the purpose of the exploratory research was not to generalize findings, but to uncover more specific information about difficulties experienced by BE and ESL in completing the process of certification. We wanted to determine if these difficulties carried over into their teaching and effected their use of effective teaching practices supported by the scholarly literature.

We acknowledge that the sample may be biased in favor of those participants who had more positive experiences with certification and teaching. That is, while most participants were certified, those from whom we most wanted to hear, who had repeatedly failed the tests or those who had been dismissed from teaching for their test failure, we assume, may have been reluctant or ashamed to respond and to invite us to their classrooms and/or were no longer teaching. Nevertheless, as shown in the analysis, the sample did include some teachers whose trajectory through certification and into teaching was very lengthy and challenging.

Using the observation checklist, we soon found how difficult it was to capture the essence of teaching and classroom interactions. Since observations focus on the reality at a particular time, a higher number of observations could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the classroom instructional practices. However, since in addition to the observations, there were interviews and questionnaires that also explored the issue of practice (used to triangulate the data), we found that the data reflected a useful description of practice for the purposes of our study.

Although willing to participate, the volunteers had limited time for interviews due to busy and demanding schedules. This could have affected the depth of their responses.

Results

Results from the three research questions are organized in two areas: certification testing and instructional practices. The quantitative results are presented in Tables 2 and 3. We discuss these results and expand on the exploration of participants' experiences by including illustrative quotes from respondents and volunteers. The relevant scholarly literature provided a research framework for the analysis.

Participants' Certification Test-Taking Experiences

Table 2 and the discussion below focus on the participants' test histories (frequency of attempts to pass the tests), test-taking challenges, and test preparation strategies.

Number of Times Tests Were Taken in Order to Pass. In Table 2, out of 63 participants, 24 (38%) passed all tests the first time. Nearly half (27/43%) passed in two to three attempts. Please note, of the three (or four) required tests, some participants may have just failed one test, while others may have failed three tests or more repeatedly. For example, 10 (16%) participants took the NTE, of which 7 passed the first time. Twelve (19%) participants (4 who were volunteers) had extreme difficulties in passing the three tests and had to retake one or more

Table 2

Participants' Certification Test-Taking Experiences (N = 63)

Test-Taking Categories	Factors and Experiences	<i>n</i>	%
Maximum Times Taking One or More Tests ^a	One time	24	38
	2–3 times	27	43
	4–5 times	4	6
	6–8 or more times	8	13
Certification Test-Taking Challenges ^b	Time ^d	23	37
	Language and Content	33	52
	Emotional Stressors ^e	35	56
Test Preparation Strategies ^c	Failed by 1–3 points	17	27
	Preparation Courses	22	35
	Self-Study	33	52
	Study Groups/Tutoring	16	25
	No study	5	8

^aSome participants took several tests more than once.

^bSome participants had multiple challenges. ^cSome participants used multiple strategies. ^dTime factors and experiences include length of test, time allocation, preparation time. ^eEmotional stressors include anxiety, draining, financial burdens.

as a BE kindergarten teacher at another public school, losing seniority at beginning teacher pay scale. One respondent, a BE special education teacher who worked with the severely handicapped children for five years, had to find another job, due to test failure. Without permanent certification, she substituted at another school (also losing seniority and benefits).

Test-Taking Challenges. Some participants (23/37%) expressed various difficulties related to time. First, due to the limited time given to complete the standardized tests and long reading passages, participants felt extreme pressure to finish the entire test. Second, since certification tests require mostly reading comprehension, it is understandable that nonnative speakers of English might need more time to process content in their second language. Third, test preparation took away valuable time that could be better spent in classroom planning or in other professional development more related to teaching.

Thirty-three participants (52%) expressed problems with language and/or content of the test: reading, writing, and language processing issues (related to time issue above). Two teacher volunteers (Mr. G. and Ms. F.) said the lengthy reading passages were irrelevant to teaching. Writing was difficult for many, even for participants who passed the tests the first time. Other

