Literacy Curricula, the Common Core, and Defending an Unpopular Profession: The Lived Experiences of Undergraduate Preservice Literacy Teachers

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of eight pre-service teachers, specifically their understandings of teaching Common Core-aligned English language arts (ELA) and their feelings about becoming teachers of literacy amid the current era of accountability. Phenomenological methods were used to interview participants and analyze data for significant statements made by all eight pre-service teachers involved. Major themes to emerge include that pre-service teachers felt prepared to design ELA lessons but unprepared to develop an ELA curriculum; they felt the Common Core State Standards had changed everything about teaching; and they were anxious about becoming teachers during a time of great educational change. These findings can illuminate some of the tensions, successes, and challenges that pre-service teachers face, and may help teacher educators to tailor instruction to meet the needs of their students at a time when enrollment numbers in teacher education programs are at historic lows.

Keywords
teacher education, clinical practice, clinical educator, professional development, teacher perceptions

Much has changed in public perception of education recently. The highly-politicized topic of education and the ease with which social commentary can take place on social media have created an environment of critical observation and examination among many Americans. One content area that has faced intense public scrutiny is English language arts (ELA). In this subject area, curricular mandates and scripted programs have become commonplace (Costigan, 2010; Griffith, 2008; Hargreaves, 2000). In many schools, the teaching of literacy has become highly-structured and prescribed, with lessons often coming

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from pre-written curricula and taught by all teachers in the same grade level at the same time. While many have explored the effects of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Albers, Flint, & Holbrook, 2016; Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014), and of scripted curricula and mandates (Ede, 2006; Dresser, 2012; Milosovic, 2007; Parks & Bridges-Rhodes, 2012), on teaching and learning, less is known about the perceptions of pre-service teachers who are about to enter this high-stakes teaching environment.

The reality of teaching for many entering the profession today is that the literacy curriculum is a tool that is already made and waiting for them when they enter the classroom (Walker, 2014), particularly in high-needs schools (Milner, 2014; Parks & Bridges-Rhoads, 2012). With more than 66 million downloads of the EngageNY Math and ELA curriculum since the materials became available in 2011 as but one example (Loewus, 2017), the prevalence of pre-made teaching materials in the United States has risen dramatically since the Common Core State Standards were introduced (Eisenbach, 2012). In fact, a recent RAND survey of the American Teacher Panel reported that 80-90% of the panel members indicated that their school districts required or recommended they download the EngageNY curriculum materials (Kaufman et al., 2017). While scripted curricula are used with varying expectations for fidelity from school to school, their use in general has increased dramatically in the past decade, despite the fact that elementary teachers with prescribed reading programs have reported wanting more professional freedom and fewer curricular mandates (Lenski et al., 2016).

Though teacher preparation programs have little control over the means by which literacy curricula are selected and created in school districts, it is their responsibility to prepare new teachers for the reality of what curricula look like in schools. Recently, some have reported pre-service teachers' perceptions that what they have learned in their teacher preparation program misaligned with what they actually faced in a real classroom (Young et al., 2017). Teacher preparation programs are also being asked to track their graduates' success in the field, yet another layer of scrutiny that adds to the mandates and accountability of programs across the country. As institutions of higher education strive to graduate teachers who are prepared to face the realities of the profession, they must consider the ways that their coursework engages pre-service teachers in authentic opportunities to teach and to reflect upon their teaching of literacy.

Additionally, enrollment in teacher preparation programs across the nation has decreased dramatically, dropping more than forty percent from over 716,000 candidates enrolled in 2009 to roughly 418,000 in 2015 (USDOE, 2016). Furthermore, the Learning Policy Institute, headed by Linda Darling-Hammond, released a report in 2016 that projected that, by 2025, there will be a teacher shortage of about 316,000 teachers (Sucter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). With enrollment in teacher preparation programs facing such historically low numbers, and K-12 student enrollments continuing to rise, there is an immediate need for research into the current issues in teacher education and teacher preparation programs.

While much research has been devoted to teachers' reasons for staying or leaving the profession, the goal of this study was to illuminate the perceptions of those who have yet to enter the field, pre-service teachers, in order to explore what they perceived of the profession at this most tenuous time, a time when many of their peers are opting *not* to pursue teaching as a career. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of eight pre-service teachers at a small, comprehensive university in Western New York. The hope is that this research may illuminate some of the tensions, successes, and challenges that pre-service teachers face, and may help teacher educators to tailor instruction to meet both the academic and the socio-political needs of their students at a time when enrollment numbers in teacher education programs are at historic lows.

Review of Literature

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions

Across the existing research, there are many who have examined the experiences and perceptions of teachers. Historically, it has been found that teachers' beliefs and perceptions impact how they teach (Kagan, 1984; Nespor, 1987), and this extends to pre-service teachers, whose past experiences shape their current beliefs, despite challenges to these beliefs that might occur in their formal teacher preparation programs (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1993). Some have found that preservice teachers typically keep the core pedagogical beliefs and practices they develop early on in their teacher training (Lombaerts, De Backer, Engels, van Braak, & Athanasou, 2009). Others have found that they perceive their beliefs as evolving and growing as they move through their teacher training, particularly during the student teaching experience, which pre-service teachers have described as fundamental to establishing their professional beliefs and practices (Erdogan, 2015; Wooley, Wooley, & Hosey, 1999).

A pre-service teacher's views can be changed by what they learn in their teacher education program (Dvorak, Shaw, & Bates, 2007). In light of this, teacher education programs should consider the beliefs of their candidates in an effort to design programs that positively impact the knowledge and beliefs held by students (Richardson, 1996; Hallinan & Khemolkov, 2001; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). Additionally, pre-service teachers have expressed the belief that teaching is more about affective, interpersonal relationships than it is about skilled, disciplined work (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005). Further, pre-service teachers tend to have naive and idealistic views about the teaching profession prior to student teaching, particularly regarding the amount of stress and emotional burnout associated with teaching full time (Hong, 2010). This research highlights some of the mismatch between teacher preparation and what candidates experience in upon entering the profession.

