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Abstract

There is a consensus among researchers that teachers from diverse linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds contribute to American education (Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks, Lewis, & Yang, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Irvine & Fenwick, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lu, 2005; Talbert-Johnson, 2001). There is also a call for teacher educators to recognize what racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring to the teaching profession (Galindo & Olguin, 1996; Kohli, 2009; Lu, 2005; Montecinos, 2004; Oling Ottoo, 2005). Yet our knowledge about how this unique group of prospective teachers interprets and works with their own strengths is very limited. It is necessary to explore the strengths awareness of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates as well as their strengths application to add to the sporadic studies in this field.

The purpose of this study was to provide empirical data about how teacher candidates from diverse racial and/or ethnic minority backgrounds perceive and utilize their own strengths. Guided by the theoretical framework of the strengths-based perspective and the analytical framework of symbolic interaction, I employed semi-structured individual interviews and document analysis to collect data. The interviews reflected the personal experience and perspective of each individual participant; the document analysis provided concrete and authentic examples of how they utilized their strengths in teaching and non-teaching venues.

The participants were eight minority and international pre-service teachers enrolled in formal teacher education programs from four higher education institutions in the Northeast regions in the U.S. All participants had had some field experiences by the time of their participation in this study in the summer 2010. The participants included six females and two

males. Four were graduate students and four were undergraduate students. One was an international student and seven were minority students.

This study uncovered a wide range of participant-identified strengths, suggesting that the participants took a “me as a whole person” perspective when talking about their own strengths. This study found that seven participants were able to name and describe some of their strengths without probing and one was able to do so with probing. All participants reported having applied strengths in a variety of ways professionally, and they were able to use their existing professional work samples to support their arguments. The ability to articulate their strengths seemed to relate to their strengths awareness levels. Participants who were able to name and explain their strengths in words more clearly were those who had thought about their strengths. Strengths application also seemed related to their strengths awareness levels. Those who exhibited strong strengths awareness used their strengths more consciously and consistently than those who were less aware of and/or less articulate about their strengths.

This study also found the origins of some of the participants’ self-identified strengths, and identified some beginnings that may lead the participants to become aware of their strengths. This study discovered several external influences and internal qualities that may encourage or discourage the participants’ awareness and utilization of their strengths.

Limitations of this study include the selection of the participants in formal programs in the Northeast regions only, limits inherent in the methodology and data analysis, and the possible influence of my “insider” status.

Implications for K-12 educators, teacher preparation programs, and future research are offered.

AN INVESTIGATION OF RACIAL AND/OR ETHNIC MINORITY
TEACHER CANDIDATES' STRENGTHS AWARENESS AND
UTILIZATION

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Teaching and Curriculum
in the Graduate School of Syracuse University

May 2012

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Guo Ronghua, my father Chen Ligen, my husband Dou Dehui, my son Jason Dou Chenyu and my younger sister Chen Lei. Thanks for your boundless love for me and your unconditional support to my dream.

Acknowledgements

I was able to finish this dissertation because of the constant support from many people over the past years. My greatest gratitude goes to my academic advisor and dissertation committee chair Dr. Gerald Mager, who always patiently listens to my joys and sorrows and offers me wise suggestions. Your passion about teaching and your readiness to help students, especially international students, inspires me to try my best to help my students in the future. I see you as a professor who guides me academically and advises my dissertation as well as a friend and a parent whom I can turn to ask for help.

My great appreciation also goes to the other two committee members of my dissertation: Dr. Joanna Masingila and Dr. Joseph Shedd. Without your caring guidance and support, I couldn't make it. Because of your insightful advice, I was able to think more about my dissertation and present it in a clearer way. I thank all committee members for your hard work in editing grammar errors in my dissertation draft.

I am grateful for the Department of Teaching and Leadership at Syracuse University. I was able to come to study in the United States for my doctoral degree because of the generous financial assistantship and fellowship provided by the department and the university. These nine years of studying and living in the United States enriched my experience as a person, as an emerging scholar, and as a future teacher educator. Studying in Syracuse University is such an important component in my life.

I am thankful for all participants in this study. Because of your openness to share your stories with me, I was able to conduct my dissertation and finish my study. Your unique experiences and positive attitudes will encourage me to do research and contribute more to the study on teacher candidates from diverse racial, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds.

Last but not the least, I am thankful to all professors, classmates, and friends whom I am lucky to know and work with over the past years. Because of your generosity, I was able to survive and thrive in this country. I am very thankful for my friend Joanne E. O'Toole who shared your dissertation writing experience with me and informed me of the opportunity to get Chinese teacher certification to teach in this country. I am thankful for Dr. Marcelle Haddix and Dr. Richard Shin for serving as readers for my dissertation. I am also grateful for the four universities that allowed me to recruit participants in your universities.

My appreciation is beyond the words that I can express.

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Chapter One – Background of the Study

I start this chapter with the discussion of the importance of having a diverse teaching population in American schools. I then discuss the benefits of strength awareness and utilization, and suggest the research gap that I observed in the literature. I explain the two purposes of this study, and state the research question and sub-questions that guided this study. I define important terms used often in this study. Finally, I offer an overview of how this study is organized.

The Importance of Teacher Diversity in American Schools

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) alarmed the educational field and the whole country with the reporting of under-representation of minority teachers in American public schools. Student demographic data in 2007-2008 showed 57.8% White students, 16% Black students, 20.4% Hispanic students, 4.4% Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 1.4% American Indian/Alaska Native students in American public schools. In fall 2007, the minority student population percentage in public schools was as high as 77.7% in large cities (NCES, 2009). In a striking contrast, this same source showed that nearly 83.1% of all teachers were non-Hispanic White, 7% African American, 7.1% Hispanic, 1.2% Asian American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.9% two or more races (NCES, 2009). Clearly, the large difference in diversity between student and teacher populations needs to be addressed, and recruiting and preparing more minority teachers are necessary and urgent steps to be taken.

The “population projection” (Tellez, 1999) perspective of recruiting and preparing minority teachers so that their demographics would mirror the minority student demographics is not the sole reason to recruit more minority teachers in the teaching profession. The power of their presence is beyond that. Guyton, Sexton, and Wesche (1996) argued strongly that “teachers of color are needed for more than to balance the numbers” (p. 643). There are many other reasons to justify teacher diversity.

Nguyen-Lam (2002) pointed out that “urban schools are still in great need of teachers who have the willingness and skills to provide a quality education for students of racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (p. 156). Many minority students are taught by teachers who are unfamiliar with their home languages and cultures. When there is a big cultural and experiential gap between teachers and students, effective instruction is impeded (Cabello & Burstein, 1995); minority students’ academic and social success in the classrooms is negatively influenced (Irvine, 2003); minority students’ communication patterns are misunderstood (Heath, 1982); and their life experiences and background knowledge are ignored by their teachers (Nieto, 2000). In the classrooms, minority students especially those who are poor in urban settings, got less instructional attention and received more criticism and less praise from their teachers (Gay, 2000).

A review of the literature indicates abundant studies demonstrating the importance of minority teachers, especially to minority students in urban public schools, and to all learners (Banks, 1993; Clewell & Villegas, 1998; Delpit, 1988; Foster, 1993; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Graham, 1987; Guyton, Saxton, & Wesche, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). According to a National Collaboration on Diversity in the Teaching Force report (2004), minority teachers play remarkable roles in helping all learners learn by serving as role

models and cultural brokers, and by providing all learners with opportunities to learn about diversity. The potential contributions of minority teachers go far beyond simply serving as role models, expanding to cultural translators, surrogate parents, mentors, mediators, home-school links, and social activists (Clewell & Villegas, 1998; Genzok & Baca, 1998; Irvine, 1989; Mitchell, 1998). Abundant studies show that racial and/or ethnic minority teachers may have positive impacts on learners' academic achievement (Dee, 2004; Deyhle, 1995; Easton-Brooks, et al., 2010; Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Clewell, 1998), learners' understanding of the diverse world (Dilworth, 1992; Foster, 1993; Shaw, 1996), learners' social adjustment (Diaz-Rico & Smith, 1994; Talbert-Johnson, 2001), learners' future career choice (Lu, 2005), and their colleagues' understanding of minority and immigrants students (Dilworth, 1998). It is also argued that, compared with European American teachers, minority teachers are more committed to teaching minority students in hard-to-staff schools and they are more likely to stay in teaching (Irvine & Fenwick, 2011). The literature above seems to suggest that teacher candidates from racial and/or ethnic minority backgrounds have a great potential to bring their strengths and contribute to American education.

Benefits of Strengths Awareness and Utilization

There are many benefits from knowing and using one's strengths. It is believed that strengths are useful tools and they help people grow optimally (Compton, 2005). Clifton and Nelson (1992) posited that people are strong and confident when they have their strengths in mind. According to Rath and Conchie (2008), a 25-year longitudinal study done by Judge and Hurst (2008) of the study of self-evaluations of 7,660 young men and women indicated that "people who are aware of their strengths and build self-confidence at a young age may reap a 'cumulative advantage' that continues to grow over a lifetime" (p. 16), and that people

with higher self-confidence in 1979, when the study started, reported higher income levels and career satisfaction, and fewer health problems in 2004, compared with those with lower self-confidence.

Besides helping personal growth and success, researchers (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006; McEntarffer, 2003; Rath, 2007) believe, strengths awareness also potentially helps improve human relationships in that people see themselves in a better way and they have a more positive understanding of others.

Strengths awareness and utilization is particularly important for teachers as teachers are responsible for both their own and their students' development. Lopez and Louis (2009) suggested beginning with teachers "discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence" (p. 2). It is argued that the more teachers are aware of their own talents and strengths, the more likely they will fulfill their potentials as good teachers (Liesveld, Miller, & Robison, 2005; Marcos, 2008). Marcos (2008) found a close connection between urban teachers' identified strengths and students' learning. Research done by the Gallup organization indicated that good teachers make the most of their strengths in their teaching (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

Helping students identify and develop their strengths is not only for self-esteem building, but also for igniting their unique potentials and preparing them for a successful life at school and beyond (Fox, 2008; Ozonoff, Dawson, & McPartland, 2002), for their self-understanding and self-advocacy (Weinfeld & Davis, 2008), for school engagement and academic success (Lopez & Louis, 2009), and for future career planning (Ozonoff, et al., 2002).

In order to teach in culturally responsive ways and teach for social justice, teachers are advised to notice the potential resources among diverse learners rather than view learner differences as problems to overcome (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); and they are advised to build on and use the strengths that diverse learners bring to school (Delpit, 1995; Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004). If it is true that good teachers make full use of their strengths in teaching and that teachers who are more aware of their strengths are more likely to fulfill their potentials, it is reasonable to assume that when teacher candidates understand their own strengths better and appreciate themselves as contributors, they are more likely to capitalize on and maximize personal assets in teaching; they are more likely to develop the ability to nurture learners' awareness and discovery of strengths in themselves; and they are more likely to identify the talents and values that diverse learners bring to their K-12 classrooms and help learners affirm, develop and apply their strengths.

Statement of the Problem

Studies reveal that teacher candidates in the U.S are predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual females, and that minorities comprise less than 5% of the candidate pool (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Wise & Gollnick, 1996). Teacher education research literature mirrors and reflects these imbalances (Montecinos, 2004; Sleeter, 2001; Sleeter & Milner, 2011; Watts Pailliotet, 1997), as a substantial number of studies on European American teacher candidates dominate the literature (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Fry & McKinney, 1997; Garmon, 1998). Thus far most of the studies of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates focused on recruitment and retention (e.g., Bennett, 2002; King, 1993; Rancifer, 1993; Robinson, Paccione, & Rodriguez, 2003; Thomas, 1995), and a few explored these candidates' program experiences (e.g., Lorenzo, 1997; Lu, 2005; Oling Ottoo,

2005), most of which aimed at investigating obstacles, concerns and needs that these teacher candidates endure on their journey of becoming teachers (Lorenzo, 1997; Lu, 2005; Oling Ottoo, 2005; Watts Pailliotet, 1997).

Some existing studies (Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Oling Ottoo, 2005; Watts Pailliotet, 1997) noted the “deficit model” orientation to the preparation of teachers from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. A deficit model presumes that the teacher candidate lacks knowledge, skills, and values necessary for teaching, and the purpose of teacher preparation is to remediate those deficits. These studies suggested that when teacher preparation programs just identify what racial and/or minority teacher candidates lack, instead of validate who they are and what they can do, many teacher candidates from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds were discouraged from entering and completing their program study. But they did not tell us much about the strengths of these future teachers. It is still not clear what specific strengths racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates perceive that they possess and bring to the teaching profession, whether their self-perceived strengths are prompted by their racial and/or ethnic identity only, where their strengths awareness are from, and to what extent and how they are able to implement their strengths during their program studies.

There is a call for teacher educators to recognize the strengths that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring to their preparation programs and the teaching profession (Galindo, 1996; Galindo & Olguin, 1996; Kohli, 2009; Lu, 2005; Montecinos, 2004; Oling Ottoo, 2005). Yet what researchers and teacher educators believe as their strengths may not necessarily be perceived in the same way by racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. Some researchers uncovered some strengths suggested by racial and/or ethnic minority

teacher candidates (e.g., Gomez, Rodriguez, & Agosto, 2008; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003; Lu, 2005; Nguyen, 2004; Tellez, 1999), but fewer documented evidence of minority teacher candidates' use of their strengths in teaching (e.g., Gomez et.al., 2008; Tellez, 1999).

On the whole, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' insider perspectives of personal strengths and evidence of how they utilize their strengths throughout their programs were explored only sporadically. I have not found a qualitative research study that focuses solely on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' experiences in their programs as related to their awareness and utilization of their personal strengths.

In her theoretical study of strengths-based mentoring in teacher education, He (2009) argued, "It is the focus on individuals' positive experiences and strengths as opposed to their problems and shortcomings that distinguishes the strength-based approach from the deficit-based model" (p. 264). She further elaborated that the strengths-based model aims at helping people's articulation of strengths and assets in the past, encouraging their hope and optimism for the future, and developing their emotional satisfaction with the present.

I believe that the strengths-based perspective can be a research perspective. As our knowledge of how diverse teacher candidates themselves perceive and use their strengths in teaching is very limited, it is my intention to bring their strengths side into this study. I do not intend to ignore or deny the possible challenges and barriers that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates face, but the picture about these future teachers is incomplete. It is my intention to uncover more about them so that research can provide whole-person pictures of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates.

Purpose of the Study

Maxwell (1998) distinguished among three kinds of purposes for doing a study: personal purposes, practical purposes, and research purposes. For this study, I tried to accomplish two purposes—a personal purpose and a research purpose. I am aware of the inseparability between my identity and experiences as an international teacher candidate and my identity as an emerging researcher and teacher educator. I am also aware of the connection between the personal purpose and the research purpose of my study.

Personal Purpose

Maxwell (1998) advised researchers on how they should deal with their personal purpose as follows:

It is important that you recognize and take account of the personal purposes that drive and inform your research. Eradicating or submerging your personal goals and concerns is impossible, and attempting to do so is unnecessary. What is necessary, in qualitative design, is that you be *aware* of these concerns and how they may be shaping your research, and that you think about how best to deal with their consequences... However, your personal reasons for wanting to conduct a study, and the experiences and perspectives in which these are grounded, are not simply a source of “bias”; they can also provide you with a valuable source of insight, theory, and data about the phenomena you are studying. (1998, p. 74)

Who I am and what I experienced in the doctoral program and the childhood teacher preparation program in the U.S. played a significant role in which research topic and from which perspective I would explore my study. The topic of this study fully engaged me. I focused this study on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates because I felt more connected to them and I felt a part of them. Based on the literature review and my program experiences, I am more interested in racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates’ strengths awareness and utilization than in their general program experiences or challenges that they experienced in the programs.

I came to Syracuse University as an international student pursuing a Ph.D. in Teaching and Curriculum program in fall 2003. I always felt privileged to be given this opportunity to pursue my advanced degree in the U.S. I felt honored to be offered generous financial support by my department so that I could concentrate on my doctoral study without worrying about my living expenses in the U.S. I kept reminding myself that I should study and work hard to show my appreciation to the program and my professors.

Like many international students, during the first few years of study, I experienced academic, emotional and life hardships. In classes, I could not fully understand what my professors talked about and I had difficulty understanding what my classmates shared due to my limited English language proficiency, and lack of cultural capital and American school contexts. There were lots of times when I could not find an appropriate word to express myself. There were several moments when I summoned up the courage to share something with the class after some mental struggles but the discussion topic had moved in a different direction.

When I walked into a classroom full of European American peers, I felt uncomfortable to be the only international student. While my classmates socialized with one another, I sat awkwardly by myself in a corner. Having grown up in a country advocating unity and implanting sameness, I felt bad to be different from my classmates. In addition, I did not have a car to go shopping for weekly food essentials so whenever my American classmates offered me a shopping ride, I would buy food for a month or two. All that made me feel inferior to my American peers. I did not see my strengths at all.

Yet my experiences with my advisor and some professors in the department were very encouraging and supportive. When I felt depressed and began to lose confidence in

myself, they showed their respect and care for me. I felt safe and secure under their wings, and they were the impetus to keep me going. I experienced their acknowledgement of my progress and their appreciation of my language and cultural background. Some of them role-modeled for my classmates their respect for my language and some invited me to share my culture in the class or during office hours on a regular basis. I had never thought about my identity and my strengths until I was pushed to think about the following question: Who am I? I learned that I should feel comfortable with myself; I also learned that cherishing who I am means valuing me as a unique person and celebrating my identities and personalities.

As an international student from a different educational system that taught me to accept and follow what schools and teachers set for me, and as an international student from a developing country, I had never thought of my potential to contribute to my program, my classmates, my professors, my department and the teaching field in the U.S. Having been taught to solely value formal knowledge from textbooks in China, I learned in the U.S. that experiential knowledge can also be a person's strengths. It is my American professors who inspired me to break through my previous outsider perspective and see my own uniqueness. They empowered me to realize that I should not worry about what I do not have and about what I could not do. Instead, I should utilize my strengths to help others and strengthen myself. I should celebrate my identity as an international student and walk out of the perceived deficiency shadow.

After sharing my thoughts and getting permission from my advisor, I decided to pursue a concurrent master's degree in the childhood education program in my department. My original purpose was to gain some authentic student teaching experience in local elementary schools to better prepare myself for a teacher educator career; however, the one

year intensive study as an international teacher candidate turned out to be very fruitful. I was recommended and got state initial teacher certificate in childhood education. Then I got Mandarin Chinese teacher certificate and now I am a full-time Chinese teacher, using my linguistic and cultural strengths to try to make a difference with my eighty-five American middle and high school students on a daily basis.

My experience in both the doctoral and the master's programs made me wonder about the experiences of other racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates who go through teacher preparation programs in the United States, as I did. I am very interested to know whether they are able to perceive their strengths and how they incorporate that information into their teaching. I believe my minority identity and previous experiences made me emotionally and experientially attached to them.

Research Purpose

As a doctoral student in a research university, I am aware of the expectation for me to become a prospective teacher educator and a researcher in my future career. My affiliation with the racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates group made me bear a responsibility to expose their unique strengths to teacher educators and field teachers and to represent them with a solid voice in the teacher education literature. Guided by the strengths-based perspective and symbolic interaction, I sought to expand the teacher education research literature by exploring the points of view of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in teacher education programs related to how they make sense of and apply personal strengths to contribute to teacher education programs and K-12 classroom learners.

Rationale and research questions. This study aimed to complement and extend the body of literature on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in American teacher

education programs. Although studies showed that there are many benefits for teachers and future teachers to know and apply their personal strengths, much existing research on racial and/or ethnic minority prospective teachers emphasizes and explores the challenges and obstacles that they face during their programs, with little attention given to the strengths that this unique group of future teachers bring to American education. Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths and application of strengths are sporadically explored, either identified by researchers or briefly suggested by the participants in the studies. These studies did not provide further information such as how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates became aware of their strengths and the origins of their strengths. These studies also provided little evidence about how these future teachers apply their strengths in their teaching.

The overarching question of this study is: In what ways are racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates aware of and able to utilize at least some of their strengths in teacher education programs?

Four sub-questions expand on this research question:

1. What are racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' self-perceived strengths that they believe contribute to teacher preparation programs and learners in K-12 classrooms? Are these strengths prompted by their racial and/or ethnic identity only?
2. To what extent and how do they capitalize on their self-perceived strengths?
3. What accounts for their strengths awareness and utilization? What experience do they see as encouraging or discouraging their strengths awareness and utilization?

4. Within racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates group, are there any different reports of strengths awareness and utilization that are related to different characteristics? What accounts for these differences?

Definition of Terms

Minority teacher candidates: Non-European students in formal teacher education programs who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

For this study, I used *minority teacher candidates* to refer to non-European Americans or permanent residents enrolled in formal American teacher preparation programs. I am aware that “minority” identity is influenced by context, and in U.S. teacher education, where the teacher candidates are predominantly monolingual European American females, particular racial, linguistic and gendered individuals become the “minority.” I understand that other aspects of teacher candidates such as their socio-economic status and religion may also lead to their “minority” identity. The word *minority* may be perceived by some people as indicating inferiority and lower status, and it can be problematic.

International teacher candidates: Non-European students of international origin who study in formal teacher education programs in the U.S. on F-1 student visas.

Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates: Non-European prospective teachers in formal American teacher education programs. In this study, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates include both minority teacher candidates and international teacher candidates.

Initially I chose *teacher candidates of color* to refer to non-European American preservice teachers. After discussing with my committee members and reading related literature, I decided not to use *teacher candidates of color* for two reasons. First, the word

teacher candidates of color may sound offensive to some people. As will be reported in Chapter Four, Aaron— one of the participants in this study— pointed out that he was offended by the words *teacher candidates of color*. Second, in reading the literature, I noticed that most studies that used *teacher candidates of color* in their titles excluded international teacher candidates. As this study also aimed to explore the perspectives of non-European teacher candidates who are international students, the words *teacher candidates of color* are not broad enough. I used the term *racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates* to distinguish non-European teacher candidates from European American teacher candidates. I understand that every teacher candidate is a racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic being, and I understand that there are differences between and among non-European teacher candidates. Yet for this study, the use of *racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates* seems to be the most appropriate word choice.

Strengths: Strengths are perceived and reported by the teacher candidates in this study. Strengths are the skills, knowledge, values and personal characteristics that the teacher candidates believe they possess which help them to make contributions in education.

According to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), strength is consistent and near perfect performance on an activity. They suggest that a combination of a person's talents, knowledge and skills makes up her/his strengths. Such a definition as this is not appropriate for my study because if I defined the word *strength* in such terms, the participants may not think they possess any strengths according to the definition; this and other definitions I might have selected as the standard may not match their perceptions of themselves. Their interpretation of the word *strength* following such definitions may have discouraged them from sharing their unique perceptions and experiences.

For this study, I purposefully chose that the word *strength* would be interpreted and reported by the participants themselves. I understand that the word *strength* may carry different meanings to different participants. I believe how each participant perceives the word *strength* is the result of her/his interaction with others around actions, events, and objects as related to her/his strengths. Her/his interpretation is important. As the purpose of this study was to explore how the participants made sense of their own strengths and the usage of their strengths, the freedom that I gave to the participants to share their perceptions of strengths allowed me to better understand the meanings and perspectives that the participants in the study hold toward their lives and experiences.

The word *strength* is widely used in different contexts. For example, in job interviews, interviewers may ask interviewees to name their strengths; in providing feedback to a writing assignment, professors may talk about the strengths of a writing piece; and in evaluating K-12 students, teachers may comment on their strengths. I have to admit that although the word *strength* is used in many aspects of our daily lives, it is not necessarily easy for a person to talk about her/his strengths. Before interviewing my participants, I had thought about how to invite them to start talking about their strengths. I think it is important to note that participants' engagement in this study and their interpretations of *strength* were based on the shared understandings that assume (1) they bring some strengths to American education; (2) their strengths helped them to make contributions as prospective teachers. Thus, a rough definition of *strength* would be assets that help them to make contributions while they study in their teacher education programs.

At the operational level, I told the participants that the word *strength* can be interpreted by each of them. I told them that I believe each person has strengths and that

racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring unique strengths to American education. I did not start the interviews with questions about their strengths; rather, I asked them to talk about their hobbies and interests, their accomplishments, how they believe their teachers, friends and family members perceive them, and how they describe themselves with words. I hoped that these questions would lead to some discussion about their strengths. In many of the case, the discussion of strengths came naturally during our conversation. In the case when the discussion of strengths did not come, I then asked the participants directly what their strengths are.

I noticed the potential tension between this study's focus on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates and the flexibility that I allowed the participants to interpret strengths themselves rather than focusing on the strengths related to their racial and ethnic identities. I did have some participants who asked me during the first interviews whether her/his descriptions of strengths were all right, and I had to comfort the participants that whatever she/he thought true was fine, and that I would not make judgments. I also had one participant asking me during the first interview whether she should talk about her racial and ethnic strengths only and whether she was allowed to talk about strengths related to other aspects of her life. I reiterated to her that she could talk about all the strengths she thought suitable. I realized that giving freedom to the participants may cause some confusion and uncertainty to the participants, especially at the beginning, but at the same time it allowed them to speak more authentically, and allowed me to understand their ways of thinking in a broader and more personal way.

In the literature review, I found that the potential strengths that researchers argued for or recorded about racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are predominantly

strengths that are related to their race, language, culture, and ethnicity. I am also aware that the participants in this study may not want to be perceived by me or other people as racial and/or ethnic minorities only. If I defined the word *strength* as related to their racial and ethnic identity specifically, I was concerned that the findings of self-identified strengths of the participants might be limited to their racial and ethnic identities, since that is what the participants might have thought of as all what I wanted to hear from them.

Awareness: The state or ability to show realization or perception.

Utilization: Make use of or apply to. By utilizing one's strengths, a person turns personal strengths into advantages.

Teacher education programs: Formal teacher education programs in the U.S. that prepare teachers for K-12 classroom learners.

Although more minority teacher candidates are enrolled in alternative programs than in formal teacher preparation programs (Feistritz, 2003; Kirby, Naftel & Berends, 1999; Shen, 2000), I decided to exclude alternative programs from this study because this study focuses on minority teacher candidates as well as international teacher candidates. From the literature review that I had conducted, I have not discovered a study on international students in alternative programs in higher education institutions. I assume therefore that international teacher candidates are enrolled chiefly in formal programs. Possible reasons for this selective enrollment might be that international students need to provide I-20 forms from colleges and universities. To get visas, online programs will not count. Further, according to the U.S. immigration law, they have to be full-time students to maintain their student status. These visa restrictions may force international teacher candidates to enroll in formal teacher

education programs. Therefore in this study, teacher education programs refer to formal teacher education programs in the U.S.

Organization of the Study

This qualitative research study is reported in seven chapters. In Chapter One, I display the background of this study, discuss the importance of knowing and utilizing one's strengths, point out the research gap in the literature, explain the purpose of the study, introduce the rationale and the research questions, and give a brief overview of the organization of the study. In Chapter Two, I discuss the theoretical framework that guided this study and review in the literature important findings and concepts related to the research questions. In Chapter Three, I discuss the analytical framework of this study and how I designed and conducted this study, which deals with the information about the four participating institutions where the eight participants were recruited, the procedures for IRB approval and participant identification process, demographic information of the participants, two methods for data collection and specific procedures for data collection and analysis. In Chapter Four, I depict individual portraits of each of the five participants who are bilingual and bicultural by focusing on their self-identified strengths, their self-selected professional sample works, and the connections drawn between these two by each participant and/or me. In Chapter Five, I depict individual portraits of the other three participants in the same structure as in Chapter Four. These three participants are different from the five participants portrayed in Chapter Four in that they do not have a bilingual background. What they share in common is that they are African Americans and they all voiced particular interest in serving as role models for African American students. In Chapter Six, I present the findings from this study that are related to the four proposed sub-questions. In Chapter Seven, I

further discuss how the findings help answer the overarching research question of this study, reflect on this study's limitations and offer implications for K-12 educators, teacher education programs and future research.

Chapter Two — Literature Review

The literature review presented in this chapter is comprised of eight parts. I start this chapter with the discussion of the theoretical framework that provided the foundation for my study. In this part, I explain the strengths-based perspective as applied to teacher education and its connection with my study.

As mentioned in Chapter One, He (2009) argued that the strengths-based perspective includes satisfaction in the present, the strengths identification and articulation in the past, and the development of hope and academic optimism in the future. In conducting the literature review, I tried to look for academic works that attempted to answer the following three questions: Are racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates satisfied with their program experiences? Are they able to identify and apply some of their strengths? Do self-understanding, teacher efficacy and strengths awareness help teachers' and future teachers' strengths formation and application? In this chapter, I summarize what have been studied in these areas respectively, which include a brief introduction of who racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are; strategies and efforts to recruit and retain them; their overall program experiences; their self-perceived strengths and strengths application; teacher self-understanding and teacher efficacy; and strengths awareness and application. The last part provides a summary of what I found in the review of the related literature.

I sought published journal articles through databases such as ERIC and ProQuest to start my search for previous studies that are related to my study. I inserted key words such as “teacher candidates of color,” “preservice teachers of color,” “teachers of color,” “minority teachers,” “minority teacher candidates,” “minority preservice teachers,” “racial and/or

ethnic minority teacher candidates,” and “racial and/or ethnic minority preservice teachers.” I put greater emphasis on identifying studies that are not limited to a particular racial and ethnic group, such as African Americans, Latino Americans, Native Americans, or Asian Americans. Rather, I was more interested in studies that include teacher candidates from more diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The search of related studies also included searching for related published books and articles or books that were cited in other articles. I also inserted key words such as “strengths,” “strengths awareness,” and “strengths utilization” to look for studies that focus specifically on strengths.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study is the strengths-based perspective, more specifically, the strengths-based perspective as applied to teacher education. In Chapter Three, I will discuss symbolic interaction—the analytical framework of this study.

