

## Separating the Chaff of Bureaucracy from the Grain of Pedagogy: Creating Quality New Teachers in the Age of Accountability

By Mellinee Lesley, Donna Gee, & Marian Matthews

*Degrees in education should be abolished and schools of education should be abolished.... Because, in my view, education is not a discipline, it is an artificially constructed area of study.... I would do away with elementary education. (Policy maker interview, 2004)*

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Schools of teacher education have been under attack for years (e.g., Abell Foundation, 2001; Ballou & Podgursky, 1999; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Conant, 1963; Goodlad, 1990). The state legislator quoted above is merely parroting what many others, even those with a much more significant background in education, have said. The Levine Report (2006) provided a historical perspective of such criticism:

Since their earliest days, university-based teacher education programs have been the subject of persistent criticism and prejudice. They have been disparaged by academic colleagues for being nothing more than vocational training for women, not an intellectual matter appropriate to the university. Their students and faculty were

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denigrated for not being of university quality in terms of their credentials, social class, race, and gender. (p. 23)

Those of us in the field of teacher education perpetually contend with this disparagement and denigration. Levine's report also cited negative findings that the research exposed:

Today, the teacher education curriculum is a confusing patchwork. Academic instruction and clinical instruction are disconnected. Graduates are insufficiently prepared for the classroom. And research on teacher education is criticized by the academic community for its low quality and is ignored by policy makers and practitioners. (p. 26)

Some of this criticism is certainly warranted and supported by the research, but those of us in the field of teacher education recognize the complexity of factors that affect teacher effectiveness and the learning outcomes of the children in U.S. schools.

The attack against teacher education has seemed increasingly focused and pervasive in recent years with the national government joining the discussion. The 2002 U.S. Secretary of Education's Annual Report on Teacher Quality (U.S. Department of Education) called for the dismantlement of teacher education programs and their "burdensome requirements" since they were irretrievably "broken" (cited in Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002, p. 1). Some reports (e.g., Levine, 2006; Teaching Commission Report, 2004) have called for the total revamping of college teacher preparation programs in order to better prepare teachers to increase student learning.

Naturally, such criticism is alarming to those of us in teacher education. Our primary purpose is to prepare quality teachers. Yet, as indicated by Darling-Hammond (2006), "it is now widely accepted that teacher quality is a critical component of a successful education, [though] there is little agreement about how to fill the nation's classrooms with teachers who can succeed at the more challenging mission of today's schools" (p. 5). Rather than calling for a dismantlement of teacher education, a 2005 Secretary's Report attempted to help educators come to that agreement by highlighting "the essential principles for building outstanding teacher preparation programs in the 21st century and [focusing] on the critical teaching skills all teachers must learn" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. iii).

As faculty members at a regional state university for several years and highly involved with revamping our teacher education program, we were anxious to study the effectiveness of our program in preparing quality teachers. The university where our study originated is considered a Masters 1 level institution under the Carnegie definition and is also one of those universities providing the most teachers for our nation's schools, as Levine has reported (2006). In this study, we also wanted to clarify for ourselves just what constituted *quality* and how those who were involved with our program viewed quality teaching. We obtained the information we sought by interviewing a representative sample of recent graduates and the administrators

who hired them to determine whether we were providing “the critical teaching skills all teachers must learn” in order to help them become quality teachers capable of providing a successful education to their students. In addition, we interviewed a sample of policymakers because we wanted to examine further the views of those who establish educational policy since education has gone through many changes lately as a result of policies enacted at both the state and national levels.

Teacher education has been a recent target of educational legislation, but we think the following study points to the numerous influences over the quality of teaching in K-12 settings and sheds light on the disparity of understanding about such influences on teacher effectiveness. Through the findings in this study, we hope to understand the disparate perceptions regarding the factors that both contribute to and hinder the development of a quality teacher.

Teacher quality has been identified as the most significant predictor of student success (Center for Teaching Quality, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; Milken, 1999; Rice, 2003; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 1998). According to the Teaching Commission Report (2004), “the public agrees that improving the quality of teaching is the most important thing the nation can do to strengthen public education” (p. 17). In the Secretary of Education’s 2005 annual report to Congress, it is seen as the highest national priority (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Yet, no consensus exists in educational research over the teacher characteristics that are readily identified with teacher quality (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004).