In general, the research into pre-service teachers' perceptions has ranged from the somewhat general--exploring their beliefs and identities overall--to the very specific, including research into their perceptions of history (Ohn, 2013), of teaching with cell phones (Thomas & O'Bannon, 2013) and laptops (Şad, & Göktaş, 2014), and their receptiveness to diversity following in-service training (Tinkler & Tinkler, 2013). While all of these studies make important contributions to the field, few have considered pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching literacy. The studies that were found in these areas will be highlighted next.

PST Perceptions of Teaching Literacy

In relation to teaching literacy, several studies have been conducted into pre-service teachers' perceptions. Some have found that pre-service teachers' perceptions of their home and school literacy experiences either served to motivate or discourage them from engaging in certain literacy activities in school (MacPhee & Sanden, 2016), and that many pre-service teachers do not personally read for pleasure, despite feeling that reading will be an important part of the teaching they will one day do (Gibson, 2010; Sulentic-Dowell, Beal, & Capraro, 2006). New teachers have expressed feeling better prepared to teach than did practiced and veteran teachers when they entered and, in fact, veteran teachers agreed that pre-service teachers seemed more prepared to teach literacy than they felt at the start of their careers (Eller and Poe, 2015). Pre-service teachers have also reported feeling confident

that they had adequate knowledge to teach literacy (O'Neill & Geoghegan, 2011), but that teaching literacy in urban settings was akin to hunting for a "missing, hidden, or buried" object (Zoss, Holbrook, McGrail, & Albers, 2014). One study found a mismatch between pre-service teachers' positively perceived ability to teach struggling readers and their limited actual knowledge in how to teach struggling readers (Washburn, Joshi, & Cantrell, 2010), something that has been previously found (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard 2001; Mather, Bos, & Babur, 2001). Finally, Duffy and Atkinson (2001) found that the perceived preparedness of pre-service teachers to address their students' reading needs increased as they moved through their programs and, conversely, their misconceptions about literacy content knowledge decreased. Duffy and Atkinson urged faculty in teacher preparation programs to research their own programs and students in order to determine ways to inform and improve instruction of pre-service teachers.

Though research into pre-service teachers' perceptions of curricula has been conducted in the fields of science education (Beyer & Davis, 2012; Duncan, Pilitsis, & Piegaro, 2012; Forbes & Davis, 2008; Forbes, 2013), math education (Hodgkinson, Land, Johnson, & Beshchorner, 2016) and with regard to diversity curriculum (Van Hook, 2002), little research into their perceptions of teaching with literacy curricula exists. Missing altogether from the research is the perception of pre-service teachers with regard to literacy instruction amid the current teacher shortages and decline in public perception of teaching. This work sought to illuminate these perceptions in order to understand how pre-service teachers feel about and perceive of their lived experiences as teacher candidates. Specifically, the overarching research question and three sub-questions that guided this research were:

What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching the English Language Arts?
1. In what ways have their lived experiences influenced their perceptions of teaching?
2. In what ways have their teacher preparation program influenced their perceptions of teaching?
3. What are pre-service teachers' perceptions of the Common Core Standards focused on English Language Arts?

Methodology

As this study sought to illuminate pre-service teachers' perceptions of their lived experiences within their teacher preparation program, phenomenological methods, which explore the structures of consciousness and experiences from the first-person point of view, seemed a natural choice. At its core, phenomenology examines a phenomenon experienced by oneself, others around oneself, and objects with which one comes in contact (Husserl, 1954/1970). The goal of phenomenological research is to describe the commonalities among participants' experiences with the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study explored the phenomenon of teacher preparation experienced by eight participants in order to describe the commonalities among them in their lived experiences. Descriptive phenomenology aims to examine the lived experiences one has around a phenomenon and to reduce the common experiences of many to a description of the universal essence of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological study examined eight pre-service teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparation programs that would lead to teacher certification in New York State.

The Research Site

This research took place from Spring 2016 to Fall 2017 at a small, comprehensive university in Western New York State. At the time of data collection, the university was comprised of 78.3% White, 6.9% Hispanic, 5.9% Black, Non-Hispanic, 3.3% Asian, 2.2% Multiple Races, and 3% Unknown students. Participants were enrolled in an advanced literacy teaching methods course, typically taken the semester before student teaching in an undergraduate teacher preparation program. The course, while designed by this researcher, was taught by a colleague. The teacher preparation programs targeted in recruitment efforts were childhood education (grades 1-6), childhood inclusive education (grades 1-6 and special education), early childhood education (birth through grade two), and early childhood-childhood education (birth through grade 6).

Though this study was focused on the perceptions of the pre-service teacher participants, previous research has suggested that teacher candidates' perceptions can be impacted by the teacher education program at their college or university (Dvorak, Shaw, & Bates, 2007). As such, a description of the participants' college of education and the ideologies espoused by faculty there must be provided. At the time of this research, the college of education at this four-year, liberal arts institution was made up of twenty-six full time faculty who taught candidates in sixteen teacher preparation programs. The mission of the college of education was to provide its teacher candidates with experiences that allowed them to connect educational theory and practice in real classroom settings. In general, faculty espoused sociocultural and constructivist perspectives of teaching that included responsive and inclusive practices. Teacher candidates were encouraged to consider the needs and backgrounds of each student as they planned their instruction. Though a designated course on curriculum was not required in any education programs at this college, faculty often invited teacher candidates to examine, discuss, and critique the Common Core State Standards and curricular programs, including the Common Core-aligned EngageNY ELA Curriculum that many of the participants in this study mentioned. Students in this college of education had a range of opportunities to critique teaching materials and consider how they might be adapted in order to meet their students' needs. It must be mentioned that these experiences and the sociocultural ideologies of faculty in the college of education likely had an impact on the participants' perceptions. The sole researcher was a full-time faculty member at the university, and all interviews took place in the researcher's private office on campus.