For this study, I aimed to explore one specific aspect of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates’ program experiences—their awareness and utilization of their own strengths. I believe the strengths-based perspective provided me with a unique framework to study these teacher candidates, because the strengths-based perspective argues (1) everyone has strengths; (2) strengths provide the greatest room for the individual to grow; and (3) we should study people’s strengths and success (Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Anderson, 2002; Clifton & Nelson, 1992). There were other frameworks that I might have adopted, for example, critical race theory, or several linguistic theories.

According to UCLA School of Public Affairs (2012), critical race theory brings a critical analysis of race and racism to the study of phenomena; and it would allow a researcher to explore the existing power structures. In the study of teacher education, critical race theory

has helped us to better understand the barriers and challenges that teacher education programs and institutions have imposed on the recruitment, preparation and retention of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. But this lens is not helpful when the study focuses on teacher candidates' strengths and their use of their strengths in teaching practice.

The use of the strengths-based perspective as the theoretical framework for this present study seemed the most useful lens for the focus of my study because it offered me a unique angle to investigate racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' program experiences. This positive perspective's emphasis on the importance of studying the strengths and success of people is particularly important for research on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, because these prospective teachers are more likely to be perceived as "problem students" due to the possibility that they do not "fit" into teacher education programs and the teaching profession that are dominated by White, middle-class, monolingual females. Guided by the strengths-based perspective as applied to teacher education, I focused my study on exploration of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' self-identified strengths.

The Strengths-Based Perspective

The strengths movement is a social movement that changes people's perception from looking for and fixing weaknesses to focusing on and maximizing strengths (Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Traditionally, people have believed that in order to grow, a person must work on her/his weak areas. Therefore a person does not need to spend time on her/his strengths (Carman, 2005; Clifton & Nelson, 1992). The strengths-based perspective holders argue that people become excellent by understanding and cultivating

their strengths; it is strengths that provide the greatest room for growth (Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Clifton & Nelson, 1992).

After interviewing more than two million people across multiple professions and careers, the Gallup organization found that the top achievers “build their lives upon their talents” (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 11). Clinton and Anderson (2002) further stated that top achievers are aware of their talents and find ways to develop their strengths.

It is difficult to trace the source of the strengths movement (Buckingham, 2007). Some authors traced this idea to Peter Drucker, who wrote in 1966 in his book *The Effective Executive* that, “The effective executive builds on strengths—their own strengths, the strengths of superiors, colleagues, subordinates, and on the strengths of the situation” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 3). According to Buckingham (2007), some regarded Dr. Donald O. Clifton’s book, *Soar with Your Strengths*, in 1992 as the foundation of the strengths movement. Others attributed the origin of the strengths movement to Dr. Martin Seligman’s 1999 speech after he became the president of the American Psychological Association: “The most important thing we learned was that psychology was half-baked, literally half-baked. . . . We baked the part about mental illness, about repair of damage. The other side’s unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we’re good at” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 3).

In 2001, the Gallup organization published *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. This book went beyond the management field and was on the bestselling book lists for more than five years (Rath, 2007). Criticizing that “the language of human weakness is rich and varied” and that “the language of human strength is sparse” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 33), the Gallup organization developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment to set up common language to describe strengths and to help people identify strengths and build on strengths,

based on the Gallup organization's 40-year study of human strengths. The Gallup organization (2006) also developed the online Clifton YouthStrengthsExplorer, which aimed at youth aged ten to fourteen.

The strengths movement has its root in positive psychology. Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that "is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). It "seeks to help the whole person, examining and promoting strengths and managing deficits, maintaining that human strengths are as real as human weaknesses" (Bowers, 2009, p. 23). Positive psychology explores such topics as hope, confidence, courage and strengths.

Prior to World War II, psychology had three distinct tasks: "curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 6). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, the treatment of war soldiers who suffered from mental illness and the various funding opportunities for mental illness studies stimulated psychologists to focus on one task: identifying and fixing the defects of human beings. The other two tasks were simply forgotten.

Positive psychology brought a fresh perspective to psychology study and it helped shift psychology from identifying and fixing the defects of human beings solely to investigating the positive aspects of human beings (Bowers, 2009). According to Wisner (2008), positive psychology gained more recognition through the study on optimism, happiness, character, virtues, and strengths. Positive psychology adopts the strengths model of focusing on the wellness of a human being. Seligman (2002) suggested that engagement of one's strengths and virtues will lead to authenticity and well-being. Snyder and Lopez (2002)

also posited that studying what is best and bravest is just as important as understanding what is worst and weakest. The strengths-based perspective believes that in order to produce excellence, we must study excellence (Clifton & Anderson, 2002; Clifton & Nelson, 1992).

There is a growing interest in the strengths-based perspective in many fields and it has been found to be used more widely. For example, Buckingham and Coffman' (1999) study found that great managers applied the strengths-based perspective in their organizations by focusing on employees' strengths, which had a positive impact on their organizations. In her book *The Power of Women*, instead of defining women by "what they are not: not physically powerful, not mentally tough, not ambitious" (p. 10), Nolen-Hoeksema (2010) identified the strengths of women as "mental prowess, a strong but flexible identity, extraordinary emotional insights, and relational expertise" (p. 294). She advocated for a revolution to spotlight women's strengths that could be used to change the world in productive ways.

Strengths-based education. Strengths-based education is based on the assumption that "potential exists in all students and that educators do well to discover and implement the kinds of learning experiences that can help their students realize this potential" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2). The core responsibility for an educator is to "draw out the strengths that exist within students by heightening students' awareness of them and cultivating a greater further orientation around how students' strengths might be catalyzed as they approach their education" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 5). Anderson (2004) explained strengths-based education as follows:

The process of strengths-based education involves educators intentionally and systematically discovering their own talents and developing and applying strengths as they work to remain current in their fields, to improve their teaching methods, to design and implement their curriculum, and to establish programmatic activities to

help students discover their talents and develop and apply strengths while learning substantive knowledge, acquiring academic skills, developing thinking and problem-solving skills, and demonstrating their learning in educational settings to levels of excellence. (p. 1)

Historically, the deficit-based perspective existed in many fields, including education (Buckingham, 2007; Gay, 2000; Liesveld, et al., 2005). Many learners feel weakened and depleted by their experiences at schools that are deficit-based (Deyhel, 1995; Fox, 2008), and this is particularly true for learners who are underrepresented and misunderstood by the educational system. For example, children with special needs have always been labeled by their weaknesses and what they cannot do, instead of being perceived as whole persons (Fox, 2008); children from low socio-economic status have been treated as not being ready for school (Evans, Arnot-Hopffer, & Jurich, 2005); and English language learners have long been perceived as lacking English language proficiency to succeed at school (DeJong & Harper, 2005; Leistyna, 2002; Ru ́z, 1984; Wenger et al., 2004). One common element of perceiving these learners with different learning characteristics is the deficit perspective. Through the deficit perspective, some characteristics of the children and/or the environment where they live in are exaggerated as negative. When educators challenge learners by starting with their weaknesses, it always creates fear, insecurity and distrust among learners. All of these negative feelings are believed to have impacts on learners' learning or growing process (Carman, 2005; Gay, 2000).

In her discussion of the teaching of underachieving students from various ethnic groups, Gay said, "Learning derives from a basis of strength and capability, not weakness and failure" (2000, p. 24). Therefore she described culturally responsive teaching as "one that teaches *to and through* their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and

their prior accomplishments” (p. 24). Here *their* referred to students who are from various diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Grandin (1995) criticized the education of children with autism: “there is too much emphasis on deficits and not enough on developing abilities” (p. 100). MacKenzie (2008) also criticized intervention programs’ overemphasis on pathology and deficits and recommended reframing educating children with autism by focusing on the preferences, strengths, knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs that these learners bring. MacKenzie developed the *Learning Preferences and Strengths* model to determine each child’s learning preferences and strengths and then harness them to “enhance his learning and development” (p. 13). She even used her learning preferences and strengths model to establish and run a preschool program for children with autism spectrum disorder. Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland (2002) identified children with Asperger Syndrome and high-functioning autism as having strengths such as “a remarkable capacity for memorization, superior academic skills (particularly in reading and spelling), and/or strong visualization skills” (p. 117) and they advised parents to use their children’s unique strengths to overcome hurdles.

In the field of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Honos-Webb (2010) called for parents to take a radical way of reframing ADHD as a gift, and suggested that parents transform their children’s problems into strengths. Honos-Webb believed that defining children with ADHD by their gifts would give these children confidence and motivation in their healing process.

In their description of an outstanding teacher, Weinfeld and Davis (2008) proposed that an outstanding teacher is both structured and nurturing. The nurturing side of the outstanding teacher is reflected by her/his connection with students through “communicating

an understanding of the unique strengths and needs of each student in his classroom” (p. 29). The outstanding teacher must “understand each student’s strengths and needs and provide appropriately challenging but achievable goals, learning activities, and assessments” (Weinfeld & Davis, 2008, p. 31). They viewed strengths-based instruction as “identifying and nurturing the gifts of many students, not of trying to select out only the most ‘truly gifted’ for this instruction” (p. 33). Therefore, they posited that the best practice of a good classroom is focusing on and incorporating students’ strengths in teaching and providing suitable adaptations.

Many K-16 schools used interventions to help raise students’ strengths awareness and develop their personal strengths. Usually they used tools to help students identify their strengths. According to Lopez and Louis (2009), the most widely used assessment tool to help college students identify their strengths is the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an instrument developed by the Gallup organization. Using StrengthsFinder is “a common first step for most postsecondary institutions seeking to utilize a strengths-based educational model, and a rich diversity of curricula and programmatic efforts on today’s campuses support this instrument” (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 3). For example, Kansas University provided the Kansas University Alliance for Identifying and Mentoring Strengths program to its freshmen to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder online assessment. The students received a description of their signature strengths and attended strengths-mentoring sessions (Bowers, 2009). Similarly, Baylor University also provided a strengths program to its students to take the Clifton StrengthsFinder online assessment and participate in the strengths discussion sessions (Bowers, 2009). Azusa Pacific University and Texas Christian University assessed some entering college students’ strengths and helped them understand and apply their strengths to

succeed at college (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). In La Sierra High School in Riverside, California, a group of high school freshmen were assigned to the six-week intervention seminar course. These students took online StrengthsFinder to help identify their strengths and they participated in academic tasks that pushed them to use their strengths. The survey taken by students at the end of the intervention showed a positive academic behaviors and academic-efficacy of the students (Austin, 2006).

In teacher education, based on her study, Marcos (2008) found a close connection between urban teachers' identified strengths and their teaching practice and teacher efficacy. Participants in her study were one hundred and fifty-one urban public and/or private school teachers in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. They all took the online Clifton Strengths-Finder Inventory that identified their top individual strengths and then took a questionnaire on the impacts of their identified strengths on their teaching practice. Participants' years of service were from three to twelve years. Their race and ethnicity were not disclosed. Twenty-two of them participated in focus group interviews and identified knowing their strengths' impact on teaching practice and teacher efficacy in urban P-12 schools. The findings revealed that after knowing their strengths (1) they gained a teacher's holistic vision of teaching; (2) they improved their ability to engage and support all students in learning; and (3) they strengthened the belief that all students can learn. Marcos concluded that "through the identification and recognition of urban teachers' strengths, student learning is positively affected" (p. 69). Thus she recommended a strengths-based approach in teacher preparation programs.

Similarly, He (2009) proposed three principles of strength-based mentoring in teacher education. First, "the strength-based model starts from the development of the strength-

based, appreciative mindset” (p. 270). Second, “the focus of the strength-based approach is on the social construction process” (p. 270). Third, “if implemented appropriately, the impact of the strength-based approach goes beyond the individuals using it – it is transactional through social interactions” (p. 270).

Summary. Overall, strengths-based education is the response to the strengths movement in education. Strengths-based education advocates suggest that educators in K-16 classrooms should build on learners’ strengths rather than their deficiencies (Carman, 2005). I noticed that in recent years, strengths-based education has been frequently advocated for K-12 learners with special needs. Part of the reason for this shift might be the need to reframe the education of children with special needs more dramatically since traditionally these children have commonly been educated based on their deficits and weaknesses. In K-16, for schools that want to help their students identify and capitalize on their strengths, inviting students to take StrengthsFinder and participate in intervention programs is a common practice for strengths identification.

Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates

In this study, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates include non-European American minority teacher candidates and non-European international teacher candidates who study in formal teacher education programs in the U.S. Existing studies on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates focus predominantly on minority teacher candidates and seldom give attention to international teacher candidates. A brief literature review shows that most often participants of studies on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. For example, although Kohli (2009) claimed that her study focused on the experience of teachers

of color in teacher education programs, participants in her study were twelve Latino American, African American and Asian American teacher candidates. In Bennett, Cole, and Thompson's (2000) study, they focused on the preparation of teachers of color in a predominantly White university, but the participants were 45 Latinos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and African Americans. Neither study included international students. For this study, the main purpose of differentiation of non-European American minority teacher candidates and non-European international teacher candidates is to emphasize international teacher candidates' existence in teacher education programs in this country.

A national longitudinal study, *Research about Teacher Education (RATE)*, reported that minority teacher candidates made up about 7% of the total number of students in schools of education in the U.S. (Zimpher, 1989). In major metropolitan areas, minority teacher candidates can reach 22.3% (AACTE, 1994). Alternative programs are reported to attract a higher proportion of minority teacher candidates than formal teacher preparation programs (Feistritz, 2003; Kirby, et al., 1999; Shen, 2000).

The biographies and experiences of European American teachers and those of their minority students are remarkably different (Gay, 1993; Irvine, 1997). Because many European American teacher candidates do not share the same cultural framework as their diverse students, they are less likely to serve as role models and cultural brokers between students' homes and schools (Goodwin, 2000; Shade, 1982; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A review done by Hollins and Torrez-Guzman (2005) of studies on teacher candidates' predispositions and attitudes toward diversity indicated that European American teacher candidates prefer not to teach in diverse settings that they are unfamiliar with. Similarly, Terrill and Mark (2000) found that 52% of the ninety-seven teacher candidates in Central

Michigan University surveyed, of whom 89% were European Americans, had never been in classrooms with minority students. Although 75% of them claimed interest in teaching minority students, 64% chose White suburban schools when asked to select first choice schools to teach.

Based on their review of studies on teacher preparation for diversity, Hollins and Torrez-Guzman (2005) concluded that large majority of teacher candidates in teacher education programs are White, middle –class females from suburban or rural backgrounds, who have limited experiences with minorities. They further summarized that many of these teacher candidates tend to have negative or deficit attitudes and beliefs about people who are different from them. When teachers regard diversity as a deficit to be overcome or when they hold low expectations for their minority students, they are not likely to use culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In contrast, more than two-thirds of African American teacher candidates and 79% of Hispanic teacher candidates ended up teaching in schools where minority students dominated (AACTE, 1999; Henke, Choy, Geis & Broughman, 1997). Native American teachers were more likely to teach at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools than at non-Native schools (Pavel, 1995).

Teacher candidates from diverse racial and/or ethnic backgrounds are also believed to have the potential to provide all students in diverse schools with high quality education (Villegas & Davis, 2008) and to help create the learning environments needed to prepare all teachers to be successful in American public schools (Sleeter, 2007).

As international teacher candidates are not given much attention in the literature, I want to discuss this group of unnoticed prospective teachers in detail. Based on the existing

literature, I argue that it is apparent (1) International teacher candidates exist in teacher preparation programs; (2) We know very little about them; and (3) International teacher candidates play important roles in diversifying the teacher candidate pool in this country. I believe, conceptually, the inclusion of international teacher candidates in the American teaching force widens our horizon of what diversity means from the perspective of an individual country to the perspective of a global village; practically, the inclusion of international teacher candidates in the American teaching profession diversifies the potential teacher candidate pool from the U.S. to the whole world. I assert that the following four themes are closely related to international teacher candidates:

1. International teacher candidates exist in teacher preparation programs, yet they need to be recognized and acknowledged in both reality and in the literature.

Based on *Open Doors 2009* (2009), an annual report from the Institute of International Education, in the academic year 2008/2009, 18,120 international students selected education as their field of study in the U.S. *Open Doors 2009* did not list specific international student enrollment numbers under each specialization area in education. As education as a field of study is composed of various specialization areas, the number of international students in teacher education programs in the U.S. would be less than 18,120; the exact number is hard to obtain. Statistics show that international teacher candidates comprise a large percentage of the total student population in some teacher preparation programs. For example, Polio and Wilson-Duffy (1998) noted the large population of international students in many Teaching English as Second Language (TESOL) programs in North America.

2. International teacher candidates may take on the role of cultural and linguistic

ambassadors.

Due to a lack of formal opportunity to learn and practice home languages at school and limited cultural representation and experiences in school curriculum, there is evidence in some studies that U.S. -born Asian American and Latino American teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates who immigrated to the U.S at early ages may not readily possess their home country culture and language (Mullen, 1997; Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Sheets & Chew, 2002). Studies document awkward situations that some minority teacher candidates face: although they were expected to be bilingual and bi-literate and use their cultural and linguistic advantages to help immigrant students in their classes, some neither spoke nor wrote in their native language and their knowledge about their home country culture was very basic (Mullen, 1997; Nguyen-Lam, 2002).

One commonality I noticed in studies on international teacher candidates in the U.S., as well as in studies on American teacher candidates studying abroad, is that a distance from one's familiar culture and language makes one more aware of and offers a better understanding of one's home country culture and language (Brislin & Pedersen, 1976; McKay & Montgomery, 1995). Because of their life and schooling experiences in both their motherlands and in the U.S., international teacher candidates have the potential to take on the role of cultural and language ambassadors.

3. International teacher candidates have the potential to be sensitive and empathetic to students who are traditionally neglected by the American educational system.

Understanding other people and being empathetic to others are believed to be crucial teacher characteristics when teaching diverse learners. Suarez (2003) recommended using international cultural and linguistic immersion to provide experiential learning experiences.

Because of their life and program experiences in a different country, international teacher candidates have the potential to be sensitive and emphatic to students who are historically ignored and who have various areas of need.

4. International teacher candidates as an untapped human resource for American education have noticeable advantages compared with foreign teachers.

Findings from *Report to the National Education Association on Trends in Foreign Teacher Recruitment* by Center for Economic Organizing (2003) showed that during the 2002/2003 school year about 10,000 foreign teachers worked in American K-12 public schools on temporary H-1B/J-1 visas. Individual schools, school districts, state agencies and third-party agencies are the main sponsors for foreign teacher recruitment.

In terms of nonimmigrant status, foreign teachers on H-1B/J-1 visas and international pre-service teachers on F-1 visas are similar since both are expected to live temporarily in the U.S. and both are regulated by American immigration law. However, in reality “most foreign educators hired through a temporary nonimmigrant visa program become employees of the schools or school districts where they work” (Report to the National Education Association on Trends in Foreign Teacher Recruitment, 2003, p. 2). This is the same trend for international students. Although some international pre-service teachers choose to return to their home country after graduation, many seek employment in the U. S. either temporarily or permanently. Some state education departments do not require U.S. citizenship to get a teacher certificate; this further stimulates international teacher candidates to apply for teacher certificates in these states and work in the American education system.

Because international teacher candidates have gone through formal professional preparation in the U.S., they may have a greater advantage in English proficiency, and their

experiences in teacher education programs may better prepare them for teaching in the U.S. than foreign teachers who may not have experienced equivalent teacher preparation in their home countries. Therefore, before searching for foreign teachers to teach in the U.S., it is reasonable to consider international teacher candidates in American teacher preparation programs as potential employees, and to make full use of those international pre-service teachers who are working toward or have been awarded state teacher certificates.

Recruitment and Retention of Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates

There are many studies on strategies for recruitment and retention of minority students in teacher preparation programs (e.g., Bennett, 2002; Gonzalez, 1997; Johnson, 1991; King, 1993; Rancifer, 1993; Robinson, et al., 2003; Thomas, 1995); the results are not promising and can be problematic (Haberman, 1988; King, 1993). The consensus is that attracting and recruiting minority students into teacher education programs is just a beginning step (Guyton, et al., 1996; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003; Zeichner & Flessner, 2009) and that without positive program experiences, many minority teacher candidates are very likely to drop out of their programs (Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Oling Ottoo, 2005; Watts Pailliotet, 1997). At the same time, researchers (Gonzalez, 1997; Nguyen-Lam, 2002) found that when minority teacher candidates have supportive program experiences, they would recommend their preparation programs to minorities in their communities.

Some researchers attribute recruitment and retention ineffectiveness to teacher education programs' lack of structure and lack of commitment to accommodate minority pre-service teachers (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996; Lorenzo, 1997). More and more researchers and teacher educators (Lorenzo, 1997; Waldschmidt, 2002) have noted that recruitment without professional supports and differentiated preparation strategies will not retain minority teacher

candidates. Their arguments have been supported by several empirical studies on experiences of ethnic and language minority teacher candidates (e.g., Bainer, 1993; Lorenzo, 1997; Watts Pailliotet, 1997). When teacher preparation programs react positively to and endeavor to accommodate the needs of minority teacher candidates—for instance, scheduling classes at convenient times and locations for minority pre-service teachers, or providing alternative programs to build up special cohorts for minority teacher candidates—the retention rate increases (Becket, 1998; Bennett, Cole & Thompson, 2000).

Some of the strategies recommended by researchers to help recruit, prepare and retain minority teacher candidates include: (1) having an equitable curriculum that addresses multiculturalism and social justice, (2) enrolling a higher percentage of minority professors and minority students, (3) erasing institutional racism, (4) drawing on the insider cultural knowledge of minority teacher candidates to facilitate student learning, and (5) setting up separate programs for minority teacher candidates (Bainer, 1993; Bennett, et al., 2000; Bustos Flores, Keehn, & Perez, 2002; Gay, 2000; Gomez, et al., 2008; Hodgkinson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lorenzo, 1997; Riojas Clark & Bustos Flores, 2001; Sheets & Chew, 2002; Tellez, 1999).

Since international teacher candidates are neglected in the teacher education literature, there is no specific study related to their recruitment and retention. But some research has been conducted on how to recruit and retain international students in general in American higher education institutions. For example, based on the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory Survey (2008) of 12,398 undergraduate international students at 496 private and public universities and colleges in the U.S., the researchers stated that academic quality, and campus safety and security are of paramount importance to attract international

students. Eland (2001) also observed that international students' relationships with faculty members, especially with their advisors, were critical for their academic experiences and retention.

To sum up, to a great extent, program experiences and relationships with academic advisors may influence the attraction and retention rates of international teacher candidates. Research suggests that without considering how to retain teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds currently in their preparation programs, the recruitment efforts, by themselves, will not solve the disparity between diverse student populations and the lack of diversity among teachers faced by many American schools.

Program Experiences of Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates

My review of the studies on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' program experiences was not exhaustive, but it did show a common thread emphasized and shared by most studies—problems, barriers and difficulties that these teacher candidates experienced in their teacher education programs. Most often the researchers are concerned with racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' low recruitment and retention rates in teacher education programs. In the following sections, I review some studies on minority teacher candidates' program experiences and then review some studies on international teacher candidates' program experiences.

Program Experiences of Minority Teacher Candidates

Studies on minority teacher candidate recruitment and retention dominate in the literature on minority teacher candidates (e. g., Bennett, 2002; Johnson, 1991; King, 1993; Rancifer, 1993; Robinson, et al., 2003; Thomas, 1995), yet research on their program experiences is limited. As Tellez (1999) pointed out aptly: focusing on the lack of minority

teacher candidates ironically distracts researchers from studying those minority students who do enter teacher education programs.

Minority teacher candidates receive very limited attention from their teacher preparation programs (Foster, 1990; Hood & Parker, 1994; Sheets & Chew, 2002; Watts Pailliotet, 1997). Unlike European American prospective teachers who are often privileged by their English language, middle-class social economic status and dominant cultural backgrounds, minority teacher candidates usually have to negotiate various challenges and unique needs as they go through their programs (Battle & Cuellar, 2006; Gomez, et al., 2008; Kohli, 2009; Montecinos, 2004). Common challenges and concerns shared by minority teacher candidates in teacher education programs are: no representation in the curriculum; lack of minority peers in their cohort, among faculty members, and among field placement personnel; being socially isolated and lonely; being alienated; racial discrimination; faculties' unwillingness and/or lack of knowledge to challenge racist comments during class discussions; unfair and inconsistent treatment by the program; limited information about the requirements for different stages of the program; inadequate financial aid; lack of mentor and administrator support; and the teacher certification exam challenge (Guyton, et al., 1996; Hollins & Torrez-Guzman, 2005; Irvine, 1992; Nguyen, 2004; Oling Ottoo, 2005; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Waldschmidt, 2002).

Minority teacher candidates in Guyton, Saxton, & Wesche's (1996) study claimed positive program experiences. Yet when they were asked for details, the minority teacher candidates all expressed disappointment with minority under-representation in the curriculum, in their faculty members, and in their field placements. They also expressed social and emotional isolation due to lack of minority peers in the program, which is

consistent with the conclusion reached by Battle and Cuellar (2006) who explored six Mexican American pre-service teachers' perceived obstacles and perceived supports on their way to become certified teachers.

Racial comments and racial discrimination are frequently experienced by minority prospective teachers (Gomez, et al., 2008; Guyton, et al., 1996; Kohli, 2009). For instance, participants interviewed in Kohli's (2009) study were more shocked by their European American peers' comfort level of expressing racism in front of minority teacher candidates than by the overt racism expression itself. The racist assumptions and expressions do not happen only in casual conversations; instead they are extended to classroom discussion. As one Latino American teacher candidate angrily complained, "They say it in class too. That's the funny thing, sometimes I'm just like: I cannot believe you said this in class and we're in a social justice teacher preparation program. It's just really frustrating" (p. 249). Guyton, et al. (1996) also reported faculty members' failure to address racist comments or controversial issues emerging from classroom discussions. In these studies, minority teacher candidates expected their teacher educators to address that issue, yet many simply ignored it or were not ready to address this issue. Therefore, most minority teacher candidates had to struggle with racism by themselves.

In order to look for factors related to racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' retention, and to determine how teacher educators make use of their talents, Oling Ottoo (2005) recruited eight participants. Four participants in her study were pre-service teachers, including two African Americans, one Latino American, one international pre-service teacher from India; four participants were faculty members, including "Latino/Latina American, African American, Caucasian, and bi-racial" (p. 68). Open-ended questionnaires, interviews,

participant observation, artifacts and document analysis were used for data collection. Shared concerns and challenges were summarized as: lack of information about the requirements for different stages of the program; inadequate financial aid; discrimination; unfair and inconsistent treatment by the program; loneliness; no representation in the curriculum; poor interaction with faculty members and peers; frustration; and feeling like outsiders. To answer one sub-question *How teacher educators make use of the insider cultural and linguistic knowledge pre-service teachers of color bring to their courses*, Oling Ottoo concluded that “The findings of this study do not show any indication of faculty intentionally making use of insider cultural and linguistic knowledge pre-service teachers of color bring to their course” (p. 94). Faculty members admitted that due to their preoccupation with legislative mandates under strict timelines, they seldom put the needs of racial and/or ethnic minority candidates as a priority.

Nguyen-Lam’s (2002) study focused on recruitment, preparation and retention of Asian American teacher candidates. Seventy-one Asian Americans were surveyed and twenty-two of them participated in a small group dialogue. Participants identified their ethnic heritage as Hmong, Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese. Most participants were from bilingual teacher preparation programs. Thirty-two percent were introduced to the program by friends and colleagues who were in teacher education programs. This finding is highly resonant with Gonzalez’s (1997) argument that minority teachers would recommend their programs to members in their communities when they have supportive program experiences. The concerns mentioned by most participants in Nguyen-Lam’s study included the need for financial support, the need for academic language development support, under-representation in the curriculum, teacher standardized tests, low confidence, and internalized racism.

One important finding made by Nguyen-Lam is that teacher education programs that value and utilize minority teacher candidates' strengths have positive impacts on their program experiences. Programs focusing on who minority teacher candidates are and what they bring into their programs give more credit to minority teacher candidates and make them feel more valued and supported. By contrast, minority teacher candidates in teacher education programs other than bilingual teacher preparation programs received less support and validation for what they bring (Nguyen-Lam, 2002).

Minority teacher candidates' program experiences are not only impacted by their experience with teacher education programs but also influenced by their experiences in field placements. Waldschmidt (2002) probed the lived experiences of three Latino American pre-service teachers on their journey of becoming teachers. She found that these pre-service teachers encountered various barriers such as lack of financial support, stressful workloads in the field placements, family and life imbalance, teacher certificate exam requirements, lack of confidence in working with European Americans, and lack of support from mentors and administrators. It is ironic that although these minority teacher candidates were perceived as valuable sources by their program, they had no opportunities to use their bilingual/bicultural knowledge and experiences in field placements where they were placed with host teachers lacking mentoring experiences with minority candidates. She suggested "redefining what constitutes an exemplary teacher so that cross-cultural skills, bilingual ability, and experience with racism and lower socio-economic status are included as valuable assets for working with all children" (p. 558). Her study indicates that host teachers' attitudes and abilities to work with minority teacher candidates may impact minority teacher candidates' implementation of their strengths into teaching.

