Confidence and Preparedness to Teach: Conflicting Perspectives from Multiple Stakeholders

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Abstract

This article, "Confidence and Preparedness to Teach" is a quantitative study that examines the level of preparedness for the classroom of fifty-seven student teachers. The student teachers, their cooperating teachers, and the professor-in-residence who monitored the placement completed a twenty-four item survey that rated the prospective teacher's preparedness for the classroom. The survey items, aggregated by domains and responses from the three different groups, were compared for responses that were similar and dissimilar.

Over the past several decades, critics of public education have become increasingly vocal. Criticisms of teacher education programs have been inherent in the different commentaries about education and student performance. Schools of education have been criticized as ineffective in preparing teachers to deliver engaging instruction, ineffective in grounding students in classroom management skills, unresponsive to the changing demographics of the country, and barriers to the recruitment of the most capable college students into the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond 2000, 166–173; Goodlad 1990, 21–33; Holmes Group, 1986). Collectively, these different voices have urged schools of education to revisit their study programs, and to place heavier emphasis on courses supporting the knowledge base and those making connections to practice and theory. The criticisms, moreover, have argued that schools of education should strengthen their capacity to support the development of knowledgeable pedagogically sound teachers.

Studies responding to these criticisms have explored a number of factors contributing to the quality of education in the United States. Educational research is replete with studies examining elements of instruction—for example, lesson clarity, pacing, flexibility, classroom management skills, and teacher enthusiasm (Ball 1997, 769–818; Cantrell 1999, 370–378; Chuska 2007, 13; Evertson and Weinstein 2006, 3–16; Muijs and Reynolds 1999, 247–263). A second broad area of research has examined teacher education programs. This research indicates that most programs a) adhere to requisite state regulations; b) show evidence of adhering to standards established by accrediting agencies (for example, NCATE and INTASC); c) attend to standards established by local institutions within the state; and d) require comparable foundation, pedagogical knowledge, and subject-matter courses. (Boyd et al. 2007, 45–68). Teacher education programs generally require a field experience as well; however, the length and time

candidates actually spend in the field vary significantly from program to program (Boyd et al. 2007, 45–68). Other studies—those focused on Best Practices—similarly indicate lack of clarity across programs. A meta-analysis examining fifty peer-reviewed reports on this topic argued that most such studies failed to address the complex factors involved in the preparation of teacher-candidates (Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy 2002, 190–204). Authors of the meta-analysis suggested that most of the studies merely touched the surface of complex issues related to Best Practices.

The disparities and lack of clarity in research about teacher education and what constitutes effective teaching have far-reaching implications for both practice and policy. The teacher-candidates' understanding of Best Practices impacts their performance in the induction experience. The candidates' ability to attend to the numerous demands entailed in lesson delivery and classroom management, in turn, affects feedback received from supervising teachers. Similarly, the candidates' performance colors exchanges with students in their charge. This first experience of the teacher-candidate significantly impacts his/her perceptions about teaching; the experience sets in place attitudes that determine whether or not the teacher-candidate stays in the profession and what kind of teacher s/he becomes (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In addition to the emotional and social implications of negative induction experiences, the estimated financial cost of teacher turnover in the United States is $2.6 billion annually (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

Although the induction experience and first year of teaching generally is emotionally turbulent (Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko 2006, 351–358), a growing body of evidence indicates that teacher-candidates prepared in strong programs more easily manage the challenges of these first experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and that supportive quality induction experiences matter (Britton et al. 2003; Johnson and The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004).

Assessing the Research and Moving Forward

As a school of education in a mid-sized metropolitan university in the southeast, we have an ongoing focus of self-assessment to strengthen the delivery of our program. Review and discussion of seminal and current educational research is part of this process; this study has made our faculty keenly aware that when universities and school districts work closely during pre-service and induction, new teachers develop and thrive (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Liston, Whitcomb, and Borko 2006, 351–358). Self-study has convinced us, moreover, that listening closely to our student teachers, program graduates, supervising teachers, and the principals who hire our graduates provides even richer input about the strength and viability of our program.

