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## From Preparation to Practice: A Qualitative Study Examining the Perceptions of General Education Teachers

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**FROM PREPARATION TO PRACTICE: A QUALITATIVE  
STUDY EXAMINING THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL  
EDUCATION TEACHERS**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The School of Education

by

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Mom and Dad, this is for you. I love you both eternally! Kayleigh Gianna and Carson Layne,  
thank you for your patience. My advice to you, when you want something work for it like there  
is no tomorrow, like you are on your last breath.... like you want it more than ANYTHING.

You all are truly the wind beneath my wings!!

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	ix
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Problem.....	7
Purpose.....	9
Definition of Terms .....	10
Theoretical Frameworks.....	12
REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	13
The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.....	14
Teacher Practical Knowledge Theory.....	18
Constructivist Theory.....	20
Theory of Community Practice.....	22
The Future of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.....	30
METHODOLOGY.....	32
Research Design.....	32
Methods.....	32
Sampling Procedures.....	34
Data Collection.....	35
Data Analysis.....	39
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	42
Demographics of General Education Teachers.....	42
Teacher Profiles.....	43
Qualitative Procedures.....	46
Codes and Data.....	47
Perceptions of Elementary School Teachers.....	48
Alternative Route to Certification and Traditional Certification.....	51
Preparation Experiences.....	52
Learning from Colleagues.....	54
Weighing the Value of the Knowledge Gained in Teacher Education Preparation with Learning from Colleagues.....	54
Struggles Addressed by Colleagues.....	55
Concluding Statements.....	58
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	61
Discussion.....	61
Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions.....	70
Implications for Further Research.....	72
Concluding Statements.....	72
Ethical Considerations.....	75

REFERENCES.....	76
VITA.....	84

## **ABSTRACT**

Teachers are certified either by a traditional university-based program or an alternative route to certification program. Graduates transition into teaching from diverse backgrounds and bring with them various experiences and predetermined expectations and visions of the profession. Teacher education preparation curriculum traditionally has included exposure to pedagogy and theory. These programs amass many underprepared students, which results in graduates who are underexposed to pedagogical best practices.

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) approach to teaching views learning spaces as sites for knowledge-building, innovation, and inquiry. According to the SoTL, the educator looks carefully and critically at students' learning to improve college and university courses and programs (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

To examine the perceptions of teachers, five elementary school teachers with three or more years of teaching experience participated in a focus group interview about their perceptions of their teacher education preparation and their teaching practice.

The research questions and interview protocol focused on understanding how to better align teacher preparation experiences with the daily endurances of teaching. In addition, this study considered the perceptions of both teachers who completed a traditional teacher education preparation program and teachers who chose an alternative route to teacher certification.

Teachers were invited to participate in the focus group based on their certification status, years of teaching experience, and level of engagement while teaching. Probing questions were asked to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences.

The differences among the teachers' perceptions was insignificant, regardless of the certification route chosen. In addition, the study revealed that the knowledge teachers gained

from observing and interacting with colleagues outweighed the knowledge gained from teacher education preparation programs.

Findings from this study contribute to the restructuring of teacher education preparation programs, teacher induction programs, and teacher experiences. Recommendations from the findings of this study include incorporation of more teacher observation and collaborative experiences in teacher education preparation programs and providing teachers with a more realistic preparation experience.

## INTRODUCTION

As a certified educator since 1999, I have always been interested in self-improvement and professional development. Consequently, I have attended numerous trainings, workshops, convocations, seminars, and conferences, and lent my ear to many "experts". Trainings with experts such as Ruby Payne, Ken Carter, Rita Pierce, and Jennifer Jacobson gave me a feeling of empowerment and rejuvenation. At the conclusion of the trainings, workshops, convocations, seminars, and conferences, however, I returned to my routine as if I had just visited a foreign place. According to the National Research Council (2002), expert teachers' knowledge is structured around core concepts that direct their thinking. The disciplinary understanding of experts encompasses extensive knowledge, however, generally only a portion of the knowledge is applied in the solution of any given problem.

When I was a recent college graduate of a teacher education preparation program and new to the teaching profession, I did not spend a lot of my time in the hallways, lounge, cafeteria, or parking lot discussing teaching with colleagues; I believed that engaging in such behavior was unprofessional. As years passed, the material at the trainings, workshops, convocations, seminars, and conferences became monotonous, but a part of a conversation I overheard stuck with me- "Often the best learning takes place through collaboration with colleagues and peers." At that point I began to spend more time in the hallways, lounge, cafeteria, and parking lot discussing teaching with my colleagues. Although I still felt unprofessional, I realized that I could learn just as much important information about teaching from my coworkers' practical experience as I could from exclusively listening to the "experts".

School systems that serve low socioeconomic families are often under-resourced, which negatively affects student progress, achievement, and outcomes (Daniel & Greytak, 2012, pp.

344-364). The student population at my school may not have all the latest research-based resources at their disposal or a plethora of technology resources and their out of school experiences may be seen as less than ideal. Further, many of the students whom I serve are being raised by grandparents in distressed communities and environments of violence and are not always fed outside of the meals provided at schools. To the untrained eye these students may seem unmotivated, unteachable, and their parents may be perceived as uncaring. These parents and grandparents want the best for their children, however, and the “experts” information simply does not address the unique needs of my students.

Some teachers do not want negativity and have become lazy, which has nothing to do with training that is the culture of teaching. Teacher training is often criticized for being too removed from classroom realities (Schorr, 2013). In my education as a pre-service teacher I received little, if any, preparation to engage the unique and critical needs of students from distressed communities. I do not believe my criticism of my preparation is unique as there is a disconnect between what was/is shared in higher education classrooms and academic conferences and what occurs in K-12 schools. This recognition and valuing of the knowing that comes from doing is an area of study that researchers refer to as Teacher Practical Knowledge (TPK) (Clandinin, 1992).

My experiences of working with underserved populations drove my research. According to the Educational Opportunity Association Best Practices Center (2016), best practices were developed to achieve positive changes in student attitudes or academic behavior. Educational researchers establish best practices based on broadly focused considerations of what works. The problem with best practices framed in this manner, however, is that the students upon whom the best practice model is based differed greatly from the characteristics of the majority of my

students. Thus, the best practices for providing educational service as relayed by university-based researchers were not the best practices for meeting the educational needs of the vast majority of my students. Teachers sometimes misinterpret the behaviors of poor and minority students because they do not understand the cultural norms of their home communities (Delpit, 1995; Fasching-Varner et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2017). Gay (2010) defined Culturally Responsive Teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 31). In these cases, there is a misalignment between what experts view as best practices and the reality of what is experienced as best practices in under-resourced communities. Consequently, one of the aims of this research was for scholarly discourses and teacher education programs to account for best practices that work for populations such as the one that I served. The question arises of how university-based researchers can draw from the experiences of classroom teachers and look for innovative ways to connect with learners.

My mother, a college graduate, worked 34 years as a school office clerk while my father, who has less than a high school education, worked as a truck driver and a corrections officer. Due to financial hardships my father deceitfully joined the military at an early age. For the past 19 years I have worked in various roles at numerous inner-city schools that sought to educate a “high risk” population: my positions included general education teacher, Instructional Specialist, Instructional Coach, Assistant Principal, and Dean of Students. I completed a traditional teacher education preparation program and received my Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and Master of Education in Administration and Supervision degrees from Southern University and Agricultural & Mechanical College. My Education Specialist Degree was earned at Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College.

As a student I paid attention to what I was being taught as well as how the lessons were being taught. I remember thinking that my teachers genuinely enjoyed what they were doing. Young, and having no real substance as a student, I remember “playing” school after school hours and on weekends, but it was not until high school that I seriously entertained the thought of becoming a teacher. Throughout my high school years, I began to see myself as an elementary school teacher. I recall numerous teachers whom I saw as heroes and role models. It became evident in high school and throughout my university learning that great teachers possessed skills I wanted to learn, however, I learned what not to do when I became a teacher from the not-so-great, ineffective teachers who crossed my path. Those experiences confirmed that teaching is truly a work of “heart”. I desired to be like the great teachers, however, to do so I knew that I must find my own teaching style, a style that would use my strengths, knowledge, values, skills, and experiences. Despite my teacher education preparation and experiences, I have much to learn, and I hoped that I enhanced my learning as I conducted my research in the district in which have worked in for over 19 years.

My teacher education preparation consisted of attending classes, and after two years of coursework, I began to take the National Teachers Exam (NTE), the teacher certification examination at that time. After attaining the requisite score, I completed the required university coursework, took the remaining required NTE components, and obtained the necessary score. After the successful completion of university coursework, the university required all education majors to undergo an internship known as student teaching. The goal of student teaching was to have students complete this internship under the guidance of a supervising teacher while gaining knowledge and skills to be successful schoolteachers. My student teaching experience included planning for future lessons as well as implementing those plans; I would have preferred that it

included nonteaching duties such as scoring assignments and assessments and taking attendance. I did not have much interaction with the building principal other than the routine morning and afternoon greeting. My teacher education preparation was devoid of effective communication and working with parents, dealing with personal and professional failure, the importance of a mentor, time management, creating authentic assessments, identifying students for special/gifted services, providing interventions, creating/implementing behavior plans, and documentation. Entering the teaching profession with a working knowledge of these components would have been valuable to me.

Under no circumstances would or could the training I received in my teacher education preparation program ever have been enough because teachers' work is overprescribed. Many days I exited the school building feeling defeated, exhausted, and mentally, physically, and emotionally drained. During those times the experiences of experienced educators proved invaluable. I learned to share my struggles and be open with my colleagues about my feeling of failing at teaching. The more honestly I spoke about my experiences, good and bad, the more I received strategies suggested by my coworkers who shared how they dealt with the hardships they encountered and that I would inevitably experience.

As my job duties and descriptions and expectations of myself changed, so did the expectations from my colleagues. They often came to me regarding the same struggles I dealt with as a teacher; I felt, however, I had to pretend as if I had been in control of my teaching experiences. I eventually found myself unconsciously trying to conceal my reality by what I later learned to be the "cover story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25), making it appear as if I had everything under control. "Cover stories enable teachers whose stories are marginalized by whatever the current story of the school is to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher

stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25). Clandinin & Connelly (1996) detailed that cover stories are often lived and told by teachers when they get positions that do not confine them to the classroom, which move them to other places on the education landscape. Shifting away from their classroom where they feel protected when living out their personal knowledge, those teachers sometimes tell cover stories in which they are portrayed as experts. The aspects of the cover stories make them fit into the acceptable range of the school. Like most teachers, Driedger-Enns (2014) had a vision of how she wanted her practice to be perceived.

Driedger-Enns (2014) shares:

I wanted to make space for multiple voices in the classroom, yet after each class I felt as though I had not done so. I wanted relationships with my students, but many of the students did not. The story of the teacher as an expert ran strong in the dominant story students held of the profession, and it was one they wanted me to support. While I did not tell this story of teacher as an expert in my elementary school classroom, I found myself trying to tell the “cover story” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25) of expert in my university classroom as an instructor. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) explained that teachers sometimes live and tell cover stories when they move out of their classrooms into other places on the education landscape. Moving out of their classrooms where they feel safe to live out their personal knowledge, they sometimes tell cover stories in which they portray themselves as experts, characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of the story of the school. “Cover stories enable teachers whose teacher stories are marginalized by whatever the current story of the school is to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 25). I told a cover story when I moved out of my elementary school classroom into the university classroom. I felt marginalized as the students shaped my story. I tried to portray myself with stories that fit within the acceptable range of stories being lived out in the university, yet it was not who I was (Driedger-Enns, 2014).

Driedger-Enns (2014) continues, I recall as I pulled the pages from the envelope I was given and began reading evaluations of my teaching, my heart pounded, and tears came to my eyes. A secret memory buried deep in a box of old supplies came rushing out anew. Their comments hurt me. I told myself the story that I was one who was good at making healthy relationships with other people, and when that story was fractured, I felt great tension. I told myself the story of being a competent and creative teacher. I told others and myself the story of living in a community where commitment to working through tension was assumed, and when this group of people did not reinforce that story, it was a catalytic moment for me. I felt shame for the words they said about me in the envelope of evaluations. Without support from my department head, and without

relationships with other sessional lecturers to try to make sense of my experience, it was enough to end my teaching at the university, Driedger-Enns (2014).

According to Driedger-Enns, (2014), this observation experience led her to wonder about early career teachers. She desired to understand her own experience as a lecturer, as a novice educator and how she may someday return to teaching at a university. She wanted to trust herself again in a relational way with beginning teachers (p. 7).

As an educator for over 19 years I gained knowledge from my colleagues which was not part of my teacher education preparation training. I learned important lessons from my coworkers about teaching; often my colleagues were instrumental in helping me work through scenarios. I understood and was aware of the many roles and responsibilities of teachers, however, I desired to know if teachers identify any knowledge gained from practice that was absent from preparation as they reflect on their preparation and practice.

