

## **Struggles and Strategies in Teaching: Voices of Five Novice Secondary Teachers**

**By Ye He & Jewell Cooper**

As most teachers and teacher educators would concur, the journey of becoming a teacher is not always smooth. Beginning teachers bring their personal experiences and beliefs with them into teacher education programs (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; He & Levin, 2008; Levin & He, 2008; Lortie, 1975; Richardson, 2003). Consequently, their beliefs and prior experiences filter what they encounter in the teacher education program, which impacts the beliefs they develop that guide their classroom practice (Chant, 2001; Chant, Hefner, & Bennett, 2004). With shifts and changes in the social and professional context of

---

*Ye He and Jewell Cooper are professors in the Department of Teacher Education and Higher Education of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina.*

21<sup>st</sup> century education (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009), however, beginning teachers are especially challenged by conflicts between their personal beliefs and the reality of teaching, in addition to the struggles first-year teachers often encounter (Brown, 2006; Day, 1999; Veenman, 1984; Vonk, 1993).

While there is an established body of literature in teacher education that examines teachers' concerns (Adams, 1982; Boccia, 1989; Conway & Clark, 2003; Fuller, 1969; Marso & Pigge, 1989, 1995; Pigge & Marso, 1987; Watske, 2007), studies exploring the emergence of such concerns and beginning teachers' strategies to

## *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

survive during their first year of teaching is limited. Specifically, more studies that focus on the professional development of secondary teachers are needed.

In this study, we followed five secondary preservice teachers for two years during their teacher education program and their first year of teaching. Using interviews and their written narratives, we described: (1) major concerns of our preservice teachers; and (2) strategies they used to help them face their concerns. Identification of their concerns and especially the strategies they used as they better understood their students and their students' families and became more aware of their identities as teachers also shed light on reforms in current teacher education efforts.

### **Literature Review**

In 1969, Frances Fuller identified a stage-related and concerns-based model of teacher development. In this model, she sequenced concerns of beginning teachers as related to themselves, their tasks, and the impact they were having on their students. While Fuller's model has been critiqued over the years, Conway and Clark (2003) suggested that within teacher development, teachers not only experience a "journey outward" as determined by Fuller, but they also have a "journey inward" when considering the self during the period of student teaching.

There are various theories and models of teacher development that have emerged since Fuller's model (Berliner, 1988; Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Hollingsworth, 1989; Huberman, 1989; Kagan 1992; Nias, 1989; Ryan 1992; Sprinthall & Thies-Sprinthall, 1980). However, Grossman (1992) examined and acknowledged that some learning-to-teach research models on teacher education are viewed through the context of subject matter content instruction and others are explored from a moral and ethical stance. As an alternate view on professional growth in teaching, she recommended that we as teacher educators not immediately accept prevailing practices and developmental models but "challenge the lessons learned during prospective teachers' apprenticeships of observation" (p. 176). Moreover, we should encourage our teacher candidates "to ask worthwhile questions of their teaching, to continue to learn from their practice, to adopt innovative models of their teaching, and to face the ethical dimensions of classroom teaching" (p. 176). By providing strategies for thinking about teaching experiences beyond subject matter content and ethical and moral issues, teacher educators offer additional, more meaningful, and lasting preparation for professional life beyond the security of teacher education programs.

Furthermore, while many studies confirmed or built upon the stage-based theories regarding teacher development, recent research has also indicated that teacher professional identity development is more complex and context-based than previously thought (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Thus, in addition to large-scale survey studies on teacher growth (Melnick & Meister, 2008; Watzke, 2007), case studies are also a commonly used method in the examination of teacher development (Levin, 2003).

Recognizing that teachers are not often followed longitudinally over long periods of time but should be (Sleeter, 2004), Robert Bullough and his colleagues (i.e., Bullough, 1989; Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991) authored several case studies related to first year teachers' professional growth. In their attempt to explain factors that influenced beginning teachers' growth, Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1991) determined that metaphors helped to predict the success or difficulty of beginning teachers' adjustment to teaching. In essence, the more positive the teachers' metaphors, the greater the likelihood of a good adjustment to teaching would be. On the other hand, the more negative the metaphors, the more likely beginning teachers would have difficulty unless they changed their points of view.

Earlier, Bullough (1989) conducted a longitudinal case study of one teacher, Kerrie, and described her development during her first year of teaching. In this study, teaching context was one factor that was highlighted. Additionally, Bullough and Baughman (1997) chronicled the professional development of the aforementioned teacher across eight years. The study was important in that the authors shared not only changes in Kerrie's life, but also changes in her professional practice, her pedagogical thinking, and her teaching context, as well as her participation in a longitudinal study.

More recently, Levin (2003) chronicled the results of a 15-year study of how the pedagogical thinking of four elementary school teachers developed over time. Her teacher participants provided an in-depth understanding of how they think about their students' behaviors, development, and learning as well as their own learning and teaching as they intersect their personal and professional lives. Levin found these factors started out being very global but gradually became more sophisticated; also, "their thinking and actions become more congruent" (p. 283) over time. In addition, their personal and professional contexts continuously influenced the development of the professional self. These teachers constantly sought to express a "deep understanding of children's development" (p. 283), and they requested assistance from other professionals as they continually reflected on both their joys and difficulties in teaching.