This article will present and analyze data from the first in a series of longitudinal studies to examine the preparedness and confidence levels of its candidates to deliver effective research-based methods of teaching. The study began with the collection and review of survey data from teacher-candidates, cooperating or supervising teachers (CTs), and the university professor or professors-in-residence (PIRs) overseeing the

student teaching placement. Research questions guiding this investigation were: How do the CT and PIR rate the preparedness level of the teacher-candidate? How does the teacher-candidate rate his/her preparedness to assume a teaching position? Do these ratings reflect the confidence levels of the teacher-candidate? In what areas do these ratings converge or diverge? Answers to these questions will provide information to inform conversations to best provide feedback and guidance to teacher-candidates.

Methods for Teacher Preparedness Survey

Participants

Surveys were administered during the 2010–2011 academic year to three different populations with insights about the teacher-candidates that focused on the student teaching experience. The groups included in the study were the teacher-candidates, classroom teachers within the local school district, and professors-in-residence (PIRs). The PIRs were university faculty assigned to assist in the observation and evaluation of student teachers within the local schools. Teacher-candidates were asked to complete the survey following their student teaching placement. Corresponding classroom teachers (CTs) responsible for supervising these student teachers completed surveys at the end of the semester following the student teacher's placement, and the PIRs were asked to complete a survey for *each* teacher-candidate they worked with during the two placements of student teaching for each semester.

All teacher-candidates who completed student teaching during the 2010–2011 academic year were asked to complete the survey. In this initial study, 144 candidates were asked to complete the survey and fifty-seven surveys were completed and returned (39.6 percent return rate). Of the 144 classroom teachers responsible for supervising student teachers, forty-three surveys were completed and returned (30 percent return rate). Of the seventeen professors-in-residence working with the teacher-candidate, 144 surveys (one per PIR per student teacher) were completed and returned (100 percent return rate).

Instrumentation

The surveys used in this study were designed to capture the perceptions of preparedness and confidence as seen through the lens of the student teacher, CT, and PIR. The specific behaviors and actions to be measured were aligned with Best Teaching Practices and the mission of the teacher preparation program administering the surveys. To adequately capture this information, statements were altered to reflect the perspective of the individual *doing* the activity or the individual *observing* the activity/behavior. Because the study's design was to capture information about the participants' perspectives of the activities and behaviors of the teacher-candidate during student teaching, the surveys were worded differently depending on the participant group responding; co-operating teachers and PIRs responded to what they were *seeing* and student teachers responded to what they were *doing* or *experiencing*.

Participants completing the survey were asked to respond to questions related to demographics. These questions included the grade and the subject taught, the school type, as well as the semester and year in which the student teaching was completed. Items on the survey contained questions asking participants to respond to the preparedness and confidence level of student teachers across various aspects considered Best Practices for teaching. These items were carefully aligned with the mission of the university's teacher preparation program to include working with students at the appropriate developmental level, using appropriate strategies, responding equitably and professionally to the needs of individual students, and creating learning environments that engage all students. Participants were asked to respond to the preparedness of the student teacher on twenty-five different statements.

To further validate the instrument, faculty within the teacher preparation program was asked to categorize each statement according to domains that are addressed in the school's instructional program. The domains for the items were a) assessment, b) content knowledge, c) equity/diversity, d) learning environment, e) professionalism, f) reflection, g) technology, and h) teaching strategies. Only survey items that were agreed upon by the majority of the faculty were included in this study; two items were omitted.

Procedure

An e-mail was sent to all student teachers, their cooperating classroom teachers, and the PIRs. The survey given to participants was administered electronically through *LiveText*. The e-mail provided a hyperlink that led participants to the survey, asking participants to voluntarily complete the survey. Teacher-candidates were asked to respond to their level of preparedness for the classroom. CTs and PIRs were asked to consider all teacher-candidates that they supervised and were asked to complete a survey for *each* candidate. In an effort to get the most accurate responses, there were no identifiers on the surveys to link teacher-candidates, PIRS, or CTs to one another; all responses to the surveys were anonymous. There was no follow-up to increase response rate or further correspondence with the participants. When the surveys were completed, responses from the surveys were loaded into SPSS for analysis. Responses were reviewed first by item and then by domain, and the results are reported as such.