Despite the discussion that has taken place in the press, the political sector, and in professional journals about what such mandates as the No Child Left Behind Act and its attendant Reading First initiative mean for education and teacher preparation, teachers’ voices have largely been omitted (Center for Teaching Quality, 2008; Clift & Brady, 2005). Given the significant amount of discussion focused on teacher quality, the omission of these voices is concerning. One teacher from our study noted:

[As] teachers we know what works in the classroom and to have somebody outside, and when I say outside, I’m talking about somebody that’s not in this classroom, come in and tell us to do things that through experience we know are not the best things to do for our children, but we don’t have a choice about that;...that’s an obstacle; that’s really frustrating, and it—in a bad sense—it makes us as teachers cheat—you know we learn to cheat the system—and I don’t think that’s quality, but we feel obligated to do things that don’t make sense. (Teacher interview, 2004)

The quote above attests to the fact that new teachers are under increased pressure to follow mandates designed to foster quality teaching that originated from outside of the classroom. Of this phenomenon, the Center for Teaching Quality *Teaching-Solutions* Report (2008) noted:

There is ample evidence that top-down mandates have not improved student

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learning or “teacher-proofed” our schools. The public is coming to see that you cannot teach children from the halls of Congress or the cubicles of education publishing houses. (p. 13)

As we interviewed new teachers about their experiences, we became interested in better understanding what supports quality educational practices both through what we do in the teacher education program and once teachers embark on their careers. Certainly the teacher education program has some influence, but other factors also count toward quality teaching. Zumwalt and Craig (2005) identified a number of these factors, which included “workplace context factors, teacher dispositions and personality traits” (p. 187).

### **University Level Teacher Preparation Program Responsibility**

As teacher educators, we take seriously our responsibility to develop quality teachers for the public schools and the world. In our program we defined quality teachers as those who are transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) who view themselves as learners, risk takers, researchers, questioners, problem solvers, leaders, active participants in local educational settings as well as in the larger society, collaborators with peers, and creators of a nurturing classroom and a school community that engages and enhances the learning of all (students and educators alike) and leads to an equitable society. We encourage our students to put educational theories into practice in their classrooms and analyze them against the experience of teaching. As we worked with pre-service teachers year after year, we heard our students profess their readiness to work for the greater good of humanity, to defend the rights and engage the responsibilities of their students, and to instill democratic principles within their classrooms, while at the same time encouraging the highest level of learning possible. We were heartened by such declarations, but we were not sure we were seeing this happen as we observed the teaching practices of students who graduated from our program.

We wondered what impact the teacher education program had on these new teachers. What did they think constituted quality teaching and what, in fact, encouraged teachers to become quality teachers, both in the education program where we taught and afterwards as they began their new teaching careers? We also wondered what hindered new teachers as they tried to engage in quality teaching practices. These were our initial questions as we began to study quality teaching and the implications for our teacher education program.

### **Context of the Study**

Since many of our former students had obtained teaching positions in a common region, we focused our study on elementary-level graduates of a branch campus of

our state university located in a small city in the Southwestern United States. During our tenure at the university the state reorganized its licensure requirements for elementary teachers. All three of the researchers involved in this project redesigned the elementary teacher education program to one that was more school based (incorporating professional development schools) and more focused on the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) Standards (1992) and the needs of schools, as indicated by focus groups of administrators who hired our students. A teacher shortage exists in this rural state; and because of the size of some of the rural schools, some teachers teach in areas for which they are not considered “highly qualified.” As is the case with many other universities, we developed alternative pathways to licensure for those who already have bachelor degrees.

### **Methodology**

In order to address our questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 1998; Spradley, 1980) with: (1) new teachers who had graduated from our institution, (2) school administrators in the region where the new teachers were employed, and (3) policymakers responsible for developing state-level educational policies being implemented within the region where the new teachers were working. (Please see appendix A for a sample of the interview questions.)