Participants

As Moustakas (1994) recommends having three to fifteen participants in phenomenological research, eleven preservice teachers were initially recruited to participate in this study. Of the eleven who responded to the call for participants, one later decided she could not make the time commitment to participate, one did not respond to the researcher's requests to set up an initial appointment, and one was a student in a course taught by the researcher and therefore did not qualify to participate. Eight participants remained who were able to commit to the study and did not have any other conflicts that would prevent them from participating. Each one was majoring in early childhood education, childhood education, inclusive education, or any combination of those programs, at a small, comprehensive university in Western New York. Participants volunteered for the study after they were given a brief recruitment presentation in their first of two literacy methods classes, taken just before they entered student teaching. All volunteers were women, and all but two were traditional students in the sense that

they went directly from high school into college and were roughly 20 to 22 years old in their junior year. Two participants had returned to college after taking a few years off and were several years older than the others, and both of these participants were married with children. Though selection of all female participants was not intentional, this set of participants was typical and representative of the student population at this rural university in the represented education programs which have been historically enrolled by a majority female population.

Table 1
Participants by Major and Gender

*Shilyn	Female	Junior in Early Childhood & Childhood Education
Ashley	Female	Junior in Early Childhood & Childhood Education
Nicole	Female	Junior in Early Childhood & Childhood Education
Belle	Female	Junior in Childhood Inclusive Education
Anna	Female	Junior in Childhood Education
Dany	Female	Junior in Early Childhood & Childhood Education
Julie	Female	Junior in Childhood Education
Lily	Female	Junior in Childhood Inclusive Education

*All names are pseudonyms selected by the participants.

Bracketing

An important early and ongoing step in phenomenological research is for researchers to free themselves from the "propositions that enter into their systems," (Husserl, 2012/1931, p. 59) via the act or bracketing, referred to by Husserl as *epoché*. During bracketing, researchers must "set aside [their] prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) in order to "take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 78). As faculty in the department in which each pre-service teacher participant was a student, I was intimately familiar with the coursework offered and philosophies espoused by my college of education. Though the participants were not enrolled in courses I taught during this study, I developed the syllabus for the literacy methods course from which the participants were recruited. In addition, like most of the participants will, I have a bachelor's degree in elementary education and have had similar experiences to them. Though my own teacher preparation pre-dates the Common Core State Standards and the accountability measures that I was interested in examining, nonetheless, I have formed my own perceptions about the phenomenon experienced by my participants, and have continuously made every effort to bracket these perceptions in order to look objectively at the experience as lived by the participants.

Data Collection

As phenomenological researchers are interested in "first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84), interviews are typically the main source of data in phenomenology. After engaging in the

initial epoché process, I conducted two one-on-one, topically-guided and semi-structured interviews (Moustakas, 1994) with each participant. I developed one set of open-ended questions for each interview (see Appendix A for full topical guided interview questions) and asked participants other questions that emerged from the natural flow of conversation. The goal of the first interview was to gather background information on the participants' personal histories in relation to their own education and their perceptions of education, in general, and of the Common Core State Standards, specifically. The second interview occurred approximately three months later, and explored the participants' perceptions of the job of an elementary educator and what they expected to experience as they transitioned into the profession. All interviews took place in the researcher's private work office, each one was approximately one hour in length, and all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by either the researcher or a research assistant. Immediately after each interview, I took extensive and detailed analytic memos to recognize and bracket any biases that emerged and to create "think pieces that articulate[d] the mental processing of the data that [had] been collected" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 255). These notes helped me examine what collective experiences the participants were describing while also allowing for deep reflection on my own lived experiences. Analytic memos became part of a recursive and reflective process of bracketing and data analysis.

Data Analysis

The main data for this study were interviews with each participant that were coded according to phenomenological data analysis techniques (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014), particularly "phenomenological reduction" (Husserl, 2012/1931, p. 63). This began first with bracketing as described above and continued through data collection in the form of analytic memos. In analysis, structure was given to the data to make underlying essences obvious. To start, interview data were reviewed multiple times and analyzed for "significant statements" made by the participants, a process Moustakas referred to as "horizonalization" (1994, p. 95). Through horizonalization, the researcher seeks to bring the distinct character of a phenomenon to light to "disclose its nature and essence" (p. 95). This manifested in direct quotes from the participants that provided an understanding of how they experienced the phenomenon of teacher education.

From there, "clusters of meaning" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 79) were developed across all of the significant statements. These were the horizons that were similar among the participants. For example, most participants made significant statements about writing literacy lesson plans ("I really like lesson planning."), a teacher's roles ("It's a lot of jobs in one job.") and assessing students ("Testing in New York State, I think, is a huge thing."), common experiences for all of them. The significant statements were collected and clustered into themes such as *perceptions of lesson planning, memories of learning to read,* and *the teaching profession.* Then, the clustered statements were used to write "textual" and "structural descriptions" (Moustakas, 1994) of what the participants experienced as a way of understanding "*how* the [participants] as a group experience[d] *what* they experience[d]" (p. 142). These descriptions gave a structure to the many themes that were present after horizonalization and clustering. Finally, from the structural descriptions, the "essence" of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants was reduced to a single statement that focused on the participants' common experiences. Moustakas (1994) described the essence as "that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is" (p.100). Essence statements became the findings of this research--the common conditions of the experiences had by all participants--and will be described in detail.

Findings

In analyzing the statements made by participants using phenomenological methods, three major themes, three essences, emerged that described the lived experiences and perceptions of all eight pre-service teachers. First, each participant expressed unease with curriculum development, despite the fact that each felt comfortable with lesson planning and implementation. Secondly, the participants perceived that the Common Core State Standards impacted the planning and teaching of English language arts. And, finally, the participants expressed anxiety and excitement about entering the teaching profession.

From "I get excited about writing lessons" to "I'd try not to cry"

The first finding to emerge from the creation of essence statements in data analysis was that the participants felt uncomfortable with the idea of developing a literacy curriculum, despite the fact that they each described feeling very comfortable with writing lesson plans. Data in this theme were grouped around three clusters of meaning. First, they felt that teachers were the best people to plan for individualized instruction, which all participants felt was the most effective sort of instruction. Next, they felt that planning for literacy instruction was easy for them, and even enjoyable. Finally, they felt that designing a literacy curriculum was difficult work and not something they felt comfortable doing, nor that they expected to have to do as teachers, despite being able to describe a clear process for planning a yearlong curriculum when pressed. Similar statements were made by the participants in each of the clusters of meaning areas in this theme. The data shared here are salient examples of the kinds of significant statements made by the participants in these cluster areas.