Following is a description of TPK and how it applies to my teaching practices; the experts meeting the needs of students from under-resourced communities may very well be the educators in the community doing the day to day work. Consequently, an analysis that implemented TPK afforded me the space to recognize, welcome, and ultimately ground this study in an often-neglected element of teaching at the intersection of social relationships between teachers, students, and subject matter in classrooms. TPK does not offer a new theory of teaching; TPK is simply the compromise between the planned curriculum and the lived curriculum.

### **Problem**

Preservice teachers are not prepared to provide service for the full range of ethnically, racially, and economically diverse students that comprise the 21<sup>st</sup> century student demographic. Lacking appropriate educational services, increasingly diverse student populations

are at increased risks for higher incarceration rates, dropping out of school, health disparities, and earning lower wages; in a *New York Times* article, Irwin (2015) reported that less-educated workers in lower-paying jobs earn less money than they would have a generation ago. Although the reasons for dropping out of school differ, the consequences of leaving school early are similar. Dropouts typically earn less, have higher health disparities, and have an increased chance of incarceration than their educated peers (Fuger, 2008). Improving schools, and particularly pedagogical relationships between students and teachers, will lead to improved graduation rates, which will lower crime rates and improve the nation's economy. Quality teaching will save the nation dollars and saves students' futures. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice (2003), there is an indirect correlation between educational attainment and incarceration; 67% of inmates in state prisons did not complete high school. According to Gaquin & Dunn (2015), the more education a person has obtained, the less likely he/she will be unemployed. According to the 2015-2016 *Almanac of American Education*, the unemployment rate for population 25 years of age and older with less than a high school diploma was 13.7%. Further, Josephson (2018) reported in *The Economics Daily*:

Workers with less than a high school diploma are the lowest earners on average when you examine the average salary by education level. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, median weekly earnings for those with less than a high school degree are \$493. That works out to \$25,636 per year, assuming a year of constant earning. The unemployment rate for Americans with less than a high school diploma is 8%, the highest of any of the educational categories (n. p.).

Harlow (2015) reported:

While only 18% of people outside of prison have not obtained a high school diploma or equivalent, the number of inmates without this level of education is much higher: 47% of inmates in county jails. 40% of inmates in state jails. 27% of inmates in federal prison (p. 1).

According to the 2013 Alliance Report, crime rates are linked to educational attainment. In 2013, Bob Wise, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former Governor of West Virginia, said, “The nation needs to focus dollars and efforts on reforming school climates to keep students engaged in ways that will lead them toward college and career and away from crime and prison. The school-to-prison pipeline starts and ends with schools (Crime Rates Linked to Educational Attainment, 2013, p. 1).

On February 13, 2015, the Center on Society and Health reported: Educational attainment has a significant impact on personal health behaviors. Adults with higher levels of education are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking and drinking, and are more likely to have healthy behaviors related to diet and exercise. Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicate that in 2009-10, 35% of adults who did not graduate high school were smokers, compared to 30% of high school graduates and 13% of college graduates. The impact of education on health behaviors likely stems from education's impact on skills and socioeconomic status. Examining competing explanations for the education gradient in health behaviors, Cutler and Lleras-Muney find evidence for the importance of resources, cognitive ability (especially how one processes information), and social integration. Adults without a high school diploma can expect to die nine years sooner than college graduates.

In short, successful schools improve the overall health of communities and a key part of nurturing that success involves teacher preparation that is directly linked to the norms and experiences of the students being served. Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the seeming disconnect between teacher education preparation and the realities of the teaching practice. It is significant because as schools and students evolve and change, the stories of classroom teachers doing and experiencing what works are untold and their experiences are not recorded or

shared. Against this backdrop, and in the wake of this disconnect, novice teachers exhibit higher discontent with their jobs resulting in higher levels of burnout and ultimately exiting the profession (Warren & Sorge, 2013). Those who do continue in the profession are forced to learn “from scratch” on-the-job-lessons that they should have learned in their teacher education programs. Novice teachers need access to practicing teachers’ daily wisdom of practice that is rarely if ever documented or shared (Shulman, 2004). In the midst of the current complex there exists a wealth of knowledge, but we have no way to transfer that knowledge/resource. I believe representing the voices of practicing teachers will allow their truth to be heard and ultimately will allow teacher education programs to become more effective at educating teachers to meet the unique needs of increasingly diverse student populations. Teachers face real issues and that reality can be easy to forget, even by those who are just a few steps removed from the classroom, i.e. the “experts”.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Alternative Route to Teacher Certification:** In this study an alternative route to teacher certification is an expedited program that places prospective teachers into the classroom after a brief introductory training and student support period (Jacobs & Walsh, 2007).

**Best Practices:** In this study, best practices are a wide range of individual approaches to achieve positive transformations in student attitudes or academic behaviors (Arendale, 2016).

**Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:** In this study, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is an emerging movement of scholarly thought and action that draws on the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning at the post-secondary level (Boyer, 1990). Further, SoTL is an approach to college and university teaching that views learning spaces as sites for inquiry, innovation, and knowledge-building (Fanghanel, 2013, p. 59). It involves faculty

bringing their scholarly habits and skills such as asking questions, gathering evidence of all different kinds, drawing conclusions or raising new questions, and bringing what they learn through their students' learning.

**School dropout:** In this study, a school dropout is someone who leaves school after reaching legal age to do so, but before degree completion.

**Teacher Practical Knowledge:** In this study, teacher practical knowledge is the body of convictions that resulted from experiences and are expressed in a teacher's actions (Craig, Meijer, & Broeckmans, 2013, p. 68). Practical knowledge consists of teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their own teaching practice. It is developed through an integrative process rooted in teachers' own classroom practice and it guides teacher behavior in the classroom (Meijer, 1999). According to Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer (2001), TPK is the foundation of teachers' actions that guides their teaching practice. As a result, an exchange between theoretical principles and teacher expertise is necessary for the refinement of this knowledge base of teaching.

**Teacher Education Preparation Program:** In this study, a teacher preparation program is designed to prepare both undergraduate and graduate students to become licensed teachers. The teacher preparation program also includes a hands-on student teaching experience, which is required for licensing. The program is designed to provide teacher candidates with connections to gain the critical skills and knowledge needed to instruct and positively impact all children.

**Traditional Teacher Education Preparation Program:** In this study, a traditional teacher education preparation program is a 4-year degree program that integrates content knowledge, professional knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and technology in depth and breadth to create meaningful learning experiences for aspiring teachers and generally consist of general education

courses, certification area courses, professional education courses, and usually conclude with field experience, internship or a residency. Upon successful completion, aspiring teachers earn a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree (Gagliardi, M., 2017).

**Wisdom of Practice:** Wisdom of Practice refers to the full range of practical arguments engaged by practitioners as they reason about and ultimately make judgments and decisions about situations they confront and actions they must take (Shulman, 2007, p. 560).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

My dissertation focused on the importance of the existing scholarship that highlights the significance of university-based researchers, or experts, who have developed pedagogical best practices, however, their recommendations do not seem to connect with the day to day teaching practice of educators like myself who teach in diverse educational contexts. Consequently, my primary interest was investigating whether teacher education preparation, professional development, and training include the practical knowledge and experiences of classroom teachers who serve increasingly diverse student populations. To investigate this topic my theoretical frameworks included:

- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
- Teacher Practical Knowledge Theory
- Constructivist Theory
- Theory of Community Practice

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In studying the disconnect between teacher education preparation and the realities of teaching a diverse student population, the researcher drew from the theoretical frameworks of:

- Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
- Teacher Practical Knowledge Theory
- Constructivist Theory
- Theory of Community Practice

### **The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

My dissertation research primarily was located in research on the higher education teaching practice recognized as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). The SoTL has been most visibly expressed and theorized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. According to Huber (2000), the SoTL is an approach to teaching that views learning spaces, (not limited to classrooms) as sites for knowledge-building, innovation, and inquiry. In the SoTL, the teacher looks carefully and critically at students' learning to improve courses and programs. The teacher publicizes insights, experiences, and results that will be useful to other teachers by providing a knowledge base for evaluation and growth. As a result of the SoTL, a teacher advances the teaching profession by joining pedagogical conversations that transcend specific schools and disciplines. The SoTL involves constant reflection of the teaching process and the outcomes of teaching and learning and recognizes the contextual nature of teaching. SoTL practitioners pay significant attention to change and their practice is developed as a result of a cycle of action, reflection, and improvement.

The SoTL identifies the focus of good teaching as student learning and the search for its compelling evidence. Although Boyer (1990) popularized the SoTL, the concept of a

‘scholarship of teaching’ existed long before Boyer coined the term. Boyer (1990) proposed that scholarship should have four separate yet overlapping meanings: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching. He sought to bring greater recognition and regard to teaching, suggesting that excellent teaching is marked by “the same habits of mind that characterize other types of scholarly work” (Boyer 1990, p. 11).

While a variety of definitions of the term SoTL have been suggested, this dissertation used Shulman’s definition (as cited in Bitzer, 2009, p. 291):

Scholarly teaching is what all teachers should be engaged in every day in a classroom, an office with students, tutoring, lecturing, conducting discussions, all the roles we play pedagogically.... But it is only when we step back and reflect systematically on the teaching we have done, in a form that can be publicly reviewed and built upon by our peers, that we have moved from scholarly teaching to the scholarship of teaching (p. 291).

The University of Central Florida’s Karen L. Smith Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning defined the SoTL as research into their faculty’s teaching methods and institutional effectiveness (University of Central Florida, 2018). Research is conducted about and within the University of Central Florida classes and an attempt is made to institute a change in the way material is presented or the way student learning is assessed; the effect of these changes is tracked to decide how best to improve teaching practices. The SoTL also publicizes the results so that others are inspired to create their own systemic changes. According to this systematic approach to inquiry into teaching, the outcome of the SoTL should always remain focused on improving student learning.

At Indiana University at Bloomington, the SoTL initiative seeks to improve undergraduate learning. To this end it encourages, supports, and publicizes course-focused research projects that are faculty defined and implemented (Indiana University at Bloomington,

2018). The SoTL fosters an interdisciplinary community of conversation and engagement centered on teaching and learning. This community supports and enhances both the inquiry of individual faculty and a more evidence-based approach to teaching generally. Instead of focusing on specific issues or learning methods, the SoTL approach encourages faculty to explore a variety of approaches and to reflect on questions about student learning resulting from their own experiences in the classroom (Indiana University at Bloomington, 2018). As such it is self-renewing and self-broadening. As more faculty members address more learning outcomes and explore more alternative learning environments, they use an increasingly diverse range of techniques to assess the effectiveness of their strategies.

The SoTL at Western Carolina University is a university-wide commitment and collaboration among faculty, administration, staff, and students in initiating and continuing systematic conversation, reflection, research, and dissemination about teaching and learning that is open to public critique. WCU's aim is to establish the scholarship of teaching and learning as research that is as institutionally valued and rewarded as traditional disciplinary scholarship, with the ultimate goals of improved student learning, teaching effectiveness and enjoyment, faculty development, and the creation of a deeply collegial academic community (Western Carolina University, 2018). Finally, Illinois State University defined the SoTL as, "systematic reflection on teaching and learning made public" (Illinois State University, 2018).

Each of the previous examples is an example of institutions seeking out the insights of practicing teachers. Once teachers have a general understanding that the SoTL is serious scholarly work, they document the insights and experiential knowledge gleaned in their teaching. The documentation is circulated amongst teacher communities and used as a primer to reflect upon what works in classrooms from and for the people who are doing the work. The

experiences are cycled back to the institutions charged with the responsibility for improving teaching and learning.

Prior to advocating for institutional cultural transformation to promote the SoTL, the value of this work must be addressed generally. It begins with the general understanding that the SoTL is serious *scholarly* work, instead of work done by academics in isolation from their scholarship (Boyer, Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff as cited by Ginsberg & Bernstein, 2011). Shulman (1998) suggested that there is not enough conversation from academics around the concept of good teaching, or the knowledge regarding good teaching to build a scholarship around it (p. 6). Hutchings (as cited by Sipple & Lighter, 2013) wrote:

A scholarship of teaching will entail a public account of some or all of the full act of teaching – vision, design, enactment, outcomes, and analysis – in a manner susceptible to critical review by the teacher’s professional peers and amenable to productive employment in future work by members of that same community (p. 6).

Teaching and learning scholars can build on their philosophy of good practice in an evidence-based manner and develop a body of scholarly work, similar to what is done in disciplinary research.

It is not necessary for all faculty to engage in the SoTL. Since pursuing all areas of scholarly work is not feasible, some may opt to concentrate on work in the scholarships of discovery, integration, and application (Boyer, 1990). According to Boyer, however, a growing SoTL is non-negotiable for the general academy and at the institutional level.

Shulman (1998) argued that teaching, like other forms of scholarship, is an extended process that unfolds over time. Shulman described this process as embodied by at least five elements: vision, design, interactions, outcomes, and analysis. It is with these elements that active teaching becomes like the extended act of traditional scholarship or research (Hutchins, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011, p. 37).

