Through the Eyes of Student Teachers:

Successes and Challenges in Field Teaching Experiences

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Abstract: "The most important aspect in the learning to teach process is the field experience, i.e., the opportunity to stand face to face with the challenges and demands of the teaching profession" (Caires & Almeida, 2007). This study presents the successes and challenges encountered by preservice teachers while conducting a semester long student teaching experience. This is a qualitative study with data collected using anonymous questionnaires and case-study interviews involving elementary and secondary preservice teachers. Challenges regarding classroom management, cooperating teacher interactions, and university demands emerged from the questionnaire and interview data. The interview data revealed a more in-depth perspective of the student teaching experience and provided the foundation for establishing relevant prevention strategies for teacher education programs, university supervisors, cooperating teachers, first-year teachers, and future student teachers.

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Introduction

The importance of the student teaching experience is reflected in how teachers consistently highly rate their student teaching experience (Taggart & Wilkinson, 1985). It is through this experience that preservice teachers apply the theories and knowledge they gained through preparatory coursework, practice different skills, learn from their mistakes, and discover their own teaching style. But if teachers, teacher education programs, and state boards of education recognize the student teaching experience as the most important factor of learning to become a teacher and all preservice teachers undergo that training, why does the National Center for Education Statistics report that only one in five teachers feel "very well-prepared" for teaching in today's classroom (NCES, 1999)?

There are many influential factors that contribute to the overall quality of the student teaching experience. Factors identified from the literature include content preparation provided by the university, interactions with the cooperating teacher, interactions with university support staff, and the requirements held by the teacher education program during the student teaching experience. The challenges and successes encountered by preservice teachers during the student teaching experience are often associated with these factors. While a lot of literature (e.g., Caires & Almeida, 2007; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2006) exists that pertains to the effectiveness of specific aspects of these factors on preparing preservice teachers, the focus of this study is to reveal what student teachers perceive to be the biggest challenges and successes of their student teaching experiences.

Identifying limitations within the framework of the student teaching experience lays the foundation for determining appropriate strategies for improving the overall experience of future student teachers. Cooperating teachers and university supervisors can benefit from this information, as well. Various authors have agreed that the cooperating teacher represents the most influential role model in the eyes of the student teacher (Karmos & Jacko, 1997). The information gathered from this study can be used by teacher education programs to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts to prepare students for the student teaching experience and more importantly the teaching profession.

Questions addressed by this study are as follows. *What are the challenges and successes faced by preservice teachers during their student teaching experience?* The discussion that follows examines published literature on the topic of the student teaching experience. There are three major themes apparent in the literature that relates to the effectiveness of the student teaching experience: student-teacher and cooperating teacher interactions, university supervisor practices, and support from the teacher education

program. Aspects of these three major themes are discussed in detail in the following section.

Review of Literature

The student teaching experience represents the final test of knowledge and ability for individuals who desire to be teachers. It is the point when theory meets practice. Students must be able to apply what they have learned, and demonstrate that they have the ability to handle planning, organization, and other necessary skills that teachers are called to do on a daily basis. While the process of becoming a teacher requires study and practice outside of the classroom, student teaching experience is arguably the most influential and important aspect of learning how to teach. Caires (2007) describes the student teaching experience as "the opportunity to stand face to face with the challenges and demands of the teaching profession." Student teachers undoubtedly face many challenges during the student teaching experience, and considerable research has been published on teacher preparation and the challenges encountered during the student teaching experience. The central issue confronted in this review of the existing literature is what challenges have the greatest affect on the professional development of student teachers and what strategies could be implemented to help students overcome these challenges.

There are two major types of challenges with regard to the student teaching experience. The first type of challenges includes difficulties with different aspects of the skills demonstrated by professional teachers. These problems may include problems with communication, classroom management, or instructional delivery. Literature devoted to this type is fairly uncommon since student teachers have different difficulties based on their strengths and weaknesses entering the student teaching experience. The second type of challenges represents difficulties that are inherent in the student teaching process and associated with the student teacher's professional growth. One example of this challenge that has received considerable attention in the literature would be acquiring and applying effective feedback from cooperative teachers during post-lesson conferences (see Bertone, Chalies, Clarke & Meard, 2006). Challenges within this category are far more apparent in the literature, because they imply problems inherent in the teacher education program and not in the teacher to be. This category of research will be discussed in detail below.

Most people agree that the cooperating teacher is the most influential member of the student teacher's development as a teacher (Copeland, 1980). It is under their supervision and direction that student teachers grow into their identity as a teacher. Cooperating teachers are by far the most involved in the development of

the student teacher's professional skills, and act as a role-model and mentor to the preservice teacher. There are many responsibilities of this role that are necessary for the student teacher's professional development.

The post-lesson conference is thought to be both essential to the training (Parsons and Stephenson, 2005) and to the development of professional knowledge (Meijer, Zanting & Verloop, 2002) for student teachers. While this is generally accepted, some studies suggest that major impediments restrict the professional growth of student teachers during post-lesson conferences. The first major impediment deals with the cooperating teacher's relationship with the student teacher. More often than not, student teachers are placed under the supervision of cooperating teachers who are unprepared for their role as mentor (Grimmett & Ratzlaff, 1986) and cautious when providing feedback (Morehead &Waters, 1987). During conferences, these cooperating teachers often refrain from confronting students with observations of difficulties and errors in order to avoid upsetting their trainee (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInery, & O'Brien, 1995; Edwards, 1997).

