

Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers As They Relate to Professional Practice

Dr. Emily Williams
New Mexico Highlands University

Dr. Elissa Poel
New Mexico State University

Dr. Miguel Licona
New Mexico State University

Dr. Elsa Arroyos
New Mexico State University

Alma Meraz-Rodriguez
Las Cruces Public Schools

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and concerns of pre-service teachers as they relate to professional practice during their practicum experience. This study took place in a minority-serving university in the Southwest. All activities were conducted during one academic semester and held during the weekly on-campus seminars. The participants were a convenience sample of 13 pre-service teachers enrolled in dual licensure programs (elementary/special education and secondary/special education). Pre/post surveys, interviews, and focus groups were used to triangulate the data. Responses to questions posed during focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires were explored thematically. The results indicated that pre-service teachers maintained a positive attitude toward their students, projected an understanding of their students and their disabilities, and recognized the challenges that students with disabilities face.

Perceptions of Pre-Service Teachers As They Relate to Professional Practice

Pre-service teachers enter their practicum experiences with strong beliefs about teaching and learning. Their individual differences lead toward establishing a teaching style that is unique and incorporates a variety of pedagogical strategies and materials that may or may not be appropriate for the population of students with whom they will be working (Aka & Yildirim, 2011). Transitioning from their role as university student to a professional in the classroom remains challenging. Pre-service teachers become confused between wanting to be a friend and maintaining a professional role as a strong, effective teacher and role model. Often, pre-existing knowledge is quite different from the reality of the structure of the public school classroom and may lead to bias and misconceptions.

There is an importance to gaining insight into the way pre-service teachers perceive their roles and present themselves in the classroom (Aka & Yildirim, 2011). Practicum experiences provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to think about teaching, their roles as professionals, how to apply theory to practice, and the importance of developing a classroom culture that reflects a strong learning environment (Cakmákcı, 2009; Collier, 1999 Tarman, 2012). “Regardless of what beliefs prospective teachers hold, one may wonder about the extent to which prospective teachers’ initial beliefs are subject to change by the experiences they gain in teacher education programs...” (Tarman, p. 1).

Since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2002, the “quality of teachers in our public schools” (Alawiye, 2001, p. 1) have become a major topic in education. Efforts to make teachers accountable have distracted from the needed improvement of teacher preparation programs. Special education teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities across the country have been restructured over the past decade to recruit and prepare more teachers in order to meet the growing needs of school districts. Dual licensure programs, alternative licensure programs, and internships have been created to increase the number of licensed teachers in special education classrooms who work with children with disabilities.

Since the program of choice for children with disabilities is inclusion, more students are continuing to receive special education services in the general education classroom. Hence, there is a need to actively recruit and retain qualified individuals into the field of special education. In addition, it is important to mentor pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs and investigate their perceptions related to professional practice as they enter into their practicum experiences.

There is a wealth of information in the literature that focuses on (a) pre-service teachers on reflective practices (Christensen, Wilson, Sunal, Blalock, St. Clair-Shingelton, & Warren, 2004; Greiman & Covington, 2007); (b) the perceptions of pre-service teachers on content delivery (McLeman & Cavell, 2007); (c) perceptions of pre-service teachers on teaching (Coughlin, 2001), and (d) perceptions of teachers on the integration of technology (Knight, Pedersen, & William, 2004; Lipscomb & Doppen, 2004/2005). However, very little information is available on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their cooperating teachers, the students with whom they will work, and the families of those students.

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers during their practicum experience as they relate to professional practice. Responses to questions posed during focus groups, interviews, and questionnaires were explored. Emerging themes were analyzed using a coded system (Bogden & Biklen, 1998).

Research Focus

The focus of Teacher Education Programs in higher education is to prepare effective candidates who are highly qualified and able to engage students in the learning process, reflect on their practice, move toward praxis, and remain highly qualified in their field. Therefore, preparing pre-service teachers to address the diverse population of children in the classroom challenges the

teacher education program to prepare teachers who can address the needs of all students (Burriss & Burriss, 2004).

In 1990, 2.4 million teachers were employed in general and special education; by 2001, this number grew to 3.0 million teachers (USDOE, 2004). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006) reported that 441,000 special education teachers were hired during 2004, while 534,000 will be needed by 2014. The anticipated growth rate remains at approximately 22%. Unfortunately, 6,452 employed special education teachers were not highly qualified by the NCLB standards as compared to 5,762 general education teachers (USDOE, 2006). Generally, teaching jobs are at risk. “Nearly 300,000 educator jobs have been lost since 2008 representing 54% of all job losses in local government” (NEC, 2011, p. 1).

“Teacher attrition is a significant problem facing schools, with a large percentage of teachers leaving the profession within their first few years” (Sass, Flores, Claeys, & Pérez, 2012, p. 1). Young teachers, new teachers, and male teachers were most likely to leave the profession early on in their careers. African American teachers were at greater risk of leaving the teaching profession while Hispanics were more likely to remain. Hence, the teacher shortage in our country is not necessarily due to the inadequate supply of teachers but to the high rate of teacher turnover due to job dissatisfaction, increasing student enrollments, transfers, and retirement (Ingersoll, 2001). To contribute to this bleak state of affairs, teacher attrition in education and special education, in particular, is high.