According to Kroll and LaBoskey (1996), the default epistemology in education is an empirical/reductionist approach to teaching and learning. On the other hand, the shared epistemological basis for these two perspectives is interpretivism, where knowledge is believed to be acquired through involvement with content instead of imitation or repetition (Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996). Teacher Practical Knowledge is a component of the SoTL that consists of a steady reflection of the growth and results of teaching and learning and recognizes the contextual nature of teaching (Gentry, 2018). The SoTL provides the educator a unique opportunity to reflect upon the lessons in the world and in the classroom, conceptualize and theorize, and cycle those lessons back into teaching practice while sharing them with the teaching community. The SoTL holds the power to allow educators and students to link lived experiences to the classroom (Adade, 2007).

Literature about SoTL provides a way of examining how it is done, how it works, and what good teaching looks like, however, it lacks the bridge that connects teacher education preparation programs to the world of teaching and is resistant to change; it also does not account for the shifting emphasis between content delivery and teacher to student learning. I turned to the formulation of Jean Piaget's Constructivist Theory, which suggested that knowledge occurs as a result of the experiences of the learner, and Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory of Community Practice, which suggested that learning is an aspect of ongoing social practice (Lave, 1996).

The SoTL literature contributed to my research in the recognition of what Lev Vygotsky (1978), referred to as "good learning"; Vygotsky acknowledged learning that advances development is the only "good learning". According to Vygotsky (1978), "actual development level" and the "zone of proximal development" are the two levels of development regarded as

indispensable for understanding the learning process. The “actual development level” is best understood within the framework of what learners can grasp without the help of someone more knowledgeable than themselves; the “zone of proximal development” is what the learner is able to do with the support of a more knowledgeable person (p. 504). Vygotsky identified the more knowledgeable person to be a teacher who has access to information. According to Schorr (2013), typically, teacher education preparation programs lack a feedback loop that informs their practice with the actual impact their trainees have on students in the classroom. My research adds to this conversation by allowing those who are doing the work, and whose voices are often overlooked in the scholarly literature, to be recorded to inform teacher education preparation.

### **Teacher Practical Knowledge Theory**

Teacher practical knowledge (TPK) is the knowledge that teachers generate as a result of their teaching in specific educational contexts. Fenstermacher (1994) argued TPK is the knowledge generated by teachers as a result of experiences and reflections on such experiences. TPK is formed in classroom situations and includes all the practical dilemmas that teachers face in the teaching profession. As cited by Rahmany, Hassani, and Fattahi (2014), Educator D. Jean Clandinin looked at the knowledge of any individual teacher and called it personal practical knowledge. For Clandinin (1992), a teacher’s “personal practical knowledge is reflected in the person's background, present mind and body, and future plans and actions” (p. 124-137). Theorist and philosopher Donald Schon (2014) defined practical knowledge by four characteristics. First, practical knowledge is time bound. Second, practical knowledge is discipline-specific and therefore does not readily transfer across disciplines, regardless of the similarities of the situation and or circumstances. Third, practical knowledge is personally compelling, as it will not trigger the teacher to transform practice unless the distinct problem

addressed is one that the teacher presently faces within the classroom. Finally, teacher practical knowledge is lead toward action. (Rahmany, Hassani, & Fattahi, 2014, p. 454).

Teacher education preparation critics argue that effective teaching is primarily a matter of transferring theoretical principles to practice (MacLure, 1993; Schon, 1983). These critics suggested research indicating that conventional teaching involves more complex decision making than simply one-way action of applying theory to practice.

At the core of TPK research are specialized training and ongoing professional development. As a result of a specialization of knowledge and skills, the training is challenging. The notion exists that teaching can be learned simply through observation, and because most adults have experienced some type of formal schooling, consequently teaching is perceived as something that is easy to master (Hoyle, 1995, 2001).

Teachers' practical knowledge base is not stagnant. Professional learning communities and research contribute to the evolution of new knowledge. From a TPK perspective this knowledge must be accessed, processed, and evaluated, and reconstructed into knowledge for practice. As professionals, teachers are expected to process and assess new information relevant to their core professional practice and to regularly update their professional knowledge base (Guerriero, 2017, p. 29). Thus, active engagement and proposed learning from doing are essential to TPK.

In summary, researchers acknowledge the leverage teachers' past experiences and life histories have on their decision making as teachers (Taylor, 1996; Bullough Jr., Knowles, & Crow, 1991; Clandinin, 1992; Maitland-Gholson & Ettinger, 1994; Pinnegar, 1995). Such research suggests that past experiences might shape the basis of teacher images more powerfully than anything they learn from teaching courses. Writing education-related life histories proved to

be an important step in uncovering images at work in problem situations. Giving consideration to past experiences and their connections to current actions well with the notion of accessing practical knowledge through examining images. Listening to others allowed individuals to tap into their existing images of teaching and to analyze how these had been influenced by prior experiences.

### **Constructivist Theory**

Constructivist theory emphasizes an understanding of how and why individuals learn and offers a method to combine the practices of good teaching and learning (Cole, 2008). According to Piaget (1950), through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals gain new insight from their experiences (Joubish & Khurram, 2011). As a result of assimilation, new experiences are built into an existing framework without altering that framework and cause a learner to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. The learner develops new outlooks, rethinks what were once misunderstandings, and examines what is important, resulting in a change in their perceptions. Accommodation, on the other hand, reframes the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Learners conceive a particular fashion in which the world operates (Bhattacharjee, 2015, p. 65-66).

Martin Haberman (as cited by Cole, 2008, p. 30) speculated, “what if teachers join students as fellow learners in quest for answers to real-life problems or for ways to generalize scientific phenomena?” Good teaching is good teaching, regardless of students' racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Good teaching involves teaching what is relevant, engaging, multicultural, and appealing to a variety of modalities and learning styles. It works well with all children (Cole, 2008). TPK theory is relevant because teaching comes with countless relevant, invaluable experiences that need to be shared, thus relying on the practical aspects of teaching

(Oss, 2018, p. 171). Constructivist theory suggests that the goal of school is not simply to gain knowledge, but also to build an understanding (Cole, 2008, p. 31). Constructivism removes the emphasis given to teaching and shifts it to learning. Through constructivism students' learning experiences are individualized and conceptualized and students develop processes, skills, and attitudes while attention is given to individual learning styles of students. At the hand of constructivism, learners are engaged through authentic tasks (Christie, 2005; Clarkson & Brook, n.d.).

These studies outlined that constructivist theory is about how individuals learn based on observation and scientific study. They maintain people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflections on those experiences. When people encounter something new, it must be reconciled with existing ideas and experiences, and may change what they believe, or it may be eliminated due to its irrelevance. Individuals are active creators of their own knowledge and thus must ask questions, explore, and assess knowledge.

In the classroom, the constructivist view of learning can point towards multiple teaching practices. Generally, it means encouraging students to use active techniques such as experiments and real-world problem solving to gain knowledge and following with reflection and discussion about what is being done and how understanding is changing. The teacher ensures understanding of the students' pre-existing conceptions and facilitates activities to address and build upon those conceptions. Constructivist learning theory seeks to answer the question of how people know what they know. The “constructivist stance maintains that learning is a process of constructing meaning: it is how people make sense of their experience” (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 260). The literature presented suggests the constructivist theory can expose truths about education which have not been represented in traditional theories, however, it lacks linking feedback and

knowledge to teacher education preparation programs. Therefore, the researcher turns to Lave and Wenger's Theory of Community Practice.

### **Theory of Community Practice**

Cognitive anthropologists Lave and Wenger (2015), an educational theorist and computer scientist, defined community practice as a group of people with a common craft, interest, or passion for something they do (p. 1). As a result of regular interaction, they learned to teach better (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 1). The evolution of a group can be as natural as a result of the members having a common goal of gaining field-related knowledge. The process of a group's sharing experiences and knowledge results in participants learning from each other. This learning and sharing allow members to gain professional and personal growth and development. Jean Piaget, Jerome Bruner, and Seymour Papert supported the work of inquiry-based instruction learning techniques of discovery.

A Community of Practice involves three crucial characteristics: the domain of interest, the community of members engaging in joint discussions and activities while helping each other and sharing information, and the practice involving a members of the community sharing resources, experiences, stories, tools, and methods of addressing recurring problems (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, pp. 2-3). Bruner (1961) argued that practice in discovering for oneself teaches one to acquire knowledge in a manner that makes the knowledge more readily viable in problem solving.

While a variety of definitions of the term Community of Practice have been suggested, this paper used that of Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011). Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011) defined Community of Practice as "learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other's experience of practice as a learning resource" (p. 9). With this definition as a starting point, the important

concepts that form the basis for the principals of domain, community, and practice of Community of Practice according to Wenger (2004, 1998) are the domain, community, practice, participation and reification, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, engagement, imagination, and alignment, boundaries, brokering, legitimate peripheral participation, identity, and knowledge.

The domain comprises “the area of knowledge that brings the community together, gives it its identity, and defines the key issues that members need to address (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017, p. 211). The domain is what gives a group its identity and distinguishes it from a club of friends or a network of connections between people.

The community constitutes “the group of people for whom the domain is relevant, the quality of the relationships among members, and the definition of the boundary between the inside and the outside” (Smith, Hayes, & Shea, 2017, p. 211). For a group of people to constitute a Community of Practice, its members must come together around ideas or topics of interest (the domain) and interact with each other to learn together.

The practice is defined by Wenger (2004) as “the body of knowledge, methods, tools, stories, cases, documents, which members share and develop together” to address recurring problems in their specific contexts (p. 1) The most recent attempt to define this construct from a Wengerian perspective came from Consalvo, Schallert, & Elias (2015). These authors defined practice as “a way of acting in the world” and as “a field of endeavor and expertise” (p. 3). In combination, these definitions suggest that practice implies knowledge of and engagement with a domain.

Wenger (1998) asserted that individuals’ engagement in a Community of Practice regularly encompasses a process of negotiation of meaning that takes place in the merging of the

processes of participation and reification. Participation involves acting and interacting, and reification involves producing artifacts (such as tools, words, symbols, rules, documents, concepts, theories, and so on) around which the negotiation of meaning is organized.

Participation and reification are complementary processes in that each has the capacity to make up for the inhibitions of the other.

Wenger (2010) emphasized that over time, through participation and reification, participants of a Community of Practice develop and negotiate “a set of criteria and expectations by which they recognize membership” (p. 180). These criteria include joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. Joint enterprise is a collective understanding of what the community is about and its purpose. Mutual engagement involves interacting and establishing norms, expectations, and relationships; and lastly shared repertoire involves using the communal resources, such as language, artifacts, standards, concepts, tools, and methods.

Wenger (1998) concluded it is through joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire that a community establishes guidelines as to “what it is to be a competent participant, an outsider, or somewhere in between” (p. 137), and further includes that establishing such guidelines are essential for learning to take place in a Community of Practice. According to Wenger (1998), as people participate in a Community of Practice, their belonging is conveyed through three methods of identification: 1) *engagement* – doing things together, talking, producing artifacts; 2) *imagination* – reflecting, constructing an image of the practice and its members and seeing self as one of them; and 3) *alignment* – following directions, aligning self with expectations/standards, coordinating actions towards a common goal (p. 228).

Individuals regularly belong to more than one Community of Practice and each has boundaries that distinguish it from one another. Wenger (2000) envisioned boundaries to connote

difference. “They arise from different enterprises; different ways of engaging with one another; different histories, repertoires, ways of communicating, and capabilities” (p. 125). Members of multiple Community of Practices cross boundaries.

Crossing boundaries between various communities provides opportunities for brokering, a concept Wenger (1998) defined as the process of “transfer[ring] some element of one practice into another” (p. 109). Wenger added that good brokers are those who motivate learning as they engage in import-export.

When individuals’ cross boundaries as outsiders or newcomers, they are offered possibilities for participation called peripheries. A newcomer’s participation in a Community of Practice frequently begins on the periphery – “a region that is neither fully inside nor fully outside” (Wenger, 1998, p. 117) – and leads towards the center through growing involvement. This process of moving from the periphery to center is characterized by the concept of legitimate peripheral participation, a view first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). In Wenger’s (1998) writings, legitimate peripheral participation is noted, but not prioritized. Instead, it serves as an important background condition under which newcomers become included in a Community of Practice. Wenger’s contribution to the development of this notion lies in his articulation of the special measures (e.g., observation, special assistance, close supervision, etc.) that may be taken to open up a practice to newcomers. He also noted, “No matter how the peripherality of initial participation is achieved, it must engage newcomers and provide a sense of how the community operates” (p. 100).

Identity construction as a result of participating in and learning from the practices of a community is another topic that Lave and Wenger (1991) initially explored and upon which Wenger (1998) expanded. Wenger reminded us that as people participate in a Community of

Practice, they amass new knowledge and simultaneously their sense of who they are and their identities change.

