. . . But I Love Children:
Changing Elementary Teacher Candidates' Conceptions of the Qualities of Effective Teachers

By Nancy Brown, Pamela Morehead, & Julia B. Smith

Effective teaching, as endorsed by the current standards movement, describes an effective teacher as one who is "highly-qualified." No Child Left Behind (2001) defines a highly qualified teacher as one who possesses a bachelor's degree, full state certification or licensure, and prove that they know each subject they teach. Essentially, policymakers have defined the qualities of effective teachers only in terms of the teachers' academic abilities.

In contrast, research suggests that teacher candidates' conceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers may vary greatly from the teacher quality definitions provided by current high stakes policies (Book, Byers & Freeman, 1983; Reeves & Kazelskis, 1985). As early as the 1980s, Lasley (1980) identified a fundamental belief held by teacher candidates regarding the characteristics of a good teacher is that of "liking children." Moreover, Laskey claimed that teacher candidates indicated that liking children is a sufficient condition to be an effective teacher. Since that time, other researchers have consistently supported the notion that prospective elementary teachers identify effective teachers in terms of interpersonal skills such as "caring" and "loves children" (Walls, Nardi, Von Minden & Hoffman, 2002; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). These commonly held perceptions

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visualize the elementary teacher as the warm, fuzzy female who nurtures the child through the learning and growing process. This familiar understanding of the attributes of a quality teacher, in contrast to the standards movement description, creates a contradiction for teacher candidates. On the one hand, teacher candidates are informed in teacher preparation courses that knowledge is paramount, yet they conceive of personal attributes as critical to becoming a good teacher.

To reconcile these seeming conflicts, we propose that critical reflection combined with public discourse and broader definitions of quality teaching are needed in teacher education coursework. The Teaching Commission (2004) released the report, *Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action,* stating that our nation's most valuable profession is teaching. The Commission's report includes high standards for teacher performance and student achievement. Lest we rely solely on the public view and definition of teacher quality, it is time we address teacher candidates' personal conceptions, assisting them in joining the personal with the public. Teacher candidates must give up dimensions of their personal selves as they conform to public expectations of 'teacher' in forming their professional identity (Britzman, 1991). We define professional identity as a connection between the perceived external requirements for the role of teacher and the self-conceptualization associated with that role. Our goal is to assist teacher candidates in developing richer professional identities that include active pursuit of new knowledge, high quality teaching practices along with their ingrained notion of a caring teacher.

Teachers' conceptions of the characteristics of a quality teacher are well-formed before they enter teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2003; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992). In fact, there is agreement in the literature that teacher candidates enter teacher education programs with predetermined conceptions, visual images, and beliefs about teaching (Danielewicz, 2001; Kagen, 1992; Knowles, 1992; Mahlios & Maxson, 1995). Lortie (1975) contended that teacher candidates develop images about teaching during their "apprenticeship of observation" which occurs throughout their earlier school experiences. Lortie does acknowledge that there are important limitations to the apprenticeship of observation in that the student only sees the teacher from their own vantage point. Subsequently, students are not aware of the decision making process of the teacher, nor are they aware of the professional identity the teacher has developed over time (Alsup, 2006).

As teacher candidates progress through the teacher education program, the preconceived images serve as filters to their learning (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 1997). These conceptions influence their teaching practices as student teachers and beginning inservice teachers (Pajares, 1992; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984). Additionally, changing these early conceptions can be extremely difficult (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Therefore, connecting these two conceptions of a quality teacher provides a challenge for teacher educators.

As teacher educators and researchers, we bring a Vygotskian perspective

to this work focusing on contextual support provided to teacher candidates for developing a professional identity (Abdal-Haqq, 1998; Richardson, 1997). The Vygotskian perspective suggests continuity rather than a tension exists between the development of a personal and professional identity as students construct new understandings. This transformative relationship between personal and professional conceptions of a quality teacher is important to developing competency knowledge demanded by the political mandates and public pressure. The professional identity or the individual's personal (internal) conceptions of a quality teacher must ultimately develop in harmony with public (external) conceptions. The idea is that the two are joined in a dialectical relationship (Jenkins, 1997) that can and should be explored within the confines of a teacher preparation program. We chose to situate this dialectic in terms of our students' development of a professional identity in order to continue and extend the conversation regarding the important role teacher education programs hold in this process.