To begin, the participants were unanimous and firm in their belief that teachers were the best people to plan instruction to meet the needs of all students by tailoring their instruction based on their knowledge of learners. About this, Nicole had the following to say: "Good teachers learn who their students are first and then plan their teaching." Dany also shared this perspective: "It's nice being able to write your own [plans] because you can follow along and write and change things as you want...based on the students' needs." Similarly, Anna shared her feelings about teachers as planners when she said: "...to be a teacher, you have to go through education and...there's a reason we go through it." Each participant remarked on how they perceived teachers as the best people to plan instruction for their students.

Next, the participants talked at length about how they felt comfortable with planning effective literacy instruction, many of them mentioning long-recognized and research-based practices such as guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Lyons & Thompson, 2012; Underwood, 2010), strategic comprehension instruction (Boardman et al., 2016; Stahl, 2004), and offering choice-based writing (Graves, 1994; Zumbrunn, Ekholm, Stringer, McKnight, & DeBusk-Lane, 2017). Every participant provided detailed descriptions for how to go about aligning literacy lessons to the Common Core Standards and even writing literacy block plans. The table below shows each participant's remarks on planning for literacy instruction.

All of the participants spoke with confidence about writing literacy lesson plans and many were able to describe clear, research-based procedures found across the literacy literature, including the gradual release of responsibility model (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Young, 2017) and inquiry-based learning (Alfieri, Brooks, Aldrich, Tenenbaum, 2011; Ness, 2016). Though there were varying comfort levels among participants, when pressed, each could describe clear steps in their literacy planning process that would

Table 2
Participants' perceptions of literacy lesson planning.

Participant	Perception
Shilyn	"I think I'm good at writing a lesson plan and finding ideas and, kind of, pasting them together and coming up with good lesson plans...I think I've written some good lesson plans that are engaging, so I think I would be able to [write my own literacy lessons]."
Ashley	"I like planning...I actually kind of enjoy it, like, I get excited about writing lessons."
Nicole	"One of the main parts of being a teacher [is]...all education starts with the child and moves out from there...There's a different way to teach the material than to give them a worksheet and be like, okay, do this...You can take an activity and you can make it more than that...you can make it...something more interactive."
Belle	"When I was doing the block plans for [literacy methods class], I was like, wow, I forgot how much fun these were! Like, being creative and thinking of these things...I forgot how much fun making plans like these [was]."
Anna	"I know I would be able to do it [plan literacy lessons]. Like, it is not hard and I can work through it and I will be fine, especially if they're [administrators] not coming at everything I am doing and saying I am wrong."
Dany	"Well, [literacy planning] usually involves me having some kind of idea of what I am supposed to be doing for the lesson, and then I will look on EngageNY and I see which standard that that could fall under."
Julie	"I feel like I'm learning enough to really understand [planning], and it helps having all of the [text]books...like, I have the *Common Core Lesson Book*, and when I have to plan lessons right now, I am looking in there for activities and different things..."
Lily	"When I make a lesson, I [plan] the lesson first and then find the [Common Core State] Standards, so that way the goal of your lesson isn't lost just so you can fit it into the standards, but, rather, your lesson is already done and the standards are just, kind of, to make it better."

ultimately lead to student-centered, needs-based instruction. Not surprisingly, this was the main ideology espoused by the participants' College of Education.

From the descriptions of their lived experiences with literacy planning the participants provided, it was clear that they felt lesson planning was something that was expected of teachers, easy for them to do, and sometimes even fun. However, when asked how they felt about and how they might go about planning a year-long literacy curriculum, most of them stated that this would be extremely difficult and

that they did not feel they had adequate skills for the task. For example, when I asked Belle how she'd feel if she was asked to plan a Literacy curriculum, she told me "Very nervous, lots of anxiety. I wouldn't know what to teach. What can I use? Can I use the Common Core Standards? I'd try not to cry...I am getting anxiety just thinking about it." Julie responded, "That would be tough," and Lily stated, "It would be overwhelming just planning out everything for the year when we're used to just spending so much energy and time on one lesson plan, and you can't do that or you won't get it all done." Shilyn said she would feel "very, very stressed out," and Ashley said, "that would be difficult."

Though planning a full-year curriculum in ELA could be seen as counter-intuitive to teacher candidates in a program that espouses a view of student-centered learning that is planned day-by-day around student needs and backgrounds, this kind of long-term planning work could complement daily planning so that teacher candidates understand the broader picture of how lesson planning fits within the larger scope of a curriculum. Likewise, these preservice teachers seemed to perceive of curricular planning as determining the day-to-day procedures--the sequence--of teaching for an entire year rather than creating a general structure or scope of content that can be revised, adapted, and planned as the school year plays out. Perhaps the participants misunderstood curricular planning and equated it with writing detailed lesson plans for an entire academic year, which would, as Lily said, "be overwhelming." Interesting to note, however, is that, despite each participant's initial reactions of anxiety and fear to planning a literacy curriculum, when asked how they might actually begin to plan, most of them were able to describe thoughtful and logical approaches to structuring ELA content for a year of teaching. For example, Anna talked about how planning a Literacy curriculum would make her feel "nervous excited" because she would "get to go about [her] own approaches and beliefs and what [she thinks] is going to work." The prospect of having control over her teaching was exciting to her, and, after thinking through the process more, she expressed confidence in her ability to plan a curriculum, saying, "I think I would be able to find something that really works for the students that I have." Similarly, Belle initially responded to the question about writing her own year-long literacy curriculum saying that she would try not to cry. When pressed further to actually think about what she might do, she said:

> I could try. I could definitely give it a try. As long as I had a template and I had, like, standards to go by, I think that it would be hectic, but maybe I could pull it off...I'd probably call up other teachers and ask them what they think, what they are using...then I would take my ideas, the teachers' ideas, take the Common Core, and start creating lesson plans and...start planning a timeline...knowing what I should do first, second, and so on, and then start creating the actual lesson plans around the standards we would want them to meet.