Participants in a Community of Practice develop knowledge as they collaborate with each other, share knowledge, experience, insight and suggestions, and help each other as they resolve disputes. Over time, it is this merge of action and conversation that represents communal ways of understanding and solving problems, and the process of reification changes this shared knowledge into the tools and artifacts that substantiate a Community of Practice system of competence. The community's insight is progressive, not stagnant. It is also explicit and implicit, as well as social and specific (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Wenger (1998) discussed learning as participation and introduction, to participation and reification, designed/emergent, local/global, and identification/negotiability as four dualities to capture the general elements for designing learning in a Community of Practice.

Participation and reification prompt the remembrance of the need to hold doing/talking (participation) and producing objects (reification) in the proper proportion to each other in social learning systems. The second duality, designed/emergent, expresses the need for inclusion of improvisation and innovation (emergent) into the prescriptions of practice (designed), such as policies and plans. The third duality, local/global emphasizes the need to include "those who organize learning and those who realize it" in the design of learning (Wenger, 1998, p. 234). Lastly, the identification/negotiability duality expresses the need to disseminate power to shape both the community and the individual. In addition to these dualities, Wenger (1998) maintained that the following should be included in a robust design for learning: interactive technologies, communication facilities, joint tasks, availability of help, and peripherality (indication of engagement); transparency, explanations, reflection, and pushing boundaries (indication of

imagination); and common focus, direction, plans, standards, policies, and distribution of authority (p. 214).

Wenger et al. (2011) presented the concept of value creation to detail and evaluate the nature of social learning in a Community of Practice, and if Community of Practice members' activities and interactions with others in informal networks result in the creation of value. The main recipients of this value are participants of a Community of Practice, but value may also accrue for other stakeholders, such as the organizations in which Community of Practice operate and sponsors who invest resources.

Wenger et al. (2011) defined five distinctive cycles of value creation developed within Community of Practice: immediate value; potential value; applied value; realized value; and reframed value. Immediate value includes learning that is put to use immediately to solve a problem. Potential value includes benefits connected to the shared skills and knowledge that can be completed at a later time. Applied value is a by-product from application of shared skills and knowledge to unfamiliar contexts. Realized value includes Community of Practice participant and stakeholder reflections on how the skills and knowledge are advanced as a result of their cooperation in a Community of Practice made a difference in their ability to achieve important goals. Lastly, reframed value involves the description and explanation of new benchmarks for success (Wegner, 2011, p. 46).

Situated learning was proposed by Lave and Wenger as a model of learning within a community of practice (Agrifoglio, 2015, p. 26) and is defined as learning that takes place in the same context in which it is applied. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that learning should not be seen as the simple transmission of knowledge from one individual to another, but instead as a social process by which knowledge is co-constructed. When problems are at the core of learning,

real life conditions are explored to find solutions. Keeping true to the belief that learning is social, learners who are drawn to communities with shared interests are likely to benefit from the knowledge of those members who are more knowledgeable than they are. Students are compelled to learn when they are put in real-life situations, and researchers have concluded students reach a higher level of thinking when a problem-based learning approach is at the forefront of curriculum design.

It is argued that research on TPK takes into account a better way of what really matters in teaching because it emphasizes the knowledge and beliefs of teachers about their daily practice and teaching (de Vries & Beijaard, 1999). Marland (1998) argued that practical knowledge provides a foundation for teachers to describe and explain what they do in classrooms and why. Practical knowledge helps teachers to predict how students might react, to decide what is the best response to their reaction, and to generate effective and workable teaching plans and modify them when necessary or possible. According to Thompson (2014), practical knowledge serves three standard functions of theory: description, explanation, and prediction.

Views of gaps in the field of the SoTL reflect strongly on interpretation and understood definitions. The humanities have a growing presence in the SoTL. The SoTL within higher education focuses on undergraduate studies at the expense of neglecting graduate students. The question arises if this is due to an assumption that it is common knowledge in the discipline of how to teach and mentor graduate students and that graduate students “know” how to learn (McKinney, 2014). At the core of the SoTL is practitioner reflection or public research that focuses on one’s own students, most likely in a classroom. Teaching, learning, and learning opportunities, however, are not confined to a classroom.

McKinney (2014) suggested more work is needed in SoTL that uses multiple data points over time and follows up with students' learning for extended time. According to McKinney (2014), doing so offers more information by which to speculate about influences. Having multiple data points over time with follow-up of students' learning for extended time would also allow consideration of issues of transfer and retention of learning or impact and would strengthen the validity of findings. Also, much of SoTL involves a new assignment referred to as interventions, new technology, change in pedagogy, and reflection or research data on learning outcomes from such. Although it is impressive to see increased learning or development after some intervention, more important parts of the picture are making improvements, encouraging adaptations, and gaining understanding as a result of gathering information about the intervening processes that occur between any 'intervention' and learning. Why, how, when, where, and for whom of any intervention-outcome relationship needs to be uncovered. A better job can be done in applying and sharing the applications of the SoTL results, findings, and implications. These applications should be for the classroom level and beyond as discipline appropriate.

One way to move the field forward and increase its impact is to engage in projects that fill the gaps in the existing literature and knowledge base. Notice should be taken of the known gaps in the field of SoTL both within and across disciplines (McKinney, 2010). Noted gaps include insufficient attention to co- and extra-curricular learning experiences, learning by graduate students, the explicit use of "theory" (Hutchings & Huber, 2007), and the intervening processes or why/how of the 'big' or common questions. McKinney (2014) acknowledged there are SoTL questions that are shared by individuals within disciplines but at different universities as well as at the same university, yet in different disciplines. McKinney suggested giving consideration to multi-institutional and multi-discipline SoTL.

## **The Future of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning**

Participants in the SoTL share concern about its status in their own disciplines and in the institutions where they teach. Part of this concern is due to the conflict among academics about the scholarly status of teaching itself and partly because the SoTL transcends categories of teaching and research that the academy has come to see and treat as distinct and different forms of faculty work (Huber, 2001).

This literature review implies that disciplinary styles will eventually prove to be meaningless to the SoTL. Regardless of the favored metaphors and styles of one's own discipline, something is gained and learned by analyzing the classrooms as organizations, teaching as communication, and teaching as an inquiry into learning. Huber and Morreale (2002) wrote:

Of one thing we can be certain, whatever the future of the scholarship of teaching and learning, it will no longer be mostly a matter of parallel play. It is our hope that volumes such as this in authors present their own field's sounds and silences to a polyglot audience, will contribute to a common language for trading ideas, enlarging our pedagogical imaginations and strengthening out scholarly work (p. 20).... What matters is not just what the disciplines can do for the SoTL nor even what the SoTL can give back to the disciplines in return. What matters in the end is whether through our participation in this new trading zone, students' understanding is deepened, their minds and characters strengthened, and their lives and communities enriched (p. 21).

In summary, the focus of my research was two-fold— an examination of the process of the SoTL by constantly reflecting on the process and outcomes of teaching and learning, while identifying if there is any benefit to more readily and more holistically including the practical knowledge and experiences of classroom teachers in teacher education preparation, professional development, and training, and, if there is benefit, what can be done by educators to contribute to this inclusion. Using the SoTL and theoretical concepts of TPK, Community of Practice, and

constructivism, my project theorized and synthesized this knowledge which thus far has been vague and unspoken.

TPK is the knowledge a teacher has at his/her disposal; however, its awareness is comparatively unfamiliar and premature in educators' professional learning. Community Practice is the sharing of knowledge by individuals of a common interest or craft. And although they specialize in pedagogy, teacher education preparation programs put much energy into theory, at the expense of preparing teachers for the daily realities of the classroom.

Teacher preparation continues to be theoretical and provided by people who have not been in the classroom for some time (Schorr, 2013). Currently, a complex wealth of knowledge exists but we have no way to transfer that knowledge and those untapped resources to teacher education preparation. By integrating all of these theoretical frameworks and the study's introduction, the research questions emerged as:

- RQ1: What are the important lessons you have learned about teaching from other teachers?
- RQ2: How would you weigh the balance of the importance of the what you learned from teacher education programs and other colleagues?
- RQ3: What specific area(s) have you struggled with that were addressed by colleagues?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative methodology to investigate what, if any, knowledge is gained from colleagues once new teachers begin the teaching practice once they transition from their teacher education preparation program to the teaching practice. The researcher used a grounded theory approach that involved the collection and analysis of data where the theory was “grounded” in data, and the analysis and development of theories happen *after* the data was collected. The researcher collected data through a focus group interview (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). The process for qualitative research was emergent. Due to the shifting of processes after the researcher had entered the field and begun data collection, the initial plan for research could not be predetermined definitively (Creswell, 2014).

### **Methods**

The goal of the grounded theory approach was to generate theories that explained the workings of some aspect of the world. This research followed a constant comparison analysis method and involved developing a theory that emerged from and was linked to the reality that the theory was intended to explain. The intent of the reality of the theory was to explain the value of including the practical knowledge and experiences of teachers of increasingly diverse population in teacher education preparation.

The field of the SoTL draws on a variety of methodological traditions. SoTL research includes but is not limited to reflection and analysis, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and surveys (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000). Page and Connell (2014) cited participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups as the three most common qualitative research data collection methods (p. 458).

A focus group interview was the main data collection for this research. The researcher conducted a focus group interview because she suspected the subjects might be more expressive if they were a part of a group than if they were the target of a solo interview (Yin, 2010, p. 142). The groups were “focused” because individuals were gathered who had some common experiences or presumably shares common views (Yin, 2010, p. 141). Examples of the teachers participating in the focus group interview were those whose experiences are typically absent from instructional discourse including: educators who were teaching students who were not performing at the grade level they were assigned; teaching students who were not ready to learn or receive instruction; teaching students who were being raised by caregivers other than their parents: teaching students from families who were living on the breadline (Kerridge, 2010).

Common views of teaching are that teaching is the act of transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the student and that teaching is the process of creating situations to allow students to interact with the material and the understandings that emanate from their home communities to be able to construct knowledge. This research was informed by constructivism and aligned with the latter view. Students do not learn in a passive manner; when they play an active role, they connect their prior knowledge and experiences with new information (Santrock as cited by Johnson, 2015, pp. 1-2).

The researcher facilitated the focus group. To promote open conversation about the topics, the group was conducted in the researcher’s home, as the location was not related to school, teaching, or children. The researcher ensured the venue was comfortable, accessible, inclusive, and neutral for the participants by guaranteeing it accommodated individuals with children, sensory deficits and sensory sensitivities, dietary restrictions and allergies, non-traditional gender identities, and different age and ethnic groups. The focus group interview

participants were asked open-ended questions (Yin, 2010, p. 142) as the participants were allowed freedom to explore initial replies in more depth. The focus group interview involved few, unstructured questions with the intention of eliciting views and opinions of the participants (Creswell, 2014, p. 190).

### **Sampling Procedures**

All participants in this study were teachers who explored integrating the practical knowledge and experiences of classroom teachers into teacher education preparation. Selected teachers were notified of research by a flyer provided to them by the researcher. To promote participation, the researcher followed up with potential participants by email, in-person visits, text messages, and letters to those who passed the screening and agreed to participate in the research. The population was elementary school teachers and the sample consisted of five elementary school teachers with three or more years of teaching experience and who were teaching in their area of certification and who were engaged in teaching.

Participants were part of a focus group interview that lasted 127 minutes. The population of a study is a group of individuals taken from the general society with a universal characteristic and a sample is the group of subjects involved in the study. Public school teachers were the sample of this study that used purposeful sampling, a non-probability sample in which participants are chosen based on characteristics and research objectives (Emmel, 2013). This sampling method is based on informational rather than statistical considerations to maximize data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Purposeful sampling “maximizes the researcher’s ability to identify emerging themes that take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 82).

The ideal study would include every member of the teaching population; however, it is impossible to collect data from every teacher. For purposes of this study, a sample unit of public-school teachers gave the researcher a manageable and representative subset of the population (Shuttleworth & Wilson, 2008).

Thirty-nine elementary school teachers were initially screened for the focus group, 25 elementary public-school teachers met the qualifications, seven initially agreed to participate and five participated in the focus group interview.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected during May 2019. Transcription was immediately followed by the researcher's analyzing the collected data using Atlas.ti software. Qualitative research studies provided the researcher with details about human behavior, emotions, and personality characteristics that quantitative studies could not match. Qualitative research is usually concerned with meaning and how people make sense of the world and experience events from their perspective (Sutton & Austin, 2015, pp. 226). Probing questions were asked to help the researcher think more deeply about the issue at hand. The focus group interview protocol included:

1. Tell me about yourself, teacher preparation route, kinds of students you teach and teaching experience.
2. Thinking about teacher education preparation and your teaching practice. What differences exist between preparation and daily teaching practice?
  - a. student teaching experience and daily teaching practice?
  - b. theory classes and daily teaching practice?
  - c. practicum classes to daily teaching practice?

3. Weighing the knowledge you gained from teacher education preparation and learning from colleagues, which has the more value?
4. Reflect on everything we talked about is there anything else you want me to know as it relates to your teacher preparation and teaching practice?