In teacher preparation courses, one aim is to critically evaluate public conceptions of quality teaching and scaffold the learner's understanding as the learner begins to personalize his/her professional identity. Additionally, the teacher candidate, through social contexts (e.g., discussions with peers and in-service teachers, and field experiences), can find an appropriate public expression of his/her evolving professional identity. As the teacher candidate moves through the teacher education program, s/he develops conceptions of teaching that are both publicly and personally meaningful (Harré, 1986). Goodson (1995) argues that a teacher's identity is an ongoing project, constructed through the use of personal stories and narratives but responding to the practical circumstances of external requirements, both through pre-service training and later in the workplace. Through guided participation (Rogoff, 1990), the teacher candidate's conceptions of a good teacher ultimately direct the individual's efforts toward acquiring professional knowledge throughout his/her coursework and field experiences.

Within the context of teacher preparation courses and various settings of field experiences, teacher candidates continue to construct an image of self as future teacher while constructing and integrating an emerging professional identity (Danielewicz, 2001). Additionally, the development of competency knowledge is complex and personal (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Elbaz, 1983) and continues throughout the teaching career (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

To this end, we designed two integrated courses linking instructional design with understanding the diverse needs of children. These courses challenge teacher candidates' conceptions about the qualities of good teachers by allowing them to develop professional identities in terms of caring about students *and* assuming the conception of a good teacher as knowledgeable about content. The first course focuses on instructional design and assessment while the second concerns building a classroom community for diverse learners. By integrating these two courses, we believe students learn that qualities of effective teachers are defined by both

academic achievement and caring. Developing a professional identity with this end requires continuous sharing of experiences and perspectives with peers, teacher educators, and practicing teachers with whom our students do fieldwork. Thus, all of the coursework for these integrated classes are purposefully designed to enhance reflection and critical discussion that develop the foundation for the teacher candidates' emerging professional identity. These exchanges provide meaning to their experiences thereby assisting teacher candidates in their conceptions of teacher quality. In this study we examine the changes in teacher candidates' perceptions of a "good teacher" during their term of enrollment in these courses.

The goal of our study is to understand changes in teacher candidates' thinking to include qualities that promote academic accountability while allowing them to remain caring and committed to children. To this aim we ask the following question: In what ways do changes occur in prospective elementary teachers' conceptions of the qualities of an effective teacher during a term of coursework and field experiences?

Method

This study examined changes in prospective elementary teachers' conceptions related to their descriptions of the qualities of effective teachers. In order to gain an understanding of teacher candidates' conceptions of quality teachers we attempted to garner information from both qualitative and quantitative data derived through multiple measures. Qualitative data for the study were gathered through pre and post questionnaires and pictorial representational drawings. Quantitative data were gathered from the questionnaire using nonparametric measures.

This study took place at a state-supported comprehensive institution serving over 14,000 students. With approximately 300 elementary education undergraduates graduating per year, the elementary education program is considered a substantial program both within the university and across the country.

Participants

There were 123 elementary education students (111 Caucasian, 2 Black, 2 Latino/a, 1 Asian American, 1 Native American, and 6 non-report) who elected to participate in the research study. This number (n=123) represented total participation of six out of eight sections of the courses. Two students did not complete the courses and their data were dropped. The participants were overwhelmingly female (108 female, 15 male). The majority of the students were traditional with 68 being under 23 years of age and 45 students who were non-traditional. Most of the participants attended suburban public schools (102), while 17 attended rural schools and 13 attended urban schools. The participants all enrolled in the two integrated courses, (1) Instructional Design and Assessment and (2) Managing the Classroom Community for U.S. Diverse Learners. These courses are the first two general pedagogy courses in the elementary education program, with enrollment

limited to 25 per paired sections. Typically students enroll in these courses in their junior or senior year, after completing an introductory public education course and being accepted into the elementary education program. The goal of integrating these courses is to help our teacher candidates build connections between the students they teach and the knowledge needed to design comprehensive instruction.