Similar to the effort to depict the journey of elementary school teacher development (Levin, 2003), in this study we explored the journey of five secondary teachers for two years through their teacher education program and their first year of teaching. In addition to examining participants' developmental change in their concerns, we also uncovered the strategies they used to face those challenges.

## **Methodology**

Two major research questions guided the data collection and analysis in this study: (1) What, if any, are participants' concerns and struggles as they develop from student teachers to first-year teachers? and (2) What strategies did participants utilize to face their concerns or struggles and sustain their passion for teaching?

## *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

### **Participants**

Qualitative data were collected from five participants over the course of two years during their field experiences in a secondary teacher education program and their first year of teaching. The participants in this study included two males and three females. All of the participants were White; however, two of them proudly recognized their Italian heritage in their autobiographies. The pedagogical content subject areas included English, social studies, and history (see Table 1). At the time of the study, four of the five participants were 22-23 years of age; the fifth participant, age 28, had been a non-traditional student during his preservice teacher years. Only one of the participants was married.

As in many other teacher education programs, participants took general education college courses during their first and second year and started taking teacher education courses during their third year. In addition to the teacher education courses, participants also participated in two one-semester internships in 2006 (at least 80 hours) and one-semester of full-time student teaching in spring 2007 (450 to 500 hours) before they graduated from the program. In other words, they experienced three sequential semesters of student interaction through internships and student teaching. Table 1 provides a general description of participants' field experience settings and their final job choice for their first-year teaching from fall 2007 to spring 2008.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected through participants' autobiographies, interviews, and focus group discussions. In spring 2006, participants entered the School of Education and completed an autobiography project in one of the required education courses, where they wrote about their family backgrounds, learning experiences, and their visions for teaching. During fall 2006, all participants had internships, coordinated in conjunction with another required education course, in high school classrooms. During their internships, participants were required to conduct a biography project with one of their students whose cultural background was different from their own. This assignment required that they consult with the parents or other family members to get biographical information about the student they worked with and compare the student biography to their autobiography for similarities and differences. This ABCs project (Autobiography, Biography, and Cross-cultural Comparison) (Schmidt, 1999) provided participants with opportunities to interact with diverse student populations and their families beyond classroom settings. Participants' autobiographies, their students' biographies, and participants' cross cultural comparison assignments were used as data for this study. Interviews with individual participants were then conducted at the end of the semester.

Participants were student teachers during the following spring 2007 semester, at the end of which a focus group discussion was convened to discuss their needs and concerns. During their first year of teaching, participants wrote about their

**Table I**  
**Description of Participants**

<i>Name</i>	<i>Major</i>	<i>Background</i>	<i>Internship-Spring 2006</i>	<i>Internship/Student Teaching-Fall 2006-Spring 2007</i>	<i>First-Year of Teaching-Fall 2007-Spring 2008</i>
Bill	English	Growing up in a rural town in the western region of his state, Bill had a great high school experience, which is the main reason why he decided to become an English teacher. He is very interested in Shakespeare and wants his students to “understand and appreciate just how amazing William Shakespeare was.” (Autobiography, spring, 2006)	Rural high school. Majority White population.	Suburban school setting with an ethnically diverse population. School was renowned from football victories.	Rural high school in the mountains of the state. Student population was predominantly White. Large socioeconomic divide.
Ellen	English	Considered a “mountain girl,” Ellen was eager to leave her hometown to experience “city life,” though she desired to return to the mountains to instill a love of learning not only English but also she wanted students to be true to themselves. (Autobiography, spring 2006)	Suburban high school. Ethnically diverse; however, mostly White.	Suburban school setting with an ethnically diverse population. School was renowned for its football victories.	Rural high school in the mountain region of the state. Student population was not very ethnically diverse. Large socioeconomic divide.
Mary	Social Studies	Mary grew up in the same city where she attended high school. She is socio-politically engaged and cared about what happened to those less fortunate than she is. (Interview, fall 2006).	Urban high school. Predominately African American.	Ethnically diverse urban setting. School was not well known for its academic reputation.	Ethnically diverse middle school. Recent redistricting caused the school to become more culturally diverse than before.

*Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

**Table 1**  
**Description of Participants**  
 (continued)

<i>Name</i>	Karen			<i>First-Year of Teaching-Fall 2007-Spring 2008</i>	Flagship high school of the city. Redistricting strengthened its ethnic diversity.	Remained in the same high school as he was in for student teaching.
<i>Major</i>	History			<i>Internship/Student Teaching-Fall 2006-Spring 2007</i>	Ethnically diverse urban setting. Large international population.	Ethnically diverse urban high school. Title I status.
<i>Background</i>	Growing up in the largest city in the state, Karen is proud of her Italian heritage and her understandings of different cultural groups. As a teacher, she wants to "help students realize the power of their knowledge." (Autobiography, spring, 2006)	Urban high school. Predominately African American.		<i>Internship-Spring 2006</i>	Rural high school. Majority White population.	
		Born in the "Big Apple", Charles enjoys working with students from diverse backgrounds and views his responsibility to "get students ready for dealing with different people" (Interview, fall, 2006).				

beliefs about teaching in the format of autobiography (fall 2007); and interviews were conducted with participants, inviting them to share their experiences as first-year teachers (spring 2008). Finally, a focus group was conducted with participants, enabling them to reflect on their first-year teaching experiences. Member checking was conducted by sending interview and focus group transcripts back to each participant for their individual feedback. All the qualitative data, including participants' autobiographies, field experience reflections, individual interviews, and focus group discussions were analyzed in this study.

Data were analyzed in both a vertical and a horizontal manner (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, each participant's autobiography, interview, and focus group responses were analyzed separately as five different cases. During the second phase of analyses, constant comparative analysis was conducted to seek patterns and themes across the five cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Two researchers analyzed and coded the data independently, and memos were kept to track emerged themes and patterns. Discrepancies in coding and analysis memos were resolved through discussions between the researchers.

## **Findings**

In this section, we describe participants' reported concerns and challenges in a chronological order, first as student teachers and then as first-year teachers. Then, a comparison is conducted to synthesize participants' concerns. The strategies they used to face the challenges are then summarized.

### ***Student Teachers' Concerns and Challenges***

During their internships and student teaching, all five participants had the opportunity to interact with diverse student populations in high school settings and to teach lessons to students at different grade levels. Based on their autobiographies, individual interviews, and a focus group discussion after their student teaching, three major themes of concerns merged: (1) classroom management, (2) student motivation, and (3) parent involvement.

While all five participants commented on their concerns related to classroom management, there was a difference in the degree to which they viewed it as a challenge. Ellen, for example, in her interview before she student taught, stated explicitly that classroom management was one of her major challenges. She commented: "Classroom management is an area that I felt especially weak in, regardless of the training I had received. This is where most of my struggles lie and the main source of frustration" (Interview, fall 2006).

Mary, Karen, and Charles commented on their concerns with classroom management in terms of establishing themselves as teachers that "the students could respect and expect respect from" (Mary, Autobiography, spring 2006). Reflecting on his role as an intern in the classroom and comparing himself to other teachers,

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

Charles, for example, commented that he was not “a big strict disciplinarian” (Interview, fall 2006). Instead, he wanted to “be somebody they [students] can trust and come to and that...they [students] will be able to respect that” (Interview, fall 2006). He did believe that as he became the teacher in the classroom, rather than an intern or student teacher, he would have the respect from his students: “Although I know that I’m just the intern...I think once I start teaching then it [student respect] will be there anyway” (Interview, fall 2006).

Bill also commented that he “may not be terribly well-prepared when it comes to classroom management (none of us really are until we actually get into the classroom)” (Autobiography, spring 2006). However, he added that he had “a great deal of leadership experiences” and that experience made him feel “comfortable and confident when placed in front of a group of people” (Autobiography, spring 2006).

In addition to classroom management, motivating students in content areas they taught was another challenge that student teachers reported. In their individual interviews and focus group discussions, all participants emphasized that it was important for them to “make the class interesting and engaging” (Bill, Interview, fall 2006), and “make the classroom student-centered to make the students responsible for their learning” (Karen, Focus Group, spring 2007). Recognizing that students might not see the content relevant, Mary, Karen, and Charles considered it teachers’ responsibility to make the real-life connections for their students and “for them [students] to understand what happened in the past and be able to apply that information to their current lives” (Karen, Interview, fall 2006), in order to “get them [students] ready for the real world” (Charles, Focus Group, spring 2007). Describing her experience motivating her students and making her lessons more relevant, Mary gave an example of teaching her third block U.S. history class during student teaching:

I just kind of switched gears halfway through and had a little conference with them and said: “Look, we’ve got to find something that’s going to work a lot better; and you tell me what [you] want to do this semester, and I’ll incorporate a lot of that into my lessons.” So we had a little sit-down talk for like fifteen minutes and they told me exactly what they wanted. So each day I tried to put something in there.  
(Focus Group, spring 2007)

To make their lessons more interesting to their students, all participants recognized the importance of making connections with students and respecting students’ input and opinions.

While all participants reported having opportunities to work with students in both small group and one-on-one settings to get to know them through projects during the teacher education program (such as the ABCs project), they recalled that they rarely had the opportunity to interact directly with parents. Ellen, Karen and Bill all reported that they had not personally interacted with parents. Their only interactions with parents were through emails or letters. Based on the limited interac-

tions, Karen was concerned that “some of the parents just don’t have a general sense of what’s going on in the classroom” (Interview, fall 2006). Mary further commented on the difficulty of getting in touch with the families, and said one of the things she has learned is “they [school administrators] tell you, you know, you need to call home and talk to parents and a lot of times you can’t. A lot of times you’re just going to have to get in your car and go” (Interview, fall 2006). Although all participants were required to conduct community-based service-learning projects during their teacher education curriculum and several of them even conducted home visits, participants still considered it a challenge to contact and involve parents in schools.