After screening 39 available teachers, the 27 teachers who met screening criteria were informed of the purpose of the study and asked to participate in the focus group interview. Seven agreed to participate. A reminder text followed up by a personal message with details about location, date, and time were sent to teachers who agreed to participate. The focus group interview was comprised of five teachers.

According to Hays and Singh (2012), qualitative data collection is time intensive (p. 292). Researchers are likely to gain an understanding using interviews and observations. Therefore, the research tools are detailed to gain as much knowledge and understanding as possible. Since a group of more than 10 participants could potentially be hard to control, the number of participants was limited to between 5 and 10 (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 6).

During the data collection process, all participants in the study were treated according to the ethical procedures of the Louisiana State University Institutional Research Board. Participants were not identified by name in the data presentation process but rather were identified using an anonymous name. Detailed information about participants such as complete name and contact information remained with the researcher. Transcripts of the focus group interview remained with the researcher and were kept in a secure location.

Participants were informed and reminded that participation in the focus group was not an evaluation, that it was to provide information to help improve teacher education preparation, and

therefore would not be used for evaluative purposes. Data collected was combined with responses of other participants for reporting purposes and to protect the identity of the participants. The data collection process took place with public school teachers.

Participants entered the research location eagerly and enthusiastically. They were greeted as they entered the designated location and were shown the area where the focus group interview would take place. Participants were encouraged to engage in light conversation to build rapport as they arrived and were shown the locations of available restrooms; conversation and enthusiasm about the relevance of the research topic was heard. All participants were asked to share background information such as employment status, career length, and teacher preparation route once the digital recording device was enabled and the focus group interview commenced.

As participants engaged in conversation; they were made aware of the hamburger bar provided for them. Before activating the digital recording devices, the researcher asked participants to silence any phones or electronic devices and speak clearly one at a time, in an effort to protect the preservation of the data.

The researcher opted to use a digital recorder over the use of field notes exclusively, because of the advantage of being able to preserve the entire verbiage of the interview for transcription and analysis at a later time. The most common method of recording data is the use of a digital recorder. Digital recorders work with software developed for sound which allows the user to “jump over” certain information and get directly to a specific point or excerpt (Heritage, 1984; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). The use of the digital recorder allowed more versatile retrieval and examination of the data. Using a digital recorder, I was able to back up and store files without risk of damage, thus protecting the integrity of the recorded files, while ensuring access

to unlimited replay. A backup recorder and extra batteries were available in the event of equipment malfunctions. At the end of consented recordings, the devices were disabled.

In the beginning and periodically during the data collection process the researcher reminded participants to state their name before speaking and not interrupt as others are speaking. The researcher attempted to persuade the participants to articulate their experiences and opinions with minimal direction (Yin, 2010, p. 141).

Throughout the duration of the focus group interview refreshments that can be eaten quietly were available for participants. A hamburger bar containing homemade hamburgers, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and onion tray was provided. Mayonnaise, mustard, and ketchup was available for participants who desired it. Country Time lemonade with added freshly squeezed lemons, along with water, sodas, and crinkle cut fries were also provided for participants. The participants fixed themselves a plate of food and poured a beverage before the focus group began. Then they were guided to the dining room where the focus group interview was conducted. The focus group interview was conducted in my home because the location that was conducive to audio recording.

The focus group interview protocol along with two copies of the consent form were placed at each seat. The researcher sketched a map of where everyone was sitting and assured everyone was comfortable. The researcher began by reading aloud the statement of confidentiality and consent as the group read silently and verified that there are no objections to participation in the focus group interview. Participants were informed about the proposed research in language that they understood. Participants were asked to review the consent form carefully and to ask questions. None of the participants expressed concerns that the researcher needed to be addressed.

Printed on the consent forms were: the purpose of the research; expectations of the participants; any applicable risks and benefits; that participation was voluntary and individuals could withdraw at any time; confidentiality was protected; and the name and contact information of the researcher to direct any questions or research related concerns. Participants were not pressured to sign consent forms (Creswell, 2014, p. 97).

Participation in the study was voluntary as explained in the instructions for consent and all participants gave consent. At the end of the session, the researcher made notes about how the session went; there were no problems encountered during the focus group discussion. The researcher collected one of the two copies of the consent form and the other copy remained with the participant. The focus group recording was replayed to ensure the respondents were speaking into the microphone in a loud and clearly audible voice. The participants were thanked for their time and told that the discussion had been most valuable.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis began with written transcriptions. The data was analyzed by grouping respondents' answers to each question. Information was developed by labeling each group of answers. The researcher read and reread the responses from participants and identified common themes of the discussion questions. During data analysis the research questions were at the forefront, so the researcher did not lose focus while working with the data. The data drove the presentation and was organized around the identified research questions.

Data was analyzed and reviewed to locate common themes that emerged from the focus group interview. Following data collection and transcription the researcher looked for trends in the data. To identify trends the researcher looked for statements that were common across

research participants. According to Muchemwa (2016), hearing a statement from just one participant is an anecdote; from two, a coincidence; and hearing it from three makes it a trend (p. 88).

The purpose of analyzing data from the focus group interview was to capture the intended meaning of the experiences of participants and to share the findings so they may be used (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 79). Data from this study was used to show how practical knowledge and experiences of classroom teachers can be more holistically included in teacher education preparation, professional development, and training. Due to its possible usefulness later, impressions of the data were transcribed by the researcher for thorough analysis.

The data collected was not analyzed with statistical techniques. Any data that did not add value or meaning or contained biased information was not given consideration. Transcripts were returned to participants to review for accuracy. Data was analyzed to identify common patterns, generalizations, or theories from themes or categories. Generalizations and theories will be posed using past literature and past experiences (Powell & Renner, 2003).

Patterns or themes such as ideas, concepts, behaviors, interactions, incidents terminology, and phrases used were identified prior to being organized into coherent categories that condensed and brought meaning to the data (Powell & Renner, 2003, p. 5). The researcher created and used abbreviated codes that were entered into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data coding system. The researcher identified additional themes that served as subcategories. The researcher was explicit about what was included as well as any exclusions in the category (Powell & Renner, 2003, pp. 2-12).

Transcripts were used because this was the researcher's first time analyzing data from a focus group interview and because the data was a part of a dissertation.

Acknowledgement of personal and methodological inclinations could possibly lead to useful thoughts about analysis (Yin, 2011, p. 175). Throughout the study, the researcher kept a journal to capture personal feelings and reflections on research work (Yin, 2011, p. 175). The entries were not long nor were they written in complete sentences or were grammatically correct. As the main research instrument, unwanted biases may be revealed through introspections and insights into the researcher's reactions or feelings regarding fieldwork (Yin, 2011, p. 175).

Elementary school teachers were the primary focus of this study because, according to Gatens (2015), traditional elementary schools educate students from kindergarten to fifth grade. It is during those years when children transform from "nonacademic" and highly needy students into readers and writers with developing independence skills. In this setting, students transform from learning to read to reading to learn. Elementary school paves the academic road for most students. For organizational purposes, most school districts group children of these grade levels together in a single building for all the grades.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions held by general education elementary school teachers about the preparation they received and their everyday teaching practice. A qualitative methods approach was used to complete this study. The qualitative method design was implemented by conducting a focus group interview with general education elementary school teachers with three or more years of teaching experience. Once gathered the teacher's perceptions of teacher education preparation results were used to inform potential restructuring of district-based new teacher induction programs. The primary findings of my research support existing literature (Snow & Hemel, 2008, p. 237, 254) that the data upon which current best practices research has been normed does not fully reflect the racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse population that the teachers in my study served. The contents of this section include demographic information about the participants, qualitative procedures, research questions, and focus group interview protocol results.

### **Demographics of General Education Elementary School Teachers**

Five general education elementary school teachers participated in the focus 127-minute group interview. Thirty-nine teachers were initially screened for meeting the criteria. Of the 39 teachers initially screened 27 teachers met the qualification criteria for the study. The qualification criteria for the study were to have at least three years of teaching experience and to be currently teaching in certification area. Of the 27 qualified teachers, seven general education teachers agreed to participate in the focus group interview; of the seven teachers who agreed to participate five teachers were present for the focus group interview. Each participant was teaching in their certification area and had at least three years of teaching experience.

Participants consisted of two female teachers who received certification through a traditional university-based teacher education preparation program and three female teachers who received certification through an alternative route to teacher education. An alternative route to teacher preparation allows persons to enter the teaching profession without completing a traditional four- or five-year university-based program (Conrad, & Serlin, 2005). Certification through traditional university-based teacher education preparation programs is positioned within discipline-specific departments (elementary, middle, high, special education) that prepare undergraduate candidates to teach in kindergarten and K-12 schools (Anderson, 2016).

The teaching experiences of participants ranged from five to thirty years. Four of the participants identified their race as African American and one participant identified as Caucasian. All participants reported teaching a population of economically disadvantaged students predominantly of either African American race being raised solely by a mother or Hispanic race; most of the students were part of an extended household that included cousins, uncles, and friends. All five of the participants were teaching in their certification areas at the time of the focus group interview and all held certifications in elementary grades/elementary education.

### **Teacher Profiles**

I created teacher profiles that include fictitious names, gender, number of years teaching, school demographics, race, and a quote from their interview that best described their disposition.

Ms. Askins was a Caucasian female kindergarten teacher with five years of teaching experience. She taught all subjects in an elementary school that comprised a student population described as 68% African American, 25% Hispanic, 5 % Caucasian and 2% other. She completed a traditional teacher education preparation program. She said:

Mom talked me into becoming a teacher, mom and grandma were teachers. I went into elementary education at Teacher Preparation University, I regret that I do not have anything to fall back on in case I do want to do something else. I love the kids. Feels like a big family. What I don't like, I don't get/feel appreciated. It sucks when these kids do something awesome and nobody seems to care because it is not what they are looking for. I don't need attention, but still people are coming and hounding me and making it seem like I am not doing a good job. They are just not seeing everything I'm doing for them and how much they're [kids] are putting into it. My kids are reading so well this year. I give them these books to take home they get these stickers when they finish the book. They are all reading at a first-grade level.

Ms. Browning was a female African American teacher with ten years teaching experience. She completed an alternative route to teacher certification program. She taught English and social studies to third-grade students in an elementary school that comprised of a student population described as 68% African American, 25% Hispanic, 5 % Caucasian and 2 % other. Ms. Browning reflected:

We did an activity at the beginning of the year and we had the kids do it again at the end just to see how they have grown. We had to write, do a self-portrait... as we were pulling up the papers from the past, we came across the paper of a student that attended the school earlier in the year, but has since dropped. That afternoon a teacher saw the mom at the store, that's where the mom works, she said two weeks ago the young man got put out of school and he'll be back at our school next year. So, people they come, and they go quite often.

Ms. Shirlene was a female African American teacher with five years teaching experience who completed an alternative route to teacher certification program. She taught social studies and math to third graders in an elementary school comprised of a student population described as 68% African American, 25% Hispanic, 5 % Caucasian and 2% other. She shared:

My teaching experience has been eye-opening because prior to being a teacher I did not understand why people put their children in private schools. I really did not. And now being in public schools I understand. Because I knew some people who had their kids in private schools who could not afford it. They were scraping that tuition together. I was like what's the issue. But now I get it. My very first year of teaching a father came to school to beat me up and the police had to be called so that's the type of, not all our parents, but that's the type of stuff that goes on, because his son got suspended. We had that happen at dismissal.

Ms. Sherman was a female African American teacher with 30 years of teaching experience. She taught all subjects in an elementary school with a student population described as 99% African American and 1% Caucasian. She completed a traditional teacher education preparation program. Ms. Sherman shared:

I learned how to do it by observing the child. I learned what they liked, what they didn't like, who were their friends. I knew who to pair them with, who not to pair them with. It became a routine for me to observe them. I gave them things to do to see if they could do them and could they do them well in a group. I knew who did not work well in a group.

Ms. Valley was a female African American who taught math and English to third- grade students in a school with a student population comprised of a student population described as 68% African American, 25% Hispanic, 5% Caucasian and 2% other. She completed an alternative route to teacher certification program. She remembered:

I came into the climate the school district is in, heavily testing. I feel I never got the experience to be like that kindergarten teacher to build that happy-go-lucky relationship. Because I was always so forced to just say we need *basic*, we need *mastery*, we need *advanced*. So, you can't be nice trying to get mastery, you got to be this unfun just dry teacher. When I wanted to teach, I thought I would be [makes happy sounds] and I did when I started out teaching sixth grade, my kids loved me. It was not until I came to *All about the Students School District* and it was just like OMG. All they care about is a score. Bump if a kid learns bump if mom is not at home, we just want a score. What good is a score if you are not reaching the whole child.

In summary, people have various reasons why they chose to become a teacher. The perceptions and comments shared by participants varied greatly. Each had its relevance, however, and was the teacher's truth.