We used purposive sampling (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982) to choose the individuals in all the groups. Our sample selections for teachers were based on the following criteria: (1) all teachers in the study had graduated from the elementary education program taught in the off-campus site within 3 years of the start of the study and (2) the teachers represented a cross-section of the total population of graduates in the program in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender. The new teachers also represented a diverse cross-section in terms of the grade levels they taught, their level of academic performance in the teacher preparation program, their teaching situations, and the level of support received through continued involvement with the university after graduation. Of the 18 teachers who were asked to participate in the study, 17 participated. The teachers were employed in the same region in which the university is located. In order to compensate for any bias and to encourage the teachers to be as honest as possible about the effects of their university program, the two researchers who had no contact with these individuals in the university program were the ones who conducted the interviews with the teachers. (See Table 1 for more specific information about the participants in the study.)

The five administrators we chose to interview—four elementary principals and one early childhood administrator—were varied in their association with our teacher education program. All of the five administrators who were asked participated in the study. We selected the five administrators because they were employed by local school districts that hired large numbers of graduates from the teacher education program. The policymakers were varied in terms of their experience with

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the field of education as well as the positions they held in public office. All of the six policymakers who were asked chose to participate in the study. The policymakers included three legislators, two Professional Standards Commission Members, and

**Table One**  
**Description of Respondents for the Study**

| Participants  | Number Interviewed   | Descriptors   | Demographics  |
|---|--|---|---|
| New Teachers<br>(1-3 years out of our elementary education program with Elementary Education license) | 17 total:<br>8 grades K-4<br>10 grades 5-8<br>(2 had taught at both levels)<br>1 high school (alternative license in ELED)             | Level of support from university:<br>1 at University PDS<br>4 taking graduate classes;<br>6 with principals associated with EEd program;<br>11 had no contact with university after graduation  | 2 males, 15 females;<br>6 Hispanic, 11 White;<br>14 small urban,<br>3 rural;<br>3 private,<br>16 public<br>(2 had taught at both) |
| Administrators  | 4 elementary principals;<br>1 early childhood administrator  | 1 PDS principal in our program;<br>1 taught classes in our program;<br>3 out of town (1 new hire from out of state)   | 3 females,<br>2 males;<br>1 Hispanic,<br>4 white;<br>4 small urban,<br>1 rural  |
| Policy Makers   | 3 legislators<br>(2 Democrats,<br>1 Republican)<br><br>1 State Department Personnel<br><br>2 Professional Standards Commission Members | All state legislators from our area who have served on various education committees;<br>1 former teacher & administrator;<br>1 farmer—no education background;<br>1 military person who had taught in military facilities, all parents of children in area public<br>7 private schools<br><br>New to state department, worked closely with elementary teachers on various projects;<br>a former high school teacher<br><br>Individuals who help set education standards in our state;<br>both former teachers | 2 males,<br>4 females;<br>1 Hispanic,<br>5 white;<br>All from small urban areas   |

one State Department of Education Personnel. We selected the policymakers because they worked in the same region in which the teachers were employed. In essence, we were interested in interviewing those administrators and policymakers representing educational stakeholders who had direct contact with the teachers in the study.

All of the interviews were conducted individually, audio taped and transcribed for purposes of data analysis. We emailed the participants the questions in advance of the interview in order to give them time to reflect about their experiences and views of quality teachers. The teachers in our study participated in a telephone interview of approximately one hour in length. Interviews with administrators and policy makers, which also were approximately an hour in length, were conducted in person. Interviews with administrators were conducted in the school building where they worked. The policy makers were interviewed in a variety of settings. Two interviews were conducted in area schools, one interview was conducted at the policy maker's office, two interviews were conducted at two different university settings, and one interview was conducted at a coffee shop.

We analyzed the interview transcripts using a process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding with the transcripts (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). Ultimately, we identified themes from the selective codes that consisted of the following: (1) quality classroom practice, (2) hindrances to quality teaching, (3) positive impacts on quality teaching, and (4) lack of alignment between the teacher preparation program and educational mandates.

To establish trustworthiness within the coding process, we coded each transcript individually then met periodically to compare our interpretations and develop consensus about the codes. During the meetings we collaboratively developed axial and selective codes. This process facilitated the development of consensus among the codes and consistency in interpretation of the selective themes. We also asked participants to engage in member checking to provide feedback regarding the accuracy of our analysis.