Though all participants successfully completed their internship and student teaching requirements despite their common concerns and struggles, they also stated their individual concerns for their first-year of teaching. Charles and Mary both mentioned that they would like to be more confident in front of their students. Being from another state, Charles reported he felt he needed to be more familiar with the curriculum. Mary, on the other hand, wanted to enhance her confidence in dealing with the “hurtful things students would sometimes say” (Autobiography, spring 2006). Ellen and Karen commented on their struggles between their ideal goals for teaching and the reality of teaching. Both of them admitted that they chose to be teachers because they “want to change the world” (Ellen, Focus Group, spring 2007), or viewed themselves as “a person of influence” (Karen, Focus Group, spring 2007).

However, in reality, Karen recognized that “it’s okay to mess up.” As she commented:

You’re going to mess up a lot. And you have to take it, roll with the punches, and I would hope that I’m getting better at that. We have a long way to go and we’re going to have ups and downs. Things are going to go well and things are going to go badly, but you have to see yourself as somebody that’s going to influence these kids no matter what you do. (Focus Group, spring 2007)

Recognizing the gap between her ideal and the reality of teaching, Ellen also reported that she was not happy with who she was as a teacher and even questioned herself as to whether she really wanted to become a teacher. Like Karen, Ellen also commented that “teachers can only bring so much idealism inside the door with them” (Autobiography, spring 2006). Different from other participants, Bill viewed teaching as “about which act you should run on a particular day” and “the person you are in the classroom isn’t necessarily the person you are outside of the classroom” (Focus Group, spring 2007). He reported that he was finally “happier at the end of the day as I haven’t been putting on as much of an act to hold them [students]” (Focus Group, spring 2007). After student teaching, he stated that he had not decided exactly what he wanted to do and just felt like he put on different masks in front of different groups of students.

## *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

### ***First-Year Teachers' Joys and Challenges***

All participants successfully finished their first-year teaching in spring 2008, with four of them being selected as Rookie Teacher of the Year in their schools, and one emerging as Rookie Teacher of the Year for the school district. After their first-year of teaching, all participants reported they were more confident as teachers and “much more comfortable in front of a classroom full of students” (Charles, Focus Group, spring 2008). Compared to their concerns during the teacher education program, classroom management became less of a concern for our participants; but all participants continued to strive to make the content relevant for their students in an effort to enhance student motivation.

While all participants had positive impacts on their students in terms of test scores, participants unanimously commented on the restrictions that standardized testing places on teaching—restrictions that prevent teachers from offering “things that they [students] really get into and look into real-world applications and issues” (Ellen, interview, spring 2008) and that allow students to “have some say in their own education and actually become engaged in works that they want to read” (Karen, Interview, spring 2008). Among the five participants, Bill is the only one who taught a communication-skills class, one that did not require a state-mandated assessment. He really enjoyed it and commented that without the testing pressure, he realized “how much I [he] could go outside the box” (Focus Group, spring 2008). Even though he did not face testing pressure as much as the other participants, he still commented: “If there was one thing I could change it would be to focus on a more realistic and a real-world approach to education instead of focusing on padding numbers for somebody in an office somewhere” (Focus Group, spring, 2008).

Since they were teaching at very different school settings, our participants also faced unique challenges due to contextual factors. Located at schools with high ethnic minority populations that were cited in the media as having student behavioral problems, Karen and Charles mentioned the desire for consistency of administrative support where disciplinary issues were concerned. Charles reiterated:

There would be times that I would write up kids for cursing or cutting [skipping class] or [what] they're not supposed to be doing, and first – the write up that I would give sometimes, it would take a week, two weeks, for it even to get read. And then, punishment that they would be given would be little to nothing at all. So, I get to the point where I'm just like, “OK, why do I even bother. . . .” I just wish that the administration would put their money where their mouth is sometimes and actually follow through on things that they say they're going to and not just expect us to follow through on things and then do nothing. (Focus Group, spring 2008)

Contrasting her situation with that of her students, Karen was especially frustrated when students are not held accountable for their behavior in school as teachers typically are. She was concerned that what happens to students in school can have consequences later in their lives. She said:

If I'm not signed in by 8:15 am, you [administration] put a note in my file. I am held accountable. But when a student is consistently late or when they are walking right in front of you smoking on campus, when all public schools are 'Tobacco-Free,' and nothing gets done about it, it's kind of like, "How can you hold me accountable when you're not holding students accountable?" How many chances are you going to give a student when the lesson should be that there are consequences for their actions? When they go out into the real world and they have a job where they are consistently late, they are going to be fired. And then they will look at their employer and say, "Where's my second chance?" They're not going to get one. By not holding them accountable, we're not helping prepare a lot of these students for what really happens in the real world. (Focus Group, spring 2008)

Mary agreed with Charles and Karen about feeling unsupported when she admitted that the assistant principal assigned to her grade level was "very unresponsive." She explained that "there would be extreme situations in a classroom, and we would never see paperwork about it. And that's the big thing that bothered me about my first year-[it] is that I almost felt like we were kind of unsupported" (Focus Group, spring 2008). She confessed, though, that her classroom management initially suffered but went on to admit that "I'm getting better at it" (Interview, spring 2008).