Because of the pressure to demonstrate adequate growth, accountability plays a major part in the teaching practice. Highly effective evaluation ratings, performance pay, and stipends all have accountability components as part of their qualifying criteria. Consequently, teacher education preparation does not give much attention to testing, results, and accountability. According to Sparks (2019), schools with a transient student body do not perform as well as schools with a stable student body. Common causes of student mobility are residential moves related to parents' jobs or other financial instability (Sparks, 2019), both of which are out of student control. Some students move to multiple schools within an academic year. Having a transient population poses some challenges for teachers (Carroll, 2015, p. 4). Some teachers find learning by trial and error helpful, which is not an option in teacher education preparation because aspiring teachers are usually placed in an ideal situation. Some teachers believe that they should enter the teaching practice with exposure to some of the challenging components they are likely to encounter in teaching.

### **Qualitative Procedures**

To investigate teachers' perceptions about their teacher education preparation, data was collected from a focus group interview that was moderated by the researcher. The focus group interview responses were transcribed by the researcher and inserted into Atlas.ti software for coding and to assist with analysis. The transcript was initially analyzed by the researcher for common themes, trends, and phrases that emerged from the focus group interview. The remainder of this section discusses the qualitative findings of the research questions.

## Codes and Data

I used Alltride-Sterling's (2001) method of Thematic Networks to merge codes and to form an overarching category. I considered the basic codes and how they interacted, which lead to different themes. I then sorted those themes into what Alltride-Sterling (2001) referred to as organizing themes. The basic themes that emerged as organizing themes were: (a) working family, (b) teacher stories, (c) primary caregiver/provider, (d) recommendations to improve teacher education preparation, (e) route, (f) preparation versus practice, (g) theory versus practice, (h) feeling unprepared, (i) issues with the organization/various departments, (j) daily practice, (k) preparation, (l) school performance, (m) transient area, (n) ethnic diversity (o) relationships/respect, (p) practicum classes versus practice, (q) disconnect between adults at the school level, (r) economically disadvantaged, (s) TPK, (t) family dynamic, (u) learning gained from colleagues, and (v) balance between preparation and practice. I then considered how those codes interacted, which helped to merge the codes to form global themes. The organizing themes that then evolved from the basic themes were: (a) teacher stories, (b) teacher education preparation, (c) theory versus practice, (d) daily practice, (e) recommendations to improve teacher education preparation, (f) preparation route, (g) preparation versus practice, (h) relationships, and (i) practicum classes versus practice. Lastly, the global themes emerged as: (a) teacher stories, (b) recommendations to improve teacher education preparation programs, (c) preparation route, (d) preparation versus practice, (e) relationships, (f) practicum classes versus practice, and (g) balance between preparation and practice.

Prior to my study based on the existing literature and my experience as a pre-service teacher and then a practicing teacher, the codes I expected to be most prevalent were: (a) family/household dynamic, (b) theory versus practice, (c) preparation,

(d) primary caregiver, (e) diverse student population, (f) transient area, (g) economically disadvantaged, and (h) diverse student population. The codes that I expected to emerge but did not surface in any prominent way were: (a) family/household dynamic, (b) primary caregiver, (c) diverse student population, (d) transient area, and (e) economically disadvantaged.

The global themes were the codes that were most surprising. The global themes were (a) teacher education preparation, (b) misleading preparation experiences, (c) learning from (d) colleagues, (e) weighing the balance of knowledge gained from teacher education preparation versus learning from colleagues, and (f) struggles addressed by colleagues. They are reflected in the headings for the following sections and the content of each section.

### **Perceptions of Elementary School Teachers**

Teacher perceptions explored in this study were teacher education preparation, practice, and weighing the value of knowledge gained teacher education preparation with learning from colleagues. Data analysis details were discussed in the research methods section of this study. The researcher used Atlas.ti software to analyze and organize qualitative data from the focus group interview and followed interview protocol. The researcher grouped data according to participants' responses based on their major themes and commonalities.

Teacher perceptions of their preparation and practice were addressed through specific focus group interview items that were analyzed based on responses. Participants made many comments about the teacher preparation that they received. Some common themes emerged among the responses given by teachers who received their certification through a traditional university-based teacher education preparation program and teachers who completed an

alternative route to teacher certification. The most common response from both groups referenced wanting to be in the classroom more during preparation.

Teachers seemed open about their thoughts and feelings concerning the teacher education preparation received. Teachers who completed certification through a traditional university-based teacher education preparation program participated in what was known as student teaching. The student teaching experience is designed to give the aspiring teacher a full-time internship practicing under the supervision and leadership of a cooperating teacher. Teachers who received certification through an alternative route to teacher certification program reported that they did not have a student teaching experience as a part of their preparation. Teachers repeatedly expressed the desire for more time in the classroom prior to beginning teaching on their own. Ms. Sherman shared:

Teacher education preparation should have provided me with more opportunities to be in the classroom prior to beginning my student teaching experience. I completed student teaching but still did not feel ready. And simply because my supervising teacher was still in control. I was not in control and the few times she gave me control; I still was not in control because she was still there, so the kids behaved. They did exactly what she said and expected. That was not enough.

What Ms. Sherman desired was not from a professor, but the actual structure of the program. She wanted control. Her university start dates were after the public-school start dates so when Ms. Sherman began her student teaching experience, the supervising teacher had spent at least two weeks with the class; therefore, the supervising teacher had introduced and established her expectations and procedures with the students and established momentum for the class. Ms. Sherman wanted to be in the classroom on the first day the students entered and to have students implement *her* expectations and procedures, to do things her way. Traditional student teacher experiences are designed to include the supervising teacher mentoring the student teacher while providing the student teacher with sound advice about the teaching practice— what

works and what does not and explaining why. Because of the importance and frequency of these exchanges, it is essential that the supervising teacher possesses the skills and abilities to mentor an adult, has competence in conducting observation and providing feedback, holding professional discussions, and working collaboratively.

Consideration should be given to coordinating the student teaching experience to with the elementary school calendar, not the teacher education preparation program calendar. In K-12 classrooms, especially in the elementary grades, the first days of the new school year challenge teachers to establish routines and acclimate students to classroom and school expectations. Thus, it is important to be there from day one and demands more intensive teacher preparation. Attempts have been made to set teacher education preparation reform in motion but have met with roadblocks. In some cases, student teaching experiences have lengthened, but not much has changed when it comes to the quality of what is happening in the process (Sawchuk, 2013). Relative to the restructuring of teacher education preparation programs, participants feel it would be helpful to include in the program building relationships and practical experience and exposure to the daily challenges of teaching students of diverse learning styles and backgrounds. Several of my participants commented teachers would be better prepared if they entered the profession already having had exposure to the challenging components of teaching.

Ms. Askins expressed:

I spent nine semesters at Teacher Preparation University doing all of the courses in elementary education. And even the math classes, I took three elementary math classes. I spent one and a half years in math. It does not teach math the way common core teaches it. It's like the way we learned. I'm like why are we still learning that way when common core is being used everywhere. Student teaching was at Teacher Preparation Laboratory School. I had no idea what was going on. I spent nine semesters for nothing. Student loans and all that stuff. Did not learn anything.

The majority of teacher education preparation curriculum is embedded in theory and not in actual classroom realities. Therefore, for teachers to be ready for the classroom, they need more time and exposure in clinical settings where they are immersed in school environments. Doing so would give aspiring teachers a clearer idea of school culture, the expectations, and how to navigate both more easily. As these participant quotes argued, the coursework required during teacher preparation, rather traditional or alternative route, is seemingly not in alignment with the experiences of teachers who serve the populations that comprise the 21<sup>st</sup> century student demographic. For example, the student teaching calendar is misaligned with the school calendar and student teaching experiences do not parallel the practical experiences of teachers.

### **Alternative Route to Certification and Traditional Certification**

Prior to assigning participants to carry out full teaching responsibilities, aspiring teachers need relevant coursework and sufficient training to be successful. Many alternative routes to teacher certification programs do not require teachers to complete student teaching. Thus, a teacher's first day in the classroom is the aspiring teacher's first day teaching, and a teacher must be prepared to take the lead and govern the class with minimal training. Experiences afforded to teacher education preparation students differ; though the same route may be pursued, each has its method. For example, two of the three teachers who completed an alternative route to teacher certification thought their experiences prior to accepting a teaching assignment were less than ideal. They expressed that they had little exposure during their preparation, and it was not representative of what they experienced daily during teaching.

Ms. Valley shared:

In my alternative route to teacher certification program we did not have any time in the classroom prior to being thrown in there once hired to teach. We did not have a student

teaching experience. We were the teacher that first year. After two months of starting the program we were in the classroom teaching.

Teachers who pursue an alternative route to certification do not have student teaching as a component to their program. As a result, they start teaching with less experience than teachers who pursued certification through a traditional university-based teacher education preparation program. It is imperative to provide aspiring teachers with adequate and applicable training and coursework prior to assigning them to a teaching job.

Ms. Bowman thought differently about her preparation than the other participants: “During my alternative certification program, when I would go to class, they would just pour into me. They showed me how to do a reading group.” Although both Ms. Bowman and Ms. Valley completed alternative routes to teacher certification program, they did not have the same experiences.

One of the critical areas for all teacher education preparation programs is to be intentional in the pre-service teacher experience. The supervising teachers may need more direction on preparation to provide consistency to teacher education preparation experiences. Areas of direction may include collaboration, mentoring, expectations, roles and responsibilities of the student teacher and the supervising teacher. Although Ms. Bowman and Ms. Valley completed alternative routes to teacher education preparation programs, they yielded contrasting results. An explanation of this difference for the two teachers in discussion is they completed two different alternative routes to certification teacher education programs; one program was completed 100% online while the other had brick and mortar components. Preparation experiences were associated with which teacher education preparation program was pursued. It is important to note that the present findings relied solely on teachers’ perceptions of their experiences.

## Preparation Experiences

According to Arthur Levine (2006), President of Teachers College, more than 60% of teachers surveyed report that their teacher education preparation and training did not adequately provide them with the necessary skill set for their work in the classroom. Teachers expressed how they thought the daily teaching practice was not how it was presented during student teaching and preparation. Ms. Sherman said:

You are still thinking you have 14 kids with a second person in the classroom. Our mindset is still in this perfect little class all packaged up that the supervising teacher has already gotten started, 99% of the time they are going to send you to a teacher who already has it together, teacher education preparation programs want to present the ideal situation in motion. But when they give you your teaching assignment you do not have a neatly wrapped package.

Aspiring teachers often prepare for teaching in classrooms with a low number of students. The supervising teacher is usually chosen based on how she presents her teaching and her students. Participants expressed that during student teaching, in addition to having small class sizes, the supervising teacher was always in the classroom with the student teacher. In practice, however, a teacher is not guaranteed to have such a small class size unless it is part of a special class or a non-traditional teaching assignment such as gifted, talented, or interventionist, to name a few situations; nor does the teacher usually have a second person present.

Educators often use “ideal world” models in an attempt to explain concepts, however, the problem with that is when an individual comes to the realization that it does not match up to the real world, they may question the value of the model [student teaching]. Having another experienced teacher in the room is helpful and having one who has their class in order is great, but it does not afford the aspiring teacher the opportunity to see the nuts-and-bolts activity of how to get there. It is priceless to be able to witness a colleague’s thought processes in motion and to have a relationship where one is free to get into each other's space and collaborate, while

feeling free to ask questions and get clarity along the way. Many teachers described that they did not get those experiences from their pre-service teaching and that they gained the understanding from colleagues.

### **Learning from Colleagues**

This study has shown that observation, collaboration, and conversation experiences provide teachers with opportunities to learn by seeing a fellow teacher in action (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 1). The teachers in this study thought they could and did learn from the practical experiences of their colleagues. They desired more opportunities to learn from each other through observation, conversation, and collaboration. Ms. Askins shared:

Coming in I got to observe every kindergarten teacher and some first-grade teachers. It is interesting seeing all the learning and different teaching styles. I found a teacher I could see myself teaching like. She's been meaningful to me ever since. Everything I learned really has come from her.

Learning from colleagues is important and affords the teacher experiences and confidence to do something different to experience something different in the classroom. Ms. Askins described the usefulness of being able to observe colleagues and was able to see good teaching in practice. She found a model teacher who continued to be a great resource to her. Collaboration has a positive impact on teachers as they draw support from each other, and they contribute naturally to improve the school and each other.

The following section outlines perceptions of teachers relating to knowledge gained from colleagues and knowledge gained from experiences with their teacher education preparation program.

## **Weighing the Value of the Knowledge Gained in Teacher Education Preparation with Learning from Colleagues**

There is uncertainty about the extent to which students use their university learning as a part of their daily jobs. Teacher education preparation programs are expected to provide aspiring educators with the tools, mentors, and hands-on experience they will need once they begin teaching. However, there are some lessons that cannot be learned in a classroom. That brings us to the position that there is more value in the knowledge gained from observing, interacting and collaborating with colleagues than the knowledge gained from teacher preparation programs. Much can be learned from colleagues and that learning can be used in professional and personal life. Learning from our colleagues is one of the positive aspects of working with others.