In another study, three Latino American teacher candidates experienced conflicts with their European American peers and host teachers in both teacher education classrooms and in field placements “where 88% of teachers and support staff are White and monolingual in English” (Gomez, et al., 2008, p. 271). In spite of using his cultural background and linguistic knowledge to conduct eleven teacher-parent conferences for his host teachers’ and other teachers’ classes in his school placement, one Latino American student teacher reported being removed by his European American host teacher from her classroom because she thought he confronted her authority and did not teach the way she wanted.

Minority teacher candidates born and educated in their home countries experienced unique challenges throughout their program of study. For example, Nguyen (2004) examined five foreign-born Vietnamese American teacher candidates’ perceptions of teaching and self-development. She used a variety of methods including classroom observation, weekly written reflection, interviews, special meetings and mixed group weekly seminars to collect data. She concluded that perceived immigrant and former refugee status, perceived accented English, interpretation of teaching and learning from home country culture perspective, and Asian appearance and stature all set up obstacles to their success as teachers. Participants in her study expected teachers’ authority and students’ respect as well as parents’ support, but parents and some host teachers in their field placements ignored these teacher candidates’ existence. They also articulated the under-representation of minority teachers and the pressure to abandon their prior knowledge and heritage to fit in. Nguyen issued a call for sustained support from faculty and especially minority faculty members. This again is in line with Nguyen-Lam’s (2002) finding that advisors’ supports facilitate minority teacher candidates’ success as most of them are first generation college students and they are

overwhelmed by program requirements. This is also resonant with the conclusion drawn from Irvine's (1992) study that the presence of minority faculty members represented the program's commitment to equity and diversity, helped lessen minority teacher candidates' feelings of isolation, and thus made their program experiences more positive.

Studies show that minority teacher candidates' ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity are seldom identified and validated, even when the classroom discussions focus on these topics (Nguyen-Lam, 2002). There is a call for recognition and validation of experiential knowledge, and cultural and contextual knowledge that minority teacher candidates bring into their teacher preparation programs (Gomez, et al., 2008; Kohli, 2009; Nguyen-Lam, 2002). For instance, Nguyen-Lam (2002) proposed, "We must recognize and validate the importance of the cultural and contextual knowledge these teacher candidates of color invariably bring into the teacher preparation programs" (p. 8). In addition, many minority teacher candidates' work experiences as either teachers or teacher aides are ignored and they are neither recognized nor credited for their daily rich experience with minority students, and their in-depth knowledge of minority students and their community (Gomez, et al., 2008; Nguyen-Lam, 2002).

Program Experiences of International Teacher Candidates

In teacher education literature, the terms *teacher candidate diversity*, *teachers of color*, and *teacher candidates of color* always refer to minority teacher candidates. International teacher candidates exist as a unique group but they are rarely included in research and their experiences are seldom documented. Very few studies have been done on the program experiences of international teacher candidates. The scant knowledge of

international teacher candidates reflects researchers' failure to notice the presence of this unique group of diverse students in higher education.

A literature review of the limited existing studies of international teacher candidates shows that there is a call for recognition of the existence of international prospective teachers in American teacher preparation programs and their needs (Lu, 2005; Oling Ottoo, 2005). There is also a call for appreciation of what international teacher candidates bring to their programs (Lu, 2005; Oling Ottoo, 2005).

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, international students are much more commonly seen in language education teacher preparation programs than in general teacher preparation programs, so most findings of international teacher candidates are derived from program experiences of bilingual program teacher candidates and Teaching English as a Second Language program teacher candidates.

Researchers have identified some common challenges that international teacher candidates in teacher education programs face. For example, it is reported that many international teacher candidates have self-perceived low English language proficiency (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Lu, 2005; Polio & Wilson-Duffy, 1998; Quisenberry, 1983), and they lack American schooling experiences and understandings of implicit principles and practices in the American school system (Lu, 2005). Due to a lack of shared cultural capital, international teacher candidates have reported the pressure to learn everything new and to unlearn their own culture and language to fit in (Lu, 2005). They also have to face credibility challenges from students and their families (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Lu, 2005; Polio & Wilson-Duffy, 1998), and they experience declining confidence from being top students in their home countries to self-perceived low level students in the U.S. (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Lu,

2005). Like minority teacher candidates, international teacher candidates feel lonely, they are socially isolated due to low diversity in their cohort (Lu, 2005) and they experience discrimination (Lu, 2005). They have limited communication with American classmates (Chen, 1996; Lu, 2005). Unlike minority teacher candidates, international teacher candidates have concerns about their student visas and they struggle with identity confusion (Chen, 1996; Lu, 2005).

“Teaching is, above all, a linguistic activity.” (Smith, 1971, p. 24) Ability to teach in English is especially challenging for international teacher candidates. Self-perceived low English language proficiency is the most commonly mentioned personal limit and concern identified by those who speak native languages other than English (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Lu, 2005; Polio & Wilson-Duffy, 1998; Quisenberry, 1983). They tend to perceive their low language proficiency as a personal limit and constraint on their success. In fact, language proficiency goes far beyond the language issue itself and evolves into and interacts with such struggles as declining self-confidence, credibility challenges, intelligence challenges, health problems, ineffective communication with peers, and unfair treatment by host teachers and teacher educators that international pre-service teachers experience.

Lu (2005) used an in-depth narrative-life history interview approach to explore four East Asian English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' experiences of becoming and being ESL teachers in the U.S. Participants in her study included three Asian American in-service teachers who were born and raised in Taiwan, mainland China and Japan, and one international student from Taiwan. Although this study focused on their professional identity transformation, I found some accounts that are related to international teacher candidates' experiences in teacher preparation programs. Out of the four, two participants discussed their

previous program experiences as international teacher candidates. All participants voiced a strong concern about their English language proficiency both as students and as teachers.

Lu's study supports Chang's study on international students' language proficiency. Chang (1997) argued that the importance of English language proficiency depends on the pursued field of study, and it is more related to international students in humanities and social science programs. According to Lu, as English as a Second Language teachers are expected to be native English speakers who have a high command of English, international teacher candidates in ESL teacher education programs might have a higher sense of the importance of mastery of English language than international students in other fields.

Polio and Wilson-Duffy (1998) further observed a connection between international teacher candidates' language difficulty and credibility challenges from their students. Kamhi-Stein (2000) listed five concerns and perceived needs of international pre-service teachers in Teaching English as a Second Language preparation programs: credibility challenges; lack of confidence; self-perceived language needs; lack of voice and visibility in the profession; and self-perceived prejudice based on their identity as international students. Polio and Wilson-Duffy (1998) and Kamhi-Stein (2000) identified self-perceived low language proficiency as the leading concern that worried international teacher candidates most. Their studies and Lu's study noted language-related credibility challenges to international pre-service teachers from their students, and that these challenges are not commonly seen by international students in other fields of study or by minority teacher candidates born and raised in this country. Here, perceived language deficiency weaves with credibility challenges from students.

The observed correlation between language ability and teaching credibility noticed by Polio and Wilson-Duffy (1998), Kamhi-Stein (2000), and Lu (2005), as well as the positive correlation between language minority identity and declining self-confidence documented by Lu (2005) confirm the conclusions drawn by other researchers about the difficulties generated by international teacher candidates' perceived low English language proficiency (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Sun & Chen, 1997; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Zimmerman, 1995).

Feeling inferior is also common among international teacher candidates. Being in a class full of European American classmates, international students are very sensitive to their speech and undergo a feeling of inferiority and declining confidence. They are under great pressure to disguise their non-native speaker identity by either keeping silent in the class or pretending to sound like native speakers in front of their peers. International teacher candidates' perceptions of themselves and their self-confidence, to some extent, are built upon how they think others perceive them. This is also consistent with Schwartz's (1975) observation that a person's view of self is influenced not only by what she thinks of herself, but also by what others perceive her to be, as well as her view of others toward her.

International teacher candidates reported feeling more accepted and feeling more confident in teacher education programs in which more international students enrolled (Lu, 2005). In Lu's (2005) study, the TESOL program was experienced by one former international teacher candidate as more inviting than the childhood education program that she attended before. As the only international student in the childhood education program, not only did she feel insecure and stressed, but also she felt that her specific concerns and challenges belittled by her European American classmates (Lu, 2005). This same participant also reflected her unique concern as an international student. Because of lack of information

and support from her program, she did not know until the last academic semester that she could extend her student visa and work in the U.S. with a practical training visa after graduation. She found out about the information at the last minute and took this opportunity to embark on teaching as an ESL teacher in the U.S.

Oling Ottoo (2005) examined the program experiences of four teacher candidates from diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One unique feature of her study is the incorporation of both minority and international teacher candidates, although the description of the international pre-service teacher's program experiences is much less attended to than those of minority pre-service teachers. The international teacher candidate, a woman from India, referred to herself as a "step child" in her teacher preparation program. She had difficult experiences in her program and field placements and yearned for support from faculty members, administrators, peers, supervisors and host teachers. To this international pre-service teacher, the only force keeping her going was her passion for her students.

In summary, perceived low English language proficiency, low self-confidence, lack of previous schooling experiences in the U.S., cultural mismatch and international student identity are all perceived as personal limits by international teacher candidates. These perspectives made their program experiences more challenging.

Summary

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the reason to distinguish minority and international teacher candidates in this study is to emphasize the existence of international students in American teacher education programs. Although according to the law, minority teacher candidates are U.S. citizens or permanent residents and international teacher

candidates are temporary visitors on student visas, the literature review above displayed many similar experiences shared by these two groups of future teachers, especially among international teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates who grew up and were educated in their home countries.

Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are “rarely excited about participating in programs that psychologically exclude them, their priorities, and their styles of learning and perceiving” (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996, p. 785). Both minority teacher candidates and international teacher candidates encounter several similar program experiences. The feelings of loneliness and social isolation; the lack of diversity in curriculum, peers, teacher educators and field personnel; being racially discriminated against; the lack of financial support; and unrecognized needs are the most commonly shared program experiences (Guyton, et al., 1996). In addition, many racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in these studies experienced the lack of appreciation of their strengths from university faculty members and the lack of support from host teachers to apply their strengths in teaching in their field placements.

Minority teacher candidates who have elementary or secondary schooling experiences in their home countries seem to share more linguistic and cultural challenges and concerns with international teacher candidates than those U.S.-born minority teacher candidates. Both international teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates who migrated to the U.S. expressed self-perceived low confidence in their English language proficiency, and their credibility as potential teachers were more likely to be challenged by their students. These unique program experiences are not reported in studies of African American teacher candidates and other U.S.-born minority teacher candidates.

Although international teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates share many common challenges and struggles in their programs, it seems that minority teacher candidates are more concerned with institutional constraints such as discrimination and isolation, whereas international teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates who were born and raised in other home countries are more cautious of their personal limits and are more likely to judge their program experiences based upon perceived personal weaknesses.

Strengths Perceived and Utilized by Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates

Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring unique strengths to their programs and the teaching profession (Galindo, 1996; Galindo & Olguin, 1996; Gomez, et al, 2008; Kohli, 2009; Lu, 2005; Montecinos, 2004; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Oling Ottoo, 2005; Sheets, 2000). Their presence in teacher education programs provides an opportunity for their peers to live and study in an authentic cross-cultural learning environment filled with learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and offers teacher educators a valuable chance to learn and model for all teacher candidates how to teach a diverse student population in today's world. It does not make sense to make their presence invisible and devalue the diversity that they bring while at the same time looking for studying abroad experience to enhance teacher candidates' awareness and sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity. As far back as the 1970s, Brislin and Pedersen (1976) criticized American higher education's lack of serious effort to incorporate the unique resources and tremendous intercultural educational opportunities that international students bring into the academic community and campuses.

Sheets (2000) strongly recommended that teacher preparation programs acknowledge, value and utilize the strengths that minority teachers bring to education. She emphasized,

“While one can argue that teachers of color may possess valuable cultural and linguistic resources, it must also be recognized that these strengths need to be acknowledged, enhanced, and developed as pedagogical tools” (p. 6). This resonates with what England (1988) advised: “We must not only be prepared to adjust our programs to accommodate all candidates, but we must also present opportunities to share their experiences” (p. 3). Offering chances for racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates to share and express their strengths is as important as acknowledging their strengths.

Studies specifically on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates’ strengths awareness and their strengths utilization are very scarce and they are sporadically explored. Most literature in this area is limited to minority teacher candidates and rarely examines international teacher candidates’ strengths perception and capitalization. I have not seen an empirical inquiry that focused solely on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates’ strengths from their own perspectives. Thus, when I conducted a literature review in this section, I had to purposefully look for and compile studies to get a glimpse of how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates make sense of and utilize their strengths in their programs.

Some minority teacher candidates expressed a commitment to speaking for minority students and helping them succeed (Gomez, et al., 2008; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003), particularly to those minority students who share the same cultures with them (Battle & Cuellar, 2006; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003).

Some minority teacher candidates indicate confidence in serving students who are the same race because of their familiarity with their students’ culture and experiences. In Tellez’s (1999) study, one participant, a Mexican American student teacher, was aware that her

strength of being familiar with Mexican American students put her in a better position of serving minority students in her host teacher's classroom. This student teacher made conscious efforts to apply her strengths in the classroom teaching. She used her insider knowledge to interpret Mexican American male students' "old English" calligraphy as showing their connections with their culture, instead of misunderstanding it as gang affiliation. When this same minority student teacher asked students about their breakfast, she made connection with them by talking about tacos instead of eggs. The insider cultural knowledge about her students was perceived as this minority teacher candidate's strength.

Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' familiarity with the minority community prepares them for serving the role of a bridge between home and school cultures for their students and parents. Minority teacher candidates acknowledge that "their heritage background enhanced their role as future teachers and their authority with students, parents, and the ethnic community" (Nguyen, 2004, p. 264). Because of their mastery of Vietnamese language and culture, Vietnamese American teacher candidates in Nguyen's (2004) study communicated effectively with parents and students from the Vietnamese community. Meanwhile, their cultural understanding of respect for the elders earned them appreciation from the community from which their minority students came. In these cases, Vietnamese American teacher candidates were proud of and confident in their unique roles such as communicating with Vietnamese-speaking parents about their children's educational concerns and progress, and translating for Vietnamese-speaking parents in parent-teacher conferences and other important meetings to encourage more parental involvement and cooperation with schools (Nguyen, 2004).

A study conducted by Gomez et.al (2008) further showed that minority teacher candidates applied their strengths widely. These preservice teachers were aware of their strengths of mastery of Spanish language and culture and they consciously used their strengths in their field placements. For example, they not only made contributions to their host teachers' classrooms but also served as good resources for the school community. One male Latino American prospective teacher helped his host teacher to conduct teacher-parent conferences in Spanish; he also accepted other teachers' invitations to hold a total of eleven teacher-parent conferences in Spanish in the school building where he was a student teacher. He negotiated follow-ups and had new communications with students' families. This study is consistent with Tellez's (1999) observation of Mexican American student teachers who offered cultural insights and perspectives to both host teachers and other teachers in the same school building.

Research indicates that some racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates use their strengths to educate their European American peers about children with diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. In the study conducted by Gomez, et al. (2008), one Latino American teacher candidate pointed out his European American female classmates' inappropriate and demeaning words toward diverse students and did not let it go by unnoticed. All three Latino minority teacher candidates in the study actively participated in social justice-oriented community or campus organizations to help promote social equality.

Although English language proficiency is the most commonly expressed concern expressed by both international prospective teachers and minority prospective teachers born and raised outside the U.S., some of them realized that their language learning experiences can be a blessing for their students and future teaching. To be more specific, their lived

experience as English language learners may serve as an advantage in reaching and understanding English language learners, immigrant students and minority students (Gomez, et al., 2008; Lu, 2005; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002). In Nguyen's (2004) study, Vietnamese American teacher candidates born outside the U.S. claimed that their language learning experiences taught them to be caring teachers who empathized with students, inspired them to reach and relate to their students, and encouraged them to share their personal language learning strategies and management skills.

Racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' personalities are also perceived as strengths and assets. For example, minority teacher candidates in Tellez' (1999) study were resourceful in their ability to capitalize on informal curriculum to teach minority children about their heritage and cultures during their practicum experiences. Although there was no space for these Mexican American student teachers to add cultural elements and teach culture in the formal school curriculum, they figured out informal ways to use their ethnic knowledge to relate to students.

A review of the literature shows that very few studies explored how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates perceived and applied their personal strengths. A limited number of studies were able to identify some strengths and evidence of strengths usage. The reported strengths focused on their linguistic and cultural strengths. We do not know besides racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' awareness of their linguistic and cultural strengths as insiders, whether they are aware of some of their other strengths; and we do not know the origins of some of their strengths and ways that they believe could discourage or encourage their strengths awareness and utilization. As studies on international teacher

candidates are very limited, there is no way to compare whether minority teacher candidates and international teacher candidates make sense of and apply their strengths differently.

Teacher Self-Understanding and Teacher Efficacy

Traditionally, the knowledge base of teaching includes subject knowledge and general pedagogical knowledge. Nowadays, teachers are expected to possess more skills and knowledge to teach students effectively. For example, teacher knowledge has been expanded to include knowledge of all learners and knowledge of technology. Some argued that teachers should have practical intelligence to teach effectively in a competitive and hectic world (Mumthas & Blessytha, 2009). Whereas many researchers tried to expand the content of teacher knowledge outwardly, some looked inward, calling for “the importance of balancing the personal development of teachers with their professional development” (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999, p. 2) and explored the importance of teacher self-knowledge.

Using a case study method, Elbaz (1983) described and explored one Canadian teacher’s practical knowledge in five categories: (a) knowledge of self, (b) knowledge of the milieu, (c) knowledge of subject matter, (d) knowledge of instruction, and, (e) knowledge of curriculum development. According to Elbaz, teachers’ knowledge of self includes how teachers see their roles as teachers, how they see their relationship with others, and how they see themselves as individuals. Although the teacher’s knowledge of self as a unique individual was not described in detail, the study did include the teacher’s personal traits, limitations, strengths and needs.

More and more teacher educators stress the importance of addressing prospective teachers’ self-knowledge and self-understanding (Beattie, 1995; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1989; Clark & Flores, 2001; Combs, 1965; Combs, Avila, & Purkey, 1973; Jersild,

1955; Sachs, 2004; Zehm, 1999). Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1989) postulated that teacher preparation programs must help preservice teachers answer the question: *Who am I?* They regarded prospective teachers' understanding of self as a critical aspect in teacher development. In his book *When Teachers Face Themselves*, Jersild (1955) elaborated on the teacher self-development and argued that "The teacher's understanding and acceptance of self is the most important requirement in any effort to help students to know themselves and to gain healthy attitudes of self-acceptance" (p. 3). Similarly, Sachs (2004) stated that one of the identified attributes of effective urban teachers is their self-understanding, which helps create a strong sense of self-inquiry among effective teachers about their beliefs and practices. Combs (1965) and Combs, Avila, and Purkey (1973) also concluded that teachers' self-perceptions can influence their effectiveness in cultivating their students' self-esteem; thus, understanding self should be a necessary component of teacher education.

Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993) cautioned that teacher education programs' emphasis on pedagogical theories had blurred the development of pre-service teachers' self-knowledge of personal feelings, self-understanding, self-esteem and personal ways of knowing. Self-knowledge is important for teachers in that the more teachers know about themselves, the better they can make decisions for better teaching and present themselves in ways that enhance learning (Hamachek, 1999).

A study conducted by Coleman (1966) revealed that a stronger sense of self could impact minority students' achievement and teachers' performances. A sense of self can help enhance teacher effectiveness and develop empowerment (Clark & Flores, 2001). Okech (1987) and Thomson and Handley (1990) also found a positive correlation between teachers' self-concept and teaching effectiveness.

Palmer (1998) noted that the complexities of teaching not only come from knowledge of subject areas and students, but also from teachers who teach who they are. He emphasized that knowing oneself is critical to good teaching and that knowing students and subjects depends heavily upon teacher self-knowledge. He argued that a teacher without self-knowledge will not know who the students are and therefore will not be able to teach them well; and a teacher without self-knowledge will only know and teach the subject abstractly and make no personal meaning and connection to the students. Palmer further argued that becoming aware of one's talents and strengths helped teachers to teach more consistently from their identity and integrity and teach from who they are.

Strengths Awareness and Application

Studies show that self-awareness and strengths awareness are closely related and support each other. Goleman, et al. (2002) defined self-awareness as “having a deep understanding of one's emotions, as well as one's strengths and limitations and one's values and motives. People with self-awareness are realistic—neither overly self-critical nor naively hopeful. Rather, they are honest with themselves about themselves” (p. 40), indicating that strengths awareness is part of a person's self-awareness. A growing awareness of self is very important for strengths discovery and building (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). At the same time, the acknowledgement of one's talents, values and interests is believed to be important for the sense of self development (Burke & Cottesfield, 1986; Clark & Flores, 2001) and that self-awareness increases as individuals identify their talents and unique abilities (Buckingham & Clifton, 2002; Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006). As I discussed earlier in this chapter, strengths awareness is sporadically explored by researchers and in most cases strengths were identified by using outside tools.

Although many researchers (Bowers, 2009; Fox, 2008; Rath, 2007) argue that strengths awareness precedes strengths application, it is difficult to know how people capitalize on their personal strengths and very few studies have explored this area. A study by Janowski is one attempt to address this question using a qualitative research methodology. Janowski (2006) conducted her dissertation on how college students capitalized on their strengths. Participants in her study were eight college students nominated by strengths-based programming directors at Baylor University, Texas A & M, and Oklahoma University. They were selected based on the following criteria: (1) enrolled in higher education institutions where strengths development programming is being conducted, (2) participated in the programming and could name their top five strengths, and (3) identified one area within their life in which they actively applied their strengths. The mean age of these eight participants was 20.5. Seven were European Americans and one was Hispanic. It is not clear in what majors these students were enrolled.

Janowski (2006) used semi-structured open-ended phone interviews as a means of data collection for her study. Interviews included: basic background/demographics, description of completed strengths development program, identification of signature strengths, application of strengths in life, capitalizing, and the perceived benefits of capitalizing. Using grounded theory, she concluded with three constructs that seemed necessary for the capitalizing process to occur: (1) continual social support from various sources including family, friends and churches, (2) experiences of success in academic and extracurricular life, and (3) the reinforcement of personal strengths by identifying benefits associated with their strengths. Her study is important in that the three constructs that she came up with helped explain how individuals capitalized on their strengths after having their

strengths identified. She noted that these three constructs are necessary but not sufficient for capitalizing to occur, and suggested that individual's personalities such as extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness might be involved as well.

I observed three limits of Janowski's study. First, although she stated that she used qualitative research to collect rich and contextual data, the presentation of her study was filled with analysis and arguments, and she did not present ample original data as direct quotes from participants were rare. Second, the demographic nature of her participants—seven out of eight participants being Caucasian with Christian background, excluded college students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Third, her study did not provide us with much information about participants' strengths self-awareness, since the strengths of all participants in her study were identified by outside strengths tools.

In the field of teacher education, McEntarffer (2003) conducted a mixed-methods study of strengths-based mentoring models in teacher education programs. The purpose of his study was to explore how a one-semester strengths-based mentoring program helped pre-service teachers to develop positive relationships. Unlike the participants in Janowski's study who were not identified by their majors, the seventeen participants in McEntarffer's (2003) study were college students enrolled as elementary or secondary education majors at the University of Nebraska. They paired as mentors and mentees, mainly based on their certification areas. They were purposefully selected after being interviewed by the director of the University of Nebraska Human Resources Institute. There was no description about their race or ethnicity. Yet similar to Janowski's study, McEntarffer's study had all participants' strengths identified by asking them to complete the online StrengthsFinder instrument. According to McEntarffer, the findings of this study indicate that the intervention program

helped increase participants' strengths awareness in selves and others and helped mentors and mentees develop a positive relationship.

However, his study did little to help explain whether preservice teachers are aware of their strengths without using the StrengthsFinder instrument. In addition, McEntarffer reflected in his study that many participants focused on how well their strengths identified through StrengthsFinder fit them rather than how to use it. He suggested that the unfamiliarity with the terminology used to describe their strengths and how to use them may cause many participants to "avoid discussing strengths with their partner because it may not feel authentic or comfortable during conversations" (McEntarffer, 2003, p. 67). I conclude that this shows the limitation of using StrengthsFinder as an instrument to identify the participants' strengths.

Summary of the Literature Review

Literature on teacher candidate diversity is abundant with studies on strategies of how to recruit and retain racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. Among studies that explored program experiences of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, most focused on examining challenges, barriers and constraints that these teacher candidates experience throughout their programs. One of the shared themes reported by these studies is the lack of appreciation of the strengths that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring to their teacher education programs. These studies also showed that the validation of their strengths had some positive impacts on the preservice teachers' program experiences, and that both field placements and university classrooms impacted these preservice teachers' strengths application.

Although it is argued that knowing one's strengths is an important part of a person's self-knowledge and understanding (Burke & Cottesfield, 1986; Clark & Flores, 2001) and that teachers who identify and acknowledge their strengths have a positive impact on student learning (Marcos, 2008), very limited research explored how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates perceive and use their strengths. Studies on international teacher candidates' perceptions of their personal strengths are particularly rare. Usually studies did not explore participants' strengths awareness, instead, strengths were identified by outside tools or by the researchers; a few empirical studies explored college students' usage of personal strengths after having their strengths identified by the StrengthsFinder. These research findings indicate the necessity to explore how strengths awareness plays a role in the strengths identification in people and their strengths application. Using professionally-designed tools such as online StrengthsFinder and using researchers' observation to identify one's strengths is one way, but it is also possible to identify one's strengths through internal exploration such as personal awareness and reflection.

Chapter Three — Design of the Study

In this chapter, I explain the analytical framework of this study—symbolic interaction, and I explain how I conducted this study. I provide an introduction to the four universities where the eight participants came from. Then I discuss the symbolic interaction framework and its connection with my study. I discuss the procedures required for each participating university's IRB approval and participant identification. I depict the eight participants in this study, followed by the discussion of the two methods used for data collection. I discuss the procedures of the collection and the analysis of the data. Finally, I address subjectivity.

Context of the Study

Participants of this study were from four different higher education institutions in the Northeastern regions of the U.S. I chose four different universities because I wanted to include both minority and international teacher candidates in my study and additional higher education institutions would increase the chance to recruit a diverse participant sample from various racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. These four institutions were selected because they were geographically convenient for me to travel to and my dissertation advisor knew colleagues at each institution who could help with participant recruitment. Each institution in which participants were enrolled is described briefly here to set the context of this study. The data are excerpts from each university's website and a comprehensive guidance book that introduces American universities and colleges. The names of each institution were changed for protection purpose.

Meadowland University

Meadowland University is located in a medium-sized city in the Northeast. There are about 3500 enrolled students, including 2800 undergraduate students and 700 graduate students. About 90% of the students are from the same state. Other students are from 30 states and 20 foreign countries. Racial and/or ethnic minority students include more than 170 African Americans, about 20 Native Americans, less than 100 Asian and Pacific Islanders, more than 100 Latino Americans, and over 50 international students.

Smooth University

Smooth University is located in a small city in the Northeast. The university has nearly 3000 undergraduate students and almost 600 graduate students enrolled. About 80% of enrolled students are from the same state. Other students are from 40 states and almost 20 foreign countries. Racial and/or ethnic minority students include nearly 300 African Americans, about 20 Native Americans, nearly 50 Asian and Pacific Islanders, less than 100 Latino Americans, and more than 50 international students.

Stone University

Stone University is a university located in a rural area in the Northeast. The student population includes about 7000 undergraduate and more than 1000 graduate students on its campus. About 99% of the students are from the same state. Other students are from about 10 other states and foreign countries. Racial and/or ethnic minority students include 600 African Americans, and about 400 students identified as Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, or international students.

United University

United University is located in a large city in the Northeast. The university has about 20,000 students, including nearly 15,000 undergraduates and over 5000 graduate students. About 60% of the students are from the same state, and the rest of the students represent 50 states and over 70 foreign countries. Racial and/or ethnic minority students include about 900 African Americans, fewer than 100 Native Americans, nearly 1000 Asian and Pacific Islanders, nearly 700 Latino Americans and over 2000 international students.

Analytical Framework: Symbolic Interaction

The analytical framework that guided this study is symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic interaction is a perspective that “places great emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation as essential human processes in reaction against behaviorism and mechanical stimulus-response psychology” (Patton, 1990, p. 75). Symbolic interactionists, such as Blumer (1969), argue that people take action toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and that these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. Symbolic interactionists believe that human experiences are mediated by interpretation (Blumer, 1969) and that “the meaning people give to their experiences and their process of interpretation are essential and constitutive, not accidental or secondary to what the experience is” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 25).

By using the document analysis method, I asked the participants to provide their self-selected professional work samples that they believed represent their strengths awareness and use of strengths in their programs. I believe that the professional work samples identified by the participants are not simply objects, but rather symbols with meaning designated by each individual participant. These meanings were mediated by each participant’s interpretation based on her/his interaction with others such as her/his professors, field placement host

teachers, supervisors, students, classmates, and people around them. I assume participants selected and showed certain documents because they believed these particular professional work samples represented their strengths and how they used their strengths in teaching.

In addition, one important part of social interaction theory is “self” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). How a person perceives herself or himself is influenced partially by how others perceive her or him, and a person’s self-perception reflects in part others’ perceptions of her or him. This qualitative research study examined how the participants identified and made sense of their personal strengths, and how they used their strengths in their teacher education programs. Although strengths awareness and usage were explored through racial and/or ethnic minority prospective teachers’ inner perspectives, based on the symbolic interaction framework, each individual participant’s unique inner perspectives was impacted by her or his interaction with others in the programs.