When pre-service teachers become in-service teachers, they often are inundated by the duties required of the special education teacher that interferes with direct teaching delivery. The seemingly never-ending list of responsibilities often overwhelm new teachers to the point that they leave the field before they develop relationships with mentors and colleagues within their school or become master teachers themselves. Currently, the attrition rate in the United States is between 30% and 50% among pre-service teachers in the field for service less than five years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006). In order to address this increasing attrition rate and improve teacher preparation, faculty in schools of education need to have a clear idea of what pre-service teachers need from practicum and internship experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006) in order to prepare them to work with students with disabilities and those from diverse backgrounds.

Research Context

Special Education teachers possess unique abilities and dispositions as well as specialized understanding, which enable them to connect with and teach children with disabilities. However, little attention has focused on the perception of pre-service teachers in terms of how they perceive the children and families with whom they will be working.

Teacher education programs prepare pre-service teachers using reflective activities where they identify how their life experiences have shaped their perceptions about the world. They also ask pre-service teachers to reflect on their preparedness for the teaching field. At the university where this study took place, pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their program activities and align their reflective comments to the components of the College of Education’s conceptual framework. Those components included: pedagogical knowledge, classroom management, assessment, communication skills, technology skills, and the ability to work with diverse

learners. More recently, the introduction of formal disposition surveys has added to the student and faculty evaluation process. It is appropriate that pre-service teachers develop the ability to analyze how their personal perceptions may vary, even be contradictory, from others and to determine how this information may influence classroom practice (Burris, 1996; Serdyukov & Ferguson, 2011).

The disposition survey categories include:

Change Agent - A person whose presence or thought processes cause a social, cultural and/or behavioral change as a result of deliberate actions or as a result of his/her own behavior. This person has the conviction to state facts based on evidence, even when/if the consequences are unpleasant.

Collaborator – A person who can work with and respond to others to achieve a common goal. This individual recognizes and seeks situations that benefit from collective decision making, encourages the sharing of opinions, contributions and commitments among team members.

Ethicist – An individual with integrity who is honest in all areas of school, work, and life, and who is moral in interactions across time. This individual speaks of and acts out of professional and personal ethics in the areas of research, teaching, and the treatment of others.

Humanist – A person who exhibits fair-mindedness, objectivity, imagination, openness to new experiences, and the courage to change his/her mind in light of further experience. This individual demonstrates dignity for others and seeks solutions to human social and cultural problems (NMSU-SPED/CD Dispositions Form).

Field Experience

There are many factors that influence pre-service teachers' professional development. For example, the perceptions of their role as a practicum or student teacher; their perceptions of their cooperating teachers; the cooperating teachers' beliefs and values; personal and professional attitudes; student attitudes; and the anticipation of their first year as a certified teacher. Positive perceptions of the mentor teacher, students, and individual abilities to teach often are highly correlated to their plans to stay in the profession and strengthen their commitment to the teaching field. Articles in the literature reveal that strong pre-service' teacher preparation programs and those including field experiences (a minimum of 10 weeks) have contributed to lower teacher attrition rates (Connelly & Graham, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) cited the National Education Statistics report that stated 29% of new teachers without practicum or field experience left the field within five years as compared to 15% of new entrants who did engage in a practicum or field experience. This report also noted that 49% of uncertified new teachers left the field within five years as compared to 14% of newly certified teachers. Additionally, Darling-Hammond et al. reported that the California State Board of Education found that 40% of teachers working on an emergency permit left the field after one year. These high teacher attrition rates underscore the need for quality pre-service training and

call on us, as teacher educators, to look at pre-service teachers' perceptions prior to and during their initial placements in the classroom.

Often, the pre-dispositions that pre-service teachers bring to teaching are a much more powerful socializing influence than either pre-service education or later socializing in the workplace (Johnson, 2002). Pre-dispositions affect how pre-service teachers react and relate to their mentor teachers, students, and parents. Culture, language barriers, gender, behavior, and self-efficacy also play a large role in developing, effective teachers. Thomas and Pederson (2003) cite the common maxim that "one teaches the way one is taught" (p. 319). Some continuing research indicates that teacher preparation programs have had little impact on the beliefs and practices of pre-service students (Pajares, 1992; Pourdavood, 2002), while other research indicates that the lack of support given to teachers in general is a major roadblock to molding positive perceptions about teaching (Chellman, 2000; Hausfather, 2001; Moore, 2003).

Stuart and Thurlow (2000) argued that without a challenge to currently held beliefs and perceptions, change is unlikely since pedagogical abilities stem from teacher philosophies of teacher and learning, which is fundamentally set in deep-seated beliefs. Nespor (1987) suggested that change is most likely to happen when a "conversion or gestalt shift" occurs (as cited in Stuart & Thurlow, 2000, p. 117). Hence, the focus is to use reflective practices so that pre-service teachers can make sense of their lived experiences with traditional teaching. "There is no problem in assimilating new information and ideas which fit with this world-view, but we find it increasingly difficult to accommodate to new stuff" (Piaget as cited in Atherton, 2011, p. 2). Pre-service teachers need to connect emotionally to the needs, culture, language barriers, gender differences, and behaviors of children in order to grow professionally. Pre-service teachers must recognize that, by examining their own beliefs, they will maximize their own teaching effectiveness (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000) by better knowing oneself.