Communication difficulties that take place during post-lesson conferences can also impede a student teacher's development. For one, student teachers are often hesitant about discussing their difficulties with cooperating teachers (Edwards, 1997). In many instances, student teachers do not even recognize their own difficulties as products of their actions. Rather, they place the responsibility of classroom successes and failures on the students that they teach (Gonzalez & Carter, 1996). In a study by Bertone, et al. (2006), miscommunication between the cooperating teacher and student teacher was observed during post-lesson conferences. While most of the discussion conducted during the post-lesson conference was characterized by agreement, interviews conducted after the post-lesson conference revealed that issues of disagreement remained (Bertone, et al., 2006).

One of the major difficulties faced by the student teacher in Bertone's study was receiving and applying constructive criticism. It was observed that when the cooperating teacher defined difficulties or suggested solutions, the student teacher took it as a question of her identity as a teacher. One solution to this problem is for cooperating teachers to present observations of classroom difficulties to student teachers in a way that reasonable. As Bertone and others described, the student teacher accepted prescribed alternative actions when she was convinced that the cooperating teacher's suggestion was supported by good reasons.

Giebelhaus and Bowman (2002) suggest that cooperating teachers should undergo training to prepare them for the mentoring process. In their study,

cooperating teachers are trained in the implementation of the *Praxis III/Pathwise* model. *Pathwise* represents the support tools utilized in observation and assessment of classroom performance. *Praxis III* is used for formal evaluations. Results of the study indicate that preservice teachers who collaborate with trained cooperating teachers "demonstrate more complete and effective planning, more effective classroom instruction, and greater reflectivity on practice than those whose cooperating teachers" were not trained.

In a case study analysis of four student teachers, Marks (2007) reveals three major factors that affect a student teacher's growth during the student teaching experience. The strength of student teachers' initial beliefs and their self-efficacy was the first factor. Preservice students who enter their student teaching experience with strong initial beliefs about the best way to teach are quick disregard university teachings, while student teachers with weaker beliefs demonstrate more student-centered practices.

The second factor identified by Marks was the internalization of knowledge and skills gained during university courses and field experience. In some instances, student teachers abandoned the instruction and training they had received through the teacher education program during their teaching. But there were other influences that affected the student teachers' application of their knowledge in their classroom, as well. Marks observed that in some instances the cooperating teacher represented the obstacle that impeded the implementation of university teachings. When the philosophy or the demands of the cooperating teacher differ from that of the university, the student teacher gets caught in a tough situation. The student teacher wants to meet the expectations of the university, but has to do so in the presence of a cooperating teacher who does not support or implement the same expectations (Marks, 2007).

The university supervisor is the third major factor affecting the development of preservice teacher during the student teaching experience. In this instance, the student teacher perceived the university supervisor as supportive, knowledgeable, and helpful. When the supervisor's expectations were little or the students demonstrated disregard for the supervisor's knowledge, student teachers performed the bare minimum requirements and quickly disposed of university teachings for the opinions and instructional style of their cooperating teacher (Marks, 2007).

Lopez-Real, et. al. (2001) addresses the importance of the conferences between student teachers and university supervisors and the relationship that is built therein. Their study identified what student teachers and supervisors find as the most difficult topics to discuss. The seven easiest topics for both student teachers and supervisors dealt with classroom

delivery skills, which are the most tangible, non-threatening, and easy to offer suggestions about. The seven most difficult topics almost exclusively dealt with personal aspects. Lack of commitment/lack of enthusiasm ranked high for both student teachers and supervisors as a difficult topic to discuss.

One suggestion provided by Lopez-Real to remedy this situation is to encourage supervisors to focus on boosting the self-confidence of the student teacher. One danger that supervisors must be aware of is that there is no particular personality that student teachers should emulate. While conferencing with student teachers, supervisors need to approach difficult topics with sensitivity. One of the problems with the supervisor-student teacher relationship that is often missing is an open trusting relationship, which takes an amount of time that is often not manageable. The result is that such a relationship is likely only to be of value with regards to classroom delivery skills (Lopez-Real, et al, 2001).

The teacher education program has a responsibility to prepare and support students during their student teaching experience. All teacher education programs have three core skills to teach to students: knowledge of learners and development, knowledge of curriculum content, and an understanding of skills for teaching. During that process, teacher education programs must overcome some major challenges involved. There are three major challenges that face teacher education programs: learning to teach requires that new teachers develop an understanding of teaching that differs from their experiences as students, becoming a teacher means learning to "think" and "act" like a teacher, and teachers must accept and accommodate for the complex nature of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

During the student teaching experience, preservice teachers develop their pedagogical skill. This skill is "the ability to successfully implement teaching strategies to meet the educational and social needs of students" and is vital to effective teaching. It requires that preservice teachers have foundational knowledge of teaching strategies, student development, and subject matter to be taught. Preservice teachers must demonstrate the ability to use that understanding to make that knowledge accessible to students (Grant & Gillette, 2006). Cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and teacher education programs all play a role in helping the preservice teacher mold a functional understanding during the student teaching experience. This can be done most efficiently when the challenges of the student teaching experience are identified and addressed.