Likewise, though Julie initially said that planning a year-long curriculum "would be tough," when asked how she actually might go about the task, she was able to describe a logical approach: "You have to know exactly what the students need to know to write a curriculum, so having an outline of what the students need to know by what time [the CCSS], then you can plan lessons according to the standards you need, looking at the standards and planning lessons to meet those standards...If I needed to, I probably could do it." Nicole also felt initial unease with the task, saying she would feel "overwhelmed, that's a lot of information." Yet, when asked what she would do, Nicole talked at length about how she would plan her ELA curriculum around reader's and writer's workshops, "so the whole curriculum...is planned around the students' literature experiences," and how she would consult with her colleagues to help her plan these literacy-rich, authentic experiences. Each participant had a similar lived experience and a similar response to the question *How would you feel about planning a year-long ELA curriculum?*: initial dread followed by a clear and articulate plan of attack.

This first finding revealed the understandings that these eight preservice teachers had about lesson planning and curricular planning. First, they each felt that lesson planning--the day-to-day decisions about what to teach--was something that should be done by teachers who know the needs of their students. Daily lesson planning was easy for the participants and was something that they had extensive practice doing in their teacher preparation programs. However, designing a literacy curriculum was perceived as difficult work and not something they felt comfortable doing, despite coming up with clear ideas for how to approach this work. It would seem that the participants favored the planning work with which they had extensive experience and practice, lesson planning, and that planning a curricular framework was not something they had experienced within their coursework and, as such, this type of planning made them uncomfortable. The second finding will describe in more detail the participants' perceptions of the Common Core State Standards and English language arts instruction and learning.

Common Core and the ELA Curriculum

The second finding to emerge was that the participants perceived that the Common Core State Standards impacted the planning and teaching of English language arts. First, they felt that the Common Core Standards were a good thing, beneficial in planning instruction. Next, they felt that some of the English language arts standards were too difficult for the grade level in which they were found. Finally, each participant expressed concern over the EngageNY Modules, a fully-developed K-12 curriculum for English language arts and math that is supported by the New York State Department of Education, commonly referred to as "the Modules." The Modules consist of semi-scripted lessons, and many of the schools in which the participants had completed field experiences had adopted the Modules as their main curriculum. Overall, there seemed to be a sense of frustration with scripted ELA programs and a general perception that they undermine the professional expertise of a teacher.

Once more, similar horizons were found among the participants' perceptions of the impact of the Common Core State Standards. Typically, participants were in support of the CCSS and were generally comfortable with using them to plan. To begin, Ashley had the following to say: "The standards I think are a good thing. I think having standards across the board that everyone has to follow is... pretty basic." Along with this, Dany said, "The standards make sense. I like the idea of everyone in the U.S. being at the same point." Likewise, Julie stated: "I think the standards are really a good thing. I think it's good that they have the standards. I think it is a good thing for teachers to know exactly what students should know by the end of that certain year." These views were representative of the perception held by most of the participants, each of whom spoke about how they felt the standards were acceptable and even helpful when planning instruction. The CCSS were perceived as a tool that could assist teachers in their planning work, something that their teacher preparation program had allowed them to practice at length. For example, Anna described for me a freshman-level course where she first learned about the CCSS, then a sophomore-level reading tutor field experience that required her to plan with the CCSS ELA standards, followed by a junior level literacy methods course that asked her to plan standards-based lessons. She told me: "A lot of things are repetitive [in the program]...Like, I feel like my classes are very, very repetitive. Like I am learning the same thing over and over." In fact, most participants described how they go about planning lessons in literacy using the Common Core State Standards, a task that they had done repeatedly throughout many courses in their programs. Generally, the participants felt at ease with the Common Core State Standards and described them as a resource they had been taught to use to begin their planning.

Along with the feeling that the Common Core State Standards were beneficial to teachers and students, some participants also spoke about their perception of the Common Core Standards as too advanced for some students and that they had impacted the rigor of what is learned in ELA. Julie described the following in this regard: "We were looking [in class] at [the writing standards] for kindergarten and they said something about having an opinion." Here, Julie was referring to the first Common Core Standard in Writing at the Kindergarten level that states that students should be able to "use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces." She continued saying, "we were talking [in class] about the fact that most kindergarten students can't write a full sentence yet...but the standards say they can write their opinion about something, and I think it is a little hard." Shilyn echoed this concern, saying, "I remember going into Kindergarten and you were golden if you could tie your shoes and color in the lines!" She then described the higher-level skills that are required of Kindergartners under Common Core, asking, "How much are we gonna expect out of these kids? It's kind of like you're losing active play where they can use their imagination and get in there and actually do it, not just be listening." Belle expressed similar concerns when she stated: "I feel like the things that I learned how to do in, like, fifth grade, sixth grade...they are doing it a lot younger now...making it more rigorous." Generally, the participants felt that the Common Core State Standards have impacted what is being taught in ELA and that there is now more rigor in CCSS-aligned early childhood and childhood literacy classrooms.

Finally, each participant had strong feelings about the Common Core-aligned curriculum endorsed by New York State's Department of Education, a program designed by EngageNY and referred to by the participants colloquially as "the Modules" because of the fact that the content of the curriculum was broken into several modules for each grade level. Each participant expressed concerns over how the curriculum was designed and how it was implemented in classrooms across the state, as well as how a teacher's professionalism was challenged by the scripted program. When describing a field placement she had completed in a Kindergarten classroom in which the teacher followed a scripted ELA lesson from the EngageNY Modules, Belle clearly described her lived experience of observing a typical Module lesson:

> [The teacher] had the Module on her lap, she read from the Module, she held up the book of pictures, and that was my first experience, freshman year, first semester, and I was like, "What is this, like, why are you reading from a booklet, and showing these black and white photos, and is that a book of them?" And it just didn't seem appealing at all.

Likewise, Lily described her perception of the Modules as follows:

> I think they [the Modules] are a good starting point, like, if you want to look at them and get ideas from them, but I don't like the rigidness, the scripted [nature of them]. 'The student says this, you have to say this back to them.' That's not what works in the classroom. If you're going to have, like, where you have to follow it exactly, you don't really need a teacher for that. I would be pretty upset because I like doing creative things.