Related to school context, having more resources was cited by Bill. He wanted his students to be more in tune with 21<sup>st</sup> century technology that was located at the school. He wanted to integrate more technology in his teaching. He would love to have a Smart Board, a projector, a document camera, and a laptop lab "where they had computers connected to the Internet. The kind of lessons I could design with a technology focus could be really a lot of fun" (Interview, spring 2008).

Four of the five participants hoped for more parent involvement where their child's academic success and behavior management were concerned, especially with parents of students who were on the borderline of not passing their courses or students who were having behavioral difficulties that impeded their academic progress. Ellen commented, "The parents whose children really don't need intervention, you see them more so than you see the parents whose children do need it. I never get in touch with the parents I need to talk to" (Focus Group, spring 2008). In fact, all of the participants wanted to get to know the students and their parents better, even though they realized that "parents can be your greatest ally or your biggest enemy" (Ellen, Interview, spring 2008). Furthermore, all of the participants wanted to gain better control over the balance of their professional and personal lives. The first year of teaching was "exhausting and yet kind of fun at the same time" (Bill, Interview, spring 2008).

While they enjoyed their first-year of teaching, four of the participants explicitly commented that it was "exhausting" (Bill, Interview, spring 2008). Participants commented on how they typically stayed late at school and still brought work, such as grading and planning, to finish at home, which sometimes made them resent

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

going back to work some mornings (Charles, Focus Group, spring 2008). As Karen put it: “You leave school late, and then you take stuff home, and then you sit there and just resent the fact that you have to do it...I think that makes the whole thing [teaching] unenjoyable” (Focus Group, spring 2008).

Reflecting on their first-year of teaching, while proud of what they had accomplished, our participants did report new challenges, including testing pressures, lack of administrative support, lack of up-to-date resources, lack of parent involvement, and the difficulty of balancing their teaching responsibilities and their personal lives. In addition to discussing the challenges, we uncovered some of the strategies our participants used to face challenges in their first-year teaching.

#### **Strategies Used to Face Challenges**

Following our participants from their teacher education program through their first-year of teaching, we noted that when facing challenges in their teaching, our participants developed various strategies including: (1) learning from their students in order to better motivate them in content area learning; (2) using assignments, observations, and class discussions to better get to know students and their families; (3) sustaining their passion for teaching through focusing on positive experiences such as student accomplishments and statements of appreciation from parents; and (4) adopting individual ways to manage stress and frustration.

At the end of their first-year of teaching, participants reported on the connections they saw between their students and themselves and the efforts they made to create those connections. Charles, Bill, and Karen commented on how they were able to relate to their students because they are close in age and they “listen to the same music and watch the same movies...and in a sense identify with the things they like to do” (Karen, Interview, spring 2008). Bill recognized that as a teacher, he could relate to students at a “social level” and that one way he earned respect from his students was “by knowing and understanding—knowing and understanding what Facebook and My Space are, for example” (Interview, spring 2008).

Charles admitted that sometimes his students were not familiar with the movies and TV shows he wanted to use as examples. For instance, when using *Indiana Jones* to explain “Epicurus,” his students “did not have a clue who that is.” He started to ask his students for examples and said that he was going to “listen to a little bit of their music, their movies and ... try to get into their minds a little bit more so that I can connect to them a little bit more” (Focus Group, spring 2008). Mary and Ellen mentioned their personal relationships with students especially because they found many students were “very much like” them (Mary, Interview, spring 2008) and “struggle with the same exact things” they had experienced (Ellen, Interview, spring 2008). Interestingly, all five participants also reported student motivation in content area learning as the most exciting aspect during their first-year of teaching.

Ellen, for example, cited her students’ growing interest in grammar as the most exciting thing for her:

When the kids beg me to have more grammar on Friday [weekly grammar exercises that precede daily instruction], because they know Grammar Fridays. That was exciting. And we had a Grammar Olympics...they're going to write their research papers, and they don't have atrocious grammar. That was incredibly exciting for me, because it actually made me feel like I had accomplished something with those silly games that people would make fun of me for. So, that was pretty exciting for me. (Focus Group, spring 2008)

To better connect with their students' backgrounds and understand students' families, all five participants in our study tried to use different strategies in addition to talking with students and/or other teachers, and having teacher-parent conferences. Bill, Charles, and Karen used writing projects, such as introduction letters, information sheets, and personal narratives, to encourage students to share personal information with them. At the same time, they also shared their own stories with their students through demonstration/modeling or through feedback to students' writing. Ellen, Mary, and Bill also stated that they learned about their students and their families through observation of "how they acted in class and their interactions with others in and out of the classroom" (Ellen, Interview, spring 2008), and through classroom discussions. As Bill mentioned, "You really get to know a lot about these kids when you get them to talk about a subject they feel passionate about" (Interview, spring, 2008). Through using different ways of communication, all participants reported learning more about their students and their families.