As explained in the previous chapter, the word *strength* was perceived and reported by each individual participant. I believe how each participant perceived and defined the word *strength* is the result of her/his interaction with others about actions, events, and objects, and this interaction is then mediated through her/his interpretation. As will be presented in Chapter Four, Tina—one of the participants in this study—reflected that she used to feel uncomfortable with being tall, especially as an Asian woman. After communicating with her host teachers, supervisors and peers in her teacher education program, she realized that her height made her look more like an authority in her field placements, which led her to rethink her tallness. Finally, she partially attributed her leadership strength to her tallness.

Procedures for IRB Approval and Participant Identification

This study took a long time to get IRB approval because I need to get IRB approval from four different universities. The whole process took nearly four months, from April 2010 to early August 2010.

Before contacting each participating university, I submitted a proposal requesting expedited review to the Office of Research Integrity and Protections at my university. I received IRB approval within a month after the submission. Before IRB submission to each of the four participating universities, I went to their school websites and found the IRB requirements. Whenever the submission instruction was not clear, I emailed to the people who was in charge of IRB submission in that university and asked for clarifications. Almost each university had its own format and requirement for IRB submission, so I had to adjust to their requirements. For each IRB submission, I enclosed all IRB documents required by the participating university, my university's IRB approval letter, and the approved participant consent form. As soon as I received approval from the university, I submitted its IRB approval letter to my university's IRB office again, with an amendment request adding one more research site.

Right after I received my IRB approval from my university, in the middle of May 2010, we started participant recruitment from my university. At the early stage of recruitment, my dissertation advisor emailed the teacher education program coordinators at my university, explaining the nature of my study, and the criteria for participant recommendation, and asking them to help identify potential participants who are non-European Americans in their programs. At this stage, the only selection requirement was that potential participants should be non-European minority teacher candidates and/or non-

European international teacher candidates and they should have completed some field experiences. The reason for selecting participants who had completed some field experiences is that, I assumed, with field experiences, participants could offer me real examples of how they utilized their strengths in teaching and that many of their professional work samples might be related to their field experiences. There was no requirement for gender, nationality, and program level. Information such as the name of each potential participant, program name, race/ethnicity and email was sent to my dissertation advisor and he forwarded the information to me through email. I made a chart to copy down all recommended teacher candidates' names and emails to serve as a potential participant pool.

Similarly, as soon as I got IRB approval from each other university and my university's IRB amendment approval letter, my dissertation advisor emailed either the department chair or teacher education program coordinators that he knew as colleagues at those universities; he explained the nature of my study, the criteria for participant recommendation, and asked them to help identify possible teacher candidates from racial minority groups and/or ethnic minority groups in their programs. Again, at this stage, the only selection criterion was that potential participants should be minority teacher candidates and/or international teacher candidates who had completed some field experiences. There was no requirement for gender, nationality, ethnicity, and program level. Names of potential participants, their race/ethnicity, program names and emails were sent to my dissertation advisor and he forwarded the information to me through email. I continued adding their names and emails to my potential participant pool chart until I filled out all recommended participants' information from these four universities. Some information provided about potential participants was not accurate. For instance, it was not clear whether some potential

participants were international teacher candidates or minority teacher candidates. When some program coordinators sent the potential participant list through emails, they identified some participants as international teacher candidates. When I emailed the potential participants and asked their nationality, I realized that they were not international but minority teacher candidates. To recruit more international teacher candidates, my advisor contacted education professors that he knew in another university. We were told that one international teacher candidate graduated half a year ago and there was no way to contact him.

Altogether twenty-two racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates were recommended from the four universities. Recommended participants were diverse in terms of their race/ethnicity, their program level, their gender, their exposure to field placements, and their content areas.

As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argued, “maximum variation sampling taps into a wide range of qualities, attributes, situations, or incidents within the boundaries of the research problem” (p.123). Similarly, Maxwell (1998) suggested that purposeful sampling can be used to “capture adequately the heterogeneity in the population” (p. 87). I used the maximum variation sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) strategy to make purposeful selection of ten participants to make the participants group as diverse as possible. For instance, I decided that from the potential participant pool, I should contact the two potential participants who are males and the potential participant who is an international student, make sure to select at least one participant from each of the four universities and include participants from different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds.

Based on our discussion as to who to contact first, I emailed to each of ten potential participants a letter introducing myself and my study and attached my participant invitation

letter. Within a week, I started receiving replies from some potential participants. Seven of the ten invited participants expressed interest in participating in my study. The remaining three of the invited participants expressed interest after I emailed them a second time, a week from the first invitation email. Some potential participants had concerns about when and where the interviews could be conducted because they lived in different regions. Two potential participants wrote emails to me saying that they would leave for a teaching job in another city during that summer. One potential participant replied that she was at home for the summer vacation and could only return back to her university campus when the fall 2010 semester started. After emailing back and forth, eight participants agreed to participate in my study and another two participants who expressed initial interest declined to participate because they had to move to different cities for their new jobs.

Description of Participants

Participants of this study were eight teacher candidates from diverse racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds including three U.S.-born African Americans, one U.S.-born Korean American, one U.S.-born Persian American, one immigrant from Ecuador, one U.S.-born Latino American, and one China-born international teacher candidate. One participant was a summer 2010 graduate, and the rest were currently enrolled in various teacher education programs from the four different universities. Teacher preparation programs in which participants were enrolled included childhood education, foreign language education, secondary special education, mathematics education and inclusive education. Three participants were in elementary programs and five were in secondary programs. All participants had completed at least some field experiences ranging from early field placements to full-time student teaching.

The eight participants were Yalissa from Meadowland University; Miranda and Nathan from Smooth University; Jaeneisha and Xin from Stone University; and Aaron, Laleh and Tina from United University. Aaron and Nathan are males and the rest are females. Aaron, Laleh, Xin, and Yalissa were in graduate level programs and the other four were in undergraduate level programs. Information about all participants is found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Eight Participants' Demographic Information*

Institution	Participants	Programs	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Meadowland University	Yalissa	M.S. in Adolescent English Education and Special Education	African American	Female
Smooth University	Miranda	B.A. in Adolescent Foreign Language Education	Ecuadorian	Female
	Nathan	B.A. in Secondary Mathematics Education	Latino American	Male
Stone University	Jaeneisha	B.S. in Childhood Education	African American	Female
	Xin	M.S. in Childhood Education	Chinese	Female
United University	Aaron	M.S. in Secondary Special Education	African American	Male
	Laleh	M.S. in Mathematics and Secondary Mathematics Education	Persian American	Female
	Tina	B.S. in Inclusive Education and English Textual Studies	Korean American	Female

Note. All participants' names are pseudonyms, as are institutional names.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research study. Qualitative studies are particularly helpful when the research purpose is “understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with, and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences” (Maxwell, 1998, p. 75). Maxwell argued that “the perspectives on events and actions held by the people involved in them are not simply their accounts of these events and actions, to be assessed in terms of truth or falsity; they are *part of* the reality

that you are trying to understand” (p. 75). Qualitative research methodology fit my research purpose and helped capture what I wanted to explore for this study.

Given the research questions set for this study, two chief methods were used to collect data. They were semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interviews and document analysis. Document analysis was employed in connection with and in support of the interviews since the second interviews chiefly concentrated on the self-selected documents provided by the participants.

The Interview

The main method of this study was the semi-structured, individual, face-to-face interview. I was interested in how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates perceived their own strengths awareness and utilization. Participants were teacher candidates, rather than teacher educators, field placement host teachers or K-12 students. I believed the interview method could help answer my research question and sub-questions from the participants’ perspectives. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) argued that interviews can be used to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (p. 94). Interviews allow researchers to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 1980, p. 196). Patton addressed the interview method as follows:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other people’s perspective. (p. 196)

Similarly, Dexter (1970) summarized that the interview method is preferred “when it will get *better* data or *more* data or data *at less cost* than other tactics!” (p. 11). For this

study, I chose to use the interview method because I believe it was the best method to help me get rich data and develop a better understanding of the participants' thoughts. Although I also used document analysis, this served as a connection with or a support of the interview method. It is through interviewing how the participants interpreted these documents that I gained knowledge of where to pay attention and what these samples meant to the participants. I will explain this further in the next section.

According to Merriam (1998), there are mainly three types of interviews: the highly structured interview, the semi-structured interview and the unstructured interview. The semi-structured interview is in the middle of the interview structure continuum. Compared with the highly structured interview, the semi-structured interview is less structured. The order of the questions and the wording of the questions are not predetermined. Yet compared with the unstructured interview, the semi-structured interview is more structured and the largest part of the interview is guided by a group of questions. Therefore, the semi-structured interview makes it possible for researchers to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). In addition, the interactive nature of the semi-structured interviews allows participants to construct meanings and allows researchers to ask clarification of those meanings (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

I used individual interviews because I believe that each participant is a unique individual with unique experiences and perspectives. Interviewing the participant individually provided me with a valuable opportunity to focus on this individual only and listen to her/his experiences and points of view attentively. I also used face-to-face interviews rather than telephone interviews because interviewing people with racial and/or ethnic

minority identity requires special awareness (Marvasti, 2004), and face-to-face interviews allowed me to observe facial expressions and body language that provided additional important information to avoid misunderstanding (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2002).

I perceived the interviews as a form of social interaction between me and the participants. In this sense, the participants were not merely information/meaning givers and I was not solely an information/meaning receiver. The communication between the participants and I had some impact on how the participants perceived and interpreted their experiences and on how I interpreted what the participants told me. As Holstein and Gubrium argued (1995), during interviews knowledge and social meanings are not communicated but constructed. The argument made by Taylor and Bogdan (1998) further explained the dynamic and interactive meaning-making process mediated by the communication between the interviewer and the interviewee:

By virtue of being interviewed, people develop new insights and understandings of their experiences. They may not have thought about or reflected on events in which the interviewer is interested, and even if they have, they interpret things a bit differently each time. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) note that knowledge is always “knowledge-in-making.” From this perspective, informants are not merely reporters of experience, but narrators. They may tell their stories a bit differently each time and may construct the meanings of events and experiences a bit differently. (p. 99)

When I designed this study, the interview questions were not intended to be used to change or reinterpret the participants’ strengths. Rather, they were intended and used to guide the interview, facilitating the participants’ talking about themselves, their perceived strengths, and their use of their strengths in teaching. Although I did not intend to influence the participants’ perceptions and interpretation of their strengths, as will be evident in two participant portraits in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the interviews prompted two participants — Laleh and Yalissa — to think about themselves in ways they may not have

done before. I do not believe that the interview process caused them to develop new strengths, nor to use their strengths in any particular ways. However, the interview process seemed to have influenced them in ways that will be described in their portraits. It showed the influence of my interaction with the participants in the interviews.

Document Analysis

The second method used in this study was document analysis. Documents refer to “a wide range of written, visual, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (Merriam, 1998, p. 112). These can be public records, personal documents, physical material, and so on. Usually, documents exist before studies start and are a “ready-made source of data” (p. 112) and they are produced for various reasons other than for research.

For this study, the documents included participants’ self-selected coursework assignments, lesson plans, resumes, electronic portfolios, evaluation forms, graduation diplomas and awards, and so on. Most of the documents, such as coursework assignments, lesson plans, resume and electronic portfolios are personal documents. An evaluation form from a supervisor was treated as physical material, and a graduation diploma and award were put into the public records category. One distinct feature of the document analysis method used for this study is that all documents were selected by the participants themselves. Participants decided which documents among many existing ones would be relevant to this study and thus would be presented to me.

Merriam (1998) warned that personal documents can be subjective because the writers record what they think is important, but she held that “personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and view of the world” (p. 116) and they “reflect the participant’s perspective, which is what most qualitative research is

seeking” (p. 116). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) wrote that personal documents such as journals and notes can “provide insights into the construction of personal beliefs, identities, relationships, and communicative styles” (p. 117). After comparing the limitations and strengths of using documents, Merriam (1998) summarized this method as the following:

Thus, like any other source of data, documents have their limitations and their advantages. Because they are produced for reasons other than research, they may be fragmentary, they may not fit the conceptual framework of the research, and their authenticity may be difficult to determine. However, because they exist independent of a research agenda, they are nonreactive, that is, unaffected by the research process. They are a product of the context in which they were produced and therefore grounded in the real world. Finally, many documents or artifacts cost little or nothing and are often easy to obtain. (pp. 126-127)

Similarly, Bickman, Rog and Hedrick (2008) argued that the use of secondary existing data has both advantages and dangers. The advantages included lower costs and time savings; using existing data “may also entail managing a large amount of flawed and/or inappropriate data” (p. 27). Existing professional work samples provided by the participants helped me “reconstruct past events or ongoing processes that are not available for direct observation” (p. 117). Existing documents offered some evidence as to what extent in the past the participants were aware of and utilized their strengths in their professional studies.

According to Van Kammen and Stouthamer-Loeber (2008), factors such as the methods of data collection of a study may impact participants’ participation and retention rates. I held the opinion that asking for three new documents might have discouraged potential participants from participating in my study and/or forced them to withdraw from this study because it could have meant a lot of extra time and energy that they would have had to devote to participating. So it was more reasonable and practical for me to ask for their existing documents than to ask participants to provide me with new documents generated specifically for my request.

At the end of the first interview, I asked the participants to bring to the second interviews at least three professional work samples that they believed would describe, explain, and reflect their strengths and their use of strengths in their programs. I emphasized that there would be no judgment of their self-selected professional work samples. I also told them that I wanted second interview topics to focus on the meaning of the self-selected work samples as interpreted by them. With each participant's approval, most self-selected professional work samples were collected at the end of the second interview, with a few exceptions. For example, some samples were the graduation diploma and award in their original forms. I could not take them home. So I took photos of them at the end of the second interview and I asked the participants to explain to me what was exactly written there if they were written in another language. Some participants emailed me within a week their samples in electronic form when it was not convenient to provide me with hard copies during the second interviews.

Bickman, et al. (2008) suggested that in order to assess the quality of the existing documents, one strategy that researchers should do is to interview the data collectors and others experienced with the data. For this study, all professional work samples existed before I contacted my participants and they carried different academic and professional purposes. For instance, some samples were written as course assignments to fulfill the participants' specific course requirements in their program studies, some were written for job searching, and some were written as an evaluation from a professional. Through interviews, I also discussed these professional work samples with their writers/owners, my participants. Interviewing how my participants perceived these documents helped reduce the potential limits of this method and helped me better understand the existing documents.

The combination of documents with other data collection methods was also advised by researchers such as Taylor and Bogdan, and Lindlof and Taylor. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) held that “by themselves, documents are usually of limited significance. But when they are related to other evidence, they have much to offer the qualitative analyst” (p. 117). I treated my participants’ professional work samples as data to illustrate and substantiate their descriptions and assertions during the interviews. During the second interview I asked the participants to explain to me what the self-selected professional work samples were, what specific strengths and strengths utilization that they believed were reflected in their work samples, and why they selected these samples. Therefore, the interview method and document analysis method mingled together.

A Note to Participant Observation

For this study, I chose not to use participant observation for three reasons. First, being a researcher, I tried to avoid my weakness and utilize what I can do better. As a Chinese woman whose native language is not English and as a person who needs time to acclimate to new settings, I learned from previous research experience that I would be overwhelmed if I was put into a new environment where there are lots of interactions and information going on. I purposefully chose individual interviews so that I could concentrate on one participant at a time instead of doing observations in classrooms. Second, my participants were at different stages in their programs and from different regions of the state so it was impossible for me to get the chance to observe all of them in the field. For example, one participant was in her first semester of the program; one participant had almost finished his student teaching; and one participant did not take any education courses for one semester and focused on courses in her second major. Third, I hold the belief that what I might have observed may not

reflect the actual strengths application of the participants because observation as a method can influence participants' behaviors. Since this study aimed to explore participants' perspectives about their own strengths and strengths application, it may not be effective to observe them.

Procedures for Data Collection

Sources of data for this study were primarily the two interview transcripts and work samples from each participant. Supplementary data included emails between participants and me, and my brief notes taken during the interviews. The two individual interviews with each participant lasted for about one hour and half each. For potential participants who agreed to participate in my study, I emailed each of them individually and we set up a time and place for our first meeting.

I took the advice of Van Kammen and Stouthamer-Loeber (1998) that interview locations should be in offices rather than in participants' homes because offices would have less interference from telephone calls, televisions and people, provide more lighting and space, and allow participants to engage in more appropriate behaviors. I politely suggested in the emails that each participant and I meet in her/his school library, and each participant agreed. I drove to the different universities where participants were enrolled for the interviews. All interviews were conducted in a quiet room in participants' university libraries. It did not take us long to find a quiet room in the library because our interview dates were all on weekends and school libraries did not have many people at those time.

During the first meeting, all participants read and signed the participant consent forms. Before the end of the first interview, we set up our second interview time. We also communicated by email if we had to reset the interview time. I managed to finish all the first

interviews with all participants before I started the second interviews. It took me nearly four months, from July 2010 to October 2010, to finish two interviews with each participant.

During the first interviews, with participants' permission, I used a digital recorder to record the conversation. I interviewed each participant according to my interview protocol. I informed each participant of the three parts of the first interview: (1) factual information about her/him, (2) her/his interpretation of personal experiences in teacher education programs and field placements, and (3) her/his perception and experiences of the strengths that she/he brings to teacher education programs and field placements. Depending upon each participant's response and the flow of the conversation, I asked some variation questions specific to each participant. Although the order may vary, my first interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What are some of your hobbies and interests?
3. What field experiences do you have and how do you perceive your overall program experience?
4. What are some of your accomplishments/success so far?
5. What do you think your unique strengths are as a racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidate?
6. What are some of your strengths and how do you make sense of your strengths? Give me some examples of your strengths application in teaching.
7. How do you feel your program perceive your strengths?
8. Where do you think your strengths come from?
9. What do you think fosters your strengths awareness and application?

10. What do you think discourages your strengths awareness and application?

11. How do people in your culture usually respond to the strengths question?

When I returned home from the first interviews, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and typed all interview transcripts. I transcribed all interviews by myself because I believed that “transcribing can serve as a portal to the process of data analysis” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 205). I changed all names of students, teachers, and schools that were mentioned by the participants to pseudonyms. Also based on the first letter of the participants’ given names, I assigned them each a pseudonym. I saved interview transcripts in individual document files under each participant’s pseudonym in my password-protected laptop. Three copies of each interview transcript were also printed for back up and kept in an individual folder in a cabinet where each participant’s data were kept and accessible to only me. I read through all first interview transcripts, formed and noted questions that needed further exploration or clarification from specific participants at the second interviews.

By the end of the first interview, I told each participant that I expected one month between our first and second interview so that she/he would have more time to select professional work samples. For most participants, there was about a month between the first and second interview. But I had one participant who was too busy with her student teaching to be interviewed, so the second interview was conducted two months later. I had another participant who had to leave for his new job in another city so I had to finish two interviews with him within one month.

For the second interview, again, with participants’ permission, I used a digital recorder to record the conversation. At the beginning of the interview, I told each participant that there are two parts of this interview: (1) clarifying some puzzles related to the first

interview, and (2) sharing self-selected professional work samples that she/he brought. I probed the participants by listening to their responses carefully and asking specific questions that were related to each participant and her/his mentioned contexts. Based on my interview protocol, I asked participants all of the following questions or variations, and the question order varied:

1. What are some of the strengths that you may want to add?
2. Since our first interview, have you ever found more opportunities to utilize your strengths? What are some of the other related experiences?
3. Please tell me what you bring here today.
4. What strengths do you think are reflected through your samples?
5. Why do you think these samples reflect your strengths and strengths application?
6. How do you perceive yourself and your own strengths?

When participants got stuck by my questions and paused for long or when they used body gestures, I took note of this. With all participants' approval, at the end of the second interviews, I collected their self-selected professional work samples. Some participants chose to email me an electronic copy of their professional samples and I received their emails within a week. For artifacts such as the certificates and awards with big frames, I just took photos of them with a digital camera.

When I returned home from the second interviews, again, I transcribed the interviews verbatim. I changed all mentioned names to pseudonyms and typed all interview transcripts. I saved them in individual document files under each participant's pseudonym in my password-protected laptop. Three copies of the second interview transcripts, self-selected professional samples and emails between participants and me were printed and copied for

back up and kept in an individual folder in a cabinet where each participant's data were kept and accessible to only me. I edited the first transcripts according to the participants' clarification at the beginning of second interviews.

After I finished transcribing the two interviews for each participant, I emailed them to each participant and asked them to check it for accuracy and completion. No participant emailed me back with any changes for the interview transcripts.

Procedures for Data Analysis

When I analyzed the data, I took Bogdan and Biklen's suggestion to "leave the more formal analysis until most of the data are in" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 158), although I did some preliminary data analysis after each interview.

The unit of analysis for this study is each individual participant. I believe that representing my participants through individual portraits helps readers perceive them as whole persons and it is also a means to do comparison analysis later. Based upon document analysis and analysis of two interview transcripts of each participant, I wrote a portrait of each participant. The participant portraits were structured according to the research question and sub-questions.

Within each individual participant portrait, the structure is as follows: section one provided a general description of the participant; section two covered the self-perceived strengths identified by the participant; section three provided the professional samples that the participant identified as evidence of or in connection with her/his strengths utilization; section four discussed the participant's understanding of the connection between self-selected professional samples and self-identified strengths, followed by my observations and

comments; and section five explored circumstances influencing how the participant was aware of and capitalized on her/his strengths.

Before I started writing each participant portrait, I read through the interview transcripts. I summarized the main content in each paragraph by assigning it a code on the left/right margin next to that paragraph. Some paragraphs were assigned more than one code because of the expressed multiple meanings. After I assigned codes to all paragraphs, I put together all paragraphs that had the same code. I shortened the paragraphs under the same code by reducing repeated information. Then based on the newly-organized interview transcripts, I wrote a 2-3 page overall description of that participant. The codes included self description, program name, program/field experiences, accomplishments, reasons for choosing teaching, hobbies and interests, self-perceived strengths, examples of use of strengths, program/field's reactions toward self-perceived strengths, circumstances that contributed to and/or hindered strengths awareness and utilization, professional work samples, and participant-identified connections between strengths and professional work samples.

After going through the interview transcripts and organizing all the strengths together, I named the strengths according to the words directly from the participant during the interviews and put them in section two of the portrait. Then I moved to the preparation of section three of the portrait – professional work samples. The data of this section came from both interview transcripts and professional samples. I analyzed the participant's professional work samples with interview transcripts, especially second interview transcripts, because the second interview focused on the participant's perspectives of what strengths and strengths application were reflected through these samples and why she/he believed this to be so.

On the left/right margin of the professional samples, I listed the names of the represented strengths that were communicated to me by the participant during the interviews. Then I put together the interview transcripts and the professional samples that discussed the same strength. I reduced the huge amount of data by deleting repeated and unnecessary words. The analysis of the professional work samples was consistent with the participants' comments of specific strengths during the interviews. In other words, it is not that I read the collected documents and came up with my own interpretation. Instead, document analysis mainly depended upon the participants' perspectives and explanation of their self-selected documents in the second interview transcripts. Section four of the portrait arose from my understanding of how the participants perceived the relationship between their professional work samples and the specific strengths. Section five of the portrait was based on the interview transcripts and my interpretations.

After I wrote all individual participant portraits, I emailed each participant a letter asking for member checks. My written portrait of her or him was emailed to each participant. I used member checks because it is an important way of "ruling out the possibility of you misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants say and the perspective they have on what is going on" (Maxwell, 1998, p. 94). Once I received feedback, I revised the portraits according to the participants' advice. Four participants provided me with some feedback. For example, Xin was concerned that the fake name that I originally assigned to her sounded very similar to her real name and suggested that I use another name. Yalissa clarified some comparisons that she made during the interview with clearer words after reading her portrait. Tina replied that I did a decent job in representing her. My advisor's feedback helped a lot as well because I was pushed to explain things more clearly.

After finishing participant portraits revisions, I completed the cross-case analysis. I compared the themes from data analysis of each participant portrait across all portraits and looked for common and different reports. I will discuss these findings in Chapter Six.

Subjectivity

As Bogdan and Biklen (1998) argued, a person's own biography would have an impact on defining the thrust of her or his work and "particular topics, settings, or people are of interest because they have touched the researcher's life in some important way" (p. 51). By conducting a literature review on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, I noticed that most researchers interested in this research area are either international teacher candidates or minority teacher candidates. This is consistent with Maxwell's suggestion that "using this (your own) experience in your research can provide you with a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (Maxwell, 1998, p. 78). This is particularly true for researchers who wrote their dissertations or theses in this research area (e.g., Lu, 2005; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Oling Ottoo, 2005).

Strong emotions and passions were involved and insider-inquirers' life experiences and research experiences were integrated. Many of these researchers included their own experiences in their dissertations and discussed eagerly how their lived experiences inspired them to start and carry out their research. Some even counted themselves as one of the participants, as in Lu's (2005) study of non-native English speakers' experience of becoming English as Second Language teachers in the U.S.

Lu (2005) confessed in her dissertation, "as an insider in this study, my own experiences and narratives are an important source to the study" (p. 30). Lu also explained how her shared experiences (both struggles and hopes) helped her understand her participants

and how critical self-analysis and self-reflection prepared her for a better understanding of herself. In another example, Nguyen-Lam (2002) argued in her dissertation, “The literature review and researcher’s personal lenses provide the basis for the study’s design, content, format and structure” (p. 54). Nguyen (2004) also realized the integral nature of her previous life experience as a Vietnamese immigrant and her research interest in Vietnamese American teacher candidates.

Researchers (Lu, 2005; Mittal, 2002; Nguyen, 2004; Ogawa, 2006) have noted the advantages of how their insider-inquirer identity helped them build up good rapport with participants. For instance, Lu (2005) reported that her insider identity and similar schooling experiences made participants open-minded to share stories and perspectives with her during interviews. Researchers (Nguyen, 2004; Ogawa, 2006) also noticed that the use of shared native language and shared cultures expedited the interview process and therefore researchers had a more accurate presentation and interpretation of their participants. As Nguyen (2004) admitted, “had I not had facility in the Vietnamese language and understanding of the cultural values these teachers (foreign-born Vietnamese American teacher candidates) shared, these ‘details and specifics’ might have been overlooked” (p. 90). She concluded that being familiar with the Vietnamese language and culture made her confident in her ability to view and interpret her participants more accurately than a mainstream researcher.

Compared with insider-inquirers who passionately integrate their personal stories with their studies on racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, outsider-inquirers are more likely to be motivated by their social-justice responsibilities and the research gap found through reviewing literature, as in the case of Lorenzo (1997) who investigated minority teacher candidates’ experiences in teacher preparation programs. As a European American

researcher, although Lorenzo cared about minority teacher candidates and offered channels for them to voice their experiences during interviews, she acknowledged her possible ignorance of participants' concerns and reflected on occasions when participants were reluctant to share with her because of her outsider status generated by her identity and experience:

...there were times, however, when I felt that some participants did not open up to me in the same way that they might have to someone who had shared similar cultural experiences... (p. 210)

...as I listened to the experiences of minority pre-service teachers from my point of view as an outsider, there were moments when I was plagued by self-doubt. I may have misinterpreted an important word or phrase or bypassed a major issue that a researcher within the cultural minority group may have seen as worthy of note. (p. 211)

I believe that insiders are deeply concerned about settings and life around them, and their unique experiences and thoughtful reflections push insiders to make sense of their own experiences. It is often true that insiders pay attention to phenomena or people that are seldom questioned or investigated by outsider-inquirers who have no related personal experience or connection. Explorations then expand to people who have shared experiences and identities, transfer personal experiences to a larger social picture and motivate them to advocate for their groups.

As researchers are the primary instrument in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998), I believe that my minority identity helped me build rapport and trust with my participants more easily than if I did not have this identity. After I emailed potential participants and introduced myself and my research, most of the time those who replied showed their interest in my research topic. For example, one participant, Yalissa, wrote to me, "Your dissertation study sounds interesting. I hope I am able to help because this is a topic 'near and dear' to my

heart” (*Yalissa, personal communication*). Participant Jaeneisha replied, “I think the work you are doing is different and is crucial and students of color need to be recognized” (*Jaeneisha, personal communication*). Participant Tina replied, “I think your dissertation topic is extremely interesting and I would be honored to help you by participating” (*Tina, personal communication*). During the interview, participant Miranda said,

I want to know more about you and you are a minority. As minorities we need to support each other. So I am happy you are going to teach teachers. You are doing something important for the teachers. I am motivated to participate. Why not help each other? For me, it is also learning and you help me understand many things. I think studying minorities is important because the population is growing. We have to tell them about ourselves. (*Miranda, Interview #2, p. 6*)

Also when I met each participant, she/he seemed to be comfortable with our interviews. Although I do not belong to each participant’s specific racial and/or ethnic group, I felt that my minority identity made them perceive me as “we” and they seemed to be willing to participate in this study and share their perspectives and experience with me sincerely. This is evident in the example of Miranda. In response to my question *How do people in Ecuadorian culture usually respond to the strengths question?* Miranda said, “If they do not know the person, they won’t say anything” (*Interview #1, p. 3*). Before the interviews I had never met Miranda. I assume because both of us share minority identity, she was willing to participate and talk about herself in front of a stranger like me.

As Van Kammen and Stouthamer-Loeber (1998) suggested, certain attributes of the interviewers, such as race, may impact participant retention rates. I believe this is true for my case. I believe that my racial and ethnic minority identity helped me retain participants in my study. No participant withdrew from the study and that commitment is worth mentioning because by the time they participated, all participants were busy with other different kinds of

responsibilities such as taking courses, participating in field placements, looking after their children, and moving to a new place to start a new life.