## **Findings**

From this analysis, we discovered four trends within the selective codes pertaining to: (1) descriptors of quality teaching, (2) hindrances to engaging in quality teaching, (3) support structures for engaging in quality teaching, and (4) evaluations of the teacher education program.

### ***Descriptions of Quality Teaching***

When we asked the participants in this study questions about quality teaching their answers were quite varied but ranged within "the mix of intellectual and personal qualities" (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005) that have been identified previously in the literature on teacher learning. The participants identified intellectual characteristics of knowledge of content and life-long learning in their responses as key to

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quality teaching. They also identified such personal characteristics as being innovative, enthusiastic, caring, committed, flexible/adaptable, and having the ability to collaborate. Each group of respondents had similar answers to the questions about quality teaching, but the administrators emphasized characteristics of caring and planning more than the other two groups.

The participants also identified a wide range of pedagogical skills based on the importance of understanding student development and teaching through active learning strategies. Several teachers were able to describe in detail specific instances of what quality teaching looked like in practice. Neither administrators nor policymakers seemed able to do this even when pressed. They simply described generalities such as “teaching the whole child, developing personal rapport with the students, and teaching in such a way that all children experience success.”

### **Hindrances to Engaging in Quality Teaching**

In response to the question pertaining to hindrances to quality teaching, three themes surfaced: mandates, isolation/lack of support, and time. The new teachers were eloquent and passionate about the obstacles present in their professional lives that inhibited their ability to do a good job with teaching. Teachers were most passionate about the mandates that restricted their freedom to teach in a way they believed was best to meet the needs of students. The other respondents also agreed that these mandates were the most common obstacle to good teaching, yet one policy maker argued for the need for high stakes testing for reasons of accountability.

#### **Mandates**

The number one hindrance to quality teaching cited by over half of the teachers was the federal, state, and district level mandates for standardized testing. Teachers cited this over three times more than any other hindrance. One teacher explained, “We’re working in a situation where testing is the only priority . . . It’s not about children at all” (Teacher interview, 2004).

According to the teachers, testing pressure leads to a teaching-to-the-test curriculum which in turn leads to superficial learning; and superficial learning is the antithesis of quality classroom practices described by teachers. Teachers feel forced to make unethical pedagogical decisions to maintain high test scores (i.e., in order to keep their jobs, they are required to teach in superficial ways that are not child-centered and don’t support the education they received in their teacher preparation program). One teacher described how this perceived pressure limited her teaching ability:

Everything is going around the test.... Before.... I was able to actually teach. I was able to think on my feet, identify the needs of students, work my curriculum off of those specific needs, and go ahead and teach what I felt the students needed



to learn. Now our hands are pretty much tied.... You're not able to be the teacher that you are capable of being or the teacher that [the teacher preparation program] tries to make you... (Teacher interview, 2004)

As a corollary to the teaching practices mandated in an effort to increase test scores, required curriculum practices did not allow for quality teaching. In particular, new teachers stated that they felt personally hampered by mandates that prescribed what to teach, which strategies to use when teaching, and when to teach specific concepts or ideas. In describing this tension between their professional judgment and mandated curricula, one teacher provided the following thoughts:

This type of teaching [i.e., quality teaching] is very demanding and takes a lot of planning, time, creativity, and enthusiasm. This is the way that I love to teach. But I don't feel that I am allowed as much time to teach this way because of the increased push for higher test scores and documentation.... It really makes me angry to think about what a quality teacher looks like and does in his/her classroom...because I feel like I used to be a quality teacher...but I don't feel like that anymore. (Teacher interview, 2004)

Learning in these situations is neither meaningful to nor internalized by students. Rather, "It's just superficial and...transitory; it's pointless" (Teacher interview, 2004). New teachers felt that within mandated curriculum, facts and figures were emphasized over teaching how to think, explore, discover, and problem solve. Student needs were not the basis for teaching. Curriculum was textbook driven and scripted and therefore insulting to good teachers. One teacher explained this phenomenon, "We're teaching the kids to learn facts and figures rather than teaching them how to think, rather than have them explore, rather than have them discover. We're just constantly pounding these facts into their heads" (Teacher interview, 2004).