tests 4–8 times. The negative consequences of not passing the tests multiple times were revealed through the volunteers' interviews. For instance, Ms. C., a BE volunteer, was relieved when she passed the ATS–W on her sixth try, fearing she would not be rehired to teach first grade in September. Ms. C. felt that “the NYSTCEs are all about money, because with the NTE, you didn't have to retake the whole test, just the section you failed.” The greatest negative consequence of test failure was losing the provisional license to teach, which happened to three respondents and one volunteer. Ms. A., BE volunteer and a native of Peru, successfully taught kindergarten for six years (according to the school administrator's evaluations). After failing the ATS–W five times, she lost her provisional license and began teaching in a Catholic school (where she taught for two years) while she studied and retook the test. After the eighth attempt, she passed and finally secured her certification. She was rehired

writing-related problems mentioned included needing additional time to write in a second language and lack of familiarity with the type of essay writing required for the tests. In terms of content, some participants' problems were due to lack of subject area knowledge or familiarity with the American school system. Ms. B., a high school ESL volunteer, from Ukraine, where she taught for 20 years, failed the LAST seven times due to math and science content difficulties. "Those subjects I studied long ago in my country," she explained. She eventually passed after taking an undergraduate math and science course, unrelated to her ESL teaching. One respondent stated that test items were confusing; with two close tricky answers to choose from.

Participants (35/56%) expressed many emotional stressors in the entire test-taking experience, from test registration to preparation to the actual test context, not to mention retaking them, which produced heightened anxiety. Tests required stamina and were mentally draining. Volunteers' comments included: "I am not a good test taker, so I get nervous" (Ms. F.), "I couldn't sleep for months" (Mr. E.), and "Too many tests to pass" (Mr. J.). A European American ESL respondent who lost her provisional certification lamented: "I miss passing by two or three points. This has taken its toll mentally and emotionally. I felt humiliated by colleagues and husband every time another failure came in. I felt a failure and wanted to kill myself." Four respondents mentioned financial burdens with costs to retake and prepare for tests. Ms. A.'s testing nightmare incurred a heavy financial burden. She estimated paying more than \$600 in registration fees to pass the ATS-W, not counting costs of other tests, preparation workshops and materials, and lowered salaries at the Catholic and new public school.

All but five participants (8%) reported doing some kind of preparation. Self-study (33/52%) and test preparation courses (22/35%) ranked the highest. Test preparation uncovered two important issues. On the one hand, the fact that failing participants used many or all of the test preparation strategies showed their persistence and resourcefulness. For instance, Mr. J.'s approach was to review study guide test objectives and practice sample questions, which helped him pass the tests. Ms. D., a 13-year-BE middle school teacher, shares with students the many valuable test-taking strategies she learned in test preparation workshops (e.g., scanning test questions, pacing/time management, and pre-reading the questions). However, on the other hand, it puts into question the effectiveness of these types of strategies for preparing students to take these tests. Data suggested that more than 27 (43%+) participants had to retake tests more than once. This finding calls into question the usefulness of these strategies to study for these tests (Harrell, 2009).

Instructional Practices: Volunteers' Perceptions and Researchers' Observations

To contextualize the analysis, the volunteers' background information is provided. As shown in Table 1, of the 15 teacher volunteers (9 ESL and 6 BE), 8 worked at the elementary level; 12 were certified; and all had taught more than four years. All 6 BE volunteers were Spanish speakers and taught different grades (kindergarten, first, elementary special education, middle and high school) and varied subjects (native language arts, social studies, science, and math). Elementary ESL teachers conducted pull-out and/or push-in instruction to multilingual