Specific details about the study are presented in the succeeding section.

Methodology

This study was conducted in a small liberal arts university. As part of the teacher education program, students complete a two course sequence that includes foundational topics in education and child development followed by one or a series of curriculum courses depending on whether the candidate is pursuing a secondary or elementary certificate. At the conclusion of these courses, preservice teachers engage in 16-week student teaching experiences which generally occur during the first semester of their junior year. They also participate in a student teaching seminar class and in a community of learners as they share, problem-solve, and discuss challenges and successful experiences in the field. Students complete the requirements of the teacher education program after completing a capstone research course during the semester following student teaching, in which they prepare a digital teaching portfolio and also write their self-study project.

The participants were preservice teachers whose ages ranged between 21 and 22 years old. Twenty-one participants described themselves as Caucasian, one as Hispanic, and one chose not to respond. During their student teaching experience, participants worked with cooperating teachers from two local, suburban school districts. Fourteen students taught within one school district, while 9 students taught within the other district.

All student teachers who completed the student teaching experience in the semester before certification were asked to participate in this study. The participant population consisted of male and female student teachers who conducted their student teaching experience in local elementary and high school classrooms. The participants completed an anonymous questionnaire asking information about their student teaching experience. Open ended questions about what they experienced as challenging and successful experiences were included. They were asked to volunteer to participate in the second phase of the study, which involved collecting specific student teaching experiences through structure-interview. Four participants were purposely from those who agreed to be interviewed to provide perspectives from elementary and secondary, male and female, and representative subject areas. Survey results were content analyzed. Interview transcripts were reviewed and coded to identify common themes that emerged from the participants' student teaching experiences.

Results and Data Analysis

Preservice Teachers' Self-Reported Competency Ranking

Fifteen preservice teachers seeking elementary certification and eight preservice teachers seeking secondary certification responded to the

questionnaire designed to gather trends apparent in the experiences of all preservice teachers. Of the twenty-three participants who completed the questionnaire, four participants were seeking certification status to teach at the middle school level, as well. Candidates seeking elementary education were represented fairly evenly with regards to the grade level in which they conducted their student teaching. Of the elementary candidates, first through fourth grades were represented equally with three candidates each. Two participants conducted their student teaching in kindergarten classrooms, and one participant taught in a fifth grade classroom. Of the candidates seeking secondary certificates, participants taught in math, social studies, science, and foreign language classrooms with three, two, two, and one candidate in each of those categories, respectively. During their student teaching experience, the majority of preservice teachers spent between three and five weeks full-time teaching their cooperating teacher's classroom.

Former preservice teachers were asked to rate their competency in the areas outlined by the professional teaching standards, language arts standards, and technology standards. Ratings were on a scale of one to ten and were based on preservice teachers' perception of their ability both before and after conducting their student teaching experience. The results of their responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Preservice Teachers Rating of their Own Competencies

Professional Teaching Standard	**Mean Rating (Before Student Teaching, 1-10, n = 23)**	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean Rating (After Student Teaching, 1-10, n=23)**	**Standard Deviation**	**Mean Difference Between Before and After**
Instructional Delivery	5.13	1.49	8.83	0.89	3.70
Learning Environment	5.26	1.94	8.52	0.95	3.26
Planning for Instruction	6.04	1.69	9.15	0.87	3.11

Assessment	5.17	2.27	8.26	0.92	3.09
Collaborative Relationships	6.57	2.19	9.04	0.88	2.48
Communication	6.39	1.75	8.70	0.82	2.30
Human Development and Learning	6.35	1.37	8.48	1.04	2.13
Diversity	6.30	2.20	8.43	1.24	2.13
Professional Conduct and Leadership	7.22	2.00	9.09	0.95	1.87
Language Arts	7.35	1.75	8.91	0.95	1.57
Content Knowledge	7.22	1.81	8.78	1.09	1.57
Reflection and Professional Growth	7.74	1.89	9.00	1.09	1.26
Technology	6.74	2.00	7.91	1.70	1.17

The information in Table 1 represents how former preservice teachers perceive their abilities, but the subjectivity of the rating system implies more of their confidence in their abilities rather than their actual ability. Before student teaching, former preservice teachers indicate the most confidence in their ability to meet the standards of reflection and professional growth, language arts, content knowledge, and professional conduct and leadership. Their teacher education program's philosophy contains "teaching and learning is an endeavor of inquiry, research, and reflection (Teacher Education Handbook, 2006)" and program participants engage in reflection on experiences within all levels of coursework. Preservice teachers' extensive coursework within their discipline prior to student teaching are reflected in the high rankings given to content knowledge and language arts.

The difference between how preservice teachers rated their proficiency before and after student teaching reveals which skills were

improved the most during student teaching. The data suggests that instructional delivery, learning environment, planning for instruction, and assessment were the top skills improved during student teaching with increases of 3.70, 3.26, 3.11, and 3.09, respectively. While strategies for accomplishing these tasks are introduced in curriculum courses within the teacher education program, preservice teachers do not really gain confidence in their own abilities until the student teaching experience.