Administrators did not specifically mention mandates for standardized testing as a hindrance to quality teaching, although a few principals spoke to the fact that scripted curricular programs and mandates undermined teachers' professional knowledge and sense of self-efficacy and that too many top-down administrative mandates undermined teachers' ability to make decisions about pedagogy. In regard to scripted curricular programs, one administrator stated:

I think too much scripting infers that we're absolutely idiots. And, therefore if you read these words to the children there's less chance that you're going to just mess up the whole thing. That's a horrible message. I have a lot of trouble with that. (Administrator interview, 2004)

However, administrators also mentioned that they supported teachers by purchasing programs for both math and reading that can be viewed as moderately to highly scripted.

Only two of the six policymakers interviewed identified mandated curriculum as a hindrance to quality teaching. Surprisingly three policymakers identified the emphasis on testing as a hindrance. One said, "Well the assessments are a bunch of

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hoey...[they are] totally useless when they're used in the context of that this class has to meet this goal. You don't know where that class started from" (Policymaker interview, 2004).

There was much less cohesiveness in the administrators' and policymakers' remarks with respect to the emphasis on testing than in the public school teachers' remarks. One policymaker spoke of the value of testing, both for teachers and for students:

So it starts with a test, yes, absolutely. Because if you don't have the ability to read, write, communicate, and you don't have the basic knowledge...if you don't have facts, you don't have anything. I know people who will say, 'Well, I don't do well on tests,' and I personally don't subscribe to that. I think people don't do well on tests because they don't know the answers. (Policymaker interview, 2004)

Variation in response from policymakers was prevalent throughout the interviews. Administrators and teachers were more aligned in their responses.

#### ***Isolation/Lack of Support***

Another hindrance to quality teaching cited by eight of the 17 new teachers was the feeling of professional isolation and lack of support from both fellow teachers and administrators/districts. These new teachers stated that they felt undermined by veteran teachers who made derogatory statements about beginning teachers' not being prepared for or used to teaching in the "real world." Veteran teachers were described by some of the new teachers as unhappy and professionally threatened, making for a difficult work environment in which to navigate. One new teacher offered:

Sometimes when I share some [best practices], they just look at me and say, 'Well, sweetie, you're going to learn that it's just not like that.' . . . Other teachers . . . constantly bring me down, saying, 'Okay, well, you're working too hard. You're putting in too much effort; you know, this doesn't really matter. These kids are horrible. Why do we teach?' It just drains you. I mean you start wondering, 'Well, why am I doing this?' ....It's just more mentally draining than anything else. Sometimes you find yourself not putting in the effort that you should be putting in. (Teacher interview, 2004)

This kind of negativity was extremely disheartening to the teachers who had to face it. Policymakers did not address this concern, and only one administrator spoke to this hindrance. In fact, many of the concerns of teachers were not recognized or acknowledged by policy makers or administrators.

In addition to lack of support from veteran teachers, some of the respondents spoke about the fact that they had encountered weak administrators. Administrators were criticized for not providing the appropriate feedback to teachers regarding their teaching. Only one policymaker spoke of lack of administrative support, but this was specifically in reference to support for disciplinary problems. Similarly,

one administrator referred to inconsistent or weak supervision as a hindrance to quality teaching.

Another aspect of professional isolation was the poor and/or limited professional development provided to teachers by districts. Some teachers and a few administrators spoke about the fact that what was provided often was not helpful. One policymaker addressed the lack of opportunity or funding for meaningful professional development. Both teachers and administrators commented on the fact that little assistance was provided to teachers in honing their pedagogy through appropriate strategies and research-based practice. One administrator noted, "Some of these [professional development activities] have just been terrible where the whole district has to attend. [They focus on such things as] how not to fall off a ladder. You know, that's hard to take" (Administrator interview, 2004). According to the federal government "teachers should be accountable for making sure every child reads and does math on grade level" (p. 30) as well as "lead our children into the worlds of learning to prepare them to be successful members of the workforce and contributing members of our society" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 1). With such a mandate, substantive and appropriate professional development is needed.