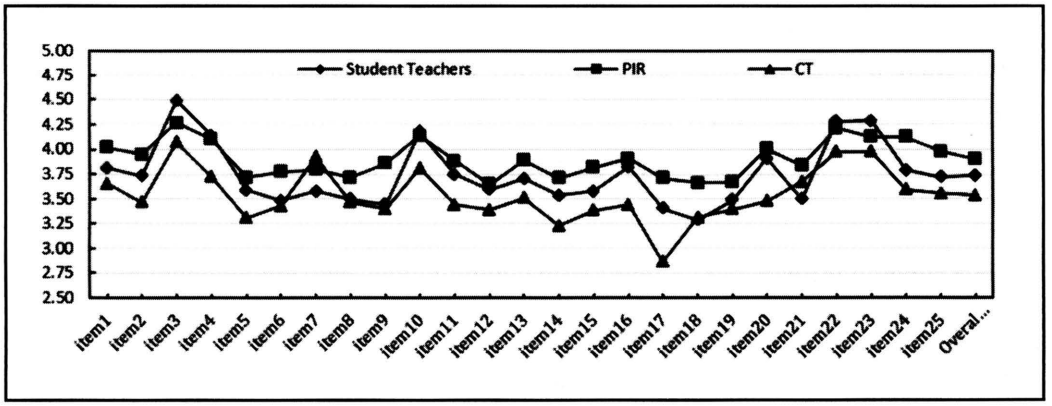
Limitations in this study include a low response rate from the student teachers and CTs. Also, in an effort to solicit accurate responses, there was no attempt to make the connection of the student teacher with the respective PIR and cooperating teacher. Perceptions of observed behaviors and attitudes are always suspect, but every effort was made to accurately capture the preparedness for teaching from the various participants. Future studies will make a conscious effort to increase the response rate of the student teachers and cooperating teachers.

Findings

Ratings from the respondents were coded by student teacher, the PIR, and the CT, and averages for each item obtained. An initial review of the items revealed that, for most statements, CTs rated student teachers lower on various aspects of teaching. The PIR

rated student teachers higher than student teachers rated themselves. The overall mean, the last item on Figure 1, supports this assumption.

Figure 1. Overall Mean Scores of Items



Although PIRs rated student teacher preparedness higher on most items, exceptions were found for items three, twenty-two and twenty-three. For these items, student teachers' ratings were higher than those of the CT or PIR. See Table 1. Although student teacher ratings were highest on these items, PIR ratings remained higher than those of the CTs.

Table 1. Highest Ratings for Student Teacher

Item	Statement	Student teacher	PIR	CT
3.	**Treats all students in a caring, equitable, and non-discriminatory manner**	4.49	4.27	4.07
22.	**Communicate respect and concern for all students**	4.29	4.22	3.98
23.	**Follow established codes of professional conduct, including school and district policies**	4.29	4.13	3.98

The three statements in Table 1 revealed areas where student teachers rated themselves higher than ratings from the CT or PIR. Four other statements revealed ratings in which student teachers and PIRs were similar (see Table 2). All ratings were less than .10 percent apart, suggesting that student teachers and PIRs agreed on the level of preparedness in the student teacher a) to hold high expectations, b) to have a positive effect on learning, c) to understand and use knowledge appropriately for diverse learners and d) to communicate respect and concern for all students.