Data Sources

We administered a pre-course questionnaire to the participants during the first week of classes, asking them to identify and rank order their conceptions of a good teacher (see appendix A). The questionnaire also requested demographic information including gender, type of school attended (e.g., rural, suburban, urban, other) and factors contributing to their conceptions. We prompted the participants with the following question: How would you describe a good teacher? We then asked students to list, describe and rank order these qualities. During the last week of classes, we administered a post-course questionnaire again asking the participants to identify their conceptions of a good teacher in rank order.

Participants also created a pre- and post-course pictorial representation of a 'good teacher' for analysis. After an introductory discussion on attributes of teachers, we asked the participants to draw a picture of their image of a good teacher. Students were reminded that representations could be symbolic and that good drawing skills were not needed for this activity. Participants frequently commented on how much fun drawing was in this exercise. We encouraged students to provide detail in their representations. We provided a minimum of one hour for students to create their picture representations. Following this activity, we had the participants meet in small groups to discuss their drawings and report back to the class. Field notes from these discussions provided interesting insight regarding the teacher images created by the students.

Data Analysis

Researchers in this study included two professors who were the instructors for the courses, one professor who did not teach either of the courses, and a graduate research assistant. The researchers performed a mixed method analysis to examine the data. The first phase of data analysis consisted of a phenomenological mode of inquiry, to look for meaning by initially looking at students' written descriptions of qualities of a good teacher (Patton, 1990). We used inductive analysis to determine emerging categories from the descriptions. Inductive analysis (Patton, 1990) means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 390). According to Dey (1993), categories occur through "the process of finding a focus for the analysis, and reading and annotating the data" (p. 99). This method led to the identification of 6 distinct themes related to the students' conceptions of a good teacher: Professionalism, Student Centered, Knowledge, Classroom Management,

Personal Attributes, and Teaching Skills. Working independently, the instructors and researchers identified the themes based on our own interpretation of the data. We used field notes, and researcher recollections of the class discussions about the meanings the participants attributed to both their drawings and the prompted questions to inform these interpretations. We compared the initial themes and negotiated reconciliation by discussing meaning and comparing our field notes. When we felt comfortable with the themes, we gave the themes to a third independent researcher (our graduate research who was not a course instructor) with the instruction to code data using the themes and confirm or reject the usefulness of these themes in analyzing the data. Finally, we (all researchers) met as a research group and agreed to the final coding themes.

Using the identified themes, all researchers independently performed an analysis of the pictorial representations of a good teacher. We coded these data for identifiers that either supported or refuted the themes that emerged from the questionnaire data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this way, the pictorial representation data provided in-depth meaning and an additional layer of understanding of the students' conceptions. Secondly, these data provided additional reliability by confirming or rejecting interpretations. The researchers read and coded 100% of the data separately using an interpretational analysis (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996). This process included a constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987) to insure reliability.

As the last phase of data analysis, we performed the Wilcoxon signed ranks test (Lehmann & D'Abrera, 2006) to determine whether participants' views shifted significantly over the course of the data collection period. This analysis compares the rank assigned to different characteristics by a person over time to determine (first) whether there has been substantive change in the rank, and (second) whether the amount of shift was sufficient to support the argument of significant change over time. These hypotheses are tested with a z-test, examining difference in rank over time by person.