Cooperating Teachers as Classroom Mentors

Cooperating teachers that worked with the participants in this study represent a variety of experience levels and skills. Six cooperating teachers had ten years of teaching experience or less, ten had between eleven and twenty years, and seven had twenty-six or more years of teaching experience. Cooperating teachers were selected by the university and many of them have mentored student teachers previously. On a scale of one to ten with ten being outstanding, student teachers were asked to rate their cooperating teachers' abilities in four areas: mentoring, providing feedback, resourcefulness in teaching curriculum, and implementing technology.

Table 2

Preservice Teacher's Perception of Cooperating Teacher's Abilities

Ability	**Average Score**	**Standard Deviation**
Mentoring	8.39	2.08
Providing Feedback	7.57	2.02
Resourcefulness in Teaching Curriculum	8.22	1.70
Implementing Technology	6.22	2.80

Since cooperating teachers were not actually evaluated on a standardized scale, this information provides a glimpse of how student teachers perceive their cooperating teachers' ability. The data reveals that student teachers perceive their cooperating teachers to be the most skilled in their mentoring ability, but their ability to provide feedback and to be resourceful

in teaching the curriculum were rated high, as well. In a study by Caires and Almeida (2007), preservice teachers gave cooperating teachers the highest ratings for the relationship they were able to build along with their guidance with pedagogical knowledge, while very few preservice teachers mentioned their cooperating teacher's ability to provide feedback. In this study, student teachers rated their cooperating teachers lowest in their ability to implement technology, but the large variance in this score suggests that student teachers worked with teachers of highly varying ability in this category.

When asked about the most helpful aspect of their cooperating teacher's mentoring ability, 45 percent of responses commented on their cooperating teacher's ability to provide feedback. One preservice teacher pointed out, "My coop was fabulous. He somehow always knew what I needed to hear and do. He let me figure out my own way and pushed me to challenge myself." But many preservice teachers thought that their cooperating teacher could have provided more consistent and constructive feedback. One preservice teacher suggested that specific feedback would have been more helpful than just the "good job" that he/she received. When asked about what aspects of their cooperating teacher's mentoring needs improvement, 35% of the participants felt that their cooperating teacher could have been better at providing feedback. In these cases, many noted that the feedback they did receive was inconsistent and unspecific. Other preservice teachers addressed the attacking and negative manner in which their cooperating teacher provided feedback. One preservice teacher noted, "She confronted me…in a very attacking manner. She made me feel awful when talking to me about things she did not like." In this case, the cooperating teacher was not open to new methods being used in the classroom and communicated this to the preservice teacher very harshly.

This information suggests that while many cooperating teachers are excellent at providing feedback, many preservice teachers also encounter challenging situations where conflicts and poor communication prevent the valuable feedback that they need for professional growth. The lack of feedback, according to Edwards (1997), suggests that the cooperating teachers in these instances are unprepared for their mentoring roles and often refrain from communicating observed difficulties and errors to preservice educators in order to avoid upsetting their trainee. One preservice teacher even attributed her cooperating teacher's poor approach to feedback to being the cooperating teacher's first preservice teacher.

In Bertone, Chalies, Clarke, and Meard's (2006) study, preservice teachers failed to accept and apply constructive criticism to their practice because they considered the criticized action to be an element of their identity as a teacher. While it is challenging for

the preservice teacher to accept constructive criticism in some instances, the cooperating teacher's approach can equally contribute to this conflict. As the most involved influence on the preservice teacher's professional growth, cooperating teachers have an obligation to positively promote their protégé's development. Therefore, cooperating teachers should present constructive criticism supported by the reasons behind their suggestion.

Supervisor as University Mentors

The preservice teacher and supervisor relationship was analyzed, and preservice teachers were asked to describe their supervisor's most helpful aspects and those that need improvement. In regards to the most helpful aspect of their supervisor's responsibility, seventy percent of the responses collected reported their supervisor's ability to provide feedback. One preservice teacher noted, "Honest feedback was the most helpful. My supervisor was not afraid to say things as they were, but this was done in a constructive way that did not make me defensive."

The less positive aspect of the university supervisor's mentoring most reported by preservice teacher was a lack of providing constructive criticism. Twenty-two percent of responses commented on their supervisor's inability to communicate constructive advice. One preservice teacher commented, "I really like that my supervisor wrote down pretty much everything because I had no idea about some of the things I was saying n the moment. I would have liked more feedback on what she thought I could improve on." Writing down every statement and action of the preservice teacher was classified by Lopez-Real (2001) as one of the seven easiest topics for discussion. It deals directly with teaching skills, which is tangible to both the preservice teacher and supervisor. It is a necessary part that many preservice teachers find insightful, but they feel like it should be coupled with constructive advice, as well.

From the responses analyzed, it appears that the majority of preservice teachers established strong connections and relationships with their university supervisors. Many preservice teachers described their supervisors as "supportive," "encouraging," "positive," and "always there to listen." Some students even stated that they felt a closer relationship with their supervisor than their cooperating teacher. All of these indicate that the majority of preservice teachers created a firm relationship with their supervisor that strengthened their willingness to internalize criticism and advice. These results follow closely with a study conducted by Marks (2007), where university supervisors were recognized to be contributors to the development of preservice teachers when a relationship was observed between the preservice teacher and supervisor.