Discussing his perspective on different degrees of parental involvement, Charles commented:

Getting to know all the students, and getting to know all their situations, you learn that, yes, there is a reason for a lot of it. ...most of them do care. It's just they have other circumstances that they have to deal with. So, it's not just our job, again, to teach them. (Focus Group, spring 2008)

Facing various challenges in their first-year teaching, all participants reported receiving recognition and support from their students and parents with whom they worked. In addition to most of them being selected as Rookie Teachers of the Year in their individual schools, all participants reported they regained their energy from their students even when they had "bad days." Ellen, for example, a Rookie Teacher of the Year for her school district, described how her students made her feel needed:

...to like walk in late or to walk in right before the bell rings, and my period [students in that period] go, "Oh, God, you're here. Thank God. We thought we had a sub." And, then, to look at them and go, "You would have been so happy?" "No, we really wouldn't have." That lets me know that I'm doing something right—that I do need to come here. (Focus Group, spring 2008)

Although all participants commented that they wanted to get to know parents better and establish relationships with more parents, they did recognize that their

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

established relationships with parents were reassuring. Charles commented that one of the parents, who was also a teacher herself, would thank him for what he did for the students and told him how she knew “what it is like to be a first-year teacher.” “Her simple thank you helped at least to validate what I was doing and kept me sane during the rough patches throughout the year” (Interview, spring 2008). Similarly, Karen reported getting thank you emails from parents and felt being appreciated: “If you try hard enough, I think they recognize that. And they would appreciate it even if you weren’t in the end successful” (Interview, spring 2008).

Ellen also commented on her relationships with some students’ families and how such relationships helped her working with students in her class:

I struggled with Brandon [the student] at first; nothing was hard for him. I became very close to his mother, who helped me find things for him to do. By the end of the first semester, I was able to scaffold for him and, in the process, built a great relationship with him. (Interview, spring 2008)

Individually, they also developed different coping strategies to unwind after having “a stressful day.” Both Ellen and Karen found sharing with other people was a way to cope with difficult situations. Karen said she shared her frustration with “a small group in my department,” while Ellen “called on a few friends of mine from college who are not teachers” (Focus Group, spring 2008). Bill, on the other hand, said going home and playing videogames was his “system of unwinding” (Focus Group, spring 2008).

### **Discussion and Implications**

During their student teaching experiences, participants were concerned about classroom management, keeping students motivated in learning the content, and parent involvement through knowledge of their children’s academic progress or nonprogress as well as of their behavioral issues. After the first year of teaching, classroom management became manageable, albeit, three of five of them would have liked more administrative support in their decision making where disciplinary procedures were concerned. Parent involvement remained as one of the major challenges during first-year teaching, and new challenges, including testing pressures, lack of administrative support, lack of resources, and keeping the balance between teaching and their personal lives, were emerged.

Given these findings, we observed that the teachers’ shifting concerns were not restricted to the traditionally defined domains such as self, task, and students. Although our findings also indicated that classroom discipline and student motivation were two major concerns of our student teachers, which are consistent with Veenman’s (1984) findings, we also noted that instead of focusing on organization of class work and daily routines, our participants expressed concern for making connections with diverse student populations. In addition, after their first year of teaching, they used various strategies to motivate students in content areas, and

viewed building relationships with students and making content relevant for their students to be their strengths.

Through internships, student teaching, and required assignments such as the ABC's project, participants had the opportunity to interact with culturally and ethnically diverse student populations during the teacher education program. It appeared that they developed an open and welcoming attitude toward diversity of all kinds, not just ethnic diversity (He & Cooper, 2009). As first-year teachers, they fully understood their multiple roles as teachers and perceived teaching as more than content delivery. While there is increasing focus on content and content pedagogy courses in secondary teacher education programs, it remains critical that teacher candidates are provided with opportunities to interact with diverse student populations, students' parents, and members of the community to better understand their responsibilities beyond academic content instruction.

In building relationships with their students and learning from their students, our participants also used positive connections they could make given the proximity of their ages and their students'. Bill, for example, related current music to his teaching of composition. Such connections sometimes also transcended differences in cultural preferences and made more visible the links between the cultural identities of both students and teachers. Through these connections, common ground was discovered, cultivated, and used as strategies to engage students in learning content and relating it to their current lives. These types of strategies, including ways to explore the teachers' own backgrounds and assets through guided reflection or assignments such as the ABC's project, taught them to make connections with students and enhanced the teachers' awareness of their own assumptions and preferences. Therefore, we believe such strategies need to be highlighted through courses and field experiences in the teacher education program. In other words, as teacher educators, we need to move beyond the discussion of what constitutes student diversity to explore the how and why in our teacher education programs (Nieto, 2003). Teacher candidates need to be equipped with ways to better understand others and to become more aware of their own identities in an effort to better serve the needs of all students in diverse settings.