Shilyn shared the following similar critique of the EngageNY ELA Curriculum: "Students don't just learn from worksheets. They learn from other ways, and a worksheet really doesn't engage the student. It's just, 'okay, here's my answer,' hand it in, and then the next day they have another worksheet to do." Nicole had a similar critique of the scripted nature of the curriculum: "I feel like [teaching] takes a lot more than reading off the script." This stance was representative of the perception held by most of the participants, and is not surprising considering that their teacher preparation program espoused similar

beliefs about the importance of teachers differentiating instruction based on learners' needs. Anna captured the essence of this group of preservice teachers' perceptions of the Common Core State Standards and the scripted curricula that have developed to meet the standards when she described her feelings toward the EngageNY curriculum:

> I don't think it should be so scripted. I think there should be standards to follow, but I don't think it should be this whole huge script like it is. Like, I like the standards, I don't really like the Modules...I think the world should trust a teacher's own knowledge...If they are giving us the Modules, I think they underestimate people's abilities in teaching.

To Anna and her peers, Common Core-aligned instruction in New York State included teaching with the Modules, which were perceived of as a scripted program that teachers were asked to use because they could not be trusted to teach adequately on their own.

Hope Amid Uncertainty

The third and final finding to emerge from data analysis was that the participants felt great anxiety and excitement about entering the teaching profession. Clusters of meaning in this theme include that they believed that society's opinions on teaching were not favorable, that there are many official and unofficial roles a teacher performs, and finally, the participants all expressed feelings of hope and self-efficacy toward becoming teachers.

To begin, the participants described having an awareness of the current social commentary about teaching and the Common Core State Standards, including among their undergraduate non-education major peers. To start, Belle stated, "[Teaching] is not all fluff like everybody thinks." She went on to describe the time and knowledge it takes to write one standards-aligned lesson plan, something to which Ashley also related when she said, "They [people] don't realize how much goes into one single lesson...I can't just throw some crayons on the table, [I] probably have to figure out some research that correlates with why I picked those colors!" Shilyn spoke more broadly about society's perspective on teachers, saying the following:

> I don't think people view teaching as a prestigious profession. I think a lot of people view it as something that's necessary but...I think a lot of people think I teach [children] their ABCs and their colors, and I think a lot of people think, like, oh, I could do that, I could just print a bunch of worksheets out...[They don't] realize how much work actually goes into creating a good lesson plan and the research behind it to write it, like, there are researched ways that you should be doing things...It's not an easy job.

In a similar vein, Nicole explained her perception that "[people who are not teachers] see a teacher be a teacher but they don't really understand how they do it or what it takes to do it." Then she described the detailed and complicated process of planning instruction for one day of teaching. Likewise, in describing her sense of public perception of teaching right now, Ashley told a story about a time she was checking out from a library, and the clerk, engaging her in small talk, discovered that she was studying to be a teacher and told her she was crazy to go into that profession today. She said:

> I just, I get that reaction a lot and it's kind of like they're like [saying] 'Don't do that!' and... I know a lot of people lately who are like, 'Why would you want to do that? It's not worth it.' But I was just like, 'I couldn't imagine myself doing anything else.'

Anna also shared: "When I am reading my children's books, I am getting made fun of [by my non-education peers] and…at the end of the day, I am not reading an accounting textbook, but it's more difficult in a sense, like…with all the different jobs [a teacher has to do]. I'm not saying it's easy though." Belle articulated the main essence of the participants' perceptions when she stated:

> My [non-education major] boyfriend is sitting there and he is like, 'Oh really, you had to do that and that?' and I'm like, 'Yes.' It's not just, you know, come home and undo my bag and sit and watch TV and maybe cut out some letters…I come home with so much [work to do]. I think this year my housemates got a whole new appreciation for teaching [because of] how much stuff I have had to come home and do, and bring home, and grade, and create little games or something, or come home and look at all these textbooks and be like, 'Yeah, I have to learn this by Monday.'

This feeling of having to defend their desire to be a teacher was a frustration that was prevalent among many of the participants. Likewise, some participants acknowledged that their peers and classmates were choosing other career paths or switching majors from education to something else. When asked why so many of her peers were leaving or avoiding teacher preparation, Julie stated, "The Common Core is a big setback for people. They have heard terrible things about it and they don't want to go into teaching." Overall, the participants were acutely aware of the negative perceptions held by society, and even their loved ones, toward the teaching profession.

Next, the participants each spent a significant amount of time describing the roles of a teacher in detail, and many of them spoke of tasks outside of the traditional job description. What follows is a table of the descriptors the participants provided when prompted to describe an elementary teacher's job as well as the rationale they stated for why they selected these roles.

What is notable in the table below is how many of the descriptors provided are tasks outside of the typical job description for a teacher. The affective roles of teaching--caring, building character, being a friend, counseling--these were the roles that all of the preservice teachers listed first, followed, by some, by the instructional tasks. Some participants spoke of these additional affective parts of teaching with great excitement and enthusiasm; others were nervous, wondering how they would meet the needs of English language learners, students from families with low socioeconomic status, and students with severe academic needs. Though most participants included teaching lessons, and some even teaching the curriculum, when describing the roles of a classroom teacher, not one mentioned selecting, reviewing, or designing literacy curricula, nor did they mention planning for the school year in any content area. When asked to describe the roles of a teacher, most deferred to the affective roles first.

Table 3
Participants' perceptions of an elementary teacher's roles.

Participant	Perceived Roles	Follow Up Rationale
Shilyn	"A Jack of all trades"; "An educator"; "A confidant"; "The boo-boo fixer on the playground"; "The referee"; "The negotiator"; "The teacher of the basic rules of respecting others…to grow up and be a responsible member of society"	"I think if a teacher didn't do those things, the classroom wouldn't function as well."