Strengthening the Teacher Education Program

Preservice teachers were asked to respond about the aspects of the teacher education program that were most helpful and those that need improvement in providing for their preparation for the student teaching experience. There was a big split in what preservice teachers reported to be the most helpful. Fifty-two percent of responses stated that the practical preparation received in curriculum coursework was the most helpful, and forty-eight percent cited the emphasis on gaining field experience early and often throughout the program. Both of these responses can be characterized as more practical forms of learning to teach, as well as forms that were used and developed extensively throughout the student teaching experience.

Responses regarding how the teacher education program could improve their preparation for the student teaching experience varied significantly. Three preservice teachers felt that the program could create more discussion on classroom management or even offer a class on it. Other responses suggested that increased communication of expectations or exposure to education vocabulary would have been helpful. Two secondary preservice teachers felt that earlier field work in their subject at the secondary level would have improved their preparation, which goes along with two other preservice teachers' comments that little practical information was provided in early education coursework. The variety of responses in regard to teacher education program improvements suggests that every preservice teacher faced unique challenges that they felt could have been more prepared for.

These responses arouse the ongoing dilemma of creating teacher education that provides a practical approach to teaching founded on a strong theoretical framework. Traditionally, teacher education programs have refrained from combining early coursework with experience in the field (Darling-Hammond, 2006), but many teacher educators have supported the finding that fieldwork integrated with coursework improves understanding and application of theory to teaching practices (Baumgartner, Koerner, & Rust, 2002). Preservice teachers noted that early fieldwork was instrumental for preparing them for the student teaching experience. At the same time, some preservice teachers did not feel the necessary connection between the field experience and coursework as described by Baumgartner and others.

Successes, Challenges, and Recommendations for Future Student Teachers

By far the biggest success of the student teaching experience was the ability of preservice teachers to build relationships with their students.

Seventy-four percent of responses analyzed reported that getting to know students and forming relationships was the best part of the entire experience. One preservice teacher noted, "The best part…was forming relationships with my students and feeling like a vital part of the school." While 100 percent of secondary candidates reported that this aspect was the best part, there were other aspects included in the elementary candidates' responses. Roughly one in four elementary candidates cited the opportunity to engage in full-time teaching and the responsibility of leading the classroom. One preservice teacher commented, "[Full time teaching] truly showed me what it's like to be a teacher. I loved having the freedom to create unique lessons and activities."

The results are very clear on what preservice teachers perceived to be the most rewarding aspect of student teaching. In an analysis of four preservice teachers, Black (2003) pointed out that the biggest success of each preservice teacher was that they "accomplished their goals and that students learned what was intended." This study shows that most students felt like their greatest success was much deeper than just accomplishing the "job" of the teacher. The following statements are preservice teachers' responses to the best part of the student teaching experience that demonstrate how preservice teachers identify success with reaching students rather than just meeting established goals.

"Working closely with students was the best part. I was able to share in some eye-opening moments that afforded great satisfaction of actually accomplishing something."

"My favorite moments were connecting with the students outside the classroom."

"Getting to really know your students and sharing experiences with them. I always get really excited if one of my students gets something that they have been struggling with."

"Getting to know my students - It connected me with them and allowed me to create lessons that fit their needs."

"Forming relationships with my students, getting to know each one, and knowing that they really enjoyed working with me as much as I did with them."

Many students identify their successes with the reward of establishing relationships with their students, as well as seeing those connections lead into learning opportunities for their students. Instead of just seeing students learn what was intended, preservice teachers perceive making connections with their students as the foundation for accomplishing student learning goals.

An analysis of responses in regard to the major challenges faced by

preservice teachers revealed that most students feel that aspects of classroom management are the most difficult challenges. Seventeen out of twenty three preservice teachers reported issues related to classroom management as the most significant challenges. One student noted, "I was overwhelmed with the sheer number of students and the amount of multi-tasking that was required." Within this category, eight preservice teachers referred specifically to the time management required during full-time teaching and the difficulty of balancing the grading, teaching, and planning responsibilities, five referred to implementing discipline, and four described meeting the needs of all their students. The remaining 5 out of 23 preservice teachers reported that their biggest difficulty was working with their cooperating teacher.

Challenges related to classroom management generally rank very high on difficulty for preservice and first year teachers. Many preservice teachers find the student teaching experience to be an overwhelming task, especially during full-time teaching. When student teachers take over full time teaching, they are faced with responsibilities such as developing new materials, planning for instruction, delivering instruction, preparing assessment, and disciplining. For a young, inexperienced teacher, these tasks can be exhausting and time consuming. These results concur with those found by Hill and Brodin (2004) where first-year teachers defined fatigue, classroom management, and discipline as the three largest challenges faced.

Regarding the challenges that they faced, preservice teachers offered a variety of suggestions for future preservice teachers. Advice provided most frequently dealt with communication, early preparation, or organization. Eight of twenty three responses dealt with establishing communication early with the cooperating teacher and supervisor and maintaining it, four responses contained references to preparing for student teaching by working on materials ahead of time, and three responses suggested staying organized. Selected examples of suggestions are condensed and compiled in the Table 3.