When I interviewed Xin, the Chinese student, I used Chinese to conduct the interviews. I believe that speaking Chinese made us feel connected and it is natural for two Chinese people to have conversations in Chinese. In addition, I felt that I had a better understanding of her when I talked with her in our shared native language. For other participants who do not share the same culture with me, I did ask them about their culture and schooling experiences. For example, I was not sure whether participants' responses to my research questions were influenced by their cultures, so I asked each of them about the common reaction of people in their culture to the question: What are some of your strengths?

Our identities are multilayered and most often we are insiders in one aspect and outsiders in another aspect. "No one is simply or solely an 'insider' or 'outsider' in any particular inquiry situation" (Bartunek & Louis, 1996, p. 67). Being an African American woman studying African American students' meanings of success, Fordham (1996) found herself in the dilemma of "both estrangement and identification" (p. 36). Because of her racial identity as an African American, she looked like an insider in the eyes of her African American participants. Yet, because of her different educational background and social status, she was an outsider-inquirer at the same time.

I also noticed possible impacts of my researcher identity on participants. Although I told my participants that I was a Chinese student studying in a doctoral program, some seemed to perceive me not only as a minority but also as a researcher or to see me as someone who had connections with stake-holders in their departments. For example, one participant, Nathan, told me that one reason for his participation was to see what a formal

interview with a researcher looked like, and before our first interview he even emailed and asked me about any dress code to which he needed to pay particular attention. Another participant, Miranda, told me that her department chair might be glad to see her participation in this study, although I explained to her that her department chair would not know whether any of the recommended potential participants would actually participate in this study or not.

To avoid insider bias and control personal feelings, some researchers such as Mittal (2002) wrote reflective journal entries, shared interview transcripts and summaries with participants and asked for their feedback. Some researchers such as Lu (2005) were cautious of the potential affective influences of speaking too much about oneself on participants and instead offered to provide more information at the end of the research. One big challenge that insider-inquirers face seems to be able to take fresh perspectives at familiar experiences.

For this study, I took the following steps to reduce my potential impacts on how participants responded to my research questions and how my feelings toward participants might influence data analysis. For example, although I introduced myself and explained why I was interested in this study, I did not tell too much about myself. When some participants showed their particular interest in my life as an international student in the U.S., I made efforts to share my stories with them at the end of the interviews. In addition, when I was not sure how to balance my feelings of empathy toward some of my participants and my role as a researcher, I shared my thoughts with my committee members. By talking with them, I realized that I needed to keep some distance from participants, although sometimes participants seemed to request my help or advice.

Chapter Four – Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates with Bilingual/Bicultural Backgrounds

In Chapter Four, I present the portraits of five of the eight participants in this study: Laleh, a Persian American female teacher candidate; Miranda, an Ecuadorian American female teacher candidate; Nathan, a Latino American male teacher candidate; Tina, a Korean American female teacher candidate; and Xin, an international female teacher candidate from China. What these participants have in common is that they all are bilingual and bicultural and they are proud of their linguistic and cultural strengths. All of them retain a strong connection to their home languages and cultures. In this study, the word *bilingual* is defined as possessing and using two languages with equal or nearly equal fluency. Although I acknowledge that some racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates speak a dialect or non-standard English, for this study, the two languages are not non-standard English and standard English, but two distinct languages such as English and Spanish, or English and Chinese, or English and Korean.

I present each participant portrait in the same structure, beginning with a general narrative about the participant. Then I list the specific strengths that the participant identified. Subsequently, I display the self-selected samples that the participant believed represented, explained or interpreted her/his strengths awareness and utilization. I combine analysis findings from both interview data and document data as evidence. I then present the participant's interpretation of the connection between her/his self-identified strengths and samples as well as my interpretation. I conclude each portrait with the summary of the

circumstances that were suggested by each participant that would possibly impact her/his strengths awareness and utilization with some cases followed by my interpretation.

Laleh

Laleh is a Persian American in her early 30's. She is tall and has a very soft voice. She used "outgoing, love family, like meeting new people, don't like to be alone, think positively, and energetic" (*Interview #2, p. 10*) to describe herself. She reported that she is "happy, energetic and positive" (*Interview #1, p. 5*) in the eyes of her friends and family members.

Laleh was born in United City, where her parents met and married when both of them were international students studying at United University. Laleh moved to Iran with her parents before kindergarten. She attended elementary and secondary schools and a two-year college there. After working for three years as a high school teacher in Iran, she decided to move back to the United States because United City is her hometown and she always felt like "I belong here" (*Interview #1, p. 2*). Laleh also wanted to get more education and she saw more opportunities for her in the United States.

Laleh is a M.S. student dual majoring in mathematics and secondary mathematics education at United University. Before starting her graduate study at United University in year 2006, she spent about five years adjusting and studying at three colleges and universities in different states in the U.S. She finally got her B.S. degree in mathematics and is very proud that she could study in the same university as her parents did years ago.

When I interviewed Laleh, she was going to give birth within a couple of months. She had finished all course requirements and only needed to complete her full-time student teaching in spring 2011 to graduate. So far, she had two observations in two local secondary schools and one part-time student teaching experience in a local urban middle school. At United University, Laleh served as a teaching assistant in the mathematics department.

Laleh perceived writing and reading English as her biggest challenge in the program and she was keenly aware that it took her much longer time to write a lesson plan and check grammar and spelling than her American classmates. Although being treated by her students and peers as a foreigner due to her accent, she was comfortable with it. She speaks Persian at home and is very fluent in Persian. She is very proud of her bilingual and bicultural assets.

Coming from Iran to the U.S. is the biggest success that Laleh takes pride in, because “I made a move that nobody in my family could make” (*Interview #1, p. 8*) and that action also changed the life of her sister. Her sister came to the U.S. after Laleh moved to the U.S. and she is studying to be a dentist. Laleh is also proud of finishing her M.S. degree in mathematics at United University because she never thought she could make it. Laleh attributed her successes to her positive attitude toward difficulties and the support she got from her husband and her parents.

During her spare time, Laleh enjoyed painting. She would bring her brushes to her office and paint for relaxation. After graduation, Laleh planned to teach in the U.S. because she likes the friendly relationship between students and teachers in the U.S. more. Currently, Laleh is a part-time teaching faculty in a state university.

Laleh’s Self-Perceived Strengths

Laleh seemed shy and modest when talking about her strengths. When I asked her whether she was aware of her strengths that she brought to education, she admitted, “Not really, I have never thought about it” (*Interview #1, p. 9*). Yet as I probed her thoughts and as our conversation moved on, Laleh was able to tell her strengths clearly.

I really enjoy teaching. Throughout the interviews, I could feel Laleh’s passion about teaching and her students. It is very encouraging to hear the experiences of how she

worked hard to achieve her ultimate goal – becoming a teacher. Although majoring in computer software and engineering at college in Iran, Laleh decided to teach. After being prepared by a short alternative teacher program, she became a teacher and taught mathematics and physics in Iran for three years. When she moved to the U.S., she started education in a variety of higher institutions and finally was admitted by the mathematics education program at United University. Looking back, Laleh feels all her studying experiences are worthwhile because she will be a teacher. Laleh shared her perspective of teaching and the reasons of choosing teaching as a profession:

I really really enjoy teaching and I really like working with kids and getting to know them. To me, I admire my teachers. When someone taught me something, I always was so grateful to them. They changed my life. I did not know years ago, but I now know it. So teachers can change a person's path and life. That is what I really like. Another reason that inspired me to teach is my dad who is a professor and he teaches chemistry. When we were little and we had no babysitter, my dad would take us to the classrooms. I really like it, and how teachers and students interacted and how they respected him. (*Interview #1, p. 3*)

Laleh wants to become a teacher because she likes working with students, because she values the profound impact that teachers may have on a student's future life and because she is influenced by her father who is a teacher and her teachers who changed her life. Her belief in education inspired her to work hard to become a teacher.

I know what international students are going through. Among all her field experiences, Laleh identified her part-time student teaching experience in an urban middle school where 80% of the students were English as Second Language students as her best experience because “students are from different cultures and that makes them more open-minded and they accept other cultures and other religions” (*Interview #1, p. 6*).

During our conversation, I felt Laleh's strong love and sympathy toward international students. When discussing international students in her practicum, she sounded very familiar

with them and she expressed confidence in them. For example, she knew that most of her students have already learned mathematics content in their home countries, although their English needed to be improved. Laleh shared that her similar experience as a child moving from the U.S. to Iran helped her make more personal connection with and better understand these international students:

I was comfortable with these students. I can connect with international students better because we kind of share the same background. I know the difficulties that they have with the language. When I went to Iran, it was the similar situation for me. When I entered first grade, I was lost. I did not speak the language and I could not understand the teacher and the students around me. It was very hard for me and I could not connect to them too. The only classes I liked when I was in first grade were gym class and math class because I knew numbers and in the gym class I did not have to speak much. I kind of knew what they were going through. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

Because Laleh went through what international students experienced at school, she was aware of the difficulties that students have with the languages, their loneliness, and their confusion caused by their teachers' colloquial phrases. So when she prepared her lesson plans, she purposefully offered English as Second Language students such adaptations as providing them with a worksheet and avoiding using colloquial phrases to make their learning easier and more meaningful. She believes that her similar schooling experience helped her reach these students in a more personalized way:

The worksheet that I had to make is an adjustment for the ESL students because they, from my own experience, I know they need it and that is why I made the worksheet and I handed it out. Everything we did in the class I made a copy for them because I did not want them to sit down and copy down sentences without knowing what they are writing. Because when I went to school, I did not know much Persian language as well. So I wrote down everything my teacher wrote on my note and I would go home asking my tutor and she would explain what that meant. So I did not want them to spend time on writing stuff and I want them to concentrate... If the teacher uses the slangs in the language, or even like gestures, American students would understand what it means, but not for international students. So I tried to use the right gestures and try not to use slang in the classroom. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

Apparently, Laleh tried to anticipate and compare these international students' experiences in the U.S. with her own unhappy experiences as an international student back in Iran. She made conscious efforts to accommodate these students because of her understanding of them. To her, helping students understand and make meaning out of the content is important.

I try to make personal connections with all students. As a minority teacher candidate, Laleh showed her sensitivity to the different family environments where her international students came from. Because of her schooling and living experiences in both Iran and the United States, she believes that she could connect with diverse student populations better than her Caucasian American colleagues and help students more effectively. She believes that “if you do not experience it yourself, you are going to have a hard time connecting with students” (*Interview # 2, p. 4*). Below, she explained by giving an example that she experienced as a teaching assistant at United University:

Here in the U.S., every year there are many people coming to the U.S. from all over the world. You are going to get more students that are international in your classes. Or they moved here when they were little. They do not have accent but they are still living in a household that parents are from a different culture and background. So I think I can better understand and connect them with the culture. For example, I have a student from India and her grades were so important to her. I know because Indian culture and Iranian culture are kind of close together. She was worried and had her dad call me and ask “how my daughter was doing?” For me it is normal because I know how important grades and education are back in Iran. My parents, I am thirty-two, and my dad still asked me, “How is school going? When are you going to get your Ph.D.?” They are very involved in our education. When I talked with my colleagues, they were surprised that her father called me but it was not surprising to me at all. (*Interview #2, p. 5*)

Laleh also tried hard to make a connection with all American students. She reported that knowing students' names is the first step that she usually does to connect with students:

I think the first thing I do is to make sure that I know my students' names by the second or the third day. When I have their names, I will write a description by their names. For instance, when I wrote Jeremy, I wrote in Persian that “he has blond hair.” Next time I see him I know he is Jeremy and he has blond hair. Or “Harry is a

gentleman.” He looks like a gentleman with good gestures. Because this is how I felt. When I was at school, it is very important for my teacher to know my name. I thought she is noticing me and I could connect with the teacher better. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

It is evident that again Laleh tried to make a connection between her experience as a student in Iran and her students’ experience in her class. Her personal schooling experience seemed to have a huge impact on how she as a teacher perceives and approaches students. Laleh shared with me that she made connections with students also by asking questions such as “What courses do you plan to take next semester?” and “Do you plan to go to the basketball games this weekend?” (*Interview #2, p. 4*) To her, it is very important to bring some life to mathematics lessons and to connect with her students.

I am open-minded and I never judge students too quickly. Laleh expressed her surprise when her host teacher in the practicum told her that 80% of the students in that school were labeled as children with special needs. Her opinion is that “these are just kids and you should not expect the boys just to sit quietly” and that “it is easier to give labels” (*Interview #2, p. 9*). She was shocked to know from her professors that many students in the U.S. have a folder about their disabilities, because in Iran, she never heard about learning disability, reading and writing problems, ADHD, and so on. But that doesn’t mean she knows nothing about children with special needs.

When the war between Iran and Iraq broke out, Laleh was in middle school and she personally experienced the war. The war left lots of children in Iran with physical disabilities and psychological wounds, and “opened a different door for me” (*Interview #2, p. 9*). During our interview she shared the impacts of the war experience on her and her teaching:

The war happened between when I was in middle and high school. It affected everybody’s life. Even though you won’t see students with real physical disabilities in the class, you had students who were depressed because they lost their whole families in the war and you had to deal with these students. The reason I think I can

communicate with students better is because that opened a different door for me. I do not judge students too quick now. When students choose not to respond or misbehave or just sit in the back quietly, that does not tell me that she/he does not like me or math class. I am more open-minded and I think there are stories behind that student. There are fourteen ESL kids and kids with special needs in the classroom in my practicum. They were constantly under great pressure. (*Interview #2, p. 8*)

Laleh stressed that whenever she had a student sitting quietly in the classroom, it did not make her ignore him or her; instead, she believes there is a story behind the behavior and she would try to find out why the student behaved that way. She is very proud that most of the time she would talk with the students and help make some positive change. During our interview, she gave me one example:

For this year's summer program I had one high school student from New York City; she is the oldest girl in the family and she is very close to her mom. Her parents got divorced so she is close to her mom. She is so quiet in the class. Once I started talking to her, she is open to me, "I miss my mom. I do not want to live here." I told her, "get on a train and go back to see your mom and then come back." She is getting better now. (*Interview #2, p. 10*)

This example illustrated Laleh's efforts to find reasons behind her students' behaviors in order to understand them better and help them out accordingly.

I teach my students different ways to solve math problems. From time to time during our interviews, Laleh would compare education in Iran and education in the U.S. Laleh believes that she brought to her college students different ways of thinking to solve mathematics problems. It seemed that her capacity to provide students with different problem solving methods was closely linked to her education experiences in Iran. When she was a student in Iran, she had to figure out different strategies to solve mathematics problems on her own. Laleh admitted that being left alone to struggle with challenging math problems did help improve her mathematical problem solving skills but it also made her frustrated and tired of mathematics. She elaborated on her thoughts:

In Iran they teach differently. They would give us one formula to use and they would give us homework that was close to what they taught, but they would not show us all the ways to solve the problem. So I had to do a lot of studying on my own...I have made the math class easier for my students to learn because when I went to school, like I said, the materials were so difficult, so I had such a hard time finding the ways to solve the homework problem. I gave my students as many examples as I can. I do not let them go until it is clear to them. I think they appreciate it. Because of my math background, I know how hard it is for students to struggle with while I can help them in the classroom first and then ask challenging questions. (*Interview #1, p. 10*)

I think Laleh's efforts to bring a variety of mathematical strategies into her class to make mathematics learning easier showed her preference to relating to students. Because she experienced boring and difficult mathematical learning as a student, she tried to bring more dynamic elements into her own teaching. I looked at some of Laleh's students' online evaluations of her that she told me to review and noted that most students mentioned that she is "the best teacher ever", "the easiest math class that she made for us", and "she provides us with different methods to solve math problems". These comments supported her arguments in the interviews.

Laleh's Self-Selected Professional Samples

The self-selected professional work samples that Laleh shared include a long mathematics lesson plan and a long mathematics unit and lesson plans. Her students were 27 seventh graders in a local urban middle school where Laleh did her practicum. Without listening to Laleh's explanation of why she chose these lesson plans during our second interview, I would have had no idea what specific strengths were reflected and why she shared these samples. Laleh reported that her professional work samples showed her adaption to meet the needs of diverse learners, especially ESL students and students with disabilities.

A mathematics lesson plan on the surface area of cylinder. This sample is a mathematics lesson plan for seventh graders and the overall theme of this 21-page long

lesson plan is finding the surface area of a cylinder. There are eight sections including the description of students, the subject, the concept maps, the lesson, the assessment, the reflection, the references, and professor's assessment. Required by the course, Laleh had to keep three target learners in mind when she planned the lesson and did some differentiated instruction according to their specific needs. In this inclusive classroom where "many students are ESL students from different culture and different backgrounds" (*Interview #2, p. 5*), Laleh chose two ESL students and one English native-speaker with a learning disability as her target students. In her lesson plan, she mentioned that she would use visuals, hands-on activity, and real-life examples to help all her students to learn, especially those ESL students and students with a learning disability. For example, in responding to the question *how could I teach the lesson*, she wrote down her plan procedures as:

I will begin by having the students share with me what a cylinder looks like and where they have seen one. I will draw the pictures of the examples that they are giving me on the blackboard. Since this is a class with ESL students, I want to make sure that they understand the word. After that, I will give students a few cylinders that I brought with me, for example canned foods. Then I will ask students to tell me the shapes that have made the cylinders...I will take a can opener and open the can's top and bottom to show them the two circles, and I will put the pieces on the board and create a net for the can. Students should see clearly what the shapes are by now. I will then give students grid papers, scissors, rulers, and a compass... (*Personal lesson plan of surface of cylinder, p. 8*)

This plan showed her concerns about the ESL students in her class and some teaching strategies that she prepared to use to address their needs. In responding to the question *how will I address the strengths of the targeted students*, she continued her elaboration:

The strengths of the target students will be addressed by visualizing the lesson for them. For the three targeted students that I have, they are having hard time with reading and writing, therefore, I will try to make the lesson more visualized and connected to the real life examples. I will differentiate the lesson by highlighting and repeating the important words and making students use them properly. Since the lesson is hands-on, they will be able to connect with the lesson and eventually to connect math to real life examples. By putting students in groups, they will be able to

balance their abilities, for example, if one student is not a good writer, he/she might be good at math and they can help more with the calculations. I will also give students that option of drawing and including pictures if they want. (*Personal lesson plan of surface of cylinder, p. 9*)

As Laleh reflected, students would have a hard time if she simply planned and implemented the lesson by providing them with the mathematical formula and asking them to find the cylinder area. Because of her sensitivity to the unique language and cultural needs and her awareness of the abilities of those ESL students, she tried to entertain them and make the lesson fun by using concrete and real-life experiences for scaffolding, and by using strategies such as visualization, word repetition, group work, and various expressions of understanding. This matches with what she shared with me during our second interview:

Most students are from different countries. I had to do adaptations for the learners. Everything that I teach had to be more visualized so they would understand better. For example, one day we used protractors, the tools to find the degrees. If I say protractor, the American students know what I talk about, but not for the international students. So I have to make the lesson adapted and more visualized so they could understand the lesson better. For my international students, they know how to use the protractor, but they did not know what it is. If you showed them, they would say, "Ok, I have seen it before and I knew it. I used it before."... Instructional strategy that I put into the lessons to make it more interesting was using common examples that they see. So I told them, "You flip a coin before you decide going to grandparents' house or not. Or "You flip a coin to see whether you want to have pancake for your morning breakfast or cereal." I try to use examples that students can connect to. (*Interview #2, p. 5*)

Mathematics unit and lesson plans. The 45-page long mathematics unit and lesson plans is composed of 11 mini lesson plans and some homework and handouts. The whole unit deals with data analysis and probability. During our second interview, Laleh referred to some pages of this unit and lesson plans and shared with me why she selected it. If she had not guided me through some pages, it could have been difficult for me to tell her strengths from this mathematics unit and lesson plans. Therefore, when I presented this sample, I just went to these pages as evidence of her strengths and analyzed them accordingly.

According to Laleh, she shared this unit plan and lesson plans because it showed her adaption to meet the needs of her diverse students. Her strengths include being aware of diverse learners when planning this unit and lessons and using different adaptation strategies to meet their needs. On page 10 of her unit and lesson plans, Laleh discussed some adaptations that she would use for her students:

For each period, I need to change my adaptations, for example, for ESL students, I need to make sure that they understand the definitions of the words that are being used. I will have to write the words down on the board and draw pictures to explain the new words. For inclusive classroom, since there are many students with learning disabilities, reading and writing problems, I could give them handouts and students could fill out the missing parts, and this will help students that have difficulties with reading and writing. (*Personal mathematics unit and lesson plans, p. 10*)

The adaptations that I noticed from her unit and lesson plans package include several handouts with blanks left to be filled out by the ESL students and students with disabilities, and the specific adaptations that she wrote in many of her mini lesson plans. For example, on the independent and dependent variables handout for these students, Laleh left some blanks for them to fill out. She explained that she wanted to make sure that “not everything was filled out so they won’t be falling asleep so they still had to write something down, but they did not have to write the whole sentences down” (*Interview #2, p. 7*).

During our second interview, Laleh impressed me by showing her dedication to make mathematics fun so that students can relate. In the overview and introduction section of this unit and lesson plans, her writing indicates her long-term goal of making mathematics learning fun:

This unit is designed for 7th graders. My general goal is for them to understand the concept of probability and relate it to real-life. I will use many everyday examples and familiar activities. I hope to show them that math is useful and is used more than they knew before. Many students feel math has no point and is useless in life. Due to this feeling, many students view math as uninteresting. I also need to make sure to be clear about tasks and recall their prior knowledge. I need to spend more time on

vocabulary with the ESL students. I will put examples of the vocabulary on the board and have students describe the new word and write the definition in their own words. (*Personal mathematics unit and lesson plans, p. 2*)

In the instructional strategies section, Laleh emphasized using interesting daily life examples and activities as a strategy to make her mathematics lessons fun for all learners:

One strategy that I am going to use for this unit is to use common examples for students as much as possible. Statistics and probability is a subject that students don't usually like, by picking fun examples and activity I can engage students more. I will pick problems that they can relate to it better, for example, I will pick an example with gumball machine instead of slot machines....I will use many examples as I can to make sure they have practiced the new topic before they start their homework. (*Personal mathematics unit and lesson plans, p. 4*)

When Laleh prepared a mini lesson on coordinate geometry in this unit, she asked students to work on one activity sheet. Among pages of her unit and lesson plans, I found this "bug coordinates" activity sheet, which required students to find the location of the different bugs found in the camp trip on the coordinate grid. Students were also required to write an ordered pair of numbers to show the location (coordinates) for each bug. I saw from this activity sheet many different bugs such as dragonfly, worm, ladybug, ant, butterfly, spider and fly on a coordinate grid. It looked like a very fun activity for students to do in her mathematics class. Laleh further explained it during our interview:

I tried to use a lot of visuals because that is how I learned and I am a visual learner, because when I see something I can understand it better. The example that I have is students are supposed to find a coordinate of a point. This is like a game for them. What is the location of the spider? It is a kind of fun and it is not a dry lesson. It brings more humor into it, and they are supposed to draw the bug at each location... Getting them involved. I have a kid who always sits in the back. When he played this activity, he asked, "Can I have purple pen so that I can draw my butterfly in purple?" They are putting more personality in that activity. So it makes students more connected to the lesson and makes it more personalized. In Iran the class would be more serious, but when I taught there, I still tried to bring some fun into the classroom. I could not use the spider example, but every day I had a joke for them. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

Laleh shared that in her eyes, schools in Iran are more serious than schools in the U.S. It is interesting for me to know that in spite of her school experience in Iran, she tried to make her math lessons entertaining for her students when she started teaching in the U.S. Although her schooling experience impacted her teaching a lot, she was still able to adjust herself quickly to meet the trends of American education. This is different from the reluctance of minority teacher candidates in Nguyen's (2004) study to adjust their schooling experiences to American teaching practices.

By reading Laleh's description of some ESL students on her lesson plans, I saw evidence of her patience of getting to know international students from different sources. I noticed lots of positive words when she described these students. For example, on page two she wrote:

OS is fifteen years old and he is an ESL student that has learning disability. OS lives with his parents, but he is the man of the house. OS is the one that takes care of his other siblings and helps his parents. He told me that he takes care of his family and it is his job to do that...OS is a positive person. He enjoys helping others and I think this is the attitude that he brings from home. He always has a smile on his face. In math class he will start his work as soon as the Din is up. He might get distracted by his classmates, but he goes back to work as soon as his teacher asks him to. (*Personal mathematics unit and lesson plans, p. 2*)

When she described another ESL student, she wrote:

MK just turned fourteen. He is an ESL student. He's been here in the U.S. for five years now, but he still has problems speaking and communicating to others. When MK talks, he uses the word *thing* a lot instead of the words that he doesn't know. Although MK has difficulties in some areas, he makes great things with his hands, for example planes. MK also does a great job in his science lab. In math class when I had them to work on activity with graphs, he did a great job making the graphs, but he had a hard time when he was supposed to explain his project to the whole class. (*Personal mathematics unit and lesson plans, p. 3*)

I believe Laleh's work samples also reflected her sympathy toward international students and her strength of never judging students too quickly, although she did not make connections between the two.

Connections between Laleh's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Although Laleh had never thought about her strengths before the interviews, she was pushed by my questions to elaborate on her strengths and strengths application. She seemed unfamiliar with the word *strengths*, particularly during our first interview. On the whole, Laleh was able to identify what she could bring to the teaching field and she clearly made a tight connection between her professional work samples and her strengths application. The lesson plan and the unit and lesson plans that she shared indicated all of her strengths and her application of these strengths in teaching, which include her passion about teaching, sensitivity to international students and students with special needs, abilities to adapt lessons to meet students' unique needs, making personal connection with students, being open-minded, providing students with various methods and making mathematics lessons fun for all students.

Circumstances Influencing Laleh's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Laleh identified one encouraging circumstance for her strengths awareness and utilization. She used evaluations from college students and her host teachers to help confirm her strengths and contributions that she brought to education. To college students whom she taught, she claimed that she could visually "see" her impacts by reading student evaluations and most students' positive evaluation of her seemed to help her realize her strengths and her contribution, and give her encouragement to keep applying her strengths in teaching at college. As she pointed out, "Here at college you are evaluated by students so you know what

differences you have made in them, in their life and learning experience. But K-12... , I do not know” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). Even though during the interviews she was able to point out her strengths when teaching K-12 learners and she felt “students do enjoy doing the spider activity” (*Interview #2, p. 7*), and though I found evidence of her harnessing her strengths in her lesson plans, she still seemed unsure about her contributions in teaching K-12 learners, simply because no students gave her an evaluation. It seemed that Laleh depended upon outside sources to confirm her strengths and encourage her strengths utilization.

I noticed that Laleh tried to compare herself with some of her European American colleagues in the math department and she believes that her schooling and living experiences in both Iran and the United States made it possible for her to connect with diverse student populations better and teach more effectively than them. Therefore, I conclude that her conscious comparison with peers and colleagues led to her awareness of some of her strengths.

When I interviewed Laleh for our first interview and asked her about her strengths, she seemed to get stuck by the word *strengths* and she was not sure whether the examples that she provided were appropriate. She told me that “I have never thought about that (strengths)” (*Interview #1, p. 9*). Clearly, never thinking about her strengths potentially discouraged her from realizing that she possessed several strengths and explained why she got stuck when hearing the word. At the same time, it indicated that talking with others such as the interviews has the potential to encourage starting one’s strengths awareness because as in Laleh’s case, she was able to share her strengths after being pushed by the research questions to think more about her strengths.

I asked her how people in Iran responded to the question *tell me something of your strengths*, she responded that most common response would be “no, not me. I don’t have strengths” (*Interview #1, p. 5*). I guess that Persian culture may have some negative impact on Laleh’s strengths awareness or articulation. Meeting me for the first time makes it hard for her to tell me directly her strengths.

Miranda

Miranda is a Latino American woman in her late 40's. She used "the mother of my family, like to help others, like to learn, want to know about people, passionate about teaching, love making friends, goal-oriented, and proud of myself and my minority identity" (*Interview #2, p. 5*) to describe herself. She reported that her friends and family members perceived her as "a good mother, always be positive, and a good leader" (*Interview #1, p. 3*).

Miranda is an undergraduate student at Smooth College, majoring in adolescent foreign language education. She was born and educated in Ecuador. She finished her college degree in accounting in her home country. After moving to the United States, she attended and graduated from a community college with an associate degree and then transferred to Smooth College. She perceived admission to Smooth College as opening "a big door for me" (*Interview #1, p. 2*).

Miranda had a variety of teaching experiences. She worked as a substitute teacher in kindergarten in Ecuador for a couple of years. When she moved to the U. S. in year 2000, she taught both Spanish and English as a volunteer for three years in New York City. She enjoyed teaching her fellow immigrants who had just come to this country and who did not know English, and she also liked her teaching experience with children who had Hispanic heritage and who wanted to learn Spanish. She regarded her teaching experience as a good motivation to get certified and become a permanent teacher in this country. By the time I interviewed her in summer 2010, she had early and practicum field experiences in two local elementary schools and one local high school, which were associated with her education courses. She showed her excitement when anticipating her Fall 2010 full-time student teaching. She expected that her student teaching experience would be "the greatest

experience I am going to have” (*Interview #1, p. 3*). Miranda planned to graduate in May 2011 and find a Spanish teaching position in secondary schools.

Miranda reported her program experience was great because she felt everyone accepted her and directed her to do what she was supposed to do in the program. She used “lucky” to describe her experience with supportive professors, host teachers and classmates. She described her field experience as “really helped and gave me an idea of education in the United States and gave me life experience” (*Interview #1, p. 3*).