Ashley	"Planning"; "Showing and telling"; "Professional problem solver"; "A counselor"; "A mentor"; "A mom and a caregiver"; "A nose wiper"; "A shoe tier"; "A ponytail fixer"	"I think if you're not willing to do those things, then at least you wouldn't probably be interested in early childhood education, because it just comes along with that stuff."
Nicole	"Everything"; "A counselor"; "A confidant"; "A friend"; "A professional"; "Discipline"; "A mediator between students but also with homelife"; "Educator"; "A role model of how to behave in school and character"	"I feel like it just kind of comes with the job, like the little asterisk that no one reads, but it's still there…You have to be those things for [your classroom] to be successful."
Belle	"Teaching students"; "Guiding them"; "Helping them discover new things"; "Helping them with home problems or anything they need"; "Getting them, like, food or something"; "Showing them you care" with "A little extra love here and there"; "Creating a welcoming learning environment"; "Being friendly and respectful"; "Being creative, organized, and fun"	"[Love and caring are] not part of the job description but when you work with kids it is a must. It's just a thing that you have to deal with. No one's life is perfect so you're going to have bumps in the road where you just gotta help the kids out."
Anna	"Be respectful"; "Know everybody's potential"; "Understand what people are going through and how it might affect their learning"; "Give them structure but I want students to know that they are free to their own learning"; "Treat students equally"; "Really know your students and their backgrounds"	"I think it's really important to know your students…just to understand that everybody has their own problems and they have their own life…To have someone feel comfortable in the classroom is huge to their learning."
Dany	"Teach a lot of other things besides the content"; "Manners and responsibility"; "Teaching friendship and how to be nice"; "Being on time and keeping a schedule"; "You're kind of like their parent or caregiver"	"There are just so many things outside of the curriculum that you have to teach…Sometimes [children] won't learn these things outside of school or at home…A lot of a teacher's job is to make a person become a better person out in the world."
Julie	"Teaching the curriculum of the school"; "Managing behavior"; Teaching their students to be well-rounded people"; "Character building"; "Caring about every student"	"I never really realized when I was in school that my teachers were constantly, constantly managing things other than teaching us in the class."

Lily	"Teach them academically"; "Teach them other things about the world"; "Connecting [school work] to things that made sense to them"; "Being there for them if they're sick"; "You're like everything when you're their teacher"; "You are kind of like a counselor"; "Be reliable"; "Be caring"	"I think that that's [caring] what's most important about what you're trying to teach them, if you're not caring the kids can sense that and then they're not going to want to care about what you're trying to teach them."

Finally, despite all of their worries, concerns, and the recognition that teaching is a difficult and undervalued career, each participant described positive feelings toward teaching and pride in choosing the profession. Many talked about teaching as a calling, something that they had known they were meant to do from a very young age. Belle shared her feelings toward this when she said, "As cliché as it sounds, I have always wanted to be a teacher from the moment I could talk. I was one of those kids. I had a school in my basement. I had an easel, I had desks...all filled with school supplies." Likewise, Anna shared, "I have always loved kids and...that is just like the kind of person I was and am," and Ashley said, "It just made sense, a kind of came naturally to me." Julie described how her first exposure to teaching came very young: "I just think I really enjoy kids...I started younger, like when I was in elementary school, when we were in fifth grade we use to go down to the kindergarten classrooms and help out and stuff. That was like my favorite thing to do." Like many of the participants, Shilyn had an anecdote about being drawn to teaching very early on in her life that stands as a salient example of the essence they all experienced:

> Since I was a kid I was always just drawn to playing school. I always wanted to be the teacher because I always wanted to be the one teaching. I remember going on family vacations when I was little and always being the one with the guide book in the back seat looking for, like, the interesting historical things around and being like, "We have to go here," and then when we got there, I'd be like, "...and over here there's this and if you look at it this, this..." My mom always joked I was just like the little teacher...taking everybody on a field trip.

The feeling that teaching was something in which they found interest very early on, or something that selected them, rather than the other way around, was shared among most of the participants.

Limitations

This study is limited by the number of participants in one teacher education program at one small, comprehensive, public university over one academic year. Participants in other teacher education programs and in varying geographical areas might experience the phenomena of these participants in different ways, respective of their programs and geographical areas. While these findings add to the existing research into pre-service teachers' perceptions about teaching literacy, caution should be taken when generalizing the conclusions from this study due to the small sample size and interpretation of the findings. Also, it must be noted that participants were interviewed by faculty in their college of education and, as such, may have been influenced by this student-teacher relationship to answer questions in a way that they felt the researcher would have liked them to answer. Great lengths were taken during interviews to remind participants that they were free to speak candidly and that the goal of the research was to learn more about their personal perceptions. No participants were recruited who

had the researcher as a course instructor. Regardless of these measures, the researcher's relationship to the participants was a limitation of this study.

Interpretations

Returning to the phenomenological framework upon which this study was built, interpretations of the pre-service teachers' perceptions and lived experiences can be formed. Within the domain of their teacher education programs, the participants of this study have all had similar lived experiences, and the descriptions of these lived experiences revealed some of the beliefs, concerns, and perceptions that are likely common among many pre-service teachers.

First, the pre-service teachers in this study believed strongly that good teaching does not come from a manual. While they had yet to enter the classroom as professional teachers, all of them had experiences observing and teaching lessons in real classrooms, and all made cogent, well-articulated arguments for the kinds of teaching that they felt were most effective. Overwhelmingly, they did not prefer teaching that originated from a pre-packed, scripted textbook, but, rather, teaching that was student-centered, needs-based, and creative. Good lessons, to these preservice teachers, were those that were designed with the students in mind and which connected them to their students in a more social-emotional way. Good lessons included choice, high-quality literature, and research-based practices. The participants did acknowledge the usefulness of a prescribed program in helping them to generate ideas and align their teaching to grade-level expectations, but overall, they felt that good lessons were teacher-made. This perception has been echoed throughout the research into practicing teachers' perceptions of scripted curricula (Ainsworth, Ortlieb, Cheek, Pate, & Fetters, 2012; Parks, Bridges-Rhoads, 2012; Sturm, 2014).