Findings

Our study developed findings based on three main foci. First, we describe the pre-course conceptions of a good teacher—the conceptions held by students about good teaching before starting our program. Second, we examine changes from the incoming conceptions as determined by a shift (or lack thereof) in students' expressed "most important characteristics" of good teachers, as identified by our six coded categories. Finally, we examine the shift (or lack thereof) in rank order of these categories from pre- to post- course assessment.

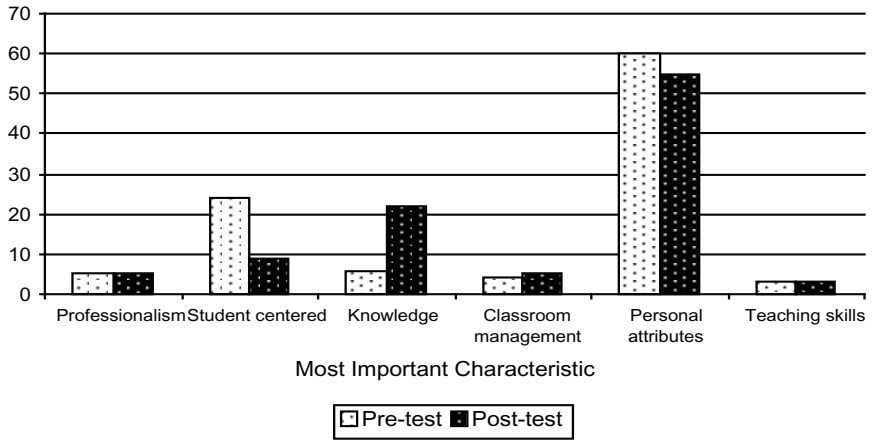
Conceptions about Good Teaching Held Prior to Coursework

Six themes represent the responses our students provided on the surveys: Professionalism, Student Centered, Knowledge, Classroom Management, Personal

Attributes, and Teaching Skills. Overwhelmingly, the theme of personal attributes dominated the responses; nearly 100% of our participants cited one or more descriptors of that category (see Figure 1). Descriptors within this category contained statements such as: "caring," "enthusiastic," "compassionate," "understanding," "patient," "empathetic," and "kind." There were 57 different descriptors that portrayed varying aspects of personal attributes. Student centeredness appeared as the next most chosen category. Descriptors included "trust," "believes in students," "encouraging," and "loves children." The category of professionalism listed 28 descriptors, which represented statements such as: "organized," "dependable," "prepared," and "works hard." Teaching skills, our fourth category, represented 23 different descriptors with comments such as: "differentiates instructions," "uses a variety of methods." and "uses hand-on activities." The fifth category, classroom management, had 15 descriptors including: "developing a classroom community," "effective classroom management," and "has control." The last category we called knowledge. Of particular interest, was our realization that the students did not attempt to clearly define knowledge. The five descriptors in this category included: "informed," "understand what is taught," and "uses resources." What is also interesting to note in these findings is that the number of descriptors in the category of personal attributes, far exceeds the number of descriptors in each of the other categories.

Pictorial representation data supported the findings of the survey. The pictures clearly depicted personal attributes in the form of symbols. Examples include symbols of hearts, open arms, flowers and teaching artifacts (e.g., rulers, apples) that teachers held in their arms. In our discussions with teacher candidates, we discovered that students provided rationales for their depictions. For example, students described

Figure 1:
Students' View of the Most Important Characteristic for Good Teaching before and after Course-Taking



drawing eyeglasses on teachers as representing "intelligence" or "smart." Several students describe rulers as representing the teaching of content (i.e., mathematics) and pointers as "directed teaching" were the teacher was "in charge" and/or "center stage." Other students justified the smiling images as reflective of "caring" and "loving." Halos were described as meaning "good" and "patient" qualities. Participants drew desks, chairs and chalkboards in straight lines describing their drawings as representative of classroom management organization. Many participants literally drew "bags of tricks" which were vaguely described as fun activities teachers used to survive the day. We also found the pictorial representations especially striking in that the teachers' images were clearly Caucasian, pretty, thin and female (see Figure 2). In other words, teacher candidates basically drew a smiling, self-portrait. The male participants drew pictures of male, Caucasian, smiling, physically fit teachers.