Table 3 *Preservice Teachers' Recommendations for Future Student Teachers*

Category	Suggestions
Communication	1. "Make sure expectations and guidelines are clear with CT* before starting first day." 2. "Don't be afraid to communicate especially from the beginning." 3. "Don't take criticism personal, your CT and supervisor are only trying to help." 4. "Take advice from CT but use it in your own way." 5. "Don't be afraid to ask [*your supervisor*] for a different CT because you are afraid to hurt their feelings, you need the best experience possible." **CT represents cooperating teacher*
Preparation	1. "Work ahead, don't get behind, write a whole week's lesson over the weekend." 2. "Write a discipline plan before school starts." 3. "Develop a strong plan for lesson planning and getting materials ready."
Organization	"Keep records of good management strategies, activities, books, keep a copy of every worksheet."

First-Year Teaching Preparedness

In assessing the effectiveness of the student teaching experience as a whole, preservice teachers' confidence in their abilities was analyzed. Eighty-three percent of preservice teachers stated that they felt well prepared for their first year of teaching after completing the student teaching experience, 17 percent were unsure about their preparedness, and there were no participants claiming to be unprepared. Preservice teachers' concerns about their first year of teaching were identified, as well. There were two major concerns that preservice teachers had about being a first year

teacher. With six responses, The most prevalent concern was not having the constant mentoring of a cooperating teacher in the classroom. One preservice teacher commented, "[I am concerned about] not having a solid support system like I did during student teaching." Another preservice teacher expressed her concern of establishing classroom management without her cooperating teacher's help. "[I am concerned about] creating my own classroom management system without having [my] cooperating teacher's as a basis."

The second largest concern, with five responses, came only from secondary preservice teachers. Sixty-three percent of preservice teachers at the secondary level expressed concerns with having enough time to create meaningful lessons. One preservice teacher noted, "[I am concerned about] organization and being able to have enough time to incorporate technology or manipulatives that I want to use." Another preservice teacher expressed his concern of just staying on track. "It's going to be so hard to keep track of everything and try to be innovative when you're just trying to make it through each day."

While there are concerns about being a first year teacher, it is important to point out that this alone is not enough to convince them that they are not prepared for the experience. Many preservice teachers expressed that having the opportunity to lead a class without their cooperating teacher in the classroom helped their confidence. "I was able to run my classroom effectively on my own and believe I will be able to do so in my own room." But students still acknowledge that the workload of their first year teaching will be overwhelming, as well. "I know that the first few years are going to be hard and require a lot of dedication, but I am completely excited to begin on my own."

The second aspect of the study included in-depth perceptions of the challenges of the student teaching experience gathered from a case-study approach of four preservice teachers.

Lessons from Case-Study Analysis

Carol and *Ben* were preservice teachers who taught different subjects at the secondary level during their student teaching experience. *Karen* conducted her student teaching experience in an early elementary classroom and *Susan* was a preservice teacher in a late elementary classroom. Structured interview was used to gather qualitative data about the student teaching experience. All interviews were conducted and aimed to draw out more personal experiences and examples. During the interviews, former student teachers had the opportunity to share their experience, assess their experience, and comment on how it could have been improved. Preservice teacher responses were compared side by side in order to identify specific themes apparent in their

responses with regard to successes and challenges of their student teaching experiences. The three common themes that emerged from the interview data are limitations in teaching in a class not their own, classroom management as a constant struggle, and success in connecting with students.

Limitations in teaching in a class not their own. Ben, Carol, and Susan all expressed difficulties with applying knowledge that they had gained from their coursework into their student teaching classroom because of limitations on how they could implement instruction. Ben stated that curriculum requirements by his cooperating teacher and her department restrained what he was trying to accomplish.

> "Over time she [the cooperating teacher] has gotten into a fairly strict curriculum to meet, and so they do a lot of lecture and the students are filling in worksheets and things like that…. I was trying to be a little more student centered because that's the education I've had…. Then when I would do that, my cooperating teacher was fine with it. She would say, 'Go for it. Do something new.' Then at the same time she would say, 'I really need to do these activities.'"

Ben's experience demonstrates how stepping into a teacher's classroom that already has its own routines and rules can impede on the preservice teacher's intentions and goals. The teaching style and activities expected of him by the cooperating teacher did not line up with what the teacher education program had trained him to do. Carol had a similar experience in her classroom, where differing teaching styles of her and her cooperating teacher got in the way.

Carol described her cooperating teacher and herself as two "totally different people." Her cooperating teacher coached athletics and the students perceived him in a much different light than they perceived her. "He already had relationships with the students so it was really easy for him to say 'do this' [and the students would listen]. The students saw me as…just another student teacher." This difference was challenging for Carol when she tried to implement more student centered instruction.

> "[When my cooperating teacher taught] it was really just like lecture and seat work which worked when [he] was doing it, because…he had a reputation and a lot of students…knew the routine. I wanted it [instruction] to be more student centered, and then when I would…assign projects and have group work...they just wouldn't do it. That was difficult because I tried to do what I was taught here [in the teacher education program]."

Like Ben, Carol desired to implement the student centered

approaches encouraged by the teacher education program, but conflicting personalities with her cooperating teacher that affected how the students perceived her were impeding on her progress.