What was somewhat surprising to find in this work was that the preservice teachers not only felt uncomfortable with planning a literacy curriculum, but also, when asked, they did not describe this as part of a teacher's job. Lesson planning, yes; but curriculum work, no. While most of the participants could talk at length about the kinds of lessons they could write in ELA (the sequence), when asked to think about planning an ELA curriculum (the scope), they often became flustered and visibly anxious. There was a difference in responses to lesson planning as something that was easy and enjoyable, as opposed to curriculum planning, which was something that was difficult and anxiety-inducing. What is particularly interesting about this, is that, when pushed a little further, and asked to speak about where they would even begin the task of planning a curriculum, most of them spoke very eloquently about how they would consult the Common Core State Standards in order to map out a year of skills, ask their colleagues to share their year-long materials, or even how they might adapt and revise existing curricular materials to plan a year of literacy learning. It seems that curriculum planning caused a sort of knee-jerk reaction of anxiety and fear, but when asked to truly consider it, the participants were able to generate very good ideas for how they might go about the task. There seemed to be a lack in confidence or a recognition that they actually did have the skills to curriculum plan. It is concerning to think that people who will soon be teachers, and those who feel very comfortable planning instruction, and in fact, when pushed to do so, could describe how to plan effective literacy curriculum, do not seem to think that they have the skills to design a curriculum or that this work is something that teachers should have to do. Perhaps this means that within the space of their teacher education programs, these teacher candidates were not being asked to consider the curriculum development and selection process and, as such, lacked the ability to speak with confidence about these processes. While there is some research on preservice

teachers' ability to adapt a science scripted curriculum (Forbes, 2013; Forbes & Davis, 2008), more research into their perceptions and attitudes toward adapting a literacy curriculum, specifically, and curriculum development, in general, is required.

Finally, each participant spoke of her hopefulness and motivations toward teaching. They all recognized that teaching is not a glamourous or highly-regarded career right now, but, despite this, they were still driven by the intrinsic and altruistic rewards of teaching that have long been reported in research (Manuel & Brindley, 2005; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Spear, Gould, & Lee, 2000). Roles like impacting the lives of children, helping others to learn and grow, making a difference in the world--these rewards outweighed the public's negative perceptions of teaching and teachers the participants described. To these preservice teachers, teaching was still very much "worth it." In fact, one even talked about how she was glad that others did not want to go into teaching right now, because it meant that she would be more likely to get a job. The essence of positivity was impossible to miss among this group of pre-service teachers.

Significance

Examining pre-service teachers' perceptions of entering the teaching profession and teaching English language arts offers an important perspective into the tensions, challenges, and experiences faced by teacher candidates. This perspective may help teacher educators to better guide their students through the transition into full time professional teaching in a way that allows them to find success and continue to be passionate about the work they do. Considering what was found in this study, teacher education programs should respond in a way that values pre-service teachers' perspectives and adjusts to meet the identified needs.

Regarding curriculum work, teacher education programs must provide their candidates with opportunities to study curricula, to analyze literacy programs, and to map out instruction for longer periods of time. As Darling-Hammond (2000) suggests, conceptual and pedagogical knowledge are equally important and both work to reinforce one's teaching practice. With an understanding of the underlying rationale for curriculum design, teachers are better able to make pedagogical decisions when using the tools included in a curricular program. Teacher candidates must be reading extensively about curriculum research and should develop an awareness of how curricula are designed. Remillard (1999) wrote: "Reading is the intellectual process most closely connected to teachers' curriculum decisions. Thus, change in the enacted curriculum must occur through change in how or what teachers read" (p. 338). If we do not provide opportunities for our undergraduate teacher candidates to read about curriculum design and engage in critical analysis work, we run the risk of preparing new teachers who are all too comfortable with being handed a scripted program and told, "This is how we teach literacy here, let me know if you have any questions." If we do not feel that teaching curriculum design and critical analysis are *our jobs* in teacher education, our graduating teacher candidates will in turn think that it is not *their job* either.

One suggestion for teacher education faculty to consider is adding a course in curriculum studies to their undergraduate offerings. Many universities have a course and, indeed, entire degrees, in curriculum and instruction at the graduate level; however, very few undergraduate teacher preparation programs offer courses that allow students to examine, analyze, and map out curricula and, as such, pre-service teachers lack this type of experience. This holistic approach to planning would complement nicely the traditional one-lesson or one-unit-at-a-time approach that most teacher preparation programs

follow. Studying curriculum within their coursework might provide pre-service teachers a more contextualized sense of lesson planning that prepares them for the kind of scope and sequence work they might encounter as professional teachers.

Finally, if we do not support our teacher candidates in the areas that concern them—how to meet the needs of all students within a curriculum that is prescribed, how to be successful in all of the roles that a teacher must take up, how to teach younger and younger students skills that are more and more difficult—then we run the risk of losing excellent teacher candidates. As Duffy (1998) reminded us, "the key to developing inspired teachers lies with instilling belief in themselves and in their ability to decide how best to promote the visions they have for their students" (p. 780). If we are to attract the best candidates to our programs, we have to consider their needs and, more importantly, we need to respect their visions for their students. Teaching is not as popular a career choice as it once was—we see this in decreasing enrollment and in the public perception of teaching that these participants described. This research provides a candid look into preservice teachers' perceptions, and illuminates areas of need to which teacher preparation programs should respond..

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Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Interview #1:

1. Tell me what program you are in and why you selected this program.
2. Why did you decide to go into teaching?
3. What was your education like growing up?
4. What do you remember about learning to read and write?
5. Describe your favorite teacher.
6. What do you feel is the most important thing you've learned in this program?
7. What do you know about the Common Core State Standards?
8. What do you think about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)?
9. How do you think a teacher can best prepare him or herself for teaching with CCSS?
10. How have you used the CCSS in English language arts? Do you feel comfortable using them?
11. What do you think about the ELA standards for CCSS?
12. How do you think elementary teachers have reacted to the Common Core Standards?
13. What do you know about the EngageNY Modules for ELA? How do you feel about them?
14. If your first job required you to write lesson plans in ELA, how would you feel? How about an ELA curriculum?
15. Describe the ideal ELA curriculum, in your opinion.
16. How would you go about planning an ELA curriculum if you had to?
17. Would you like to add anything about your educational background or the way you feel about Common Core and teaching ELA?

Interview #2:

1. What are your career goals?
2. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

3. Do you feel prepared to become a teacher, why or why not?
4. Does anything concern you about becoming a teacher?
5. Does anything make you excited about becoming a teacher?
6. What do you think are the major obstacles that someone faces when becoming a teacher?
7. What are the challenges that new teachers face, in your opinion?
8. Describe an elementary teacher's job today.
9. What makes a good teacher good, in your opinion?
10. Is there anything about teaching that you were surprised to learn in this program so far?
11. Do you think transitioning into professional teaching will be easy or difficult? Why?
12. Is there anything more that you wish you had learned as you move into professional teaching?
13. If you could go back and give the freshman version of yourself any advice, what would it be?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add about your feelings about teaching and becoming a teacher?