Changes in Important Characteristics of Good Teachers

In order to examine whether students' views about good teaching characteristics changed over the course of instruction, we first examined whether there was a systematic change in the characteristic identified as most important. The Wilcoxon signed ranks test showed no systematic shift for this characteristic ($Z = -0.39$, $p = 0.70$). Figure 2 shows the percent of respondents who chose each category as the most important teaching characteristic, with light bars representing pre- test responses and dark bars representing post- course responses.

More than half of the students (53%) identified the same characteristic at both time points. For the remaining students who did evidence a shift, the most common change observed was from identifying student centered characteristics as most important to identifying knowledge as most important (14%). These findings prompted us to further examine the ranking given to each identified category, as there could have been shifts within rankings that did not appear at the most important position.

Figure 1:
Participant Pre-Course Pictorial Representation of a 'Good Teacher'

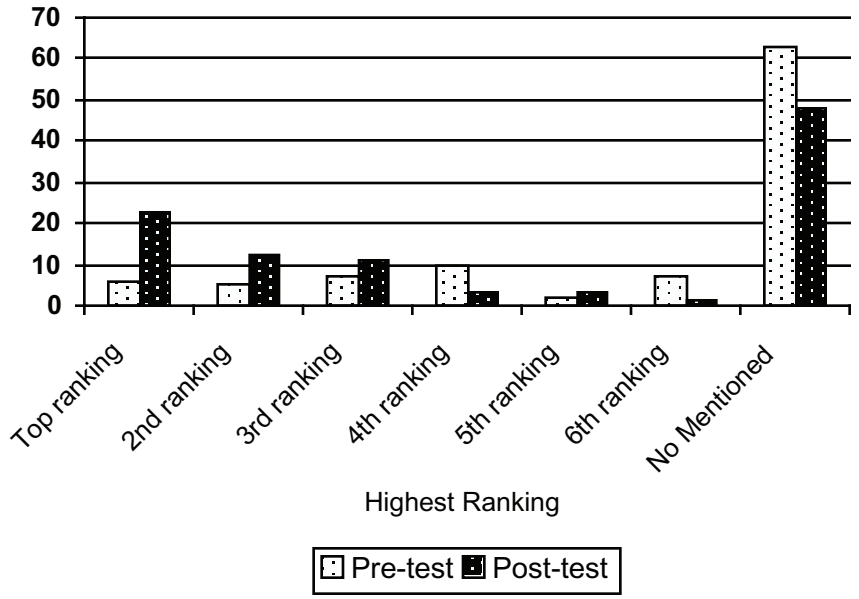
Shift in Rank Order of Important Characteristics of Good Teachers

For both pre- and post- course assessments, the data used to identify important characteristics could also be understood to identify a ranking for each characteristic. As such, for each student, the top six characteristics described were then recoded according to the highest rank given to that characteristic by that student. For example, if a student identified the most important characteristic of teaching to be teaching skill, then caring about kids, then professionalism, that student's coding for teaching skill would be 1 (top), personal attributes would be 2, professionalism would be 3, and the other three characteristics would be identified with the code of 9 (not mentioned). Thus, each characteristic has a rank order that can be compared in a paired sample structure using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to determine whether a significant shift had occurred in student ranking.

Figure 3 shows the shift in rank for knowledge characteristics from pre- to post- course assessment. Again, each bar represents the percent of respondents who indicated that ranked position. Using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test, the pre-posttest pairing reveals a significant shift in students' highest ranking position of knowledge towards the higher ranks ($Z=-3.69$, $p < .001$).