Hausfather (2001) argued that it is in early field experiences where pre-service teachers begin making new connections between personal characteristics, beliefs, goals, and actions. Each person brings different relationships and different skills and understanding of the world with him or her to the classroom. When master teachers recognize the importance of supporting individual pre-service teachers' growth in the field experience, pre-service teachers move forward in their professional development as teachers. Hausfather also stated that, in a successful field experience, all stakeholders must be able to recognize the individual goals of the pre-service teachers and identify their role in supporting the attainment of those goals. When pre-service teachers are presented with alternate ways of teaching, if done in the proper context, it can serve to motivate them to maintain effective pedagogical views.

Few studies were found that reported the perceptions of pre-service teachers as they related to their mentor teachers, their perceptions of their students or their students' parents prior to entering the classroom. Glenn (2006) reported that pre-service teachers do see their mentor teachers as a source of emotional support and an experienced colleague with whom they could collaborate and use as a role model to gain professional growth. Therefore, they expected their mentor teachers to provide helpful, corrective, and timely feedback. However, strong mentorship that is aligned with program expectations remains a challenge. Hence the opportunity for pre-

service teachers to impact the student/mentor relationship remains a potentially significant avenue for creating the optimal place for achieving strong teaching skills.

Teacher Candidate Beliefs

Pre-service teachers tend to emulate and value the beliefs and practices of their mentor teachers during their practicum or internship period (Bhuvanewari, Greene, & Debacker, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Pourdavood, 2002; Rhoads, Radu, & Weber, 2011). Several researchers discovered that a large percentage of the pre-service teachers believed that the home environment and the parents' lack of value toward education were responsible for low academic achievement by students from diverse and ethnically different backgrounds (Baum & Swick, 2008; Cho & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, 2005). However, educators are finding that teacher beliefs are the most significant in perpetuating status quo teaching and whether to question existing practices and move to best practices and away from deficit learning theories (Johnson, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999).

Jackson (2001) found that many pre-service teachers had low expectations and concerns about families with low socio-economic status (SES) and ethnic minority backgrounds prior to working with them. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005) stated that pre-service teachers tended to harbor negative beliefs about the parents of the children in public schools. Comments reported by pre-service teachers in this study included, "Blacks don't learn as well as White people. Why are we favoring a certain group, but not others? Since Hispanic parents don't value education, why bother tailoring instruction to meet their needs when they [Hispanic parents] don't care? You can't know all students, so just teach the subject" (p. 24).

Social Justice Perspectives in Teacher Preparation

As we work to educate our pre- and in-service teachers to work toward social justice, educators are confronted to be reflective of this challenge. Teacher Candidate Dispositions call on each of us to consider where we stand in the recursive spiral toward transformative praxis and social justice. Periodically, we check where we stand in our dispositions because we believe that we are life-long learners and each new experience and interaction can cause us to make modifications in the way we teach. Dispositions are the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors towards students, families, colleagues, and communities that affect student learning, motivation, and development as well as the educator's own professional growth (NCATE).

Dispositions

One of the four categories that dispositions are placed in is that of caring. These involve caring about and for others. It is caring about others that moves an individual toward compassionate and concerned behaviors toward others. When a teacher candidate cares about education and access for all, the candidate is moved to stand in solidarity with and; thus, care for others. Care is viewed as a matter of relationships among diverse people (e.g., ability, age, ethnicity, gender, language, sexuality, SES) rather than as an inherent virtue of an individual. A second category includes the dispositions for social justice that imply advocating and working for just causes, and working against discrimination, exclusion or any form of oppression. The *disposition survey* is used periodically to assess students in our program through self-awareness and feedback from the faculty. Faculty want students to see growth from awareness to analysis and on to praxis. Of

course, praxis is elusive, and with each new course and experience, it is possible for one to move back and forth on this continuum in a recursive pattern. Once pre-service teachers begin to reach praxis, it is possible to change perspectives that may provide new insights and help to move us forward to a new awareness. Pre-service teachers, like us, come to the teacher preparation programs with much influence from the lived experiences they have had in the extant educational system that we critique and try to improve. This creates many of the tensions that give rise to research opportunities and reflective moments to consider pedagogical trajectories in university classes.

Many taken-for-granted assumptions will go unchallenged unless university faculty experience opportunities to meaningfully reflect what we believe and how it impacts us pedagogically. We know the high drop-out rate of students as well as that of teachers is too high. We must relearn some things that we hold on to as normal knowledge. This is only done through reading scholarly research and putting into practice those new ideas that have emerged under the purview of critical pedagogy. Kincheloe (2008) calls on us to consider how we might go about developing distinct practices to help particular students flourish in schools. We are asked to determine what we believe our purpose is. Namely, "...students do not need to be tamed, controlled, and/or rescued; they need to be respected, viewed as experts in their areas, and inspired with the impassioned spirit to use education to do good things in the world" (p. 8). Of course, we teach a class in multiculturalism, but we move to teach every class multiculturally. This means that "when critical pedagogy embraces multiculturalism, it focuses on the subtle workings of racism, sexism, class, bias, cultural oppression, and homophobia" (p. 9) and also to include ableism. Oppression involves pervasive, historical, and political relationships of unequal power among social groups. This is a tenet from Sansoy and DiAngelo (2012) that supports how we engage our students so that they understand the difference between oppression and discrimination. Thus, we orchestrate ways to interrupt oppressive practices and eliminate human suffering related to education.

Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti (2005) commented on the ever-increasing population and diversity of students in the public schools and the SES status of the majority of college students entering the teaching profession as middle-class White with a lack of cultural knowledge by the majority class. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti also stated that university students often are resistant to discussion of social equity and racial diversity in the classroom even after participation in a multicultural education course. Many of the students wrote reflections in class that indicated they were unprepared to recognize the needs of racially and culturally diverse populations. The implications are the perpetuation of the deficit theory maintaining status quo (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers during their practicum experiences as they relate to professional practice in order to improve current teacher preparation. The overriding research question was: *What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers entering their practicum experience?* Specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1. What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of the students with disabilities who they will be working with in their assigned class?
2. What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of their role as a special education practicum student in relation to working with these students?
3. What is pre-service teachers' perception of the parents of the students in their class (even if they haven't met them)?
4. What is pre-service teachers' perception of the teacher(s) in their class?

Method

This study took place in a minority-serving university in the Southwest. All activities were conducted during one academic semester and held during the weekly on-campus seminars. At this university, students enrolled in the practicum/field experience attended a weekly seminar and worked with students with disabilities in local school districts. Their time in the public school classroom was structured and aligned with seminar, school, and state licensure requirements. There was a Web/CT component of the course to enhance face-to-face activities. During the weekly seminar, topics related to special education, licensure criteria, and teaching methodologies were discussed.

Participants

The participants were a convenience sample of 13 pre-service teachers enrolled in dual licensure programs (elementary/special education and secondary/special education). Of these participants, 92% were female (n=12) and 8% were male (n=1). The participants reported their ethnicity as 8% African American (n=1), 23% Hispanic (n=3), and 69% White (n=9).

Procedure

A discussion took place with the lead researcher and two doctoral candidates in the Department of Special Education/Communication Disorders at the end of the semester and prior to conducting the research. A review of the literature determined that there was a gap in the research. There were numerous articles on perceptions; however, none focused on pre-service teachers and their perceptions as they related to students/families, cooperating teachers, or their roles in the classrooms. A qualitative approach was chosen and research questions designed for interviewing were compiled in order to explore the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), encouraging the participants to engage in conversation in the area of interest leads to greater participation. The research can then probe for in depth responses and guide the conversation.

This project was presented during the first seminar of the 16-week semester, and all pre-service teachers agreed to participate. Incentives for participation were not offered. Four, open-ended survey questions were reviewed during class and uploaded to the assignment section of Web/CT. Pre-service teachers were allotted two weeks to individually respond to the four questions and post to Web/CT. All surveys were completed on time and uploaded to the Assignment section of Web/CT by each student. The survey questions focused on: (a) perceptions of the students in placement sites, (b) perceptions of the role of the pre-service teachers (practicum students), (c) perception of the parents, and (d) perceptions of cooperating teachers.

Data Analysis

A pre-post survey methodology was used to determine if there was a change in the perception of pre-service teachers prior to and after their practicum experiences. Pre-surveys were completed in writing by each pre-service teacher at the beginning of the semester. A focus group was conducted at the end of the semester. Meraz-Rodriguez and Williams led the focus group. They began with an introduction and overview of the focus group activities. The guided session allowed for clarification of statements and in-depth responses that were expanded upon by each of the pre-service teachers. Questions were written on the white board in the room where the focus group took place, the session was audio taped, and transcribed verbatim.

A constant comparative analysis of the written and verbal responses was conducted to determine emerging themes subsequent to the data collection. A coded system was implemented following the Bogden and Biklen (1998) method of developing coding categories for both pre/post analyses. According to this system, coding should be used only as a post data collection heuristic or, rather, a mechanism to understand and organize the previously collected data. The focus group interview was recorded on a cassette and transcribed by Williams. Williams and Poel each reviewed the written pre-surveys and focus group transcription independently, identifying emerging themes, and discussed their findings to determine mutually agreed upon themes of Behavior Issues, English/Language Learners (ELL), Mentor Experiences, Negative Feelings, Misconceptions of Special Education, Personal Growth/Professional Growth, Positive Feelings, Real World Experiences, and Student Abilities. The thematic topics were operationalized individually and re-coded individually by Williams and Poel by question and theme. Thematic titles were determined by the content of the focus group and the participant responses. The pre-service teachers discussed issues such as misbehavior in the classroom, issues particular to ELL's, mentor obligation and behavior, beliefs and mis-information concerning special education student abilities in the classroom as well as positive and negative statements within these themes.

The focus group comments were organized in Excel and color-coded by theme. This double coding procedure ensured that the themes were accurate and agreed upon and led to a higher inter-rater reliability. Recoding also has been described as a cyclical effort by Creswell (2007), who posit that qualitative data are rarely organized accurately on the first thematic analysis and that several attempts may need to occur before satisfaction is attained depending upon the complexity and volume of the data. Poel and Williams chose to re-evaluate the themes with only two rounds due to the simplicity and brevity of the data. Concentration was placed on the actual information gleaned from the focus group and utilized percentages and frequencies within the identified patterns.