Based on our findings from listening to our participants across two years, we also recognized the impact of the school context and questioned how we could effectively prepare our teacher candidates for different teaching contexts (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Bullough, 1989; Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Grossman, 1992). We believe that the first step is for us, as teacher educators, to experience diverse school settings ourselves and face some of the challenges mentioned by our teachers. Perhaps teacher educators should spend more prolonged time in school and community settings, especially in urban settings in which poverty has a severe impact on students' learning.

We also need to not only learn to empathize with some of our teacher candidates' fear of diversity but also to explore with them strategies they could use to

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

respond to it. Further, we need to more fully understand their fears of standardized testing as a chief mechanism for system-wide, state, and national accountability, and develop with them strategies to sustain their passion for teaching even while facing assessment pressures. In other words, teacher educators should observe and work, in some cases, in the same schools as do their teacher candidates to experience diverse teaching contexts for the purpose of better facilitating teachers' development in facing challenges and concerns in those specific contexts (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000).

With all participants being successful in their first year teaching, we also wondered if participation in the research itself served as a venue for teachers to reflect on their practice and discuss their concerns as first-year teachers. In their focus groups, they had opportunities to learn from each other, and they found that they were not alone in their journeys. The focus groups appeared to allow them to create their own professional learning community, where they gained strength and support from each other. Our teacher education programs should encourage building of such communities among our graduates and support such sharing and reflection in their first-year. This can be done by following up our graduates for not only the purpose of program effectiveness (Sleeter, 2004) but also to help form such professional communities for our former teacher candidates. There are additional potential benefits for following up with our graduates. By bringing our graduates together, we can promote and support teacher retention and also strengthen our own practice, for we can learn from former students, our new colleagues. Maybe by turning the tables in education, our graduates can teach us how to respond to future teacher candidates better and respond to their needs in ways never done before.

Therefore, in order to better prepare secondary teachers, we believe that as teacher educators we need to:

1. Continue engaging teacher candidates in the exploration of and reflection on their own identities—both the personal self and the professional self as related to diversity—through intentional, cohesive assignments in teacher education programs;
2. Provide teacher candidates various opportunities in teacher education programs to interact with and learn from diverse K-12 students and their families, and encourage them to develop various strategies to build relationships with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century students they teach and with their families;
3. Provide teacher candidates with structured opportunities to reflect upon the realities of today's college and university students as these realities relate to the preparation of effective teachers and transition to professional roles and responsibilities;
4. Be more involved in diverse school settings ourselves so that we could be better aware of and more responsive to teacher candidates' changing

concerns and struggles as they work with the increasingly diverse student population in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;

5. Engage teacher candidates in professional learning communities where they can learn from and provide support for each other, not only for the purpose of teacher retention but also to give our new colleagues tools to create their own such communities after they leave our programs; and

6. Continue our efforts to conduct multi-year longitudinal studies and purposefully collect program evaluation data through course assignments, follow-up interviews, and focus group discussions with our graduates, so that we could gain insights from our teacher candidates to improve and refine our teacher education programs.

## **Conclusions**

The findings of this study revealed the development of five secondary preservice teachers over the course of two years, during their teacher education program and their first year of teaching. Their concerns at different points of their teacher education program and the strategies they employed to face challenges are informative for teacher educators. Additionally of significance, this study calls attention to teacher educators' following their graduates into the classroom to explore, document, and make public the explicit connection between what is taught in teacher education programs and the reality of instructional practice (Sleeter, 2004). While participants' expressed concerns confirmed the value of field experiences and self-reflection in teacher education programs, the case descriptions provided in this study also focused our attention on specific areas for improvement in our own pedagogy and teacher education programs.

However, to better prepare our teacher candidates for the reality of today's classroom, as teacher educators, we need to familiarize ourselves not only with the changing needs and characteristics of today's college students, but also with the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century K-12 students they will teach. Further, recognizing the new reality of teaching, teacher education programs need to move beyond introducing teacher candidates to diversity, accountability, and other complex issues in schools, to more thorough discussions and analyses of the realities of diversity as we, both teacher educators and teacher candidates, experience it in particular school contexts.

Considering multicultural education, the central question is how do we teach teacher candidates to be actively involved in shaping their professional identities not only as experts in content knowledge, but also as teachers who build relationships with their students and their families for the purpose of enhancing student achievement and becoming more culturally competent themselves. How do we engage them in ways of teaching to the diverse needs of their students? Teachers

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

tend to focus their reflection on diversity in terms of how they could involve all students in academic learning. However, little effort/reflection is placed on the means and manner to educate for globalization and utilizing diversity as an asset. Perhaps we as teacher educators should educate ourselves and step out of our secure communities of practice to explore the reality of teaching to globalization. If we do not, our teacher candidates will not be the only ones left behind.