As the only minority teacher candidate in most of her education courses, Miranda felt uncomfortable at the beginning, due to her foreign accent. She was getting more comfortable after several mini lesson practices that she had to teach in front of her classmates. Miranda also attributed her comfort to her professors who verbally communicated to the whole classes that “everyone is in the same boat and all are here to learn” (*Interview #1, p. 4*), which she believed made her feel the same.

There are two accomplishments that Miranda felt particularly proud of. As an immigrant, Miranda regarded her four children as her only family in the U.S. Her biggest accomplishment is the progress of these four children. She was glad to see that “they are good kids. They are following the right way and I hope they can keep it” (*Interview #1, p. 6*). One of her children is still young, one graduated from college, and the other two are in college. The second accomplishment that Miranda reported is that she almost finished her degree. She tried to be a good role model for her children by studying hard to get her degree. She shared that she was happy because she was doing things that she really cared about and always wanted to do. She was grateful for the support both from her professors and her children who motivated her to keep going.

During her spare time, Miranda loves reading all kinds of books especially books that helped her adjust to living in this country. She also enjoys playing table tennis. Currently, Miranda is a part-time Spanish teacher and she is working on her master's degree.

Miranda's Self-Perceived Strengths

I had a sense from the interviews that Miranda is very proud of her culture and language and she perceives teaching others as her responsibility in this multicultural society. Two strengths identified by Miranda include her language and cultural heritage, and her capacity to teach others diversity.

My language and my culture are what I know, and I want to teach what I know.

When I asked Miranda whether she was aware of her strengths, she replied immediately, "I would like to teach something that not many people know well, which is Spanish" (*Interview #1, p. 2*). She shared that she perceived her mastery of Spanish and her familiarity with Spanish culture as her biggest strength and "teaching tool" (*Interview #1, p. 10*). She said,

What I think important is my language. I am going to teach Spanish and my native language is Spanish. So I can teach them a lot. I can teach from my culture and from my own culture they can learn from me. My language and my culture are what I know and what I want to teach is what I know. It won't be something that I hear or something that I learn. It is something that I know and something that I grow up with and I am part of that. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

Although originally Miranda wanted to teach English because "I go through that and I know how hard it is to learn English and how difficult it is to live in the country when you do not speak the language" (*Interview #1, p. 9*), she quickly figured out her language and culture strength and asked herself "why do not I teach something that I really know?" (*Interview #1, p. 9*) To Miranda, knowing the Spanish language and Spanish culture well is definitely her strength because, as a native speaker, she can help students learn the correct pronunciation and learn about her culture. Interestingly, she realized from her field experience that her

accent positively influenced her teaching because it helped her get students' attention when they wanted to better understand her.

People need to know who we are and it is a blessing to be a minority teacher.

When I interviewed Miranda, I felt her pride of being a minority. She regarded being a minority teacher as a way to help others to experience diversity and to know her and her culture and language. First, she shared her perspective of being a minority in such a multicultural country as the United States and her responsibility for helping others to learn diversity:

You know, when I came here, there are so many cultures. When you are in Ecuador, you cannot see your culture, but when you come to a diverse place like the United States, you know people are from different countries and they bring different cultures. We want to know about them. So I think they want to know about me too. They want to know about my country and they want to know about people who are Spanish-speaking. We have different cultures... It is a blessing that I am a minority. I think we always have something to teach. We live in this country and all other people need to know who we are. So everyone has something to contribute to them to learn. I think that is about being a minority. (*Interview #1, p. 5*)

She further moved the topic to her unique contribution as a minority teacher candidate:

Here I am with my classmates and teachers. I do not feel bad being a minority. The contribution that I gave them as a minority teacher candidate is my language and my culture and I am going to teach them. That is the way I want to teach them. We are the teachers and we are going to teach them about our cultures. (*Interview #1, p. 5*)

I interpret Miranda's above comments as that she is proud of being a minority teacher candidate and both her minority identity and her teacher identity offered her arenas to help others experience and learn different cultures.

Miranda's Self-Selected Professional Samples

I interviewed Miranda two times. The first interview was in late August 2010 and this interview lasted one hour and twenty minutes. When I interviewed her for a second time in October 2010, she was very busy with her student teaching and state teacher certificate tests

so I only got the chance to talk with her for forty minutes. Although I reminded her at the end of each interview and in emails that I hoped she could select at least three professional samples, she showed me only one sample. Miranda's 40-page research paper was done for one research course in 2010. It was written in Spanish. Since I cannot read Spanish, all accounts related to this sample were based on Miranda's explanation during our second interview. The other two samples that I chose to include in her professional work samples are two examples that Miranda talked about in detail during the interviews but was not able to bring. They are her mini-lesson on the driver's license written test in Ecuador and her mini-lesson on a vacation invitation letter. I chose them due to the limited samples that Miranda provided me.

A research paper on Spanish heritage learners and related programs to help teachers teach them effectively. In order to graduate from her undergraduate program, Miranda was required to do a study in Spanish on Hispanic people. Based on her teaching experience, she chose to study children with Hispanic background—the Spanish heritage learners. She was particularly interested in programs that prepared teachers to teach this group of learners effectively. I asked her what strengths this paper reflected and she replied, “Yes, why not teach Spanish to students with a Spanish background too? We have to take advantage of that” (*Interview #2, p. 3*). She explained the reasons behind her interest in this topic:

I have the choice to choose a topic that I like to know. Because when I saw a large Spanish population community in the middle school where I observed and when I taught in New York City as a volunteer, I had met students who had Spanish backgrounds and they came to learn Spanish. There are lots of problems coming out of that. The problem is that they think they know it, but the reality is that they may speak some Spanish, that does not mean they know grammar and they have large vocabulary to be able to conduct conversation. People have higher expectation for them but this is not reality. I want to know the best way to teach Spanish heritage

learners. We get prepared to teach English-speakers, but we forget about those students from Spanish backgrounds. I know the population is not big, but it is growing. I am looking for programs from this local region and I cannot find any. Not in Smooth City, not in nearby cities. I think Spanish teachers should know that there are some programs like that and they can get training from that program so that they can reach Spanish speakers, not only the English speakers. That would be a good idea so that we can find a better way to teach these kids and they do not get bored. (*Interview #2, p. 1*)

Even with Miranda's explanation above and her argument that "I want to teach everybody and there are Spanish speaking students who want to learn Spanish" (*Interview #2, p. 3*), it is still not very clear to me which strength is represented through this sample. During the interviews, Miranda told me that she held the belief that Spanish people should not lose their language and culture. At home she only speaks Spanish with her children and she keeps reminding her children that although they are American citizens, they are Hispanic, and "you have to keep Spanish so that you can't forget our culture and you have to understand that our culture is beautiful and that Spanish is as beautiful as English" (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Based on the above information, I think this sample reflects Miranda's special interest in Spanish heritage language learners and her efforts and teaching responsibility to teach them as a teacher. To her, teaching Spanish heritage language learners Spanish is as important as teaching non heritage learners Spanish.

A mini-lesson on the driver's license written test in Ecuador. Although Miranda was not able to bring me other specific professional samples, she mentioned during the interviews two vivid examples that showed how she utilized her language and culture strengths in her field teaching. The first example is a mini-lesson that she did with a group of students in her high school placement. She asked these American students to take the driver's license test in Spanish. She elaborated as below:

Before I taught this group, I was doing my observation there and I know their age and what they can read and write in Spanish. That group was in age around 16. I noticed that at their age they were interested in getting driver ID. They talked about what they did and who passed and who failed. Then I told them “I am going to talk about my driver license experience in my home country”. I shared what I did and even brought the test exam to the class and they were very interested in that. Over here they take it at 16 years old, but in Ecuador we take the driving exam at 18 years old. So they have to take the exam in Spanish and that is very interesting to them. They really paid attention to what I said. They really wanted to know what is going on in another country. I took the questions out from the Spanish booklet and they took the exam. Everybody passed. I was not wrong. It was a good experience and it really worked for them. It was a very good mini lesson. (*Interview #1, p. 7*)

Miranda used this example to show her usage of her Spanish language and cultural background in teaching Spanish language learners. It showed her keen observation and familiarity with her students. She was aware of their popular topics and she tried to utilize her strengths to relate to her students. As a minority teacher candidate originally from Ecuador, Miranda not only utilized her linguistic and cultural strengths in her teaching and brought to her students a real driver’s license written test sample, but also shared with them the different age requirements to apply for a driver’s license in these two different countries. She reported that the way she taught Spanish really engaged her students to be more interested in the target language as well in the target culture.

A vacation invitation letter. Miranda shared another example of how she used her cultural and linguistic strengths to teach her students to apply their Spanish language in real settings. She reflected:

We did something about vacation time. They know Spanish and they can go to Spanish-speaking countries. In order to learn Spanish, they have to practice there. So I told them they can visit Ecuador and I wrote a letter for them, inviting them to go there and I wrote about some places at my home country. They had to read and write me a letter. It is like a play or a game. They learned about my country and what we did over there. They learned how to deal with letters, like sending the letters with the envelope in Spanish. So I gave them the invitation letter and they replied me and put it in the envelope on the desk. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

Again, this example indicated Miranda's familiarity with Spanish culture and language, and her utilization of this information to help her students experience functional Spanish in real life, such as replying to letters in Spanish and filling out the envelopes in Spanish. Students learned customs that are different from American cultures.

Connections between Miranda's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

In the U.S., Miranda is aware of her racial and ethnic minority identity and she is especially comfortable with her identity as a minority teacher, because teaching offers her a channel to teach others her language and culture. She clearly identified her native language and culture as her strength and she consciously made efforts to make use of her strength in teaching, but she could not use specific words to capture her strengths and strengths application in detailed contexts. It seemed to me that Miranda is able to make a connection between her professional samples and strengths, although her interpretation of the connection between the research paper and her strengths is not as obvious and strong as the connection made between the other two examples and her strengths application.

From my perspective, her 40-page research paper written in Spanish reflected her Spanish language strength, although she did not mention that directly. Her research paper indicated her sensitivity to and her interest in Spanish heritage learners, a group of students who were usually misunderstood and potentially underserved by Spanish teachers and were expected to do well in Spanish language learning but who actually need teachers' extra help and different teaching strategy to achieve the high expectation.

The driver's license written test and vacation invitation letter examples showed her conscious capitalization on Spanish language and culture, and her effort to use authentic materials to engage her students. I argue that being able to use authentic learning and

teaching materials in teaching foreign language is her strength, one that she did not identify herself. Because of her busy schedule, Miranda could not provide me with other professional work samples. I believe her participant portrait would be richer with more data.

Circumstances Influencing Miranda's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Miranda identified three circumstances that encouraged her to be aware of and utilize her strengths. The first encouraging circumstance for Miranda's strengths awareness and application is her confidence in teaching something that is part of her. After questioning herself, she was encouraged to use her strengths as a Spanish teacher.

The second circumstance that encouraged Miranda's strengths utilization came from the good evaluation and support from her host teachers and supervisors. Miranda mentioned that she became more confident after her host teacher and supervisors verbally praised her and gave her good evaluations, and suggested that she make improvements on her voice volume instead of her accent.

The third circumstance that encouraged Miranda to use her strengths in her teaching came from what she learned from her teacher education programs. Miranda shared that she perceived her mastery of Spanish and culture as teaching tools to reach her students. She acknowledged that knowing the language did not necessarily mean that the person is able to teach the language. The feeling of being prepared well by her education program encouraged her to use her strengths to reach students more effectively.

As for discouraging circumstances, Miranda did not give me any suggestion. She said that she was satisfied with her teaching experiences but she could not predict her future teaching.

Nathan

Nathan is a Latino American young man in his 20's. He used "fun, outgoing, open-minded, doing things my way, unique, and authentic" (*Interview #1, p. 10*) to describe himself. He believes that his friends and family members perceive him as a person who is "always happy, energetic, and active" (*Interview #1, p. 4*).

Nathan is an undergraduate student at Smooth College, majoring in secondary mathematics education with a minor in Spanish. When I interviewed him in summer 2010, he had not yet started his student teaching. He planned to graduate in December 2011.

Nathan had a "diverse education background" (*Interview #1, p. 1*). He was born and attended elementary and the first year of junior high school in New York City. After grade six, he moved with his parents to their home country, the Dominican Republic, and finished his secondary education and one year at college there. He then moved back to the U.S. himself to finish his associate degree at a college in New York City. When his parents finally settled down in Smooth City two years earlier, he went with them and transferred to Smooth College to continue his bachelor's degree study.

Nathan had some limited field experiences through his education program. He did some observations and taught a couple of lessons in local schools. He had been a full-time teaching assistant for ESL students for one-and-a-half-years. He felt satisfied with his education program because most professors strove for the best and prepared students to succeed; and he felt more in control of his own field placements because of the freedom to choose the schools that he would like to go to from a wide variety of school options. His only complaint is that there is a big gap between what his professors advocated for theories and what he observed teachers actually experienced at schools in reality.

Nathan showed his concerns when we talked about situations of teacher candidates from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds in this country. He is aware of instances about many excellent people from different cultures who were denied decent jobs, although “they know what they are doing and they do their jobs well” (*Interview #1, p. 5*). Nathan attributed it to how society and people perceived minorities and he believes that the language barrier sometimes is only an excuse. Even though Nathan is always one of the only two or three minority teacher candidates in his class, he reported feeling comfortable.

In his spare time, Nathan likes playing sports. To him, being active is more appealing than reading a book. He believes that he learned from his interests not to give up. He tried to complete the task and do whatever he is supposed to do.

Nathan is particularly proud of two accomplishments. The biggest accomplishment is that he graduated from high school in the Dominican Republic. The second accomplishment is that he moved back to the U.S. himself and got his associate degree with honors. He attributed his accomplishments to his parents’ good support pushing him to strive to do the best, although they “never got the opportunity to go to even elementary school” (*Interview #1, p. 8*), and to his own never-give-up personality.

Friends and teachers told Nathan that he could be whatever he wanted to be because he is a hard-worker. Through his experience as a mathematics tutor at the college where he did his associate degree, and through his parents’ and sister’s extra push, he decided to become a teacher. Although he is still debating which grade levels to teach, he reported being very certain of his love of teaching. After graduation, he planned to find a teaching position and work on his master’s degree at the same time. Currently, Nathan is studying in his bachelor degree program.

Nathan's Self-Perceived Strengths

When I asked Nathan whether he was aware of his strengths, he confessed to me that “when you are in the field placements, you are working and you are teaching. Rarely will you consciously notice and it rarely catches up” (*Interview #1, p. 8*). As he brought his experiences into our conversation, he was able to share his strengths clearly.

I am open-minded. Nathan told me, “I used to do things in certain ways” (*Interview #1, p. 7*). After living and attending schools in both the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic, he believes that he has become much more open-minded since he has “seen two different educational systems” (*Interview #1, p. 7*), and has learned that “I should always think out of the box and take a step back” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). He perceived open-mindedness as one of his strengths to defeat ignorance and a single-angle perspective as a future teacher:

When I was in elementary school, I was taught one view and one type of the story. When my parents took me to their home country, I had opportunity to see both sides of the story. I am fortunate to know two languages, and to see both systems. They actually told me the truth. That is why my opinions seem blended. I learned that not everything on the book is true. (*Interview #2, p. 7*)

It is apparent that Nathan attributed his broader and multi-angled current world perspective to knowing two languages and seeing two educational systems.

I am culturally sensitive. From his diverse experiences, Nathan learned that it is important for a teacher to be culturally sensitive and not to assume all students think and behave in the same way. In teaching, he made efforts to not offend his students. Nathan elaborated on his perspectives in this area:

Teacher may unconsciously offend the students if they don't know what group of students they are dealing with. They think everybody has the same experience and the same background. What they think that are perfectly normal to them may not be true for the students. Comparing the students in this country with students in the third world countries, the minority countries, it is very different. What is true for the U.S. may not be true for the Caribbean Islands. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

Nathan believes that nobody would like to be offended, so the first thing that he would do before teaching is to “always try to get a view of people whom I am working with” and “know their different personality and cultural backgrounds” (*Interview #2, p. 6*). For him, making a connection with students is getting to know them so that they feel more at home being in his class.

His consideration that no one should be offended is also illustrated by another example. During our first interview, he corrected me when I used the word *teacher candidates of color* to refer to teacher candidates from diverse cultural backgrounds.

I am comfortable with diversity. Nathan identified being comfortable with diversity as his strength, “I am comfortable with diversity. I know my strength” (*Interview #1, p. 7*). He reported that in 2009 he took one semester off and worked as a teaching assistant in an inclusive classroom. Nathan observed the unfair treatment of diverse learners by the American educational system and the students’ frustration due to being misunderstood. He reflected:

For this period of time, I saw some sad things about students. Society sometimes misunderstands students. They could label students for something that they are not. Sometimes I find it is unfair when students are considered special or misbehave or resources that they just don’t need, because they do not understand that creates the frustration to the students. So much tension could be hidden because of misunderstanding of the students. I know as a teacher what a misunderstood student would feel and I try to correct it. (*Interview #1, p. 7*)

Based on his comments above, I interpret that the term *diversity* that Nathan used in addressing his students is quite broad and covers learners with a variety of learner characteristics in inclusive classrooms who have been misunderstood and mistreated by the educational system, such as English language learners, students with special needs, and

students who misbehave due to various reasons. His comfort with diversity as a person impacted his comfort and advocacy for diverse learners in his classrooms as a teacher.

I do things my way and I encourage students to be as unique as possible.

Throughout our interview, I heard Nathan use the word *I* several times. Nathan perceived being himself as his strength. As he said, “Everything you do must be part of you and it has to be unique” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). Not only did he want himself to be unique, but he also strove to teach his students to be unique people. Through giving students out-of-box examples and experiences, he hoped to cultivate students’ creativity. Nathan argued that students’ creativity was ignored at school and that might cause students’ identity crisis because they were not pushed to think who they are:

I always strive to be me. I would strive to be as unique as I can. In my teaching, I would give my students out-of-box examples. I would like to make situations unique to them so that students would identify themselves with that example. At schools we learn good models but the lack of creativity sometimes forgets who you are and that created identity crisis. I try to encourage my students to be as unique as possible. (*Interview #1, p. 10*)

I also learned from our conversation that Nathan’s being himself attitude made him never give up when facing challenges, whether it was when he was taken out of this country by his parents to live in a different country, or it was when he returned to the U.S. by himself to finish his college degree. As a teacher candidate, Nathan believes that this attitude will encourage him to be “stubborn” and make extra efforts to get his ideals through in teaching.

Nathan’s Self-Selected Professional Samples

During our second interview, Nathan told me that he brought some items that had been involved in his education portfolio, including some artifacts and milestones that he accomplished at different schools in his academic life. His self-selected professional work samples included one written evaluation from his supervisor at a local elementary school, one

nine-page-long lesson plan that incorporated adaptation, and three milestones that he is particularly proud of.

A written evaluation from the supervisor. The first professional work sample Nathan shared is a written evaluation of his performance. In the school year 2007-2008, Nathan was a full-time teaching assistant in a local elementary school, and he received an annual evaluation from his supervisor who worked with him on a daily basis. Nathan held that this formal evaluation is important because “it is part of me. It shows my perspective as a future educator, what I am capable of and where I started off” (*Interview #2, p. 4*).

When Nathan showed me this evaluation, I noticed that Nathan used it as an artifact for his program portfolio for Standard 9: Professional commitment and responsibility. Apparently, this evaluation was printed directly from his teacher education electronic portfolio. Under the name of artifact, I saw “evaluation by supervisor”. Then there is a rationale statement below:

In this present evaluation done by Smooth city school district in the school year 2007 to 2008, it demonstrates clearly that I, Nathan, am a hard-working, willing, punctual and efficient employee. In situations, such as cultural differences between African (Black) Americans, American Indian-Eskimo Americans, Asian-Pacific Americans, Hispanic (Latino) Americans, European (White) Americans, Biracial and Multiracial Americans, willing to go the extra miles for any of my pupils or staff members serving them as a bilingual interpreter. (*Personal evaluation*)

The original written evaluation was scanned and put below his rationale statement. On the evaluation form I saw Nathan’s name, school name, his title, the number of hours employed per week and six check marks from his supervisor. In the additional remarks section the supervisor had written: “Nathan is very efficient in his work!”

There are six areas that need to be checked on the evaluation form. The scale ranges from poor, to average, to good, to excellent. Nathan’s evaluation include: carries out all tasks

assigned, excellent; has the skills required for tasks assigned, good; relations and attitude toward children, good; relations and attitude toward professional staff, good; punctuality, excellent; and willingness to take additional duties, excellent.

Nathan explained that he felt this evaluation “boosts my confidence and I know I can do this” (*Interview #2, p.2*). Nathan further explained that this evaluation showed his effort and willingness to reach and teach students, showed his willingness to take additional duties, his good relation to students, and his responsible personality. He believes that from this evaluation people can see that, “I might not be the best, but I am always to get my tasks done on time. I am always willing to try things” (*Interview #2, p. 3*). From his perspective, this evaluation reflected some of his strengths as an emerging professional.

A mathematics lesson plan. The lesson plan that Nathan showed me includes one cover page and eight pages of a lesson plan named “Combinations and Permutations”. Like his first professional sample, this lesson plan was directly printed from his electronic teacher education portfolio. On the cover page, it said, “Artifact for Standard 3: Adapting Instruction for Individual Needs” (*Personal lesson plan*). As a teacher candidate, Nathan used this lesson plan as an artifact evidence of meeting his program’s standard 3 requirements. Also on this cover page, the related course name and the rationale statement were listed. Under the rationale statement section, Nathan wrote:

This artifact is a lesson created in live text for EDU XXX, an education course that its main concentration is diversity and learner differences and how to truly understand your students. (*Personal lesson plan, p. 1*)

The eight-page lesson plan had fifteen sections. It seemed that this is a standard format that Nathan had to follow when he designed this lesson. These fifteen sections included: title, rationale, justification of pedagogical approach, assumptions, state learning

standards, goals and learning objectives, evaluation, consideration for learner differences, technology, safety considerations, materials, resources, lesson script, self reflection and learning pyramid. There are subsections under each section. For example, under title section, there are subsections such as subject, grade level, date and duration of the lesson. Under lesson script section, there are subsections such as motivation and focus, activation of prior knowledge, teaching script, closure, preview of next lesson and explanation of homework assignment.

Nathan explained that this lesson was for a tenth grade mathematics class. The objectives of this lesson are that “students will be able to solve real-world problems with informal use of combinations and permutations” and that “students will be able to define what permutations and combinations are” (*Personal lesson plan, p. 2*). Instead of teaching this lesson in his field placements, he taught this lesson in front of his classmates.

Nathan emphasized that he shared this lesson plan because in this lesson plan he tried to “focus on diverse group that I had and the learner differences” (*Interview #2, p. 5*) and make some adaptations to help diverse students learn. In this lesson plan, on page 2, under the justification of pedagogical approach section, I noticed he wrote:

I use culturally-responsive pedagogy in this lesson because it seeks to enhance students’ academic involvement in the learning process while honoring the importance of Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews. This approach to teaching that focuses on Aboriginal students’ identities and self-esteem, as well as the cultural integrity of the community. (*Personal lesson plan, p. 2*)

Also, on page 4 under consideration for learner differences section, under the adaptation subsection, he wrote the following paragraph:

When the teacher divides the class into groups there are two options that would be appropriate modifications. The teacher could put all the gifted and talented students into one group and have them working on challenging problems that involve the various counting techniques. This will allow the gifted and talented students to stretch

their minds and challenge themselves. The other option would be to put one gifted and talented student in each group, thus that student could in a sense teach the other members of his/her group. However this could backfire if the gifted and talented student is making the other students feel dumb. If the gifted and talented students have already shown mastery over the lesson for today, then it would be appropriate to modify their assignment. The book has the easy problems first and the challenging problems later. Instead of 1-19 odd, you could assign 1-38 multiples of 4. Thus the students will have the same number of homework questions but the gifted and talented students will have a much harder assignment. (*Personal lesson plan, p. 4*)

It seemed that this lesson plan focused on one particular group of students: the gifted and talented students. For instance, he addressed the possible grouping strategies and ways to modify assignments to help the gifted and talented students to reach their potential.

During our interviews, I asked Nathan which page showed his cultural responsive teaching and his adaptations to different learners, he referred to the accommodation part on page 4, and said “right here. To consider all the fact, cultural differences, disabilities and so forth” (*Interview #2, p. 5*). He further explained:

I want to focus on the one that has disabilities mainly and the gifted as well. It is like two extremes, ‘cause in every classroom you don’t know what to expect. One could be extremely smart. You don’t want the students to be bored in your classroom. They will create more behavior problems, it is like, “I have already known this, why do you bother me with this?” The middle in between can be a group...I have a group of different students. I tried to accommodate them without offending and reaching them on a one-one-one base, without stereotypical. (*Interview #2, p. 5*)

Nathan’s comment on learner differences during the interview sounded much broader than the gifted and talented learner category discussed by him on page 4 of his mathematics lesson plan. Taylor and Bodgan (1998) suggested that the best way to deal with contradictions or internal inconsistencies is to raise the issue directly. I took their advice and challenged Nathan by asking him to show me where the idea of cultural sensitivity was represented in this lesson plan, and he replied:

It is easier for me to bring a video tape of myself teaching the lesson. When I did this lesson plan, this is the guideline for the lesson. During the lesson, I tried to use both

English and Spanish as well. Words can mean very different things, depending on the dialect of the language I am using. I did not mention diverse learners directly on my lesson plan here, but indirectly I was assuming and I have the assumption. One thing is the lesson plan; another thing is what you do in real teaching. (*Interview #2, p. 5*)

My interpretation of what Nathan tried to tell me is that this lesson plan is only a rough guideline. He asserted that during the actual teaching, he would show his understanding of broader learner characteristics and diversity through subtle communications with his students. In addition, he suggested that a sample such as a videotape of his actual teaching would better represent his strengths application in implementing this lesson, but he was not able to provide me with that sample.

Big milestone—high school diploma from the Dominican Republic. When I met Nathan for the second interview, I saw him carefully put a large bag on the desk near him. At that time I was curious to know what was inside. But when he took something out of the bag, it surprised me. I saw three big frames. Nathan explained that one is his high school diploma awarded in the Dominican Republic, and the other two are his honor certificate and recognition diploma awarded in his previous college in New York City. To Nathan, these are “past and they show I actually did something. It is like a registered record already. I looked up and they are always there. It is a proving that I accomplished something. It boosts my self-esteem” (*Interview #2, p. 9*). Obviously, he perceived these diplomas and certificate as documents that recorded his previous achievements.

Nathan’s high school diploma was carefully inserted in an old-fashioned but elegant frame that used to belong to his grandfather. As soon as I saw it, I could feel how precious it was to Nathan. Nathan is very proud of his high school diploma.

Although Nathan’s parents speak Spanish at home with him, “talking is one thing and putting it down on the paper is another thing” (*Interview #1, p. 7*). He had trouble with

writing and reading in Spanish before moving to the Dominican Republic. During our interview, Nathan shared why he wanted to bring his high school diploma:

I will start with my high school diploma, 'cause it really shows who I am. 'Cause it says you have been taken out the country and it is a high school diploma from the Dominican Republic. All in Spanish! It is an important part of me because it shows my willingness to, if I want to graduate or learn something, I have what it takes to do it. This is like the certificate of your degree... It shows my willingness and efforts and strives to get what I want. A lot of people don't think high school is an accomplishment. It is a waste of time of your life. I have lots of friends and they don't have the high school diploma. It takes so much time and effort. It is evidence and I must show it to my grandchildren. (*Interview #2, p. 8*)

Nathan perceived his high school diploma as a big milestone in his past and as an inspiration for his future, as it showed his efforts and capability to achieve whatever he wanted to pursue.

Big milestones—honor certificate and recognition diploma from the U.S. Two other milestones that Nathan shared with me include one honor certificate and one recognition diploma from the college where he earned his associate degree. Both were inserted in elegant frames. Like his high school diploma, they are big milestones in his life:

I wanted to prove to myself that I can go anywhere around the world if I want to. I proved that I graduated, learned Spanish, I decided to go back home. These two (honor certificate and recognition diploma) are not as famous as my high school diploma but they are almost the same value to me. After moving to where I live now, I used to maintain contact with my previous college, and they gave me these two honored certificate and recognition diploma. It is a Spanish school. When I graduated at that time, I got almost full GPA. (*Interview #2, p. 8*)

Nathan interpreted that these two milestones showed his diverse education experiences and showed his ability to travel and live anywhere he wanted to.

Connections between Nathan's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Nathan seemed aware of his strengths, and the samples that he used reflected his strengths and strengths application. On the whole, I saw a connection between his strengths

and the samples. Both his supervisor's evaluation and the three personal milestone artifacts showed him as a person and a teacher who is culturally sensitive and comfortable with diversity. Although at first sight his strength of "doing things my way" might look contradictory to his embracing of diversity and different perspectives, I interpret that essentially they are congruent because diversity comes from distinct characteristics of each individual person; with each individual the same, there would be no diversity.

During the second interview, with the support of the evaluation from his supervisor, Nathan mentioned some strengths that he did not identify during our first interview, which include his reliability, effort to reach all students, willingness to take additional duties, and good relations with students.

At the same time, I noticed that Nathan's lesson plan sample did not fully match his comments during our interviews. For example, during the interview he mentioned his strengths of being sensitive to diverse learners and being culturally sensitive, but on his lesson plan under the adaptation section, I found him spending almost the whole paragraph talking about the gifted and talented learners only. I did not find any evidence of writing about other learners such as students with disabilities, and I did not see him address cultural differences among students. Nathan suggested that a video tape of his teaching could demonstrate his adaptation to diverse learners because "I tried to use both English and Spanish as well in teaching" (*Interview #2, p. 5*), but he could not provide that sample so I was unable to see his application of culturally sensitive strengths in actual teaching.