Ms. Browning said:

Learning gained from colleagues is invaluable. Once I got to school and I had the experts here, my colleagues, for example, showing me how to fully conduct a small group, I was able to take what they [teacher education preparation] gave me and conceptualize how it is really going to work, that was invaluable.

Through collaboration, interaction, and observation of colleagues, teachers learned that caring for basic needs, such as hungry students and students coming to school with shoes that do not fit, helps prepare a student to receive what you are giving, instruction. These lessons were not a part of their teacher education preparation but rather are knowledge gained from colleagues. Teachers expressed some knowledge cannot be gained from a program; it can only be gained from experiences of their own or those of a colleague. Teachers learned important lessons about areas with which they struggled. For example, behavior management, taking care of basic needs, and taking advantage of teachable moments were areas with which they struggled and were not a part of their teacher education preparation program experience.

## Struggles Addressed by Colleagues

Sharing pain and possibilities with colleagues is one way to gain knowledge. Teachers produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences, as supported by the Constructivist theory. Teachers identified behavior management, being prepared to meet basic student needs, and taking advantage of teachable moments as areas with which, they struggled and that were addressed by a colleague. Ms. Bowman reflected:

I went into the classroom of the teacher across the hall from me who had complete control, now mind me mine were not crazy out of control but they were talkers, they like to get out of their seat a lot and while they were not very disrespectful, they were kind of doing their own thing. She wasn't the type of teacher to say let me show you this, I just harassed her until she liked me, and I said what are you doing. I just needed some help and she was the one I saw had it together and I was gonna come every day until she was going to say get out of here. I said what's going on, what are you doing, how do you do this, how do you do that, so I was thankful for that first year because I learned a lot from her. Not only in management but how she went about doing things.

It is important that students have their basic needs met prior to attempting to receive instruction. Ms. Bowman shared an example of Learner-Centered pedagogy with a student encounter when she deemed it important to address a student's basic needs when she should have been solely *teaching*: "'My shoe rubbing against my toe and I don't have on socks.' 'Come here', putting band-aid on the toe all while teaching. I'm trying to take care of these basic needs, but they [basic needs] are not my focus.'" In this example of Learner-Centered pedagogy, the teacher learned from her colleague a simple gesture that made a difference in managing her classroom. The student with the shoe rubbing his toe was more comfortable and could learn without the distraction of discomfort, and he was less likely to be a classroom distraction.

Effective teachers continuously assess students' actions and interactions and

step in whenever an opportunity to link teaching to real world events is presented. Those teachable moments allow teachers to guide students to view the situation from another perspective. Ms. Bowman recalled this teachable moment:

Just after the government shutdown, I was teaching social studies. One of my students said, 'Ms. Bowman you know you are not going to get your food stamps.' So, I was trying to figure out how I would answer that. I said, 'Why?' The student said, "The government shutdown, you not going to get your food stamps right now." I was like these kids already know about these kinds of things that's happening. Like you said Ms. Atkins, you have kids that came here by crossing the border in a caravan. I did not realize anybody made it here that way. There the things that are happening in the world are reaching our classrooms. I learned early from a teacher to always take advantage of teachable moments. So, I said 'I heard about the government shutdown, but I don't get food stamps.'" They all gasped. 'You don't get food stamps; how do you eat?' But I took that as an opportunity to teach because they don't know. You know what I mean. I said, 'I spend money at the store, and I buy the food I need.' They said, 'That's a waste of money.' I was like, 'No, that's how it is supposed to be.' So, if you are looking at these kids, the mindset that they have goes all the way back as well. Government assistance is something they think should be in place. But you can see the wheels turning. She spends money at the store. They looked at me like 'she stupid'.

Taking a moment when a student's interest or action guides the teacher to another topic is valuable. These moments occur because of a conversation or situation that brings curiosity or presents a learning opportunity. Teachable moments happen when and where the time is right. They cannot be forced. Teachable moments provide learners with meaningful contexts to expand upon a topic they are learning. Teachable moments extend back-and-forth exchanges and are a way to have open conversations with students and find out what they are thinking.

According to Frankenberg & Debray (2011), there are two fundamental strategies to prepare teachers to be successful in racially and ethnically diverse schools. These fundamental strategies are to embed lessons on teaching diverse students into courses on teaching content and to provide practice and experiences that take place in racially and ethnically diverse schools and communities (p. 259). In Ms. Valley's perspective, teachers would rather be prepared to do difficult work. That way if they happen to land a job in a high performing school teaching

students who do not have the all the challenges of these students, they can handle it, rather than being prepared in a neatly packaged student environment and being unprepared to teach the diverse student populations that comprise the public-school demographic. As shared by Ms. Valley, “Prepare education majors for diverse populations, they will be able to handle whatever.”

The single most striking finding to emerge from the data was teachers expressed an overwhelming desire to have more time to learn from the experiences of expert teachers as a part of the teacher education preparation process. Teachers want to be in the classroom when students enter on day one and want more time in the classroom during their teacher education preparation program. Teachers desire to be able to implement their routines and procedures. It is fundamental to note that these findings substantiate previous findings in the literature as they relate to assimilation and accommodation and Communities of Practice. Assimilation and accommodation and Communities of Practice bring about learning. As supported by Piaget (1950), through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals gain new insight from their experiences (Joubish & Khurram, 2011). As a result of assimilation, new experiences are built into an already existing framework without altering that framework and cause a learner to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. The learner develops new outlooks, rethinks what were once misunderstandings, and examines what is important, resulting in a change in their perceptions. Accommodation, on the other hand, reframes the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Learners conceive a fashion in which the world operates (Bhattacharjee, 2015, p. 65-66). As indicated in findings, teachers report collaboration, i.e. Communities of Practice, plays an important role in contributing to new learning. I believe teachers are assimilated into the teaching culture. They learn from their colleagues and take on characteristics and practices of their colleagues and the environment.

They take in all the information from their surroundings through collaboration, interaction and observation of their peers and trust their colleagues are doing the right things. Teachers learn how to do what they do better through regular interaction.

### **Concluding Statements**

Based on the findings of this study, teachers expressed wanting more time in the classroom during teacher education preparation. Two teachers who completed an alternative route to teacher certification program shared that their teacher education preparation program did not allow for any time in the classroom prior to accepting a teaching position. Another thought her program ‘poured into her’ during her preparation.

Student teaching experiences are different from what the teacher experiences after accepting a teaching position. Teachers undergo student teaching in an ideal environment, one that is different from that in which they are likely to be assigned. Learning from and with colleagues through interactions, collaborations, and observations provides more valuable knowledge and experiences than through the teacher education preparation. Teachers identified behavior management, taking care of students’ basic needs, and maximizing teachable moments as struggles that their colleagues were instrumental in helping them address. Teachers wanted more practical classroom knowledge, however, they got it from their colleagues as opposed to their teacher education preparation program. Teachers valued the knowledge gained from observing, interacting, and collaborating with their peers, and appreciated benefiting from teachable moments based on the students’ diverse backgrounds. Little teacher education preparation deals with this valuable insight of the knowledge gained from observing, interacting and collaborating with their peers. Teachers thought they did not receive adequate training on

interacting with students from diverse backgrounds in their teacher education preparation program.

There are limitations to teacher preparation programs, however, teachers must know their students home environments and what is going on and be able to incorporate that into their teaching; standard approaches presented in teacher education preparation programs simply do not do that. Teacher education preparation should extend beyond the school so that prospective teachers can interact with families and learn about how their students live day-to-day and the learning resources they bring with them.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This section presented the findings and discussed the results of the study's research questions and the study's in-depth review of the literature and theoretical frameworks, and concluded with the recommendations for practice, such as restructuring teacher preparation programs for educational improvement and improving the teaching practice. Included is a discussion related to the findings of the study and implications for restructuring traditional and alternative route teacher education preparation programs to improve the experiences of teachers and better prepare them for the realities of the teaching practice.

Preservice teachers are not prepared to provide service for the full range of ethnically, racially, and economically diverse students that comprise the 21<sup>st</sup>-century student demographic. Lacking proper educational services, this increasingly diverse student population is at increased risks for poor quality of life outcomes that may include higher incarceration rates, dropping out of school, health disparities, and earning lower wages (Irwin, 2015). The U. S. Bureau of Justice (2003) reported improving schools and particularly pedagogical relationships between students and teachers will lead to improved graduation rates, which will lower crime rates and improve the nation's economy. Quality teaching will both save the nation dollars and saves students' futures.

The introduction of this study stated that the purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the seeming disconnect that exists between both teachers who completed certification through an alternative route and teachers who received traditional certification from a university-based teacher education preparation program, and the realities of the daily teaching practice. This disconnect is significant because schools and students evolve and change, however, the stories of the classroom teachers who are doing and experiencing what

works are not circulated or used in preparation; we have the stories, and they need to be used. Teachers face real issues and that reality can be easy to forget, even by those who are just a few steps removed from the classroom, i.e., the “experts.”

A focus group interview was the main data collection for this research. Focus group interviews were conducted because the researcher suspected the subjects might be more expressive if they were a part of a group than if they were the target of a solo interview (Yin, 2010, p. 142). The groups are “focused” because individuals were gathered who have had some common experiences or presumably share common views (Yin, 2010, p. 141).

The perceptions of teachers relative to the preparation they received, and their daily practice was the focus of this qualitative study. The investigation of these perceptions consisted of a focus group interview protocol relating to preparation received, daily practice, value of knowledge gained from teacher education preparation, and learning from colleagues. Teacher experiences related to preparation and practice were discussed.

### **Discussion**

The preliminary findings of this qualitative study suggested that teachers desire more time in the classroom during their teacher education training. Additionally, teachers want to have a more explicit connection between preparation and practice. Participants reported believing that the knowledge gained in their preparation did not have much value when compared to the knowledge gained from doing, observing, and interacting with colleagues. My participants thought that the time spent in their teacher education preparation was not representative of their experiences in their daily teaching practice. Teachers shared that in looking back on their preparation experiences they would have preferred to be prepared to do difficult work as opposed to a neatly packaged classroom. The participant’s rationale was that if teachers land a job in a

high performing school teaching students who do not have the challenges of today's increasingly diverse student population they can handle it, rather than be prepared in a neatly packaged student environment and situation and be unprepared to teach the diverse student populations that comprise the public-school demographic. Teachers want to be prepared to teach in low performing, under resourced schools, possibly teaching underachieving, at-risk students. I recognize highly resourced schools have challenges as well because of my experiences in high poverty and high performing schools.

In examining the perceptions of teachers related to the preparation received and their daily practice, the focus group interview protocol investigated preparation received, daily practice, value of knowledge gained from teacher education preparation, and learning from colleagues. Teacher experiences related to preparation and practice were discussed. This section includes a summary of findings, and implications for restructuring traditional and alternative route teacher education preparation programs.

I believe the results emphasize the validity of the theories described in the Review of Literature. These findings are in agreement with the SoTL, TPK, Constructivist Theory and Community of Practice theories and these findings compare well with the four theoretical frameworks detailed in the literature review. Evidence of the SoTL, TPK, Constructivist Theory, and Community of Practice are presented in the findings of this study.

Working with classroom teachers is critical. I argue that regarding teacher preparation and practical experiences, one cannot exist without the other. Both are necessary; however, teacher preparation and practical experiences need to be better balanced. This study showed that teacher education preparation programs must be supplemented by the lived experiences of the classroom. By not supplementing teacher education preparation experiences with

lived experiences of the classroom, teachers show up in classrooms ill prepared. Teachers need more engagement with people who are directly in the field to eliminate the imbalance between preparation and practical experiences. The scale is tipped toward what teachers get in teacher education preparation and not enough toward the lived experiences of teachers. Good things are happening in classrooms that are not happening in university classrooms.

de Vries & Beijaard (1999) and Marland (1998) were correct in their argument that TPK considers a better way of what matters in teaching because TPK emphasizes the knowledge and beliefs of teachers about their daily practice and teaching. Practical knowledge provides a foundation for teachers to describe and explain what they do in classrooms and why they do what they do. Practical knowledge helps teachers to predict how students might react, to decide the best response to their reaction, and to generate valid and workable teaching plans and modify them when necessary.

Returning to the research questions of this study, it is possible to state that teachers identified behavior management, implementing small group instruction, differentiation of lessons based on student needs, caring for the primary student needs, and taking advantage of teachable moments as important lessons learned about teaching from other teachers. To balance the weight of knowledge gained from teacher education preparation programs and knowledge gained from colleagues, participants consistently expressed the knowledge gained from colleagues had more value. Participants thought the preparation experience was misleading and was not representative of the daily teaching practice. This study serves as a method to understand what experiences practicing teachers would like incorporated into teacher education preparation programs based on their daily teaching practice.