Table 2. Similar Ratings by Student Teacher and PIR

Item	Statement	Student teacher	PIR
4	**Hold high expectations for students**	4.14	4.10
10	**Have a positive effect on the learning of all students**	4.18	4.14
12	**Understand and use content and pedagogical knowledge that is appropriate for diverse learners**	3.60	3.65
22	**Communicate respect and concern for all students**	4.29	4.22

Table 3 shows a different set of items with similar ratings between student teachers and CTs. There was agreement in the level of preparedness between the student teacher and CT for: (item 6) using different approaches; (item eight) using methods consistent with current theory; (item 9) working with students to create solutions; and (item eighteen) using assessment to communicate to stakeholders. These items were similar for the CT and student teacher and more positively skewed for the PIRs (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Similar Ratings by Student Teacher and CT

Item	Statement	Student teacher	CT
6	**Use different approaches when conveying information to a student who did not understand the initial teaching**	3.48	3.43
8	**Use methods consistent with current theory**	3.50	3.47
9	**Work with students to create solutions to existing problems**	3.45	3.40
18	**Use assessment data to communicate knowledgably and responsibly to students, parents, and community and school personnel**	3.29	3.32

When reviewing Figure 1 for similarities between cooperating teachers and PIRs, it can be seen that there are none. The two supervising parties were found to have ratings that were varied more than similar for all statements responding to the preparedness of the student teacher to effectively teach. Further analysis of Figure 1 reveals that student teachers rated themselves lower on the use of technology appropriately with students (item 7), and that the highest rating on this item came from the cooperating teachers. This was the only item in which CTs rated student teachers higher than the student teacher or the PIR. Ratings were 3.58, 3.80, and 3.92 for the student teacher, PIR, and CT, respectively. One other noteworthy finding can be found in item 17 (see Figure 1): Item 17 asks raters to respond to the preparedness of the student teacher to implement effective classroom management strategies in all school spaces. CTs rated student teachers 2.86—the lowest of all ratings in the survey. Student teachers rated

themselves lower than the PIRs, though both of these ratings were significantly higher than the CT (3.40 and 3.71, respectively). These findings warrant consideration and will be addressed in the conclusion.

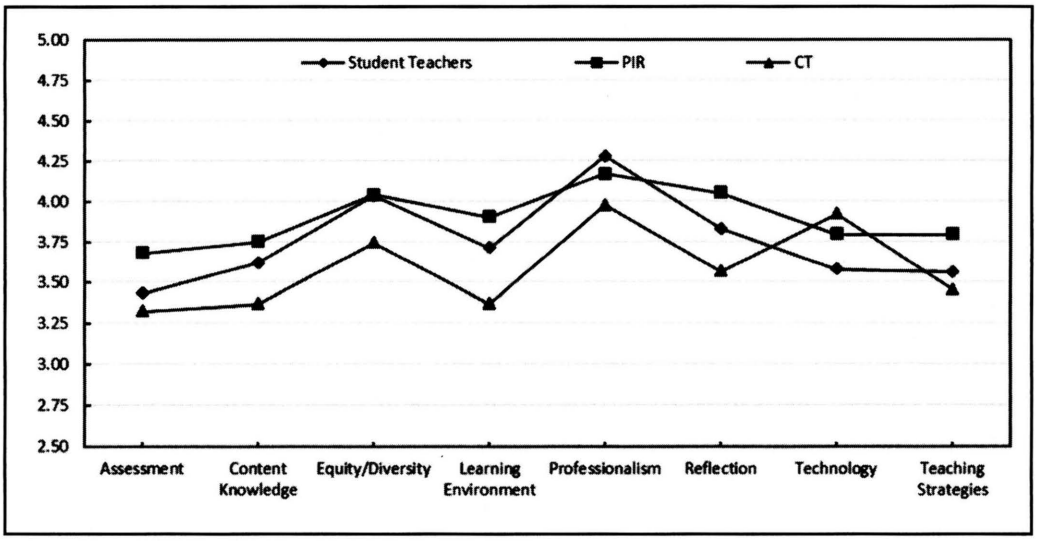
Additional analysis of the items included categorizing the various survey items into domains of teaching. The domains were chosen from the state teaching standards in which the teacher preparation program resides. They include assessment, content knowledge, equity/diversity, learning environment, professionalism, reflection, technology, and teaching strategies. Faculty within the teacher preparation program was provided these eight domains and the twenty-four item survey (item twenty-five represents the overall mean), and they were asked to categorize the statements into the most appropriate domain. Two survey items were not represented within a survey domain by the majority and were omitted from this analysis. These two items were item four (preparedness to hold high expectations for all learners) and item twenty-one (preparedness to integrate technology and other multimedia sources appropriately to maximize learning . . .). Item four was determined to be vague but all-encompassing when found to be categorized by faculty within almost every survey domain provided. There was no consensus. Item twenty-one was categorized under three domains (assessment, technology, and teaching strategies), and was thus removed from the analysis. Table 4 provides the corresponding statements and domains included in the additional analysis.