Circumstances Influencing Nathan's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Nathan identified two discouraging circumstances for his strengths application. One came from the pressure from the educational system because "they expected employees to do

things in a particular way” (*Interview #1, p. 9*). Nathan was concerned that although he had his education philosophy, such as “treat all students equally and never label them,” the demand from the system might conflict with his ideal way. He stressed that he would try his best to fuse them together to make things better. He believes when facing conflict between the system and self ideal teaching philosophy, the main circumstance that would encourage him is his persistence and never-give-it-up attitude. In this sense, his “doing things my way” personality would be a possible encouraging circumstance for him to apply his strengths in teaching.

The second discouraging circumstance came from students’ attitude towards learning. Nathan realized that some students were forced to stay at schools and asked to do things that they did not like to do. He felt somewhat frustrated to have students who asked, “What is this for?” (*Interview #1, p. 9*) Yet he did not want to stop here; instead, he was inspired to ask these students what they wanted to do with life and teach them accordingly.

I posit that lack of time to reflect while teaching might hinder Nathan from being aware of his strengths.

Tina

Tina used “tall, Korean, pastor’s daughter, compassion, musical, intelligent, and enthusiastic” (*Interview #2, p. 7*) to describe herself. She reported that in the eyes of her friends or family members, she is outgoing and friendly.

Tina is a junior at United University, dual majoring in inclusive elementary and special education and English textual studies. She is in her early 20’s. Born in Texas, she moved around the country a lot with her family. Tina grew up in a Korean family with both parents originally from Korea. Her father came to the U.S. at age 16, and her mother came after marrying him. As Korean is the only language spoken at home, Tina is fluent in Korean in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. She identifies herself as Korean American, and she takes a lot of pride in her ethnicity and loves Korean culture.

Although she is a junior, Tina had a rich field experiences because the teacher preparation program at United University provided her with lots of teaching experiences. By the time I interviewed her, she had experienced both field observation and some teaching in two local elementary schools and one pre-school. In Tina’s opinion, her education program was excellent because her close relationships with her professors made her feel “at home” (*Interview #1, p. 5*) and because “starting freshman year, I have been in a variety of field placements” (*Interview #1, p. 1*). Though she has not yet finished her program, she feels very confident in what she is doing. While in the field placements, Tina made efforts to get help from her host teachers and she believes that host teachers made a lot of difference in her gaining the most out of her field experiences.

From time to time, Tina volunteered when the university wanted someone to talk about diversity. Yet she credited her acceptance by the university and her popularity among

faculty members to her smartness, good transcripts and hard work, not her minority identity. Being the only Asian and one of the three minority students in all her education courses, Tina felt comfortable with her ethnicity most of the time as many of her friends are Caucasians. Although sometimes Tina would be offended by her classmates' comments on race and ethnicity during the class, she tried to keep quiet because she understood where their opinions came from. During the class discussions, Tina seemed to be strategic to avoid saying things to make her classmates angrier and she chose to leave the heated debates for the professors to handle.

Tina believes that her biggest accomplishment is that "I really love who I am right now" (*Interview #1, p. 7*), because she used to "be shy and it is hard to show my personality and be proud of myself, especially being a very tall Asian is difficult" (*Interview #1, p. 7*). She also believes that going to college and getting a perfect GPA are her biggest accomplishments since she learned and grew a lot not only academically but also as a person.

Tina was inspired to be a teacher by her summer school teaching experiences at her church and by her fourth grade teacher who "is the only teacher who recognized that I really loved to read and recommended and lent books to me from her home library" (*Interview #1, p. 2*). After graduation, she planned to work on her master's degree in education or to work as a flight attendant for about two years to travel around the world before teaching for the rest of her life.

Tina's Self-Perceived Strengths

Influenced by the Korean culture of being modest about speaking about one's strengths, Tina admitted that initially it was hard for her to say things that are good about

herself. But at the same time, Tina held the opinion that she would be lying if she said she did not have strengths. It seemed to me that Tina was able to articulate her specific strengths.

My passion for teaching and my students is my biggest strength. Tina impressed me by saying that her biggest strength is her passion for teaching and students:

What I am positive and confident is that I really love students and I really love teaching and it shows. My passion for teaching and my students is the biggest strength. I care about them and that is the only thing that I want to do. That is my biggest strength. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

Tina held the belief that passion for teaching and students is important because “without having that passion you are not going to put much effort in teaching” (*Interview #1, p. 8*). She elaborated that it is her passion that motivated her to work harder and take extra steps than most of her classmates:

Teaching is the only thing that I want to do and that is the only thing that will make me happy. I will do my best to be the best teacher. I will work as hard as I can and put everything on the table to help my students. I think sometimes I tried so much harder. Like even if it is a tiny lesson, I kept thinking and thinking about how to make it better. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

According to Tina, she tried to take a step further by doing more than the minimum requirement by her program when designing lesson plans. She is aware of this strength and expressed that she will continue using it in her future teaching.

I have leadership strength. As a pastor’s daughter, Tina felt tons of pressure in her childhood as she was always put in a role model position and expected to be perfect. Although she hated it then, she admitted during our interview that “being a pastor’s daughter is part of who I am and I am accepting it” and “it gives me leadership quality” (*Interview #2, p. 8*). She identified leadership as one of her strengths because “we need leadership to be a teacher” (*Interview #1, p. 11*). Tina realized that “when I meet someone new, I am good at

drawing them in and I am good at meeting new friends” (*Interview #1, p. 3*). Her leadership strength is also reflected in her teaching as a teacher candidate. According to Tina:

When I walked into the classroom, I am very good at getting their attention. I know that I can get their attention without raising my voice. I have the look. It is interesting. I have the presence and when I stand there and look at them, they will be very quiet. Very cool. My supervisor told me that the kids really respect you and they know you are the teacher and all my classmates say that too. (*Interview #1, p. 11*)

Having Korean culture is such a strength and I take a lot of pride in my ability to speak Korean. As an American-born Korean, Tina surprised me because of her keen love of her language and cultural heritage. I was surprised because unlike some other participants in this study who had lived in their home country for several years, Tina only traveled to Korea two times. She claimed that “having my Korean culture is such a strength” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). In her opinion, “if you are Korean people, you should speak Korean” (*Interview #1, p. 4*). She also reported that “even though I was born in America and I had American citizenship, I still have Korean culture throughout all parts of my life. I love my culture” (*Interview #1, p. 4*). Compared with her Korean-heritage friends who cannot speak Korean, Tina felt lucky to be able to speak fluent Korean. She valued her parents’ good rule of allowing her to only speak Korean at home.

Tina thought her presence as a minority teacher candidate in the field placements helped open her students’ horizons toward the world and she attributed this unique teaching capacity to her racial and ethnic identity. For example, all students and teachers in her second placement in a suburban school regarded her as Chinese. Tina took the opportunity and taught them a lesson entirely on Korea, explaining the location of Korea, how far away it is from China and how different these two countries are. Tina reflected on her contribution to these third graders:

It is important for them to be exposed to me, because they have never seen someone like me before and they just do not know how to react. I am very glad to show and introduce them to a different culture so they could be more open-minded and know more about the world. It important that I have the ability to do that. I take a lot of pride in my ability to speak Korean and my ethnicity. (*Interview #1, p. 10*)

Through this experience, Tina saw how her cultural background can help contribute to her students' learning about the world and to their multicultural perspectives formation.

I do not want my students to grow up biased. As a minority teacher candidate, Tina taught students about Korean culture, more importantly, she capitalized on her open-minded attitude when teaching different cultures. She proposed that teachers should be cautious when teaching about a culture different from their own and that it is a teacher's responsibility to provide students with a full picture of that culture because:

I don't want them to grow up biased. I don't want them to learn only about certain things so whenever they share, it is "oh, all Africans wear red." I want them to be exposed to many kinds of people living in Africa, just as there are many kinds of people living in America. I want to put them in a multicultural perspective. I don't want my students to think that all Africans are this way, all Koreans are this way and all Chinese are this way. I don't want them to say, "Koreans only do this and that." Or "Chinese only do this and that." I try to give them a full picture. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

In her suburban school placement, Tina experienced bias from her host teacher.

Although she was of Korean culture, she was taken as a figure to represent all Asians. She recalled one incident that she experienced:

When I came to the classroom, she (the host teacher) was teaching them about China. The students asked about culture and she said, "Maybe Miss K knows, even though she is not Chinese." Why would I know? She always asked me for answers. I am not Chinese. That really bothered me. She kind of grouped Asians together. (*Interview #1, p. 11*)

That experience left a big impression on Tina. In spite of extra time and work, when she planned lessons on a different culture, she would make sure to cover all aspects of that culture so that students would have a full picture of that culture.

I am sympathetic and I want to make sure all students feel accepted. Influenced by her father who had opinions on how Asians were treated in this country when he was a young immigrant, and who taught her to “have a presence and make your appearance good so that other people can look at and treat you on the same level” (*Interview #2, p. 9*), and by her mom who struggled to speak English, Tina learned that as a minority she needs to work very hard to succeed.

As a minority teacher candidate, Tina believes that “we have more to bring to the table in terms of different experiences and different cultures,” (*Interview #1, p. 6*) and that minority teachers “would be more open-minded to make sure all students feel accepted and included” (*Interview #1, p. 6*). She is aware of the additional effort that she puts in the inclusion program compared to some of her European American classmates, and she identified sympathizing and including all students as her strength. Tina showed her commitment of making all students feel accepted, especially those whose language is not English. She commented:

I think I made more efforts than some of my classmates. They need to have an understanding of inclusion, especially for students who do not speak English and when they go to the classroom, it is hard for them to know. Regardless of where the students are from, I actually have taught students from Brazil this summer. I do not say Portuguese, but I tried to learn their language to communicate with them. I think it makes you work hard being from the perspective of a minority. It is easier for me to see what they go through because I saw what my parents went through and I saw my mom learned English so I think I am much more sympathetic to students who do not speak English. That is definitely a strength. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

From the above statements, it is evident that growing up in a minority family and being a minority herself offer Tina a unique perspective of understanding inclusion. Even after realizing the extra work ahead, she is still committed to including all students in her teaching.

I am musical. As a band leader in her church, Tina is very good at music and she has been playing violin since six years of age. She believes that her strength in music will impact her future teaching. This is evidenced by her lesson plan samples. For example, in a lesson plan on Kenya, she planned on playing contemporary Kenyan music. When she taught a lesson on Korea, she also taught students how to sing the “head and shoulders” song in Korean. Tina shared that once she has her own classroom, she would play music as the background and make it a daily experience for her students.

Tina’s Self-Selected Professional Work Samples

Tina’s self-selected professional work samples include a lesson plan on Kenya, a mathematics lesson plan, and one research paper titled “Bilingualism in Education”. Tina told me that “these are what I am really proud of and I think they show my strengths, but in the way that I never saw before” (*Interview #2, p. 1*). Later when I went through these professional samples by myself, it became easier for me to understand in what ways these samples reflected Tina’s harness of her strengths. Tina’s detailed explanation of what strengths she thought were reflected in this lesson plan during the interviews helped me to understand her thinking on this.

A mathematics lesson plan that incorporates community building. The mathematics lesson plan that Tina shared is 15 pages long, using an inclusive lesson planning template designed by professors at her university. It was designed for a third grade mathematics class. This is the second lesson of a unit. Her lesson plan has seven sections including the student, the subject, the concept map, the lesson, the assessment, reflection and reference. Each required section was written in detail. She stressed that she shared this lesson plan not because it showed the mathematics content, but because it showed her effort and

creative way of incorporating community building into the lesson preparation and implementation. She explained, “This is my favorite, even though I did not get recognition for it. After I taught the lesson, I felt so good” (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Tina worked very hard when planning this lesson. As she recalled:

I put a lot time planning into it. Usually when you prepare a math lesson you would focus on math. We did cover all the materials, and they did learn a lot of subtracting and adding. You can’t just focus on math. There are opportunities for me to bring in ideas of knowing your classmates and working together no matter who is your partner. It is fostering the sense that this is the classroom and a community that all kids are my friends. That is important to me. I feel that some of the students are more part of the class and they are interacting with more friends and students after this lesson...During their lunch time, I took out this tiny paper that says, “Dear XX (students’ name), today I want you to work with XX (another students’ name) at table 1, 2, 3 or 4.” and folded them under their chairs. When they were back, I told them, “Guys, you each have a personal letter from the Smith family, and they will tell you who you are to work with today.” They got up and worked with different people. It really worked out well. I tried to make sure that students could help each other, so they can do problem solving by themselves, so the teachers do not need to tell them the answers. I feel glad that I could take the opportunity to mingle. I think it is creative and they really like it. The teacher did not focus on community building and that is why I wanted to incorporate that in my lesson. It is five-minute introduction but it changed the tone of the rest of the lesson. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

Tina believes cultivating community building is a crucial task for teachers and she is proud of taking the opportunity to take more steps:

Community building can make a complete different shape of the students. I do not think teachers are here simply to teach information. Schools are there for more than academic purposes. I am not saying that we have more moral responsibilities, but we kind of are. We teach them how to behave in community and how to be good citizens. That is what school is for. So you have to think about other things that you are teaching them unconsciously without realizing them. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

When I went over this lesson plan, I did find the evidence of community building that Tina mentioned in the interview. For example, under the lesson procedure section, she wrote:

Students will be asked to quickly look underneath their chairs where a small letter from the Smith family will direct them to find their new partner for the day. Students will find their partners and sit at the tables indicated on the letter. (*Personal mathematics lesson plan, p. 12*)

Also under the student and room arrangement subsection, she wrote:

The students will be seated at their round tables during this lesson. There are twenty students with four students at each table, and so each student will have a partner to work with. Before the lesson begins, the students will be re-arranged so that they do not have to work with the same peers they have been working with every day. This re-arrangement will be prepared beforehand with purposeful partnering in mind. Working at tables with partners encourages students to work with one another and use peer teaching instead of relying on adult support. (*Personal mathematics lesson plan, p. 9*)

Based on what Tina said and what I read in this sample, I saw her passion for teaching, her effort to make all students included and respected, her creativity to make students work with different classmates, and the extra efforts that she put into teaching preparation as a minority teacher candidate.

A lesson plan on Kenya. This Kenya lesson plan is 15 pages long. Like her mathematics lesson plan, Tina used the required inclusive lesson planning template and covered all seven required sections in this sample. During our interview, Tina admitted that this was her first lesson and she was extremely nervous at the time. But she chose to share it with me because this lesson showed her strength of including all students in the class and her strength of making extra effort to help students learn a full picture of another culture so that they would not grow up biased. Tina reflected:

For this lesson I had to teach Kenya. I do not know anything about Kenya. I have never been to Africa. Sometimes when we teach about cultures that are other than our own, we take out a couple of things that we find interesting, and children might think that is really cool. We would not focus on the culture as a whole or other aspects of it. At the first thought, I thought maybe I will just teach them the tribes. Then I said, “No, that is not right.” I decided to change my mind. I did not just teach them about the tribes, beads and hairs; I taught them people who live in the city and who wear normal clothes and go to work on bus. I don’t want them to say, “You are like a tribe person” when they meet someone from Kenya. I used peer learning and students learned from each other. I have one student with autism. He had a teaching assistant with him all the time. I told her, ‘Please adjust for this lesson and have him work with another student instead of the teacher.’ I felt that because he is always with the teacher, the other students did not treat him as another student. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

As Tina explained, she wanted students to learn from their peers, not from teachers. Under the lesson procedure section of this lesson plan, I noticed the details of her learning centers:

The first center will be on the rug. Students will use the mini-globes to pinpoint Kenya and circle its location. They will also be asked to talk about the significance of Kenya's location and how it may affect the people of Kenya. Using a Primary Source Guide to Kenya, students will read through pages 1-2 as a group and discuss the types of land in Kenya as well as how the land is affected by Kenya's location. Students will write down two things that they learned from the center on the writing forms.

The second center will be at the kidney-bean shaped table. At this center, students will be given a map activity in which they will be asked to identify and label certain geographic features of Kenya (such as the capital of Kenya, Tana River, Mount Kenya, etc). Students will be asked a question in which they will respond by writing on their writing form.

The third center will be at the rectangle table. At this center, various books and resources will be available to the students. Students will be asked to use the books and resources to: (1) find 2 ways Kenyan culture is different from American culture; (2) find 1 way that Kenyan and American culture is similar. Students will write answers on the writing form in addition to any other discoveries they make about Kenya, its people, and the culture. (*Personal Kenya lesson plan, p. 10*)

According to Tina, by the end of the lesson, she divided students into eight groups and each group made a stand and deliver presentation of a certain group of people in Kenya. Students shared differences and similarities between the people that they studied. Tina thought it worthwhile although she had to put much time and effort in her lesson planning. She believes that her Korean family background and the personal experience with her host teacher who assumed that a Korean can represent all Asians made her more aware of issues surrounding teaching about another culture.

On this lesson plan, I also noticed Tina wrote, "During centers, a playlist of modern and traditional Kenyan music will be playing softly in the background" (*Personal Kenya lesson plan, p. 11*), which is a reflection of her application of musical strengths in teaching.

Research paper titled Bilingualism in Education. Tina shared this research paper that she wrote for one of her education courses during her freshman year. The title is “Bilingualism in Education”. In this paper, Tina summarized previous studies on bilingual education in the U.S. and discussed controversial issues related to the education of bilingual students. She explained that she chose this sample because it is a topic that “really goes to my heart” (*Interview #2, p. 5*). That reminds me of what Tina shared with me in the interviews: she has a mother who “over the ten years still did not have confidence in her English” (*Interview #2, p. 7*); she speaks Korean at home with her parents and she is proud of Korean culture. I believe Tina’s personal experience as a bilingual child in a Korean family and her interpretation of how that experience gives her teaching capacity to widen students’ horizons influenced how she perceived students whose native languages are not English.

Another circumstance that explained why studying bilingualism in education is an important topic for Tina is her previous school experiences as a student. She shared one incident when she was a second grader:

One of my teachers—in her class there are two students, one from Korean and one from India, they just came from their countries and did not know how to read in English. I guess she was really having a bad day. She felt angrier and angrier. She asked them to read aloud and they just couldn’t. She felt so frustrated and threw their books across their room. Everybody was so scared and I ran home and told my parents. It was really scared, you know. I guess that made a really big impression on me. She really hates them because she is frustrated. That really bothered me. And I felt like a lot of teachers ask students to speak English only. I can understand that position, but being able to speak two languages is very valuable skill and that definitely will be helpful to them. Their future life will be helpful, besides the fact that you should be proud of your culture and know your language. I support bilingual education and support schools to have foreign language programs. (*Interview#2, p. 6*)

Tina reflected years later in our interviews that she was bothered by her teacher’s attitude and behavior toward her classmates who spoke their native languages only. Although she could not help at that time, she shared it with her parents. She decided not to copy her teacher and

not to treat her future students in the same way; instead, she wanted to value her future students' home languages in her class. Her attitude matched her statements in this research paper:

Bilingual students are in no way at a serious educational disadvantage to their monolingual peers, and educational research will continue to prove that students who are bilingual are able to be just as successful as monolingual English speakers. (*Personal research paper, p. 9*)

Based on her own experience as a bilingual child and her review of the studies on bilingual education, Tina advocated bilingual education at schools and in society. As she explained in the interviews, she dislikes English only and she dislikes learning English at the cost of students' native language. I agree that this research paper reflects her strengths of including and accepting all students.

Connections between Tina's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Tina is very aware of her strengths and she clearly expressed her specific strengths during our interviews. The professional work samples that she provided reflected almost all the strengths that she mentioned. There is a close connection between the two. Both Tina's professional work samples and the arguments that she made during the interviews substantiate and support each other. Although Tina commented on her leadership strength during the interviews, I cannot find evidence of that strength and its application through her professional work samples.

Through reading her lesson plans, I observed Tina's description of the three targeted students as filled with encouraging and positive words. For example, she described one student named Nicholas as "very talented at memorizing popular pop songs from the radio" (*Personal lesson plan, p. 5*). She described Max, one student with autism, as "feels discouraged when a task seems overwhelming, but with some assistance and encouragement,

he is persistent in completing the activity” (*Personal lesson plan, p. 5*). I believe her positive comments on her target students reflected her inclusive attitude toward all of her students.

From Tina’s lesson plan, I also identified her other strengths such as her ability to use different teaching strategies, her collaboration with other teachers, and her willingness to offer a variety of presentation choices for her students. She used pairs, individual, and big group grouping strategies for her mathematics lesson. During the “stand and deliver” time, students had freedom to write or draw a presentation of what they learned during the lesson, or they could let their partner speak for them. She also provided students with options of various writing utensils such as markers, colored pencils or crayons, and colored post-its. In both lessons, she invited her host teacher, the teaching assistant to collaborate with her to make her lesson move smoothly.

Circumstances Influencing Tina’s Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Tina identified two main encouraging circumstances for her strengths awareness and application. First, Tina explained that outside encouraging evaluations made her aware of her strengths. She felt that her strengths were recognized by her program. She was encouraged by her host teachers, supervisors, professors, and cohort members who gave her positive feedback after observing her lessons. For example, after teaching her first lesson on Kenya, Tina felt it went bad because she was extremely nervous and she almost cried, but her supervisor verbally told her, “That is really good. The students responded very well” (*Interview #2, p. 3*). By listening to their feedback about her teaching, Tina understood herself better and realized that she criticized herself too much.

In another case, Tina was told by her host teacher and supervisor that she “had good presence and possessed the teacher look and voice” (*Interview #1, p. 7*). Tina confessed that

she used to feel bad for being tall, especially as an Asian, but when she was told that she had good presence, she changed her negative self-evaluation to a positive one, “I guess it helped when I am tall. That makes my students know that I am an authority figure. I am their teacher and I am not their friend” (*Interview #1, p. 8*). Tina commented:

I was not until last semester my host teacher and supervisors wrote feedback that was so nice. I feel that it is the best thing in the world that a professional told you that what you are doing, like you are made for that job. When I have a professor telling me like “you are really good at this and you are meant to be a good teacher”, like validating what you really want to do is really good. (*Interview#2, p. 7*)

Again, getting positive feedback from her host teachers, professors and supervisors helped to confirm her confidence in teaching and that made her encouraged.

The second circumstance that Tina identified that has encouraged her strengths awareness is her growth as a person during her college years. Tina told me that if she were interviewed one year before, she probably could not have been confident about her strengths. Now, she realized that she did not need to hide her strengths and it is okay to talk about them. Learning to understand and accept who she is—including her strengths and her weaknesses— facilitated her strengths awareness and articulation.

Tina believes that competition with her classmates and discouraging feedback sometimes would discourage her strengths awareness. Sometimes she would doubt herself after comparing her lessons with her classmates’ lessons. In addition, “any time when you get any discouraging feedback, of course, you are going to doubt your strengths” (*Interview #1, p. 12*). But Tina said she would take the opportunity to turn the discouraging moments into her strengths. Tina told me, for example, when she started teaching, she was told to speak louder. She took the advice and worked very hard on it and now it has become her strength as she is recognized by her teacher voice.

Xin

Xin is a Chinese woman in her early 20's. She is tall and slim, with a very cheerful voice. She described herself as “positive, active and creative” (*Interview #2, p. 7*). She thinks that in her friends' and family members' eyes, she “likes to sing and dance, positive, willing to communicate with people, lovely, idealistic and sometimes willful” (*Interview #1, p. 11*).

Xin was in her second year in the M.S. Childhood Education program at Stone University, and she planned to graduate in December 2010. She came to Stone University as an exchange student for her college senior year in year 2007-2008, and decided to stay and get her master's degree afterwards. She got a B.A. degree in China, majoring in Childhood Education with a concentration in mathematics. She wants to become a teacher because teaching is an ideal profession for women in China.

Born in Beijing, the capital of China, Xin attended elementary and secondary school there. Encouraged by many personal success stories in Beijing, she believes “you can achieve your goal when you have some beliefs in your head plus you work hard” (*Interview #2, p. 9*). She looked like a very typical native of Beijing, who was talkative and confident during our interviews in Chinese.

When I interviewed Xin in the summer of 2010, she was taking her last two education courses to fulfill all her coursework requirements. She was looking forward to her full-time student teaching in the fall. Xin already had relatively rich field experiences, including observation in two local elementary schools near Stone University, and teaching lessons as a practicum teacher in two other local elementary schools. Besides that, she worked as a student teacher in one elementary school in Beijing. Xin reflected that her relationship with host teachers played a very significant role in how much she gained out of her field

placements in the U.S. She believes that how much she accomplished largely depended on the degree of support from the host teachers. She failed her first practicum because of lack of host teacher support, but passed the second practicum.

Xin expressed her pride in her Beijing teacher certificate. She regarded that as her biggest accomplishment. She did not consider studying in the U.S. as an accomplishment since “it is only education and it does not show you have won an award or certificate” (*Interview #1, p. 5*). In her eyes, accomplishment should be defined as something connected with certificates or awards which ultimately lead to positive changes in her life.

The biggest challenge that Xin has been struggling with in her program is her self-perceived low spoken English proficiency. She labeled her spoken English problem as “a disability” (*Interview #1, p. 3*) and she even used a metaphor to describe this weakness: “It is like a person with no foot, and that is a fact. I am a person with Chinese accent and that is also a fact” (*Interview #1, p. 3*). Xin believes that lack of high oral English proficiency influenced her in a variety of ways. For instance, being unable to explain concepts clearly and concisely may negatively impact her classroom management in her field experience; and it would decrease her confidence level. “Confidence is the power to hold you up as a teacher and let you control the classroom” and “students are smart enough to figure out whether their teachers are confident” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). Since Xin believes that teaching largely depends on oral communication, she framed the ability to conduct oral communication with students and colleagues as the most important thing as a teacher. In spite of not being confident about her spoken English, Xin believes that her good personality would help make up for what she perceived as a weakness and that her positive attitude toward life would bring her more confidence in teaching.

Xin compared her program experiences with those of her minority classmates and concluded that as an international student she felt more like an outsider because this is not her home. She is very aware of her program's inability to adjust to her needs: "I can feel they want to help me, but they just don't know how. They know I need help, but they can't identify my needs" (*Interview #1, p. 4*). Xin shared with her department faculty members some of her concerns and issues as an international student when she was in her exchange year, but the problems were not solved properly. Because of prior experience, she chose not to talk with her faculty members whenever she had difficulties in her M.S. program. She would rather leave the problems for herself to solve.

Xin applied for her current program because it is linked with a state teacher certificate and getting a teacher certificate is so important for her. Before application, Xin went to the state education department website for the initial teacher certificate requirements. She learned that she is eligible for a teacher certificate even though she is an international student. She mentioned that information several times to her department chair and program coordinator, but no one believed her. Xin was very frustrated.

When I interviewed Xin in the summer of 2010, she sounded optimistic about her future. By the time of graduation, with her master's degree in the U.S. and a teacher certificate in hand, she believes that she would have broader options than her American classmates. She can teach in the U.S., Hong Kong, or some other Asian countries. Currently, Xin is a full-time teacher in a public school Chinese program in Minnesota.

Xin's Self-Perceived Strengths

Because both Xin and I are Chinese native-speakers, I chose to interview her in Chinese. I believe that using our shared mother tongue would help build a good rapport

between us, and it would make our communication easier and clearer. Xin seemed to be capable of expressing her strengths very logically and explicitly in Chinese. I was impressed by her perspective on diversity and her interpretation of the positive influences that her presence had on her program, her professors, classmates, the university campus, her field placements and the local community.

As the first international teacher candidate in my program, I feel that my contribution is really huge. They need diversity. Xin told me after the first interview, “I feel like a lab mouse and they are doing experiment on me” (*Personal communication*). She believes that her presence posed some particular challenge for her program as her department professors and staff members had never dealt with international students before and they did not seem prepared for unexpected problems. For example, they had to arrange a new field placement when Xin failed her first practicum; she took a longer time in class to express her thoughts; and they had to help her with student visa supporting documents. But Xin stressed that her contributions outweighed the “troubles” that she brought because her presence pushed her program and the department to respond to international teacher candidate’s needs, which in her eyes is good for a program’s development. Xin is a firm believer that “It is a very important trend that teacher preparation programs are becoming more diverse. I believe diversity brings program and student development. It is a necessity. They need to experience these challenges” (*Interview #1, p. 6*). I interpret that, from Xin’s perspective, international prospective teachers can bring diversity to their programs and contribute to American students’ learning.

Professors learned how to work with international students from experiences with me. Xin emphasized that she brought her experiences and background in China into class discussions and course assignments. She explained:

At least my professors know what international students' special needs are. Before they had me in the class, they only did theoretical research. Without experiencing an international student, they would never know the real experience. I have been in the program for two years and they learned how to work with international students and they are learning more about the Chinese educational system. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

Xin seemed to tell that her American professors learned from her presence and contributions in the class: What they learned from her will potentially impact how they deal with other international students professionally in the future; and their experiences with her broadened their understanding of teacher candidates from different cultures.

My classmates have never been so close to an international student like me.

Ninety-five percent of Xin's classmates are Caucasians. Although some showed no interest in getting to know her, some took opportunities to exchange information with her. Xin believes that her presence and sharing is the strength that she brought to her peers. For example, during class discussions, some peers would ask her, "How can you teach back in China since the educational systems in China and U.S. are so different? What does it look like in your teacher program in China? What kind of teacher certificate can you get and what are the requirements for teacher certificates in China?" (*Interview #1, p. 6*) To Xin, communication with her peers is a cultural and experiential exchange. Xin reflected:

For my classmates in the master's program, they have never been so close to an international student like me. To them, they will learn different educational systems between China and U.S. All information is fresh and new when we communicate with each other. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

From Xin's perspective, her classmates also benefited from communicating with her as they had the opportunity to learn about educational systems in another country.