#### **Time**

All of the respondents talked about lack of time as a hindrance to quality teaching. New teachers uniformly stated that they operate with a constant deficit of time. As one teacher stated succinctly: "Time, time and idiotic bureaucracy and fear" (Teacher interview, 2004). Four of the five administrators, but only three of the six policymakers, specifically addressed time as an issue. A specific concern raised by teachers was lack of time for planning and collegial feedback. One teacher noted:

Right now, we don't even have a prep period. And, in the current environment, I don't know that there's a person on my team who'd have the unmitigated gall to say 'How am I doing?' (Teacher interview, 2004)

New teachers stated that they wanted to meet with their peers to discuss and share ideas about teaching; they wanted to keep current with research, but time constraints did not allow for that opportunity.

To summarize, teachers, administrators, and policymakers were asked what hindered quality teaching. As stated earlier, teachers were eloquent in identifying several specific areas that hindered quality teaching. When asked what hindered quality teaching, the only consensus between administrators was the lack of time. Policymakers and administrators had limited consensus on time-related aspects that hinder quality teaching, with only one policymaker articulating concerns similar to those provided by teachers.

## **Support Structures for Engaging in Quality Teaching**

### ***Collaboration***

From responses to the question pertaining to what supports quality teaching a complex understanding of professional collaboration emerged. Sixty-five percent of the teachers and 80 percent of administrators spoke about the powerful and positive effects of the help teachers received from their colleagues. In fact new teachers felt that working with, and learning and receiving support from their peers was the avenue that provided the most positive impact on their teaching. Of the teachers who spoke of the lack of support from some colleagues, two of those teachers also identified other teachers in the same building who were supportive and collaborative. An explanation of this contradiction is that some teachers who identified collaboration as a positive aspect worked in different schools than the teachers who identified the lack of support from peers as a hindrance.

Even though four of the policymakers also identified teachers learning from their peers as a positive impact, they did so in the context of the state-mandated “Master Teacher” program. This program was never mentioned in the comments made by the teachers.

Administrative support, which included being recognized through both formal and informal commendations, was mentioned by 67% of policymakers as positively impacting teachers. One policymaker explained:

We need to change people’s thinking so that they recognize the value of what [teachers] are doing in the classroom with their kids.... make [the teachers] feel like they are the professionals that they really are, that they’re doing one of the most valuable jobs there are; I mean [teaching] our kids. (Policymaker interview, 2004)

We noted that such “atta girl” administrative support was not identified, and therefore not emphasized, by teachers or administrators as positively impacting quality teaching. Otherwise, there was simply very limited consensus among policymakers as to what positively impacted teaching.

Support from the school district in terms of effective in-services and workshops were also cited by 9 of the 17 teachers, 4 administrators and 2 policymakers. Even though some of the in-services and workshops were not viewed as helpful, several teachers had experienced a few professional activities that were valuable in their growth as educators. Generally, the in-services or workshops that were identified as most helpful were those that were led by fellow teachers and emphasized collaboration.

Again, although teachers and administrators generally were aligned in their thinking about the way collaboration and support has a positive impact on quality teaching, policy makers were fragmented and lacking in consensus in their overall responses.

### Evaluations of the Teacher Education Program

In order to learn and improve as teacher educators, we believe it is important to examine what happens to students after they leave a teacher preparation program. In this spirit, we specifically asked our respondents about the teacher education program in order to learn what they thought about the preparation of new teachers. The majority of teachers championed their teacher preparation programs with 82% specifically stating that the programs positively influenced their teaching. However, several teachers discussed the ways that administrative and curricular restrictions limited their use of what they had learned at the university. One teacher explained:

I mean they had some really good ideas. I wish we were able to apply more of what we learned in the classroom. I rely on the knowledge [from the teacher preparation program] as much as the administration will let me. (Teacher interview, 2004)

New teachers (53%) said that they were very well-prepared in many areas but also that they needed more practical applications in such areas as classroom management, paperwork, laws, and the specifics on teaching reading.