Susan expressed similar difficulties as Ben and Carol. When asked about the biggest challenge of entering the classroom as a preservice teacher, Susan stated, "The biggest challenge was taking my ideas and forming them into something that would resemble her [the cooperating teacher's] ideas." It is apparent that Susan is struggling with establishing her unique instructional and managerial styles to ensure that they are in accordance with the cooperating teacher's expectations. When told by her cooperating teacher that she needed to learn how to teach from the textbook, Carol reaction was submissive. "I pretty much succumbed to what she said, and I would textbook, textbook, and then I would take my ideas and hide them into textbook-esque activities."

Ben, Carol, and Susan all had similar challenging situations during their student teaching experience. Their desires to implement university-taught practices were stunted by conflicting interests in the classroom. Susan summed it up in saying, "It's weird to walk into an experience where she [the cooperating teacher] has one set of goals and I have another set of goals, and my goals are to, yes, deliver instruction, and, yes, prepare them [for the ISAT], but also to make sure that they [her students] don't drop out of school." The above conflicts were most commonly associated with differences between the expectations of the cooperating teacher and the teacher education program. This trend is supported in a study by Marks (2007) in which he found that sometimes student teachers abandoned the instruction and training they had received through the teacher education program during their teaching. he student teacher wants to meet the expectations of the university, but has to do so in the presence of a cooperating teacher that does not support or implement those expectations themselves. Karen refrained from expressing this aspect of student teaching as challenging, and support provided from her cooperating teacher may help explain why.

After getting past initial reservations about seeking advice from her cooperating teacher, Karen learned how supportive she was of her actions in the classroom. From the very first day, Karen's cooperating teacher had her involved in helping teach the class. When Karen transitioned to full-time teaching, her cooperating teacher offered a lot of ideas to her.

> "She was so open to giving me ideas or she would just give me a file folder of all her materials and she has been teaching for so long that she had a lot of resources. She would be like 'You don't have to use any of this, I suggest running with it

in a new way.' I think she tried to encourage me to find stuff [materials] on my own, but she was there to support me"

Karen's cooperating teacher's actions created a supportive atmosphere that gave Karen guidance and room to grow.

Classroom management as a constant struggle. The second theme that appeared in the case-study analysis was challenges and successes associated with classroom management. Carol described some of the problems that she dealt with and how she addressed them.

> "I had a really large class and I had trouble making sure that they were not talking with one another because for a second if I was transitioning and it was a little lax they would start talking and it would be hard to bring them back. It was through planning that I addressed those issues but it wasn't strategies I learned through my classes, it was I just became a better planner and had to come up with more activities."

Carol felt that the preparation she had received for her teacher education program in regards to classroom management was insufficient. In effect, she looked for support from her cooperating teacher and her colleagues, but still felt like her approach to classroom management was more of trial and error. "I think we maybe spent about thirty minutes on it [classroom management] in one class and I felt like it was more trial and error while I was in the field and I had to figure it out myself." In the end, she felt like more preparation on classroom management and behavior issues during her coursework would have been helpful.

Susan expressed similar feelings from her field experience. "When you get into a class of fourth graders who are walking around the room, leaving their seat, and sharpening their pencil, it's something you're not prepared for." Like Carol, she wished that she would have been exposed to expectations of what handling a classroom would be like and strategies for managing situations during her coursework. Except for the student teaching experience, Susan felt that she was "never actually accountable for everything they [students] do [while she was teaching]." While she stated that she felt well prepared for preparing lesson plans and engaging in reflection, she wished that during coursework situations would have been fabricated to simulate classroom management situations. One suggesting she had was giving fellow classmates roles that demonstrate unannounced disruptive behaviors to put students on the spot and to see how they handle it.

During her student teaching experience, Karen's perception of her classroom management skills were different than her cooperating teacher's and supervisor's evaluation. When asked about her biggest challenge during

student teaching, Karen said, "The first thing that I think about is discipline, but that must have been in my head because… my cooperating teacher and my supervisor said [discipline] was one of my strong points." She admitted that during evaluation sessions when her supervisor was present that she constantly perceived her students' behavior as too rowdy. Karen's case demonstrates that while many students feel unsure about their abilities to establish an effective learning environment, many preservice teachers have the knowledge and ability to implement adequate classroom management practices.

Ben's reflections on how he handled classroom management during his student teaching experience gave him confidence for entering into his first teaching job.

> "You always hear that classroom management or discipline is going to be the biggest problem. I see that there is a potential for it to be an issue, but I don't necessarily expect it to be my number one issue because I had a lot of students who didn't want to pay attention when I was a student teacher, and we had to take a number of actions: develop and issue new written plans, closely follow those rules day to day, change the classroom organization, call parents, have personal conferences with students, conferences with students and parents, talk to individual students, and get the administration involved. So although it could be a problem, I feel comfortable facing that problem, so I'm not going to stress too much about it because I know what to do."

Ben acknowledged that classroom management represents a difficult challenge in developing a teacher's pedagogical skill, but he uses his own experiences from his student teaching to reinforce his understanding of his own knowledge, ability, and belief in himself.

Each of the preservice teachers expressed how they encountered and addressed issues with classroom management, and in comparison each explanation was unique to their individual experience. Carol expressed how through trial and error she developed strategies for containing disruptive behaviors during transitions in her lesson. Susan felt that more attention to common disruptive situations during coursework could have prepared her for the reality of managing student actions as a teacher. Karen did not perceive her knowledge and ability to maintain classroom management as effective, even though her cooperating teacher and supervisor felt it was one of her strengths. Ben implemented a variety of classroom management strategies that worked and gave him confidence in his abilities as a future teacher.