The pre-survey responses indicated that the pre-service teachers were focused on their placement sites and remained optimistic toward their cooperating teachers, students, and placements. Several negative beliefs were expressed by the pre-service teachers and included statements such as, "students are unmotivated," "students have low self-esteem, "girls try harder than boys," and "students need to learn strategies."

The post-survey group responses showed that pre-service teachers were more focused on the students and their readiness to take over the classroom. The somewhat negative comments were

not repeated during the focus group. Instead, pre-service teachers expected that their “students were going to be more severe [low cognitive abilities].” Several reported disappointment that their classroom assignments were inclusive settings and not self-contained or pull-out programs. Respondents stated, “It felt more like a regular [general] education practicum than a special education practicum.” “My class had a lot of behavior kids, and it was more like she was a teacher’s aide to the regular education teacher. She was running around, putting grades in the computer. We didn’t pull out a whole lot which was kind of sad.”

Another commented:

When I walked into the class, I was expecting for them to be focused more on LD and what’s happened at the middle school where I was placed. They’ve started including more of the inclusion classrooms with students who are BD as opposed to LD. The classroom size was small, but we were dealing mostly with a lot of behaviors instead of more of the disabilities.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers during their practicum experience as they related to professional practice in order to improve current teacher preparation practice. The overriding research question was: *What are the perceptions of pre-service entering into their practicum experience?*

Pre-Survey and Focus Groups Questions:

1. What are pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the students with disabilities who they will be working with in their assigned class?
2. What are pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their role as a special education practicum student in relation to working with these students?
3. What is pre-service teachers’ perception of the parents of the students in their class (even if they haven’t met them)?
4. What is pre-service teachers’ perception of the teacher(s) in their class?

Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers

Question 1: *What are your perceptions of the students with disabilities who you will be working with you in your assigned class?*

Written responses indicated that 80% of the pre-service teachers believed that their students would be bright and capable of completing in-class assignments, while 93% responded by naming the disabilities (learning disabilities, behavior problems, etc.) present in the classroom. Comments included:

Table 1

Pre-Survey Responses: Pre-Service Teachers Perceptions of Students with Disabilities

Student

Responses

Student “They seem to do very well in the reading aspect of the class.”

Student “All of the students have a wonderful disposition and they are willing to be their own person.”

Student “I feel the students that I will be working with are great students. These students have the typical behavior of a teen. I know I am stereotyping, but I also believe they act the way they do because of the neighborhood they live in. In this class, I am not sure which students have a disability, although, I do know half the class has one.”

Student “I am not sure of the severity of any of the student’s disabilities so I feel that judging them at this point by their disabilities would be detrimental to my feelings toward them in general.”

The focus group conducted at the end of the semester revealed that 61% of the pre-service teachers had positive perceptions of their students and exhibited a sophisticated understanding of the problems faced by students with special needs. Comments included:

Table 2

Post-Survey Responses: Pre-Service Teachers Perceptions of Students with Disabilities

Student “It was the first special education practicum I had had and a practicum that I had a really good experience in. I had a low-incidence class and all of my kids had such a great disposition. They were happy, all the time. They could be having a really bad day but they were happy and really willing to do whatever you asked. It was an M-S class and I was kind of uneasy about that, but being in that class, I started feeling that maybe middle school is the way I should go.”

Student “I thought my students were going to be more severe [low cognitive abilities]; I found that my students were very capable, they were all very bright; I was surprised by that.”

Implications for program improvement indicate that pre-service teachers are well read on disability categories and general characteristics exhibited by these students; however, the reality of what the behaviors look like are only identified through engaging experiences in the classroom. The majority of these pre-service teachers spend time in the general education setting during their elementary methods classes (science, social studies, and math); however, working with students with disabilities is often not an option at that time. Hence, the special education practicum at the end of their program appears to be late for students seeking licensure in special education.

Question 2: *What are your perceptions of your role as a special education practicum student in relation to working with these students?*

According to their responses, 67% of the pre-service teachers reported, during the pre-survey, that they were looking forward to teaching their own lesson plans, while 95% of candidates stated that they wanted to help their students. During the focus group, pre-service teachers (61%) stated that their experience was not what they expected. Comments included:

Table 3

Pre-Survey Student Responses: Pre-service Teachers Perceptions of their **Role**

Student “I didn’t have any expectations. I didn’t know what to expect. When I first got there I was just supposed to help with tutoring type stuff, but by the middle of the semester if any kids got out of hand, I was the one dealing with it. It was just like I was another teacher in the class. If I wanted to bring anything in that I thought the students would benefit from, she’d let me do it.”

Student "I didn’t have any perceptions except that I was going to be working with elementary instead of middle school student which I normally work with. What I was very disappointed with was not that my cooperating teacher was an inclusion teacher but that we jumped around so much."

Most of the pre-service teachers viewed their role in the classroom of helping students as positive. They further stated that at first they were unsure of themselves and wanted to be accepted by other teachers. These concerns were not mentioned during the focus group. Many pre-service teachers (58%) did seem to be concerned that they would learn from their mentor at the beginning of the semester but did not state that this was a primary reason for participating in the practicum during the focus session.