Table 3
Volunteers' Perceived and Observed Instructional Practices

Areas	Perceived ^a		Indicators	Observed ^b	
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%
Teaching Commitment					
Enjoy teaching	15	100	Encouraging statements towards students, use of personal anecdotes and experiences, display of rich and a variety of materials in the classroom	15	100
Caring professional	7	47	Use of humor, personal examples, keep attention/engagement of students	15	100
Role in Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students					
High expectations	11	73	Encouraging statements towards students, well planned/organized lessons, interactive classroom management, student engagement	15	100
Build on students' linguistic strengths	14	93	Classroom as learning community, use maps, family stories, work on group task, students helping one another, time for students to respond, questioning, translation from one student to the other.	11	73
Delivery of Instruction					
Knowledge of curriculum	8	53	Well developed lessons, (math, language arts, ESL, social studies, science), appropriate use of content	15	100
Create & provide relevant materials	6	40	Charts, dictionaries, L1 books, large quantity of experience charts, graphs, charts, texts, commercial charts, multilingual texts, teaching materials	15	100
Scaffolding strategies	13	87	Brainstorming, questioning, drawings to demonstrate concepts, guidance and focus on the task, check for understanding, clarifying questions, role playing, modeling, repetition, rephrasing, environmental materials, use pictures, visuals, early childhood content, sheltered science content, translating, visual charts, oral scaffolding, modeled reading, story pictures, open-ended questions, realia, hands-on activity, modeling	13	87
Bridge students' languages and cultures	8	53	Questioning, audiovisuals, repetition, paraphrasing, L1 work groups, discussion and L1 explanations, use of cognates, students asked questions and wrote in two languages, sheltered content, use peer translation, L1 text and discussion, sharing cultural customs (i.e.; food), L1/L2 cognates	13	87
Develop literacy	7	47	Strategies and tasks addressing vocabulary development, writing process, oral language, reading comprehension, questioning for comprehension and critical thinking, oral discussion, L1/L2 cognates, grammar and spelling strategies, literacy centers, listening center, word and language games, language experience approach, balanced literacy, choral reading, modeling, shared reading, theme based projects	15	100
Make connections across content, language, and culture	8	53	Use of learners' background knowledge, reading/writing across subjects, spoken to written language connections, text strategies, integrating language content, content literature connections, connected sequence across content, start with familiar and extend beyond	10	67

Note. *N* = 15 teachers.

^aData from questionnaire and interview. ^bData from classroom observation.

students from mixed grades and proficiency levels. The secondary ESL teachers were assigned to teach regular ESL classes organized by language proficiency levels and/or subject.

According to the data, teacher quality, as defined by the certification process, presents a partial picture of the participants' true abilities. Given the complexities of the certification process, their talents as teachers may be obscured. Thus, the researchers wanted to explore the perceptions of the volunteers' teaching effectiveness and as compared to observations of practice done by the researchers. We wanted to see if the interviews and observations revealed different or additional information about their effectiveness than that suggested by their performance on certification tests. Table 3 compares the 15 volunteers teachers' perceptions of their instructional strengths with the researchers' observations in these areas: teachers' commitment, their role in working with CLD students, and the delivery of instruction.

Teachers' Care and Commitment. All the volunteers were seen as enjoying working with ELLs, although only 7 (47%) specifically mentioned this in the interviews. Classroom tone was light and friendly, with supportive smiles, while at the same time serious about the instructional work being done. Volunteers expressed and demonstrated high expectations for their students and had a positive rapport with them. Mr. P, BE volunteer, teaches high school science, stated, "I am very happy in my position helping kids. I see myself in the students." This teacher's connection with his students echoes the importance of teachers' identity connections with their students as a requirement for a positive learning environment as mentioned by Nieto (2004) and Clark et al. (2011). Volunteers' strong teaching commitment was observed in their use of varied and appropriate classroom management strategies, which in turn kept students on-task and attentive.

Observations (15/100%) confirmed a high level of care for and commitment to students through encouraging and culturally endearing statements; reference to students' backgrounds and personal anecdotes; and classroom environments displaying student work, cultural artifacts, and appropriate curriculum materials. These culturally relevant practices are in line with effective practices discussed by Lemberger (1997).

Teachers' Roles in Working with CLD Students. All teachers saw their role as important in building their students' self-esteem as learners and in building their ethnic identity. Teachers implemented lessons that reflected high expectations for students, and used culturally relevant teaching methods. Although 11 (73%) volunteers mentioned high expectations for students in the questionnaire or interviews, the observations of classroom practice suggested that all 15 (100%) volunteers believe in their students' high-level capabilities. All of the teachers observed used frequent encouraging phrases in English or the native language, such as: "Yes, you can do it." "You are getting there, try it one more time." They showed profound respect for diversity and made reference to students' ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Ms. K, in her food lesson, welcomed the sharing of culturally familiar Caribbean foods.

Teachers also indicated their responsibility for expanding students' ability in their first language using it as a tool for learning content. However, observations suggested mixed results in

this category. Fourteen (93%) teachers said that they built on students' linguistic strengths, but only 11 (73%) volunteers were observed using specific strategies for building these strengths (such as, cognates for language transfer, and peer translations).