Teachers, administrators, and policymakers uniformly recommended that courses and information presented in courses be pragmatic and *relevant*. Teachers found it most helpful when ideas were specifically tied to actual teaching especially when examining teaching or assessment methods. Some of the teachers had taken or were currently enrolled in graduate-level courses at the time of the interviews. They acknowledged that graduate courses, such as the National Writing Project Summer Institute had greatly assisted them in their growth to become quality teachers. [For more information about the National Writing Project, please see their website at [www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org).] In addition, some of the teachers found value in the knowledge received by studying educational theories and research-based practices through their university coursework. As one teacher noted:

I've been impacted by writers like Donald Graves. I've tried to build my best practices based on research.... All those books that live behind my shelf that I grab for when I say, 'Oh man, I don't have to figure this out. I know somebody has done it for me.'.... It's a quantum leap forward to have, not so much the knowledge, but the confidence you gain by being able to say, 'Well, perhaps so, but Donald Graves says that testing is not teaching.' From [this] ..., I think that you become a stronger, not necessarily a more assertive, but certainly a more confident teacher. (Teacher interview, 2004)

One administrator also noted the value of teachers participating in this kind of professional development: "Oh, if every one of my teachers had gone through the Writing Project it would make my life so much easier" (Administrator interview, 2004).

Some policymakers also spoke to the fact that students in teacher preparation programs do not understand the "real world of teaching," which can lead to the problems now experienced with teacher retention. All groups of respondents said that more involvement in field experiences would provide the "real world" experi-

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ence these students need. Most emphasized the need for a good field experience where student teachers are apprenticed by quality teachers. Seventy-six percent of the teachers specifically noted that required field experiences helped prepare them for teaching in their own classrooms. These experiences provided them a context with which to experiment and examine teaching strategies. Eighty percent of administrators also recommended field experiences.

Some teachers found a few of the courses they were required to take a complete waste of time, especially when faced with the day-to-day challenges in the classroom. One teacher summed this belief up, stating, "I don't go back on the history of education a whole lot when I am in survival mode with eighth graders" (Teacher interview, 2004). Several teachers (29%) in the study cited at least one pre-service class as being irrelevant. These were typically classes that did not have some component of field experience or a healthy dose of teaching methods.

Both administrators and policymakers mentioned a chasm between theory presented in university coursework and actual classroom practice. One policymaker offered the following criticism of university coursework, "The [university] classroom experience itself seemed very disconnected. It seemed to be heavily weighted in the theory end of things and very disconnected from the realities of the public schools" (Policymaker interview, 2004). Interestingly, teachers did not specifically mention this as an issue. Instead, they spoke to the impossibility of teaching in the manner they deemed to constitute quality teaching (and reflect the philosophy of their teacher preparation program) given the constraints they faced in the classroom setting.

The policymakers we interviewed did not specifically indicate that teacher education preparation programs positively influenced quality teaching, and this correlates with the recent criticisms being levied against teacher preparation programs at the state and federal levels. Through analysis of the policymakers' transcripts, we found that they defined their professional roles primarily as supporting the concerns of the public sector. As criticism raised in part by the 2002 NCLB Legislation fueled the public's opinion about unqualified teachers, policymakers noted the increased pressure they felt to hold teachers and teacher preparation programs responsible for student learning outcomes. One policymaker explained:

You know I left the . . . schools with one perspective, and I went into the legislature and my perspective has changed greatly because as a legislator we're just under tremendous pressure to . . . make teachers and principals and administrators much more accountable for the product they are producing. (Policymaker interview, 2004)

One aspect all three groups of respondents agreed upon was a need for enhanced communication between teacher preparation programs and schools. Policymakers spoke of the need for the university and schools to be mutually supportive and balanced in their approach to teaching. All respondents stated that once they were

in the field, little support was provided to new teachers, by either the university or their schools, to aid them in applying what they had learned in their professional coursework.

### **Educational Implications of the Study**

This study reflects the personal constructs of beginning teachers, administrators, and policymakers situated in a common geographical region regarding factors that support and hinder quality teaching. The findings of this study reveal compelling insights about the discrepant perspectives among these three groups of educational stakeholders. Whereas teachers tended to be unified in voice as to factors that supported and hindered the development of a quality teacher and quality teaching, policymakers not only differed in their responses as compared to the teachers but also had little to say in common with each other. This finding may provide some insight into the turmoil that has surrounded education and educational policy in recent years. Through communication and collaboration, perhaps teacher educators can better address what it is that beginning teachers need in order to develop into quality teachers, what it is that administrators need to support the continued development of quality in teachers, and how policymakers can support and sustain the development of quality educators and education more effectively.