It is interesting to note that initially pre-service teachers were concerned about themselves, their relationships with their cooperating teachers, and judgments by other teachers in the building. By the end of the semester, their concerns shifted from self to student needs. The role of the special educator is constantly changing from lead teacher in a pull-out setting, team teacher in an inclusive setting, case manager who often does not see students, and consultant to other professionals. Therefore, it is crucial for pre-service teachers to spend time in the classroom and a variety of settings (e.g., elementary, middle, high school).

Question 3: *What is your perception of the parents of the students in your class (even if you haven't met them)?*

The pre-survey written responses indicated that 79% of the pre-service teachers believed that the parents were largely uninvolved or otherwise inaccessible to help their children at home. Conversely, by the focus group, 88% stated that they believed that parents did care for and are patient with their children. The focus group results showed that 100% of pre-service teachers increased their positive views of parents by the last week of their practicum experience even though more than 61% continued to hold some negative views of parents. Comments included:

Table 4

Pre-Survey Responses: Pre-service Teacher Perceptions of Parents of Students with Disabilities

Student “There was another student who they were going to write letters to somebody, and she wanted to write to her dad. My co-op teacher asked if Mom would be okay with that. I could tell right away that she wasn’t going to be writing to her dad.”

Student “I learned more about their extracurricular families. Their Juvenile Parole Officers

(POs) and their case managers met with a lot of them and discovered that my cooperating teacher kept in contact with these extracurricular families through email, and it was a daily thing. The students respected that authority more than they did their family authority.

Student One pre-service teacher described an altercation in the classroom with two of the boys during which the mentor teacher got knocked down. The pre-service teacher stated that the mentor teacher told the boys that she had not written their PO yet, but that they knew what was going into the letters. She reported that some of the parents came in, but the kids didn't talk to their parents; it was like they weren't even there. She described the students as not acknowledging that their parents were present during the meeting."

The reality of being a special educator is that they only can effect a change in the lives of students during the time they work with them. However, educators need to continue to encourage parental participation and remain creative in scheduling educational activities that bring parents to school. Adolescence is a time that children are exploring their world and using their experiences to put meaning into their life (Wiseman, 2010). "Significant adults can have an important impact on children's development at any age, but it is particularly relevant during the adolescent years due to the significant life choices they experience as they become more autonomous" (p. 1).

Question 4: What is your perception of the teacher(s) in your class?

A high percentage of the pre-service teachers (93%) expected their mentor teacher to be caring and patient toward students and expected the mentor teacher to be knowledgeable in teaching students with disabilities. Student comments included:

Table 5

Pre-Survey Responses: Pre-service Teacher Perceptions of Teachers

Student "I am hoping that my teacher will be intelligent."

Student "The lead teacher in the classroom had several years of experience and seems to highly skilled at running a special education classroom. She is extremely patient. Over the course of the day she didn't once lose seem to get angry or hostile in any way towards the students, even when some extremely frustrating behaviors were being exhibited." She treats them respectfully and seems to be very much in tune with their individual needs, both psychosocial and academic."

Student "The perception of my teacher is that she is a very caring teacher. "You can tell from her interactions with the students that she truly enjoys her job. She seems to be the type of person that is always ready and willing to help any of her students as well as any of her colleagues."

Student "They usually refrain from sending the students to detention. The teachers treat the students like people who want to learn. The teachers try to get the students to learn by

relating their school work with their own life experiences and modifying their classroom and assignments to meet the student's needs. They set up their classroom, room and environment for the students to succeed (not fail). They want their students to feel they are welcome/safe/comfortable in their classroom."

Most pre-service teachers (80%) reported a desire for the mentor teacher to be open to their needs at school and at the university on the pretest; however, this concern was not mentioned at the focus group. Although most candidates expressed positive views of their experience, there were some candidates who left their practicum experience with a negative view of their mentor teacher.

The focus group responses indicated that 53% of pre-service teachers felt that their mentor teachers displayed knowledge related experience. Interestingly, only 38% of the pre-service teachers specifically stated that they had observed their mentor behaving in caring ways toward students and felt that their mentor teacher seemed to be "too busy" to adequately teach students every day. One pre-service teacher stated that her mentor teacher was absent much of the time, relying on her to teach the class almost all of the time. She noted that the students in the classroom did not seem to respect her and that her absence from the classroom may have been part of the reason. She stated, "I use to think that it was a good idea to have IEPs during the day so you could get everyone in there, but I don't think so anymore." This pre-service teacher concluded that "when she would come back after a 2 or 3 day absence, the kids would treat her as a [substitute]. She didn't know what was going on." Another pre-service teacher commented, "that [mentor] didn't really do anything with them. They did a bunch of worksheets. When they were working at Peter Pipers [Pizza], she would always look after me and show me her lesson plans. She got mad at one of the students because he couldn't do what she said for him to do; he couldn't do it, but she wasn't really watching."