These comparisons revealed 35% of the participants maintained their ranking of knowledge from pre- to post- course assessment while roughly half of the cases (54%) raised their ranking for knowledge to a higher level from pre- to post- course

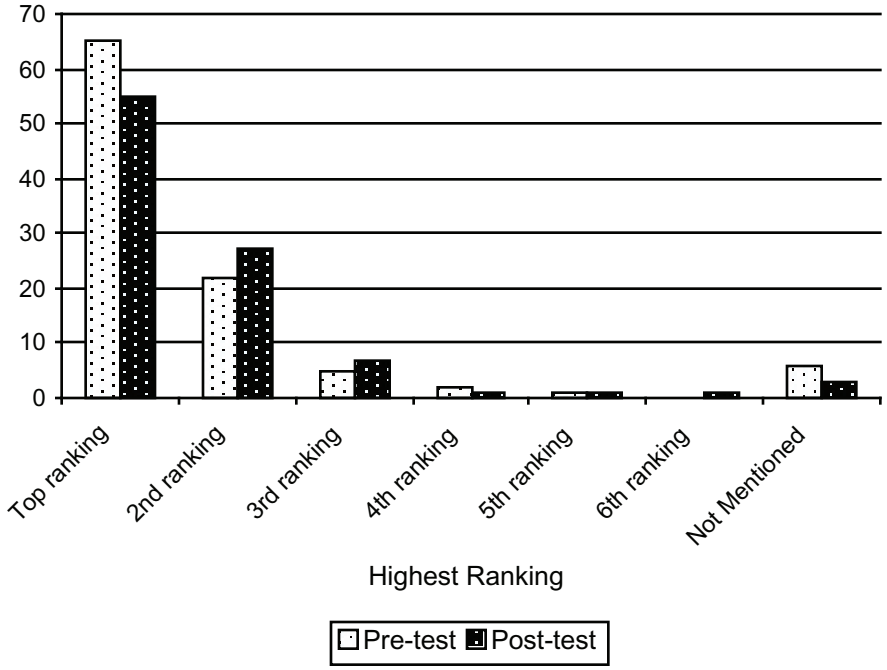
Figure 3:
Change in Highest Ranking Position of Knowledge Characteristics



assessment. The percents shown in Figure 3 demonstrate that the largest shift in ranking occurred from no mention of knowledge at the pre-test, shifting to the highest rankings (top through third) at the post-test assessment. A similar shift occurred for professional characteristics, a characteristic that also shifted significantly from not mentioned to being ranked in the middle of the rankings.

By comparison, Figure 4 shows the lack of shift in rank for personal attribute characteristics from pre- to post- course assessment. Again, each bar represents the percent of respondents who indicated that ranked position. Using the Wilcox on Signed Ranks test, the pre-posttest pairing reveals no significant shift in students' highest-ranking position of personal attributes ($Z = 1.44$, $p = .15$). These comparisons revealed 70% of the participants maintained their ranking of personal attributes from pre- to post- course, while the rest were evenly split between raising and lowering their ranking from pre- to post- course assessment. The percents shown in Figure 4 demonstrate that the largest shift in ranking occurred from placing personal attributes at the top ranked position at the pre- course assessment, shifting to the second position at the post- course assessment. However, this change was not large enough overall to establish a statistically significant shift in ranked position.

Figure 4:
Change in Highest Ranking Position of Personal Attributes Characteristics



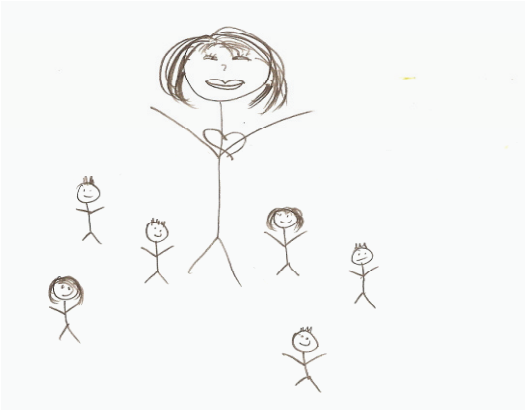
The post- course pictorial representations support this static yet interesting finding. Teacher candidates continued to draw happy, pretty, Caucasian, women who wear hearts and big smiles (see Figure 5).