Another conflicting finding was in the area of the teacher's role in building community and collaborative skills among the students. Eleven volunteers used different groupings that built a sense of community where students learned together through class discussions, small groups, and collaborative projects. The literature supports these practices as an important component of effective teaching (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; González et al., 2004). However, in the other four classrooms observed, whole-group teaching dominated the instruction. In these cases, the teachers saw their role as that of director rather than a facilitator of learning. This is problematic for the language-learning classroom, because whole-class instruction provides less opportunity for comprehensible output (Waxman, Padrón, Franco-Fuentemayor, & Huang, 2009). Their findings are congruent with ours in that they identified a predominance of teacher-directed lessons and passive student engagement.

Delivery of Instruction. The active engagement of students in learning content, concepts, and process enhance their acquisition of knowledge and their participation as a community of learners (Chamot, 2009). Delivery of instruction, as shown in Table 3, is comprised of six areas: (a) knowledge of the curriculum, (b) use of relevant materials, (c) scaffolding strategies, (d) bridging of students' languages and cultures, (e) literacy development, and (f) connections across content, language, and culture. When analyzing the data, we found that bridging students' language and cultures coincided with scaffolding strategies in BE/ESL classrooms, therefore, we combined those categories.

Knowledge of the Curriculum. More than half the volunteers (8/53%) spoke about their subjects as a teaching strength. However, our observations of lessons in science, math, language arts, ESL, and social studies content areas revealed varied degrees of mastery in the subject grade-level content. They used different instructional approaches to engage students in acquiring new knowledge and content-related skills. To exemplify the range of differences in knowledge of the subject and instructional approaches, we discuss below the instruction of two observed teachers. Mr. K., high school ESL educator, stated that knowledge of his subject makes him an effective teacher. Yet, this fully certified, experienced (12 years) teacher conducted a grammar-based lesson straight from the textbook. While students did the assigned tasks, they seemed less than engaged with the teacher and with each other. His overdependence on the textbook suggested to us a lack of planning, which obscured his subject area mastery. In contrast, Mr. H., a BE high school math teacher, spoke of implementing the literature-based Interactive Math Program (IMP), in which students read fiction and apply mathematical problem-solving related to the text content. Mr. H. had learned the innovative IMP over three years of voluntary intensive professional development. He expressed strong subject mastery, "I have the capacity to communicate a subject which I not only know, but have working experience [formerly as an engineer]." Our observations confirmed that he facilitated instruction in two languages to develop concepts and the language of geometry (e.g., using cognates: *vertex* and *vértice*). He also

modeled and encouraged the use of appropriate academic discourse where students practiced solving problems, explained the solutions, and critiqued each other's performance. This type of constructivist-based instruction in content areas has been supported by the work of Schleppegrell and her colleagues (2008).

Teachers' Use of Relevant Materials. Related to teachers' curricular knowledge is the use of appropriate teaching aids, materials, and resources to make content relevant and meaningful for students (Chamot, 2009). These resources include texts, supplementary materials, manipulatives, technology, print materials such as maps, and dictionaries as well as other materials for students' research activities. As indicated in Table 3, there is a mismatch between volunteers' perceptions (6/40%) of their use of relevant materials and the classroom observations (15/100%). BE and ESL classrooms were equipped with current and relevant materials. In BE classrooms, materials were in English and Spanish and usually located in two different classroom areas; they included maps, dictionaries, charts, and commercial and teacher-made materials. All classrooms had student work displayed showing the varied class projects and activities. For example, in Ms. L.'s high school ESL humanities class, groups of students used different textbooks and internet sources in English and Spanish to construct a newspaper on the ancient civilization of their choice. In this category, our observations of the classroom environment did not match the teachers' perceptions of their ability in using different instructional materials and resources.

Teachers' Language and Scaffolding Strategies. Scaffolding instruction describes specialized teaching strategies geared to support learning, especially when students are first introduced to new content or concepts. Scaffolding gives students a context, motivation, or foundation from which to understand the new information introduced in the lesson (Echevarria & Short, 2009). Scaffolding techniques are considered fundamental to good, solid teaching for all students. Table 3 shows that 13(87%) volunteers expressed and demonstrated varied scaffolding approaches through the use of visuals, demonstrations, role-playing, hands-on activities, graphic organizers, and semantic/story maps. Teachers carefully modeled language by orally rephrasing, repeating and building vocabulary. Further, instruction was scaffolded through use of students' background knowledge and experiences, content adaptation for different language proficiency levels, and grouping strategies (Echevarria & Short, 2009). Teachers modeled oral discourse and promoted students' oral language use. The first language served as a bridge to English, as seen in Mr. H's math lesson. Similar to August and Shanahan (2006), this not only occurred in BE classrooms, but also three ESL teachers encouraged peers to work in the native language or translate to English. Three other teachers spoke of creating environments aimed at keeping students' "affective filters" low and allowing "wait time" for students to process their responses in English. Both demonstrate teachers' implementation of language acquisition principles in action (Peregoy & Boyle, 2009). Ms. S., a BE special education volunteer, mentioned "scaffolding" content for her students and was observed providing real materials and shared experiences, exemplifying an integration of language and content (Echevarria & Short, 2009).