Table 4. Survey Domains

Domain	Corresponding item
Assessment	5, 18
Content knowledge	11, 12, 14
Equity/diversity	3, 15
Learning environment	9, 10, 16, 17
Professionalism	22, 23
Reflection	1, 20, 24
Technology	7
Teaching strategies	2, 6, 8, 13, 19

The findings from the means of the domains were similar to those of the individual items, with the PIRs rating the preparedness higher than the student teacher and the CT rating the lowest. Two exceptions were found among the eight domains. For professionalism, the student teacher rated himself/herself highest followed by the PIR and then the CT (4.28, 4.17, 3.98, respectively). For technology, the student teacher rated himself/herself lowest followed by the PIR and the CT (3.58, 3.80, 3.92, respectively). As with individual items, CTs rated student teachers lower on all domains except technology. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Overall Means by Domains



Similarities of domains could be found between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher and between the PIR and the student teacher, but as with the individual items, the CT and PIR ratings were dissimilar. CTs and student teacher similarities were found between the assessment domain (3.32, 3.43), and the teaching strategies domain (3.45, 3.56). Student teacher and PIR similarities were found between the content knowledge (3.75, 3.62), and equity/diversity (both at 4.04) domains.

Summary of Findings

It is not surprising that responses of different individuals vary, but the change in these variances calls into question the underlying definitions and perceptions of the raters. Student teachers rated themselves highest in their preparedness to 1) treat all students in a caring and equitable manner, 2) communicate respect and concern for all students, and 3) to follow established codes of professional conduct. CTs rated student teachers highest in preparedness to use technology appropriately with students. Overall, PIR ratings were highest for most other items and held the highest overall mean.

Important in these findings are the behaviors in which student teachers felt more prepared than was observed by the CTs and PIRs. Student teachers felt more confident in their preparedness to work with students in a professional manner than *seen* (rated) by the PIRs or CTs. It is understandable that one might find it difficult to observe how a student teacher responds to behaviors. This particular finding, however, will be monitored more closely in the follow-up study with the next group of student teachers and may possibly need to be addressed with qualitative data.

Another important finding in this study was the higher rating of cooperating teachers on the use of technology to deliver lessons. This finding suggests a particular strength

of the teacher preparation program and a possible lack of professional development in the use of technology for classroom teachers. This finding suggests, as does the work of Koehler and Mishra, that cooperating teachers were gaining insights about the use of technology from the student teachers (Koehler et al. 2004, 25–55; Koehler and Mishram 2005, 94–102).

Perhaps the most interesting finding and the item that presented the greatest variance among ratings was item seventeen (implement effective classroom management strategies in all school spaces). This item was categorized in the teaching strategies domain. As an individual item and within the domain, CTs rated the preparedness of the student teacher lowest in their ability to implement effective classroom management strategies. It is well documented that new teachers struggle with classroom management (Robert Marzano and Jana Marzano 2003, 6–13; Tauber 2007) and the findings, though not surprising, support this rating. The mean for classroom teachers' ratings of the student teachers was 2.86 and the mean for student teachers rating were 3.40. This difference was the greatest difference of all items in the survey.