Discussion

This study contributes to emerging research connecting teacher quality to the development of professional identity. We live in times where professional identity is being defined in terms of "highly-qualified," however this characterization contrasts with common views of teachers as warm, encouraging, and friendly. An understanding of the experiences teacher candidates have that shape their professional identities provides important information about how personal and public conceptions influence that development. It is not that the public definition of a good teacher is wrong. Who does not want a teacher who is highly proficient in content knowledge and equipped to design lessons that prepare our children for the 21st century? The problem lies in teacher candidates' perception of what the societal norms are of a good teacher. They simply do not see their conception as one sided or problematic (Weber & Mitchel, 1995). These inexperienced and often naive teacher candidates are stuck in the social norms that were apart of a society when they were elementary and secondary students (Alsup, 2006).

The prospective students are not incorrect. Who does not want a teacher who is warm and loving? Our challenge as teacher educators is to help these teacher candidates meld the two different identities, the public notion of a knowledgeable professional and the personal notion of a caring professional. We must also redefine knowledge as a multi-dimensional understanding that extends beyond the contemporary public definition of simply content knowledge as defined by passing

Figure 5:
Participant Post- Pictorial Representation of a 'Good Teacher'



tests and taking content courses. This broader definition includes content knowledge along with many other aspects of knowledge including those that make up the professional repertoire of the domains of teacher knowledge (Shulman, 1986). Along with subscribing to a broad definition of knowledge we must recognize and incorporate the common definitions of a good teacher as caring and concerned for children.

Throughout the process of this research project we strove to advance the understanding about preparing elementary teachers to participate in the conversation between public and common definitions of a "good teacher" in order to redefine professional identity. As our research indicates, coursework that includes emphasis on the development of a professional identity that integrates both the public and common understanding must include more reflection and discourse for teacher candidates. Reflections and critical discussions that scaffold new understandings about the knowledge teachers must possess in today's classroom will ultimately help future teachers develop the foundation for a personally meaningful professional identity that will continue to grow throughout a teacher's career. The resulting professional identity will benefit the learning and achievement of all students within our classrooms.

Our attempt at designing courses that would overtly provide a place to investigate this dialectic is only partially fulfilled. Armed with the knowledge gained from this study we are better able to design instruction that directly impacts professional identity. Without providing for teacher candidates' conceptions, we allow these young professionals to measure our courses against their image and we come up short. Increasing their understanding of the greater demands placed on teacher educators in today's diverse classrooms helps them understand that knowledge transcends certification and state teacher testing requirements as they consider their professional identity.

The results of this study should be interpreted within the boundaries of the stated context. Developing a professional identity is a career long process. This project provides a window into the beginning of that process. Teacher candidates within this study were involved in these courses early in their program, and limited to a specific course. Other elementary certification programs might yield different results based on different course designs, placement in program and university population. Further research across different contexts including programs for secondary teachers is needed. Nor can we as course instructors and researchers remove ourselves from the positionality of our dual roles. A self-study of our instruction might help clarify that possible limitation. Lastly, future research should address the implication that changing teacher candidates' conceptions of professional identity will yield change in their future practice to include elements of both public and personal conceptions of effective teachers.

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Appenix A

1. Name_____Date_____

2. Instructor's name_____

3. Section number_____

4. Age: 20-22___ 23-25___ 26-28___ 29-31___ 32-35___ 36-40___ over 40___

5. Gender M F

6. Ethnicity _____

7. Experiences working with children and ages of children. (please list)

8. What type of schools did you attend? Urban? Rural? Suburban?
Please provide some descriptive details (public; private; charter; etc.).

9. Did you like school? Why or Why not?

10. Please reflect on the following questions:

a. How would you describe a good teacher? List/describe and rank order qualities.

b. How would you describe a bad teacher? List/describe and rank order

c. What factors influenced your descriptions?