Two pre-service teachers explicitly stated their mentor "helped them to learn." Additionally, many of the comments made throughout the focus group suggested that the majority of mentor teachers spent quality time and energy teaching their novices the fundamentals of classroom practice. One pre-service teacher reported that she had met with her mentor before she actually began her practicum. She noted "from day one she allowed me to work with the kids. There was no observation, she said go for it; do what you want to do." She stated that if she was doing something her mentor "either didn't like or wanted another way, she'd pull me aside and say great approach, but let's do it this way."

Another pre-service teacher revealed that her mentor was much like everyone else's and that her mentor also had several of IEPs near the middle of the semester. She also was left in the classroom to teach without the mentor, but perceived it to be a positive. It was her first special education practicum and it had really differed from the general education practicum in that she had a really good experience and that she had been allowed to teach on her own. "I had a low-incidence class and all of my kids had such a great disposition. They were happy, all the time. They could be having a really bad day, but they were happy and really willing to do whatever you asked."

One pre-service teacher reported that initially she was uneasy about her placement, a middle school classroom, but during the experience began wondering "if maybe middle school is the way I should go." Her mentor teacher began sending her to the classroom "to take care of things in there." The last couple of weeks, the mentor turned most of the teaching duties over to her. She stated, "It's been a lot of fun. It was an inclusion class with both special education and regular education students."

When pre-service teachers enter into their practicum experience, they often are faced with inaccurate ideas of what they will encounter in the special education classroom setting. They have spent countless hours in the university classroom learning theory and textbook pedagogy and often the reality is as varied as the inclusion setting. Many students believe that all special education settings contain students with severe disorders and maladaptive behaviors. Because many of the practicum settings are inclusion and resource rooms for children with special education needs in the mild to moderate range, there is a need to prepare students for a more realistic range of student abilities and their needs. Children with mild disabilities warrant instruction of the proper type and intensity just as do children with low incidence disabilities.

By forming strong partnerships with placement school districts and selecting strong mentors, adhering to best practices as outlined by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC), creating dual-licensure programs (e.g., special education & elementary education; special education & secondary education; special education & bilingual education) in higher education, and listening to the voices of our pre-service teachers all suggest the beginning to creating a strong quality teacher preparation program.

Limitations

The research was limited to a small sample of 13 pre-service teachers. They were a convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a university in the Southwest. The research took place during one academic semester. Providing mentors with the time to devote to the pre-service teachers also was deemed a limitation as more than one candidate noted that her supervising teacher was out of the classroom on a regular basis and for extended periods of time.

Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine the beliefs and perceptions of pre-service teachers as they related to their practicum experience. Based on the analysis of the open-ended survey and focus group responses, pre-service teachers maintained a positive attitude toward their students, projected an understanding of their students and their disabilities, and recognized the challenges that students with disabilities face. These are indeed complex issues, and the study revealed several concerns that are worth addressing. For example, many of the pre-service teachers described their students primarily by disability and ethnicity at the beginning of the semester. This response had been replaced by more descriptive terms such as *bright*, *capable*, *funny* and *respectful* by the end of the semester. Their focus switched from attention to themselves and limitations of the students to the abilities of the students and their individual learning need.

By better understanding the perceptions and beliefs of pre-service teachers completing their practicum and field experiences, the researchers hoped to provide pre-service teachers with a more complete experience to help prepare them for student teaching and, ultimately, to become a lead teacher in the classroom. Meeting with the cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and pre-service teachers together at the beginning of the semester may help to clarify responsibilities and make for a stronger triad team. A longitudinal study may provide information that would be beneficial to the overall improvement of teacher education programs.

References

- Aka, E. & Yildirim, A. (2011). Influence of teacher perceptions of students on teaching high school biology. *Egitim Arastirmalari-Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 44, 19 – 32.
- Atherton J. (2011) *Learning and teaching: Assimilation and accommodation* [On-line: UK] retrieved from <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/assimacc.htm>
- Alliance for Excellent Education (2005). *Teacher attrition: A costly loss to the nation and to the states*. Issue Brief. Retrieved from <http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/TeacherAttrition.pdf>
- Baum, A., & Swick, K. (2008). Descriptions of dispositions for assessment in pre-service teacher education field experiences. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 35(6), 579-584.
- Bhuvanewari, R., Greene, B., & Debacker, T. (2005). Predicting pre-service teachers' cognitive engagement with goals and epistemological beliefs. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 98(4), 11-22.
- Burriss, K., & Burriss, L. (2004). Competency and comfort: Pre-service' attitudes toward diversity. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 18, 199 - 210.
- Cakmáki, G. (2009). Preparing teachers as researchers: Evaluating the quality of research reports prepared by student teachers. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 35(2), 39 – 56.
- Cho, G., & DeCastro-Ambrosetti, D. (2005). Is ignorance bliss? Pre-service teachers' attitudes toward multicultural education. *High School Journal*, 89(2), 24 – 29.
- Collier, S. (1999). Characteristics of reflective thought during the student teaching experience. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 50, 173 – 181.
- Connelly, V., & Graham, S. (2009). Student teaching and teacher attrition in special education *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 32(3), 257 – 269.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st century education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 300 - 314.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Keeping good teachers: Why it matters? What leaders can do? *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, 60(8), 6 -13.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Chung, R., & Frelow, F. (2002). Variation in teacher preparation: How well do different pathways prepare teachers to teach? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(4), 286 – 302.
- Glenn, W. (2006). Model versus mentor: Defining the necessary qualities of the effective cooperating teacher. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(1), 85 – 95.