Conclusion

It would be remiss not to acknowledge that rater reliability comes into play in analysis. In that PIRs always gave higher ratings and that CTs for the most part gave lower ratings does not mean there is not congruence in the evaluation. The stability of these responses provides a degree of assurance in the reliability of the scoring. However, what warrants attention and further review are the areas where scores break this rule and vary from the norm.

It also could be argued that appropriate and continual training possibly could eliminate bias and rater differences. When queried on the opportunities, PIRs and CTs had to discuss what each of the behaviors being rated should look like; it was determined that these were minimal. New PIRs and CTs were given instructions and briefed on the process, and then left to rate student teachers at their discretion. The findings of this study suggest that bringing the raters together for discussion and training might eliminate some of the discrepancies and provide more accurate representation of the preparedness of the student teacher. It would be expected that the student teacher, having completed the teacher preparation program's course of study, would have an understanding of what is expected in the classroom. In future studies, student teachers also will be included in the conversation and apprised on the expectations for ratings.

Perceptions are not always accurate portrayals of observed behaviors (Pajares 1992, 307–332; Zimmerman et al. 1995, 181–197). Thus, recommendations should be most closely drawn from congruence of the PIRs and the CTs observations and ratings. These individuals are responsible for working with the student teacher and providing support and counsel on best practices and recommendations for improvement. If these individuals do not agree on what is observed, mixed messages would tend to confuse the student teacher. Providing opportunities for the PIRs and CTs to convene, view and score taped lessons, and then to discuss behaviors observed is imperative to

providing the student teacher with similar recommendations. If these recommendations are as varied as the survey's ratings, student teachers may leave the program with an unclear understanding of the appropriate practices. To adequately prepare and train student teachers to become effective new teachers, the CTs, PIRS, and others responsible for the education and training of these individuals should be cognizant of the feedback given to the student teacher. These messages need not be "exact," but must not be opposing. Providing student teachers with the necessary training for them to make appropriate decisions on how to effectively work in the classroom is the purpose of teacher preparation programs. To do this effectively, the faculties, PIRs, and CTs must work in concert. Feedback from one area should support and reinforce that received from another. To do otherwise is counterproductive and causes possible problems for the teacher-candidate.

To address the research question, what does student teacher preparedness look like through the lens of various observers, the response is, "different." The study first sought to determine if such differences were evident and if so, in what areas. This information has been determined from a single point in time and will be further studied for trends. Armed with the time series findings, the teacher education program can begin to address discrepancies in perceptions between the PIRs and CTs, and then provide training to address this problem. Results from the student teacher ratings can be discussed in courses taught prior to the student teaching experience. The intent will be to provide prospective teachers a better understanding of what is expected in the classroom.

Going forward, a major finding from this study is the need to more assertively address classroom management with students. Presently, this is being addressed in courses leading to the first Professional Development School Program (PDS I), in which students in the teacher education program spend a semester in a public school classroom while also taking several hours of integrated course work. As more attention is given to classroom management skills in the courses leading to PDS I, students can then observe different strategies during the experience. This should lead to critiques of effective, as well as counter-productive, strategies. Similarly, increased emphasis on management skills prior to the PDS I experience, followed by viewing and critiquing strategies during and immediately following PDS I, should give the teacher-candidate a stronger understanding of those strategies essential to the delivery of effective instruction. Since our self-study, as well as research (Robert Marzano and Jana Marzano 2003, 6–13; Tauber 2007), indicates that management skills are the major area of weakness for the beginning teacher, the prospective teacher's courses following PDS I also should revisit this critical topic. We will monitor the progress of our candidates in future studies to determine the impact of our increased focus on this critical management skill. This study indicates that increased attention to management will most certainly impact the confidence levels of our teacher-candidates and should position them to make even greater contributions to the classrooms they enter. Future studies will provide more evidence to support or refute these findings and give the teacher preparation program guidance in how best to model, train, and provide technical assistance to all involved in mentoring and advising student teachers.

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