Emphasis on Literacy Development. While only 7 (47%) teachers referred to literacy as a teaching strength, all 15 (100%) engaged students in some type of grade-level appropriate literacy activity through the use of research-supported practices such as centers, games, language experience approach, shared and guided reading, internet research, and math-related literature. Lessons on important components of language learning were observed including vocabulary development, writing process, oral language, reading comprehension, and grammar. Questioning for comprehension and critical thinking were frequently emphasized, as seen in Ms. L.'s Ancient Civilization project, when she prodded students to question the social structures that enabled advanced developments of each civilization. Yet, two teachers observed, who employed some of the activities mentioned above, relied on teacher-centered tasks for most of their literacy instruction. For instance, Mr. K. and Ms. C. presented literacy lessons directed by them with students passively engaged for most of the lesson (Waxman et al., 2009).

Connections Across Content, Language, and Culture. As teaching is a holistic endeavor, many aspects are interrelated in multiple ways. In classrooms with a strong culture for learning, both teachers and students are actively and cognitively involved, and they connect content, language and culture (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Teachers interviewed referred to making connections across culture, language and content. Approaches mentioned (8/53%) and observed (10/67%) included the use of learners' background knowledge, reading and writing activities across subjects, integrating language and content, use of literature to clarify content, and sheltered content lessons. Similar to Nelson and Stage (2007), these teachers used varied questioning, graphic organizers, and think-aloud explanations to contextualize information and concepts. They also provided opportunities for students to engage in high quality discussions to expand meaning and interpretation of content, text or new information. For example, Ms. B., high school ESL teacher, explained how she made American culture visible by discussing idioms, sayings, and cultural differences. This was observed when in the lesson, students made sense of idioms through native language discussion and acting them out. Ms. L. expressed joy and pride at seeing newcomer students' faces light up in connecting to new words in English and experiences in the United States. "I try to consider how course material relates to my students and use real content and examples to make it more interesting to them." She continued, "I pay attention to their responses to make sure they understand." Several teachers explained how they gauged instruction based on comprehension checks. Ms. C., a first-grade BE teacher, makes a mental note of difficulties children have and "won't move on until all the children show they understand the concept." In her healthy foods lesson, Ms. K., an elementary ESL teacher, used real objects to introduce new foods and their names (e.g., asparagus, croissant). Students then described and classified them and shared foods from their cultures (e.g., beef patty).

To summarize, results from this exploratory study showed that teachers, to varying degrees, had a strong teaching commitment, positive rapport with students, respect for language and culture, and used students' home languages and cultures as resources in their teaching. Many observed lessons demonstrated knowledge of the curriculum and engaged students in appropriate instructional activities.

It was interesting to uncover that on occasion the teachers' perceptions, as recorded in the questionnaires and interviews, did not align with our observations. This may have resulted for a variety of reasons. First, because of the open nature of the interviews, volunteers may have not focused on areas that were highlighted in the literature. Due to scheduling, some interviews were conducted prior to the lesson, which did not allow us to delve deeper into practices we saw. Volunteers may have been humble about speaking about their accomplishments, which were better observed, such as the classroom tone, the careful planning, and their understanding of students (Flores & Clark, 1997; Hones et al., 2009). More time in the classrooms and more focused interviews following the observations might have resulted in showing even greater effectiveness.

Discussion and Implications

We began this descriptive exploratory study hoping to better understand the BE and ESL teachers' certification and test-taking experiences and challenges. We also wanted to prompt teachers to identify their instructional strengths and confirm them in their classrooms. The purpose of the interviews and observation was to explore if the volunteer's practices revealed any ineffectiveness, as was suggested by the fact that many had difficulties passing the tests and completing their certification immediately after graduation. Our findings suggest multiple elements that color perspectives on teacher quality.