- Hausfather, S. J., Strehle, E. L., & Outlaw, M. E. (1999). [Negotiating the construction of field experiences](#): Creating a model of successful early field experiences. *Gateways to Teacher Education*, 12(1), 55-70.
- Hecker, D. (2005). Bureau of Labor Statistics: Occupational employment projections to 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/11/art5exc.htm>.
- Ingersoll, R. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499-534.
- Johnson, L. (2002). My eyes have been opened: White teachers and racial awareness. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 154.
- Kincheloe, J. (2008). *Critical pedagogy* (3rd ed.). New York: Peter Lang.
- Minor, L., Onwuegbuzie, A., & Witcher, A., & James, T. (2002). Beliefs and their perceptions of effective teachers. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 96(2), 116 – 129.
- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 131 - 141.
- Moore, R. (2003). Reexamining the field experiences of pre-service teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 31 – 42.
- National Economic Council, the Domestic Policy Council, the President’s Council of Economic Advisors, and the Department of Education (2011). *Teacher Jobs at Risk*. Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:cosNMDB7gHYJ:www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/teacher_jobs_at_risk_report.pdf+&hl=en&gl=us&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESjlK3pxw6szgsxNU9Hr5b0IKVfCna5NH8VPy3JZ_npZMZeaF6NN70FbeLJfsWthY69JZfXUc3wsGIWJckkq12ITIUN3U2StfedVV-EtqaukmX5NcG0R9-QFE4Ott5wnjzDodMRy&sig=AHIEtbRh-MUxvkimqSV-Wf9ffCEMI9LydA
- Pajares, M. (1992). Teachers’ beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307-332.
- Pourdavood, R. (2002). Exploring the evolving nature of three elementary pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices: Three parallel case studies. *Focus on Learning Problems in Mathematics*, 24(1), 45 – 64.
- Proctor, T. , Rentz, N., & Jackson, M. (2001). Preparing teachers for urban schools: the role of field experiences. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 25(4), 219 - 227.
- Rhoads, K., Radu, I., & Weber, K (2011). The teacher internship experiences of prospective high school mathematics teachers. *International Journal of Science & Mathematics Education*, 9(4), 999-1022.
- Sass, D., Flores, B., Claeys, L., & Pérez, B. (2012). Identifying personal and contextual factors that contribute to attrition rates for Texas public school teachers. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 20 (15) Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/967>
- Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2012). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Serdyukov, P., & Ferguson, T. (2011). Teacher dispositions: What kind of candidates do we have in a teacher preparation program, and how can we make them better? *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching*, 4(1), 106-119.
- Stuart, C. & Thurlow, D. (2000). Making it their own: Pre-service teachers' experiences, beliefs, and classroom practices. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51, 113 – 121.

- Thomas, J., & Pederson, J. (2003). Reforming elementary science teacher preparation: What about extant teaching beliefs? *School Science Math, 103*(7), 319 - 330.
- U.S. Department of Education, International Affairs Office, Attracting, Developing, and Retaining Effective Teachers, Washington, DC, 2004.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

About the Authors

Dr. Emily Williams is an Assistant Professor with New Mexico Highlands University. She holds a Master of Arts degree in Special Education from the University of Florida. She earned an Education Specialist in School Psychology, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education, both from New Mexico State University. As a k-12 educator in Florida and New Mexico, she taught in both general and special education and served as a school psychologist for several years. Her research interests include teacher efficacy, parents and families of children with disabilities and on-line education.

Dr. Elissa Poel is Associate Professor Emerita in the Department of Special Education/Communication Disorders at New Mexico State University and served as the Director of Field Practices for Special Education. Her teaching responsibilities and research interests included teacher preparation, inclusive practices, international student teaching, specific learning disabilities, and assistive technology. Dr. Poel served as the Co-PI for Reaching the Pinnacle (RTP), a program, funded by the National Science Foundation, that recruited, mentored, and retained individuals with disabilities in college/university STEM programs throughout New Mexico and far west Texas. Dr. Poel served as an active member of the board for the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Her mission has been and continues to be to improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities.

Miguel M. Licona is a Professor in the Curriculum and Instruction Department at New Mexico State University. His research interests include transformative pedagogies in education using a critical multicultural perspective. His recent publications deal with teaching and learning on the U.S.-Mexico border, distance education, multicultural and science education.

Dr. Elsa C. Arroyos is an Associate Professor in the Counseling & Educational Psychology Department at New Mexico State University. She is also the training director for the Specialist-level School Psychology Program. Her research interests include issues related to education and teaching in relation to mentoring as well as multicultural competencies related to school psychology.

Alma Rodriguez earned a Bachelors' degree in Spanish and Psychology, a Masters' degree in Counseling and Educational Psychology, and an Educational Specialist degree in School Psychology. She worked as a school counselor with elementary and middle school students in New Mexico and Texas and as an associate school psychologist in New Mexico and Colorado. As a graduate assistant in the Special Education Department at New Mexico State University,

she taught both undergraduate and graduate courses. Currently she works in New Mexico with K-5 students as an elementary school counselor.