RQ1: When weighing the balance of value of what you learned from your teacher education preparation program and other colleagues, which has the most value and why? I read the literature. Participants consistently expressed that the value of knowledge gained from colleagues has more value because their preparation experience was misleading; it was not representative of the daily teaching practice. Based on the literature and the focus group, and as the researcher and now an expert, I think teacher education preparation and practical experiences are necessary, however, the existence of one without the other throws off the balance necessary for effectiveness. Teacher preparation programs and alternative route and traditional route certification should have more components that incorporate the practical experiences of teachers. The teachers who are in the schools doing the work have worthy voices and stories and experiences to be heard and passed on. How do we assure that their experiences and knowledge are assimilated into universities and are widely circulated upon upcoming generations of teachers? I suggest that university professors be required to partner with mentor teachers who are current practicing teachers who cannot be removed from classroom teaching.

It is often assumed that students' backgrounds and parents' income, education, and family factors are the major factors that contribute to the differences that exist in levels of student achievement. Teacher education preparation and teachers' practice are as responsible as any outside factors that the student may bring into the learning environment. No blame is placed on teacher education preparation but rather teachers and their backgrounds are included as responsible also. Teacher preparation programs need to include more components with practical student diversity experiences as part of the curriculum. Practicing teachers have lived through and experienced today's schools and are equipped with relevant knowledge that is valuable. Because their experiences are not recorded, their stories not widely circulated, and this resource

is under-utilized in teacher preparation. I believe new teachers know their content areas but may not have the tools and skills and experiences to deal with home life and everyday struggles that often mask student learning. Having the experiences of teachers who know or have found what works as a part of teacher education will assist new teachers in working through situations that might be a part of their teaching practice.

RQ2: What specific areas have you struggled with that were addressed by colleagues? Participants identified behavior management, taking care of students' basic needs, and maximizing teachable moments as struggles that their colleagues were instrumental in helping them address. Based on the literature and my focus group educators must grow and change with the ever-changing model of student diversity. Teachers should have time embedded in their day and schedule for training, sharing, and collaborating about meeting the needs of the changing audience— students; administrators and those on the pathway to leadership or administration should not be left the handle those tasks of training. Regarding peer observations and learning to learn from colleagues, it is important that all parties involved— teachers, administrators and the school— understand that observations are for professional growth and student learning. Having an established culture that fosters, encourages, and promotes collegial transferring of knowledge and ideas establishes a climate of trust among teachers. Most people would agree that classroom management plays a critical role in teaching.

From my experiences and perspective, teachers cannot teach in a poorly managed classroom and students cannot learn in a poorly managed classroom. Chaos becomes the norm in a classroom without clearly taught expectations, rules, and the practice of routines and procedures. A well-managed classroom does not just happen; there are many moving pieces in its development. It is important for teacher candidates' calendars to be aligned to school district

calendars as aligning calendars will allow aspiring teacher to be in the classroom in the beginning so that they witness the inner actions of how things work, what works, and what does not.

A quality teacher is a caring teacher. I believe that a teacher has to reach the child before the teacher can teach the child. From my experiences, students are more ready to receive what the teacher has to offer when the student feels like the teacher cares about them as a person. The teacher also models the desired behavior for students. Teachers get so caught up in numbers, results, standards, curriculum, pacing, etc., and often the effect of a hug, smile, genuine compliment, or even a simple greeting is inadvertently overlooked.

RQ3: What important lessons about teaching have you learned from other teachers?

In reading the literature, participants said observation, collaboration, and conversation experiences provided them with opportunities to learn by seeing a fellow teacher in action, and they desired more opportunities to learn from each other. Regarding the literature and my participants, as the researcher and now an expert, I think there must be a balance to learning from colleagues. There is wisdom in practice and the practical experiences of colleagues are valuable as long as those experiences are kept in perspective and in balance with teacher education preparation.

I am not advocating abolition of all traditional teacher education preparation programs; I am suggesting critical steps that should be taken to account for future improvement. One option would be to move teacher education preparation programs out of universities and have teachers apprentice within schools or school districts. Moving teacher education preparation out of universities and having teachers apprentice within schools or school districts would provide

knowledge of the community and numerous opportunities for real world engagement. On the other hand, there is the potential for the stagnation of ideas.

Second, I suggest providing more general instructions in teacher education preparation programs with a greater focus on disciplinary and broad information. The advantage of this would be the emphasis on best practices from a broad and diverse community of educators, and thus alleviating group thinking and stagnant ideas. As outlined in the study, however, great ideas without the ability to translate them into existing circumstances translates to useless knowledge.

Finally, a third recommendation is to create an entity at the state level responsible for bridging the teacher education preparation and the teaching practice. The entity should not be university-based or for profit but one that translates the best practices of the field to the unique needs of the specific state setting.

The SoTL requires that the teacher carefully examine student learning to improve courses and programs. The teacher then uses this knowledge as a basis for sharing insights, experiences, and results that will be useful by providing a knowledge base for evaluation and growth. I used the SoTL because my research was inspired by my experiences of being a teaching-focused instructional leader; as a leader it is important to prepare and provide students with experiences that will contribute to professional growth. Like the literature, the participants in my study carefully and critically examined student learning, thus making it a factor in improving instruction, courses, and programs.

TPK suggests that teachers' base knowledge is generated as a result of lived experiences and reflection on such experiences. TPK is the body of convictions which result from experiences and are expressed in a teacher's actions (Craig, Meijer, & Broeckmans, 2013, p. 68). Practical knowledge consists of teachers' knowledge and beliefs about their own teaching

practice. Practical knowledge is developed through an integrative process rooted in teachers' own classroom practice and it guides teacher behavior in the classroom (Meijer, 1999).

According to Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer (2001), TPK is the foundation of teachers' actions that guides their teaching practice. As a result, an exchange between theoretical principles and teacher expertise is necessary for refinement of this knowledge base of teaching.

Through this study participants confirmed the value in such knowledge. They concurred that the lived experiences of practicing teachers should be included in teacher education preparation programs. Practicing teachers have knowledge worthy of dispensing to the profession. If the voices, experiences, and stories of teachers are not preserved and shared those stories will die. I believe that this would be an injustice to the teaching profession.

I used Constructivist theory for my study based on the premise that learning is a result of combining new knowledge with existing knowledge. Constructivist theory suggests that knowledge occurs as a result of the experiences of the learner. The majority of the participants in my study agreed that teacher education preparation programs do not provide practical learning experiences. Participants expressed mixed thoughts about their teacher education preparation programs regarding providing sufficient experiences to allow them to gain adequate new knowledge that they would add to their existing knowledge and that could contribute to them being successful in the classroom. The majority of participants thought that the knowledge gained from their colleagues was more useful, practical, and relevant than the knowledge gained from teacher education preparation programs and reported not gaining enough new knowledge to add to existing their knowledge. One participant, however, reported being “poured into” by her teacher education preparation program and thought new knowledge was gained that she was able to add to existing knowledge.

Lave and Wenger's (1996) theory of Community of Practice suggests learning is an aspect of ongoing social practice (Lave, 1996) and as a result of regular interaction, community participants learn to teach better (Wenger & Trayner, 2015, p. 1). The evolution of the community can be a natural result of the members having a common goal of gaining field-related knowledge. The process of the group's sharing experiences and knowledge results in participants learning from each other. I used Community of Practice for my study based on the knowledge that a community is a group of people with a common craft, interest, or passion for something they do. This learning and sharing allows members to gain professional and personal growth and development. Participants confirmed this in discussion about knowledge acquisition through collaboration and conversation with each other. The findings from this study suggest a need for restructuring teacher education programs for both traditional university certification preparation and alternative route certification preparation programs. Restructuring teacher education preparation is an important finding in understanding the value of the SoTL, TPK, Constructivist Theory, and Community of Practice. This study provides a springboard for a new way of preparing teachers.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Assumptions**

My study had some limitations. Limitations are involved in every study (Taylor-Powell, & Renner, 2003). Expressing the problems encountered while collecting and analyzing findings will bring knowledge to others as others try to understand better how I reached my conclusions (Ellen Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003). This study was limited to certified general education teachers with at least three years of teaching experience. This study may be used to help to enhance the teacher education preparation programs and improve professional development. Participants selected to be a part of this study came from a limited group of teachers and were

delimited by those who accepted the invitation to participate in the focus group. It was assumed that all participating teachers responded truthfully and with earnest intent.

In this study, the following limitations were relevant:

1. This study was limited to certified elementary school general education teachers with three or more years of teaching. The results may not be precisely typical for less experienced teachers.
2. This study was conducted during the last full week of school before the summer break. Participants may not have been fully focused.
3. Only elementary general education teachers participated in the study. The results may not be precisely typical to special education, ancillary, middle and high school teachers.
4. It was taken for granted that respondents replied without forming an opinion before the conclusion the focus group interview, thus limiting the study to participant truthfulness in responding to the questions.
5. This study did not include administrators or university faculty.

Future work needs to be done in college education preparation programs to allow aspiring teachers to have more time in the classroom before becoming a teacher. The results of this research provide valuable information for universities, while giving local employing agencies insight into restructuring professional development, induction programs, and providing meaningful support for teachers. I am hopeful my research serves as a starting point in addressing teachers' perceptions relative to their preparation and practice. This research gave rise to several concerns that need to be addressed.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Teacher education preparation is an excellent topic for future research. This study was my first step towards improving the teacher education preparation experiences of aspiring teachers. Additional research questions will be generated from the results of this qualitative study. This research will need to be expanded to include teacher education preparation instructors and middle and high school teachers. Data will need to be gathered from graduates of more universities; data will also need to be collected from individuals who participated in a teacher education preparation program that was redesigned based on the results of this study to identify the elements and factors that have the most impact on teachers. Future work should concentrate on enhancing the experiences within teacher education preparation programs. Future research should be dedicated to the development of better-prepared teachers. The present findings suggest, however, a practical first step to improve teacher education preparation.

## **Concluding Statements**

Teachers make positive differences in student learning, not institutions. Aspiring teachers need effective teacher education preparation if their teaching practice is to be adequate. This study identified the perceptions of teachers relative to the preparation received and their daily teaching practice. It is understood that the researcher's suggestions may be broad, however, the researcher's suggestions are realistic options to consider to reform teacher education preparation.

This paper provides an account of the perceptions of five elementary school teachers as they related to the teacher preparation they received and their teaching practice. Findings from this study have the potential to contribute to restructuring teacher education preparation programs, district-based teacher induction programs, and daily experiences of

teachers. Importantly, these results provide evidence for the need for reforming traditional university-based teacher education preparation/certification programs as well as alternative route certification programs. The researcher's recommendations surfaced from the findings of this study and included: restructuring teacher education preparation programs to include more incorporation of teacher observation and collaboration opportunities; providing teacher education candidates with a more realistic preparation (alternative route) and student teaching (traditional route/university based teacher education preparation) experience; assigning a mentor teacher to teacher education preparation teachers; and moving teacher education preparation out of the university; and having teacher apprentices with schools and schools districts. I suggest these recommendations as the key components in redesigning teacher education preparation programs to better align the teacher education preparation and the realities of teaching.

This study argues that the characteristics of effective teachers should be a part of the foundation for building an effective teacher education preparation program. The researcher concluded that perceptions of being unprepared to teach the diverse student population are not confined to teachers who received certification through the traditional route or to teachers who choose to receive certification by an alternative route. Providing opportunities for more classroom exposure during preparation may positively impact individuals preparing to enter the teaching profession.

As noted in the findings section of this study, more experience in schools before beginning teaching is a change teachers wish to see addressed in teacher education preparation programs. The first step is to make changes as new information becomes available from those who are charged with getting the job done and getting it done effectively— the experts.

Additional literature about several topics related to this study are:

***A Summary of Education and Education Preparation Programs***

<https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/links-for-newsletters/partners-in-preparation-survey-report.pdf?sfvrsn=6>

***Differentiating Small Group Instruction***

[https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/wp-content/uploads/nodefiles/node-presentation\\_smallgroupwebinarfinal.pdf](https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/wp-content/uploads/nodefiles/node-presentation_smallgroupwebinarfinal.pdf)

***Learning in the Workplace: The Wisdom of Colleagues***

[https://www.governmentinfopro.com/federal\\_info\\_pro/2010/09/learning-in-the-workplace-the-wisdom-of-colleagues.html](https://www.governmentinfopro.com/federal_info_pro/2010/09/learning-in-the-workplace-the-wisdom-of-colleagues.html)

***New Teachers Eager but Unprepared for Classroom Realities***

<https://www.publicagenda.org/press-releases/new-teachers-eager-unprepared-classroom-realities>

***Overlooked: How Teacher Training Falls Short for English-Learners and Students with IEPs***

<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2019/05/15/overlooked-how-teacher-training-falls-short-for.html>

***The Current State of Teacher Preparation***

<https://www2.ed.gov/offices/OPE/AgenProj/report/theme3a.html>

***21<sup>st</sup> Century Teacher Education***

<https://www.educationnext.org/21st-century-teacher-education>

This research study falls into the category of grounded theory, as the researcher

shaped the conclusions as data was gathered and new information became available from ongoing conversations from teachers.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Treatment of all participants in this study conformed to the Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College Institutional Review Board. Participation in this study posed no risks. Precautions were taken to ensure the safety and security of the participants.

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## VITA

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