We found that new teachers in the study felt limited in implementing teaching strategies and learning activities due to what they often referred to as the “testing-crazed environment” of today. Unfortunately, new teachers felt they were becoming increasingly silenced in such an atmosphere. For example, one teacher reported:

We teach in an element of fear right now. . . . we teach in an environment where we are threatened that if you do not meet these scores you can be replaced. Your principal can be replaced and just watch as they take three out at a time. (Teacher interview, 2004)

What can we do in teacher education to prepare students to become quality teachers within this kind of context? The teachers in this study did not intend to rely on mandated, scripted curriculum, but rather to implement a variety of teaching strategies to improve student learning. Their strong and independent stance emphasizes to us that teacher education programs need to assist teachers in developing a strong theoretical and pedagogical base from which they can draw as different pressures, including those from the federal and state government, confront them. This also correlates with Cochran-Smith and Fries’ (2002) caution “about the growing role of government in education policy and practice” in relation to reform in teacher education (p. 26). When new policies are mandated, teacher education needs to provide up-to-date research and interpretations to pre-service education students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers in an effort to close the communication gap between these stakeholders. Ultimately, as the role of government grows, teachers must be supported in their efforts to advocate for their professional knowledge.

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We must arm them against a powerful and oppressive system with knowledge that comes from their own experience/practice of what works with their students and that is undergirded by both theory and research.

In examining what supports quality teaching, collaboration was identified by the majority of teachers and administrators. To further build on this finding, structured forms of collaboration can be implemented through such means as collegial coaching, mentoring, and study groups. Universities can work with school districts in implementing structured collaboration as a means for teachers to be supported and grow professionally.

In addition, the study shows a disjointed portrait of emphasis and concerns among new teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Findings of the study have highlighted that those with the least amount of power—teachers—are those with the most cohesive ideas of quality teaching and the factors that support and hinder such teaching. Conversely, those with the most amount of power—policymakers—have the least cohesive ideas in these areas.

We found it extremely important that there was little to no consensus throughout the responses given by policymakers in all of the themes we identified. This finding merits further examination. In addition, few of the policymakers exhibited knowledge of what happens in the classroom based on current, on-going, first-hand experience; yet they develop legislative decisions on the premise that they understand classroom practice. Such decisions are often based on pressure from their constituents. Somehow the needs of educators and their students have not been made more evident to policymakers.

Ultimately, we feel this study points to the fact that the power ratio in educational practice needs to be adjusted. Policymakers need to respect the knowledge base of teachers and teacher educators and engage them in truly collaborative decision making when policy is being decided. As teacher educators, we need to turn the mirror on ourselves. We need to examine our practice from a developmental perspective. We need to scaffold student experiences, both in their various internships and as a part of their first teaching experiences with mentor programs. The responses from the teachers in this study and others (see Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) indicate we need to lead teacher candidates from a concrete understanding of teaching through ever-more-reflective and metacognitive levels of understanding of the teaching process.

Finally, educators must all be willing to speak out against practices that hurt K-12 students. Otherwise, teacher preparation programs are serving little more than providing grist for a bureaucratic mill. We have to use what we have learned to separate the debilitating chaff of bureaucracies from the grain of good teaching and good teacher education.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

The following are examples of questions asked during the interview with teachers.

*Mellinee Lesley, Donna Gee, & Marian Matthews*

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Similar or exact questions were asked of administrators and policymakers, with wording that was more appropriately situated to their positions. For example, administrators and policymakers were asked the following questions, which are similar to question 2: What does quality teaching look like in practice? Can you describe the practice of a quality teacher? How do you know that this teacher is a quality teacher?

1. Recently there have been conversations about the topic of quality teaching. What do you think about this?
2. Do you believe you engage in “quality” teaching? What does that look like? How do you know when you are effective? Is that the same as quality? Why or why not?
3. How are you able to engage in quality teaching? What supports you in this? What inhibits it?
4. What do you believe creates a “quality” teacher?
5. What role did your teacher preparation program play in your ability to teach?