We did not find that certification, and especially testing, was a barrier to BE and ESL teachers' continuation in their jobs, since most of them persisted until achieving their teaching certification. At the conclusion of the study only 4 out of 63 (6%) participants did not attain certification due to multiple test failures. However, this led us to consider that many other caring, qualified, and diverse teachers beyond our study may also have left the profession or were too ashamed to respond. Similar to Lemberger, (2001) and Hones, et al. (2009), our data suggested that certification test-taking was challenging and stressful for participants, and some BE and ESL teachers may take longer to complete certification because of failure to pass the tests. Our data confirms that the numerous required tests seemed to prolong the certification process and caused needless discouragement and frustration to teachers (Albers, 2002; Bennett et al., 2006; Brown, 2005; Flores & Clark, 1997). Some foreign-born participants in our sample seemed to be at greater disadvantage in passing the tests due to language differences, unfamiliar test content and formats, and test anxiety (Hones, et al., 2009; Lemberger, 2001). The fact that most of the teachers took the tests multiple times until they achieved their professional goals is a testament to their resiliency and commitment to becoming teachers. Yet, it also alerts us to the weak validity of these tests in signaling teacher quality.

In terms of observed teachers' instructional strengths and practices, their perceptions of instructional practices generally matched those observed in the classroom and to varying degrees reflect research-based ELL practices (August & Shanahan, 2006; Echevarria & Short, 2009; Francis et al., 2006; Genesee, et al., 2006; Samway & McKeon, 2007; Slavin & Calderón,

2001; Waxman & Padrón, 2003). Our data suggested that these teachers do indeed possess many of the intangible teaching qualities (Goldhaber, 2002, Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010), not measurable by tests. The passion and persistence that observed teachers exhibited in becoming certified was admirable and showed considerable dedication to students and professional commitment. We were pleased to hear them talk about and see them use research-based practices that had been introduced in our university's teacher preparation programs. Through the observations, we got a sense of their competence. This finding echoes Goldhaber's (2007) finding that licensure does not guarantee quality service and that some people, even those who score well on the tests, end up being quite ineffective teachers.

Nonetheless, we found a small number of teachers exhibiting instructional practices that are not fully supported by the scholarly literature. Some still use whole class instruction as the *main* vehicle of instruction. This finding alerts us that, despite the strong research base presented in teacher education programs and professional development activities that identify clear and specific strategies to teach ELL students in BE and ESL classrooms, whole class instruction still prevails (Waxman et al., 2009), with students working passively on teacher-assigned activities (i.e., watching or listening). This finding suggests that it is important to consider other ways, beyond certification tests, to gauge how effective a teacher candidate might be once he or she is certified. These less-supported practices may exist regardless and have little to do with certification testing.

This study also revealed the need to reconsider the entire certification process. Given the dire need of an increasing number of districts nation-wide for hiring highly qualified BE and ESL teachers, more strategic attention should be given to the certification process to prevent it from delaying their entry into the classroom.

Our study also underscores the advantages of gathering larger-scale more-accurate data on teachers' test histories. Such research could explore how many teachers fail to become certified because of tests, which tests they fail, how many times they fail, why they fail, and how many and which tests really are needed to ensure teaching quality. Interestingly, some of this information already exists in state departments of education and test companies, but are not available for researcher evaluation (Committee on Teacher Preparation, 2010). Such data could point toward other alternatives (Brown, 2005), which could better ensure a qualified culturally and linguistically congruent teacher force. Perhaps time extensions for certain tests could be given to foreign-born teachers (Hones, et al. 2009) who pass the BEA at a certain score, under the premise that their competence in the native language would transfer to English provided they have more processing time. The industry is reticent to make such changes so as not to compromise test validity and financial profits.

Teacher licensure is just the first gate, and new policies such as Race to the Top portend raising the stakes on teacher quality and evaluation through using student test scores (Buddin, & Zamarro, 2009). The current test frenzy indicates that it is unlikely that states will loosen teacher certification exam policies and may even further raise the bar (Medina, 2009). We recommend

that teacher educators be attentive to their teacher candidates' test-taking experiences, shepherd them more closely through certification (Flores & Clark, 1997; Hones et al., 2009), and advocate for alternatives (Brown, 2005). We agree with Mitchell, et al. (2001), who call for research on and development of tests that better reflect the complex nature of teaching and use multiple school-based assessments to certify and signal qualified teachers.

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