Success in connecting with students. All four preservice teachers described connecting with their students as both their greatest success and the

aspect of student teaching that they liked the most. Carol stated, "I think that I connected really well with my students." When asked how she accomplished this, she replied,

> "I think just asking them on Mondays, 'Did everyone have a good weekend?' or 'Did anyone do anything exciting?' I think that if they know you are invested in them and you genuinely care about what they are talking about they are more likely to do well in class."

Carol was able to expand on those connections with the students and find exciting ways for them to learn the information, as well. "My favorite part of student teaching was seeing them [her students] make those connections to the material that maybe they hadn't before."

Susan described her biggest success as "leaving a memorable impression" through the connections that she made with her students. During her teaching, she made a point to find out what the students were most interested in and incorporate that into her lessons.

> "I would ask them, 'What are you most interested in?' Even [student name] who was sleeping during every class, I found out he liked dinosaurs. [Reaching students requires] finding that little thing about them and then introducing it on the side."

After the student teaching experience was complete, Susan returned to visit the classroom where she student taught. Seeing the excitement of her students when she returned to visit them convinced her that she had made strong connections with here students during field experience.

Karen went back to visit her classroom after finishing her student teaching experience and reported one of her former students asking her, "Can you stay and teach us for awhile?" This question really reinforced Karen's feeling that she had touched the lives of her students and demonstrates that the relationship she shared with her students was beyond just friends. "They don't even just see me as a person; they want me to teach them." Karen also described one of the best parts of the student teaching experience as "finding ways to work with troubling students." Like Carol and Susan, Karen expressed a passion to discover the interests of her students and incorporate that knowledge into instruction and classroom management.

Ben described his greatest success as developing after school sessions to help students who struggled in his class. During those sessions he could address the individual needs of students and felt successful in that "students were leaving those sessions having learned something." Ben's favorite aspect of the student teaching experience was centered on his everyday interactions with students.

> "I think I liked working with the students day to day because that's really what's drawn me to teaching. I'm interested in the content obviously, but relaying that type of information that I don't feel is broadly understood or appreciated to students and working with them is one of my primary motivations."

The responses of Carol, Susan, Karen, and Ben support the questionnaire data regarding how preservice teachers perceive success during student teaching. Each of these preservice teachers expressed student learning as an identifier of success, but only in the context of the meaningful relationships and connections that were formed in the process. Connecting with students did more than just indicate success for these preservice teachers. It represented the most rewarding and fulfilling aspect of the student teaching experience.

Conclusion

This study confirms that within the student teaching experience, preservice teachers encounter difficulties that result from problems associated with the cooperating teacher's mentoring, supervisor's feedback, and preparation provided by the teacher education program. Problems with the cooperating teacher's mentoring were found to be the most prevalent in this study and had the greatest consequence on the preservice teacher's growth due to the magnitude of influence they have during the student teaching experience. While it was found that a large percentage of preservice teachers suggested that their cooperating teacher's ability to provide feedback was their best aspect, many also suggested that more constructive feedback would have been helpful. The limitations on implementation expressed by preservice teacher due to differing expectations of cooperating teachers and the teacher education program is an area that needs to be addressed. Although the exact extent of this difference is relatively unknown, depending on the relationships between the cooperating teaching and preservice teachers, the implications of preservice teachers abandoning practices instructed and supported by the teacher education program should not be ignored.

The teacher education program has the responsibility of ensuring that expectations for preservice teachers are aligned during the student teaching experience. Giebelhaus and Bowman (2002) used a framework for training cooperating teachers in methods of observation, feedback, and assessment. The *Praxis III/Pathwise* framework not only trains cooperating teachers in proper methods of mentoring and supervision, but opens communication lines that allow for increasing their knowledge of the philosophy and goals of the teacher education program. Results of their study showed that preservice teachers who worked with cooperating teachers trained under this

framework demonstrated "more complete and effective planning, more effective classroom instruction, and greater reflectivity on practice." In effect, cooperating teachers, teacher education programs, and most importantly future preservice teachers would benefit from training cooperating teachers under this framework.

Although the premise of this study was to propose recommendations for eliminating challenges faced by preservice teachers, adversity encountered during the student teaching experience encourages personal and professional development. Future research in this field could identify how first-year teachers perceive the preparation provided by the student teaching experience. It would also be interesting to identify the challenges faced by cooperating teachers in managing their curriculum, classroom, and mentoring responsibilities.

Classroom management represents another one of the major challenges identified by preservice teachers during their student teaching experience. Many students expressed that increased exposure to management situations and strategies provided during early educational studies coursework would have prepared them for the challenges encountered as preservice teachers. One preservice teacher suggested that professors should strive to bring first-year teachers into the classroom to discuss issues they deal with and how they resolved them. Classroom management is challenging for preservice teachers due to the difficulty of providing realistic situations in the educational studies classroom prior to student teaching. Contributing to this are classroom dynamics that vary widely depending on the level of the classes, the time of day, and the students. This approach provides a practical approach that still falls short of simulating the experience, but exposes student to real-life situations, expectations, and strategies in regard to dealing with classroom management.

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