If we were to continue following up with our participants into their second and third year of teaching, we would like to further examine the impact of various contextual factors, such as urban versus rural school settings, on our participants' professional development as beginning teachers. Further, we are more curious to also learn about strategies beginning teachers use to make sense of their school context and community and how they integrate various resources to become good teachers in their efforts to better serve the needs of the diverse student population. Finally, we would like to collect additional data from school administrators, parents, and K-12 students to obtain their perspectives on the development of our teacher participants.

### **References**

- Adams, R. D. (1982). Teacher development: A look at changes in teacher perceptions and behavior across time. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(44), 40-43.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 107-128.
- Berliner, D. C. (1988). Implications of studies of expertise in pedagogy for teacher education and evaluation. In *New directions for teacher assessment. Proceedings of the 1988 Educational Testing Service Invitational Conference*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Boccia, J. A. (1989). *Beginning teachers speak out: A study of professional concerns in the first three years of teaching*. ERIC Document ED 316555.
- Brown, T. (2006). Negotiating psychological disturbance in pre-service teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, 675-689.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr. (1989). *First-year teacher: A case study*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr., & Baughman, K. (1997). *"First-year teacher" eight years later*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bullough, R. V., Jr., & Knowles, J. G. (1991). Teaching and nurturing: Changing conceptions of self as teacher in a case study of becoming a teacher. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 4, 121-140.
- Chant, R. H. (2002). The impact of personal theorizing on beginning teachers: Experiences of three social studies teachers. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 30(4), 516-450.
- Chant, R. H., Heafner, T. L., & Bennett, K. R. (2004). Connecting personal theorizing and action research in preservice teacher development. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 31(3), 25-42.
- Clandinin, D., & Connelly, F. (1996). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher

- stories—stories of teachers, school stories—stories of schools. *Educational Researcher*, 25(3), 24-30.
- Clandinin, D. J., Downey, C. A., & Huber, J. (2009). Attending to changing landscapes: Shaping the interwoven identities of teachers and teacher educators. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teaching Education*, 37(2), 141-154.
- Conway, P. F., & Clark, C. M. (2003). The journey inward and outward: A re-examination of Fuller's concerns-based model of teacher development. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, 465-482.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Snyder, J. (2000). Authentic assessment of teaching in context. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 523-545.
- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenges of lifelong learning*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Fuller, F. F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualization. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207-226.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Grossman, P. L. (1992). Why models matter: An alternate view on professional growth in teaching. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 171-179.
- He, Y., & Cooper, J. E. (2009). The ABCs for preservice teacher cultural competency development. *Teaching Education*, 20(3), 305-322.
- He, Y., & Levin, B. B. (2008). Match or mismatch? How congruent are the beliefs of teacher candidates, cooperating teacher, and university-based teacher educators? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 34(4), 37-55.
- Hollingsworth, S. J. (1989). Prior beliefs and cognitive change in learning to teach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26, 160-189.
- Huberman, M. (Ed.). (1989). Research on teachers' professional lives. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 13(4), 343-466.
- Kagan, D. M. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 129-169.
- Levin, B. B. (2003). *Case studies of teacher development: An in-depth look at how thinking about pedagogy develops over time*. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Levin, B. B., & He, Y. (2008). Investigating the content and sources of teacher candidates' personal practical theories (PPTs). *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(1), 55-68.
- Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marso, R. N., & Pigge, F. L. (1989). The influence of preservice training and teaching experience upon attitude and concerns about teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 5(1), 33-42.
- Marso, R. N., & Pigge, F. L. (1995). Outstanding teachers' concerns about teaching at four stages of career development. *Educational Review*, 18(2), 1-11.
- Melnick, S., & Meister, D. (2008). A comparison of beginning and experienced teachers' concerns. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 31(3), 39-56.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nias, J. (1989). *Primary teachers talking: A study of teaching as work*. New York: Routledge.
- Nieto, S. (2003). *What keeps teachers going?* New York: Teachers College Press.

### *Struggles and Strategies in Teaching*

---

- Pigge, F. L., & Marso, R. N. (1997). A seven year longitudinal multi-factor assessment of teaching concerns development through preparation and early years of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 13, 225-235.
- Richardson, V. (2003). Perservice teachers' beliefs. In J. Raths & A. McAninch (Eds.), *Teacher beliefs and teacher education. Advances in teacher education* (pp. 1-22.). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishers.
- Ryan, K. (1992). *The roller coaster year*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Schmidt, P. (1999). Know thyself and understand others. *Language Arts*, 76, 332-340.
- Sleeter, C. S. (2004, Fall). From the Vice President. In *Teaching and Teacher Education: Division K Newsletter*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Sprinthall, N. A., & Thies-Sprinthall, L. (1980). Education for teacher growth: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Theory into Practice*, 29, 278-286.
- Veeman, S. (1984). Perceived problems of beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 54(2), 143-178.
- Vonk, J. H. C. (1993). Mentoring beginning teachers: Development of a knowledge base for mentors. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April.
- Watzke, J. (2007). Longitudinal research on beginning teacher development: Complexity as a challenge to concerns-based stage theory. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23, 106-122.