I strongly believe diverse environments contribute to student learning. Xin held the belief that her presence in the local schools and the cultural and personal backgrounds that she brought with her helped provide a real diverse learning environment for her students. She strongly believes that diverse learning environments benefit student learning. I asked Xin where her belief came from and she explained that she learned from Chinese history that a nation which refused to open its door to the world would not prepare its citizens well for the future. In addition, she explained that American history taught her that diversity promoted the rapid development of the U.S.

On the first day of her second practicum, right after she told students in her class that she is a Chinese person from Beijing, almost all students in the school building knew that news as students excitedly shared with other students, teachers and parents, “I have a teacher from China” (*Interview #1, p. 7*). Xin attributed that to the fact that children like anything unique and her presence provided students in her field placements a unique opportunity to learn about China, Chinese language and culture from her — a person from that particular racial and ethnic group. Xin reflected:

During these three years, I went to different local schools and I brought Chinese culture and differences to the school communities. During the class, I explained to students the meaning of my name in Chinese culture, and I taught them how to write their names in Chinese. I taught them Chinese songs. I told them that Beijing and Shanghai are different from twenty years ago because of rapid development. My host teacher also used me as a real example when she taught immigration. She always hoped that I can bring some positive impacts on the students. She told students that lots of people immigrate to this country and we need more equality. Without me as a real example, it would be hard for her to explain this concept to students because all people around are majority. If she had simply talked about equality with students, they would have thought that nowadays it is very equal, and they won't have been able to consider minorities' perspectives. (*Interview#1, p. 7*)

Going to local school communities gave Xin a chance to share her culture and language strengths with students and teachers. They learned from her the big changes in China over the

past years, expectations that parents held when giving their children names; they also learned from her how to write Chinese characters and sing songs in Chinese. More importantly, they learned about equality and learned to understand minorities and immigrants.

Xin shared with me another example of how she utilized her strength to bring diversity to the local schools. In her exchange student year, she and three other students from China did a PowerPoint presentation on Chinese New Year and they invited two adopted Chinese children in that school to perform a play with them.

One main responsibility for me is to help local people gain more current knowledge about China. Xin also spent some of her spare time in teaching Chinese and Chinese culture at a local church. Right after one administrative staff member at Stone University told her that local children wanted to learn Chinese holidays, traditions and language, she went there as a volunteer. All of the children showed their keen interest in learning Chinese. Since there was no suitable teacher, she was willing to help out. Reflecting on her contribution to local people in the community, Xin commented:

I feel local people know very little about China. One main responsibility for me is to help people gain more knowledge about China. Many opinions they hold about China are out-of-date. They had thought everything in China was still old. In fact it is not. There are misunderstandings between U.S. and China because of the different social systems and different value systems in these two countries. Although my main purpose of coming here is to get my master's degree, if I can do something to help them know more about China, I would do it whole-heartedly. If I can bring my language and my culture to the classrooms as a teacher to help them learn, whether it is in the elementary schools or at college, I would do it. (*Interview#2, p. 8*)

Xin's reflection indicated her awareness of her contribution to the local communities and her effort to make connections with local communities. Through intercultural communication, she hoped to provide local people with learning opportunities to ignite their interest in China and to correct their misconceptions about China.

I am musical. When Xin was a child, she went to training school to learn how to sing songs. Later on at elementary and secondary schools, she won several awards. She thought that being able to sing songs, dance, and draw are necessary skills and strengths for a teacher:

I really like singing. When I was in my field placement, sometimes children would ask me, “Can you sing a birthday song in Chinese?” I am really good at that. I sing very beautiful songs and I can sing that in Chinese. I feel it important for an elementary school teacher. Sometimes I would play music as background in the class. (*Interview#1, p. 4*)

I do not know why Xin did not talk much about her musical strength, but it is clear to me that she perceived being musical as an important and necessary skill for her future teaching.

Xin’s Self-Selected Professional Samples

Xin shared three professional work samples that she believed represent her strengths and strengths utilization. They are: her resume, a lesson plan on Columbus, and one reading response for her elementary social studies course.

Resume. Although I told Xin that she could bring any professional samples that she thought suitable, I was still a little surprised by her resume. Xin explained to me the reasons for her to bring her resume:

Resume can reflect what a person has done to the team or the community. It is a very important part of a person’s professional life because what is written here are always the most important things that the writer wants people to know. So it usually will manifest the writer’s strengths. Whatever I want people to know about me, I would put it on the resume. In addition, resume is not like coursework. All that is on resume should be true and it is something real about the writer. (*Interview #2, p. 7*)

It is clear that Xin regarded her resume as a good source to represent her strengths. On her three-page resume, Xin listed her language skills, overall GPAs, academic honors, responsibilities in each field placement, national teacher certificate in China, Mandarin speaking level A+ certificate, volunteer work, academic traveling and academic memberships. She expressed her pride in her bilingual capacity in Chinese and English and

her national teacher certificate. Her overall GPA for the master's degree is 3.4, and her exchange year overall GPA is 3.6. She was also on the dean's list and was awarded several scholarships and was selected as the Top Three Singer at college.

On Xin's resume, I noticed several volunteer work experiences on the university campus. For example, she volunteered in a panel discussion on multicultural studies at Stone University and presented as an invited guest speaker twice for the university Study Abroad in China program; she participated in Stone University Asian Night as a model for the Asian fashion show; and she presented Chinese food for the International Night. Outside the college campus, she volunteered in a local church to introduce Chinese language and culture to local children; and she paid with her own expenses to travel to the 2009 National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) annual conference for a volunteer job.

A reading response to social studies method course required reading. The reading response that Xin shared is a two-page written response to her social studies method course. When answering why she chose this reading response, Xin explained that it reflects her conscious effort to utilize her background knowledge to make a connection between the text and her personal experience back in China. In her words, "I felt that I am using my strengths to express my understanding to my professor" (*Interview #2, p. 4*). For example, both during the interview and in her reading response she discussed the war between Korea and United States and compared the term *the War of Korea* with what she learned in history class back in China. Xin told me how this response helped her social studies course professor:

The War of Korea intrigued me because the information provided by the editor about this war is different from the knowledge I learned in my history class in China. In China, we called it "the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea." So what I learned from the U.S. is different from what I learned in China. I am using these differences to respond to my assignment. I would mention in this assignment and other assignments what I have learned in China and why there are differences. By

reading my response, my professor will understand what a Chinese student's ideas are after reading American textbook. I think what I wrote would probably be a reflection for him. He would be more motivated to think, "What Chinese students can learn and what they want to express after learning in the U.S. for a while?" I think what I wrote benefits him. (*Interview #2, p. 4*)

Xin assumed that her social studies course professor might learn from reading her reading response because he would know about the history from another country's point of view and he would be inspired to learn more about international students' prior knowledge to better help them succeed academically.

Similarly, from both perspectives of *the War of Korea*, Xin argued for exposing students to different perspectives of the same historical events. She wrote:

It is important for children to learn history from multiple perspectives in order to get a comprehensive understanding of an event. I believe that they should learn history from many perspectives without any bias and stereotype. I would like to teach the Korean War by using literature books written by different authors who come from different countries and truly experienced the war in their countries. I would offer students opportunities to communicate with children from other countries. Students will benefit from communicating with children from different nations and getting information without any bias and stereotype. (*Personal reading response, p. 2*)

Learning to perceive *the War of Korea* from both American and Chinese perspectives inspired Xin to teach history from multiple points of views in her future teaching. Here she shared her future plans of helping her students to unlearn bias and stereotypes. What Xin expressed above reflected her advocacy of bringing diversity to the classrooms so that everyone can benefit. The essential part lies in the perspectives and experiences that people from different cultures and countries shared with American students and teachers.

A lesson plan on Columbus. The sample includes a three-page lesson plan, a rubric, grading feedback from her professor, and a brief self reflection. According to Xin, she chose this sample because "Columbus is a person that intrigued me" (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Although this lesson plan was not her best one, this is an interesting topic that she would like to

explore. For this lesson, Xin reviewed the life of Columbus with her students and taught them how to make a time line. She believes that this lesson showed her strength of bringing a diversity teaching philosophy through providing her students, professors and classmates with perspectives from a different race and culture when looking at events in history. As Xin reflected:

As a minority in the U.S., I feel that American success is deeply rooted in its diversity. People have different cultures, different interests and different developmental goals. They won't develop in one aspect only. It is multi-aspect. My interest in American history represents my teaching philosophy. I think this is my strength. Many people may not be interested in American history or diversity. But for me, I want to explore what diversity looked like at the start of American history... The required textbook is called *Rethinking Columbus*. This book is about how Europeans came to the United States and how they treated African Americans and native Indians. I felt so lucky that they did not come to Asia, because if they had been to Asia, China might have faced similar genocide. That is definitely not what I want to see. Columbus thought he arrived in India, but that was not. I felt so lucky that he was not in India. I shared with my classmates that I felt happy that Columbus did not find a new continent in Asia so he won't come to China. All students in my class thought I was humorous, but I was actually telling them my perspective. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

Unluckily, although Xin took the class opportunity to share her perspective of Columbus with her American classmates, they seemed not to take her perspective seriously. Some information that she perceived important and shared became “funny” in her peers’ eyes.

Connections between Xin’s Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Xin explicitly expressed her understanding of her own strengths and she was able to use different samples to show her strengths application. All her self-identified strengths were reflected through the samples that she presented. I saw a tight connection between the two as she explained. On the whole, the samples supplement and support the statements that she made regarding her strengths and strengths application in the interviews. Interviews and document analysis methods helped me observe a close connection between Xin’s self-perceived strengths and her samples. With Xin’s verbal explanation, I was able to see from

her selected lesson plan her diversity teaching philosophy, a strength that she identified in our second interview.

At the same time, I noticed from Xin's Columbus lesson plan some strengths that she did not identify in our interviews. For example, in the lesson process section, instead of introducing the definition of timeline immediately, she planned lots of questions to link students' prior knowledge to this new lesson. She prepared a T-chart to write students' answers related to important dates about Columbus on the left side and the corresponding information on the right side. She also allowed students to use their favorite markers to highlight information and dates that they believed interesting and impressive. I think scaffolding students' learning by building on their prior knowledge, giving students the freedom to use their favorite learning tools, and organizing information with a clear visual chart are also Xin's strengths as a teacher candidate. The professor's feedback on the grading rubric evaluated it as "clear and interesting" and the procedures section was given full points.

Circumstances Influencing Xin's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

There are two circumstances that Xin identified as encouraging her strengths application. First, as a Chinese living in a foreign country, she perceived China's growth and prosperity as one main circumstance that encourages her to utilize her strengths and contribute to the communities. For instance, inspired from reading newspapers and Internet postings that China is a hot topic among many Americans, Xin is more willing to share with them her language and culture. Second, she pointed out that fifty percent of her professors and twenty percent of her classmates expressed their interest in learning about her background, and this encouraged her to have an active communication with them:

As a Chinese person, I don't like talking too much about my culture. I see myself at the same stage as other people. But if someone asks me, I would definitely bring my

cultural background in the program and I believe that will bring some strengths to the program. Some of my professors actively brought my cultural background to the class. For example, I had one professor who invited me to share whether maps in China put China in the central position of the world map, like what many other countries did. He purposefully utilized my background to build in the class. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

Part of what Xin talked above seemed to contradict the strengths that she identified previously. Here, she mentioned that she would not talk too much about her culture, but she is willing to share when asked. Previously, one of her self-identified strengths is sharing her experiences and backgrounds in China with her classmates and professors. I interpret that although Xin is aware of her strengths and is willing to use her strengths in a variety of situations to contribute, she is influenced by two potentially discouraging circumstances. One circumstance comes from the Chinese culture. As a Chinese, Xin admitted that “Chinese are modest and they would definitely say ‘I don’t have strengths’” (*Interview #1, p. 9*). Another circumstance comes from Xin’s eagerness to be treated as equally as other students. She did not want to show off too much because she is very aware that as one of the few international students in Stone University, she can easily get people’s attention and focus. As an international teacher candidate, she also figured out from her field experience that her strengths are “add-ons” to make her teaching more engaging and effective, but she had to be able to teach different subjects and fulfill her teaching responsibility in order to meet the program requirements.

Xin identified three discouraging circumstances that impacted her strengths application. First, she hesitated to talk about China in group discussions when she felt prejudice from her classmates. Second, she would not talk much when her classmates showed no interest in Chinese culture. Third, due to her limited spoken English proficiency, Xin sometimes did not want to talk because she felt her classmates might be confused.

Chapter Five – Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates without Bilingual Backgrounds

In Chapter Five, I present the portraits of the remaining three participants in this study: Aaron, an African American male teacher candidate; Jaeneisha, an African American female teacher candidate; and Yalissa, an African American female teacher candidate. What sets them apart from the five participants in the previous chapter is that they are monolingual. What they share in common is that they all are African Americans and they all voiced particular interest in serving as role models for African American students. Yet both Jaeneisha and Yalissa have been exposed to diverse people due to their school or traveling experiences, which helped them to form a broader understanding of diverse learners who may be different from their own race. The format for each portrait in this chapter has the same organization as those presented in Chapter Four.

I start each participant portrait with a general narrative about the participant. Then I display the specific strengths that were identified by the participant, followed by the professional work samples selected by the participant. I tried to combine analysis findings from both interview data and document data as evidence. I then discuss the participant's perceptions as well as mine about the connections between their strengths and selected professional work samples. I end each portrait with the summary of the circumstances that were suggested by the participant that would possibly impact her/his strengths awareness and utilization with some cases followed by my interpretation.

Aaron

Aaron is a 23-year-old African American. He talks very fast. Aaron used “assertive, passionate, positive, organized, confident, understanding, like helping people and like companionship” (*Interview #1, p. 12*) to describe himself. He thought his friends and teachers saw him as an organized, goal-oriented, social and approachable person.

Aaron was born and educated in New York City. For elementary school and middle school, he went to public schools. For high school, he went to a private school. Aaron confessed that growing up in the city made him not only more competitive, but also made him stand out a lot in the university because he always contributes to class discussions.

As soon as getting his B.A. in American history and social studies in education from United University, Aaron continued his graduate study in the secondary special education program there. He will be dually certified in both social studies education and secondary special education. When I contacted Aaron through email for the first time in the summer of 2010, he was student teaching. Although he was very busy then, he replied immediately and said that he was willing to help me with this study.

Aaron had rich field experiences. During his undergraduate years, he did observation, practicum and student teaching in three different local city schools. During his one-year of graduate study, he student taught in two other local city schools. The undergraduate program impressed Aaron, but he was disappointed with his graduate program because some required courses did not prepare him well to teach students with special needs, and for his full time student teaching he was assigned to a host teacher who taught mathematics. Luckily, his host teacher found ways to put him into his content area classes. Aaron learned that he needed to be more flexible.

In his spare time, Aaron likes watching sports and playing video games. Every weekend he would go out for socialization to avoid being overstressed by his academic study. He perceived himself as a “work hard and play hard” (*Interview #1, p. 5*) person. He said playing video games made him compete with his friends. When he does something he always tries to do it better.

The biggest accomplishment that Aaron achieved so far is that he found a full-time teaching job before graduation. Aaron felt very excited because he perceived the job as an opportunity to be independent from his parents. He believes that he made it because his university provided him with lots of chances to gain teaching experience in the field. He is also proud of his award as a Ronald McNair scholar in his undergraduate years because this national program is “mainly for high-achieving minority students” (*Interview #1, p. 8*).

Aaron was disappointed that there are few teachers from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds in this country. Although he is aware that he is always the only minority student in his undergraduate and graduate studies, he is not bothered. Aaron attributed this comfort to his outgoing personality and his willingness to interact with others. Currently, Aaron is a full-time special education and social studies teacher in a public high school near New York City.

Aaron’s Self-Perceived Strengths

During our interviews, Aaron told me that “asking city people to talk about their strengths is not difficult” (*Interview #1, p. 12*) and that “my culture is highly influenced by the fact that I am from the city” (*Interview #1, p. 12*). So when I asked him what his strengths are, he seemed very comfortable with this topic. I noticed that he was very verbal and open-minded to share his thoughts with me.

I am young and I love using technology in my teaching. Raised in the technology era, Aaron uses computers every day and he is very familiar with Internet arenas such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Aaron admitted that his laptop was with him all the time and technology had been imbedded in his life. Unlike “some old-fashioned teachers in the city school district who seldom used technology in class” (*Interview #2, p. 7*), Aaron used technology in his teaching every day. He regarded using technology as his strength as a young and open-minded teacher. He believes that using technology academically made him connect with his students better and helped make his lessons more engaging. When talking about applying technology to his teaching, Aaron had a lot to say:

I use technology and I know it is important to my life and to my students’ life. My host teachers always told me that I was connecting to the students. When you lose connection, you lose students. I know at their age they love technology. They all use computers. Students love technology, so for some of the lessons, I allowed students to use the laptops and the WebQuest. They responded very well due to the video clips, visual images, and discussions. The websites were interesting. It is not just me giving them information and they taking notes. I mixed it up. I think this is my strengths as a teacher. I think the more outlets you use to teach students, the better they are going to respond to you. Technology makes things so easier for the teachers. I tried to be open-minded and make my lessons not boring. My biggest fear is that it is boring. I remember being bored at school. It is a terrible feeling. If I can minimize their boring, I can maximize their learning. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

As a young person born in the technology era, Aaron enjoyed using technology in his life.

Technology is part of him and he can easily integrate technology into his teaching. But more importantly, he realized that his students love and use technology in their daily life as well.

Using technology in his classroom not only serves as a way to allow his students to experience fun learning through diverse outlets, but also serves as a link to connect him closely with his students.

I always try to connect history to the present. Aaron stressed that if students saw history as past that had no connection with present and their daily life experience, they would

get bored and resist learning. So for his class, one main goal is to help students see the connection between history and the present. For example, when he taught a lesson on early civilization, he told students that “you are part of the American civilization” (*Interview #2, p. 2*). When he taught a lesson on the second industrial revolution, he showed students photo images of the first telephone and the currently popular iPhone, the first car and the most modern car. Aaron explained his ideas:

The theme of growth over time is what I incorporated into my lesson, because I think students need to learn history and it is important, but they feel boring, “Why am I learning this?” So I always tried to connect it to the present time. For example, when I taught some inventions during second industrial revolution, instead of teaching students the first phone and moving on, I wanted to make it to present time so students can see how things grow over time. They are making a connection between history and contemporary stuff. I think if students can make a modern contemporary connection, it will stay with them longer. If I have to teach them something that happened long time ago, and if I can connect with something right now, they can remember on the test and exams, they are going to like it. My students were born in 1995. They don’t care about what happened in 1895. They would say, “This is a hundred years ago and I do not care.” So this is what happened then, look what it happens now and how it changed over time. Just showing the continuum makes history concrete rather than being abstract. When any kind of lessons become abstract, that is when you are going to lose people. That is why I never like math, because math is abstract for me. I always tried to keep that in mind and tried to make connection so that they can remember it. (*Interview #2, p. 7*)

It is apparent that Aaron worked hard to make history more meaningful and appealing by connecting it with students’ daily experience in the contemporary time.

I am making connections with my students. As shown above, Aaron tried to connect with his students by using technology in his teaching. At the same time, Aaron believes that his African American identity and his life experiences in New York City all contributed to his close connection and good rapport with his students, especially with African American students. Interestingly, even before watching him teach, all his host teachers in his field placements told him that his African American identity is his big strength

for city school students. Aaron shared his perception of how his identify as an African American teacher played an instrumental role in a lesson that he taught:

I taught a lesson about oppression in the U.S. I am an African American and most of my students are African Americans. I am teaching them about oppression as a Black person, and it might be more effective than a White person. They are learning about racism, about oppressions, but from a person who is also a Black. That makes a better connection. I am the same color as you but I am teaching you about oppressions that have been done to us. I think they connect more when it is from a Black person whereas from a person that is not their race, because they might say, “that person is White and you don’t know what is going on and you just teach me.” Or “you are not teaching as passionately.” (*Interview #1, p. 10*)

Since ninety percent of students in this field placement were African American students living in United City, he believes that students saw a more sincere connection between him and them than a European American teacher. Besides being an African American teacher, Aaron believes that sharing similar city life experiences also helped him connect with city students better:

Students know that I am from New York City and I was raised in the city. I look like them and I probably have similar experiences that they have from the city because I am from the city. So lots of the time when they tell me their experience I can say, “That happens to me as well.” So the fact that we grew up in similar cities we probably have similar experience. When I tell them something, they know what I tell them is sincere because I have experienced it versus a person that they talked to who have never lived in the city and that person can only listen to what they say. So if a person has never been raised in a city, that person can’t relate to it and they can’t connect to it. So I felt that when students talked to me, they saw a sincere connection and the fact that I am from the city and I am a person of color that makes it much more sincere. (*Interview #1, p. 11*)

Aaron cited sharing similar living experiences with his students as important as sharing the same race with them. His living experience in New York City facilitated his close connections with his students in the field placement. Because making connections with students seemed very important to Aaron, I asked him why he is so eager to connect with his

students and he replied that making connections with students serves the ultimate goal of student success at school:

I think letting the students know you have connections with them is important because that allows us to go with the relationship. With students, building relationship is an integral part of helping them succeed. A lot of students feel they can't connect with you and they do not like you. Some would say, "I do not like you." If they do not like a teacher, they don't listen to that teacher and they won't learn. If I can build a relationship with the students, they are more likely to listen to me. So that is why I think VERY important to get connected and build the rapport with the students because if students like you, they would respect you and they would listen to you. (*Interview #1, p. 11*)

Because Aaron believes that connecting with students plays a vital role in helping students to succeed at school, he diligently made efforts to connect with them. As a teacher who not only shares same racial identity but also shares similar city experience, he expressed his confidence in teaching them more effectively than a European American teacher.

I am passionate about children and teaching. Aaron identified his passion about teaching and his students as his strength as a teacher. He perceives teachers as "very influential people" (*Interview #1, p. 3*) and he is grateful to his teachers who helped shape who he is today. He regards teaching as one way to improve education and "I want to be a role model for young children" (*Interview #1, p. 3*). He expressed his passion:

I am a passionate person and I am passionate about a variety of things. I am very passionate about children and I am passionate about teaching. I like to see people doing well. I would like to see people succeed and I love helping people. That is where the passion for my teaching comes from. Which profession can help so many people do so many great things? I can help students learn and help them be more confident and help them be better people. Helping them become smarter and helping them go to college. I am not the smartest person in the world, but I want to help students so that they can become great. So I just love helping and that is where my passion comes from. I like giving back to people. (*Interview #2, p. 9*)

To Aaron, teaching is a profession that focuses on helping others. He is passionate about teaching because he wanted to help others succeed and become who they want to be.

I have high expectations for my students and I want them to know they are smart. Aaron perceived having high expectations for each student as an important strength that he brought to education. He believes that all African American students deserve high expectations:

I have high expectations for my students. Regardless of what others say about them and the experiences that they have, I think that if you request a lot from students you hold the bar high, people are expected to step each bar. If it is low, they are going to reach low; if it is high, they are going to reach high. So the higher you need to put the bar, the better they are going to do. That is what I think and that is my philosophy. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

When I teach lessons, I try to support students and let them show their own knowledge. Yes, I am trying to teach them something, but they already know something. For example, I taught a lesson about cities for eighth graders. I asked them to brainstorm the city they go to school, and I asked them what they liked about United City and what they disliked about it. Students said they did not like the crime and the violence, but they liked the fact that they went to the same school and they went on the same bus. They also knew what a suburb was and they could name some suburbs. So always reinforce the fact that “you guys are smart and you have some to contribute to the lesson.” A lot of kids are not told they are smart all the time. I felt like it is necessary. (*Interview #2, p. 10*)

Therefore, Aaron verbally communicated to students that they are smart and he has high expectation for them. He also reinforced the idea through scaffolding their learning and through convincing them that they have knowledge and experience to contribute.

I am a social person and I contribute a lot to my education courses. Aaron is a very social person. He seemed very comfortable with African American identity. He reported that his social personality is a very important strength for him as a teacher because he had to communicate and collaborate with different people at schools:

I am going out and partying a lot. I can talk with anybody. I am a very comfortable person. I think going out and meeting with different people and having a good time makes you a confident person. So I am very comfortable with my own skin and I like myself as a person. I think that is very important for a teacher because if you are comfortable with yourself you can talk with anybody. So I can speak with students, parents, peers, staff members and administrators. (*Interview #1, p. 7*)

Aaron also pointed out that due to his approachable personality, he was able to get on well with his professors and classmates. He contributed a lot to class discussions, particularly during the time when nobody wanted to break the ice and talk. Professors knew they can always ask him questions and he can get the conversation going over time. In addition, as most of his classmates were not from cities, he shared with them lots of his schooling experiences in New York City when they discussed urban education:

Most students in the class went to suburban schools. So when they do talk about urban education, I can talk about it because I experienced it. I have shared with the class my experiences of going to an inner city middle school and elementary school. So when we talked about urban education, I actually experienced it. I can also bring that to the table. United University tries to teach lots of school of education teachers to improve urban education but lots of teachers have never been through urban education before. They have never been to until they got their placements and they go to experience it then. But I went through it so I can speak at the first account. I think that played a role too. (*Interview #1, p. 9*)

Therefore, being social and contributing to his classmates' understanding of urban education are the strengths that Aaron believes that he brought to his education courses.

Aaron's Self-Selected Professional Samples

The professional work samples that Aaron shared with me are four PowerPoint lesson presentations of U.S. and global history lessons that he taught in his field placements. Each is between 12 and 16 slides. Almost all include concise lesson structures, several vivid pictures, video clips and homework assignments.

Aaron told me that he used PowerPoint a lot in his teaching and he enjoyed using it. He felt that he could plan different activities by implementing technology in his teaching. For example, he could include video clips, photo images, WebQuests and pop songs in his lesson plans, so I was not surprised to see these PowerPoint slides. Aaron reported choosing these lessons because "you told me to bring some lessons that show my strength. My strengths as a

teacher are being entertaining, using technology, reaching out to the students, making things realistic, connecting history to the present, and these are my strengths” (*Interview #2, p. 7*). Interestingly, Aaron admitted that he did not do well in one of the lessons but he still wanted to show me because “these lessons embody who I am as a teacher, both strengths and weaknesses”, and they showed “the whole me” (*Interview #2, p. 7*). It seemed that showing him as a whole person from both sides is important.

During our second interview, Aaron brought his laptop and showed and explained to me these four PowerPoint presentations one by one. He then emailed me these PowerPoint presentations and I downloaded them on my laptop and printed a hard copy of each. Aaron believes that all his professional samples showed his strengths as a young teacher who “incorporated a variety of materials such as video clips, visuals, the internet, technology and diagrams in daily teaching” (*Interview #2, p. 6*) and his strengths of making lessons fun and interactive, connecting history to the present and making connections with students.

A PowerPoint on early civilization: Maya, Aztec and Inca. Aaron introduced that the main goal of this lesson was to help students understand and articulate what civilization means. As Aaron went through each slide of this lesson PowerPoint and explained, I saw lots of pictures, including colorful Mayan maize, tall Mayan pyramids, old ruins, Aztec crops, Aztec warriors with ancient dresses, Inca empire warriors, an Incan map, and some Incan artifacts. I also saw some video clip links and a WebQuest for students to click and explore the daily life of the Incan empire at their own pace. In our interview, Aaron elaborated on his thoughts when he designed and taught the lesson:

I showed students pictures, because I am a big visual. Here you can see pictures of Maya civilization. They can see the old ruins, and they can see where the temples were located. Students have only seen yellow corns and they have never seen black corn or red corn, so they were pretty surprised when I showed them the pictures. This

is very useful for them. I also provide video clips, so they click on this and it talked about the Maya calendar. Kids like gory things, and one thing about the culture is that they do sacrifice people. So I would video clip here to show some of the factual rituals, also about the Aztec warriors. Children like these and it made fun.... I borrowed the laptops from school library and asked students to click on the links and read information related to the Inca empire. They can read the information and gain their own insights and then answer the questions to the sheet. It is their own way to move their pace. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

In this work sample, Aaron applied his technology strength in teaching by combining various outlets with his lesson. He took further steps and borrowed laptops to assist student learning.

A PowerPoint on the second industrial revolution. This PowerPoint presentation is for an eighth grade U.S. history class. Aaron focused his lesson on three important inventions and their development throughout history: phone, car, and airplane. There are sixteen slides and the slides include background information of the Industrial Revolution in a short paragraph, captions for some photo images, the picture image of an oil light, picture images of a light bulb and power plant invented by Thomas Edison, picture images of Alexander Graham Bell's first telephone, some old-fashioned phones and the modern iPhone, photo images of Charles and J. Frank Duryea's first gasoline-powered automobile and modern cars, photo images of the Wright Brothers' first airplane and modern airplanes, some video clips, homework assignment and conclusion.

My impression on this PowerPoint is that Aaron used lots of visuals and audios in teaching and they vividly showed students the historical developments of each invention. Aaron explained that he purposefully selected photo images of these inventions at different points in history to provide students with an opportunity to see changes of each invention over time. To be more specific, he wanted to connect history to the present to make history lessons more appealing. Aaron elaborated in our interviews on this PowerPoint:

Students got to see the first telephone, which was created by Alexander Bell in 1856. That is what the first telephone looked like. These kids are 14 and 13 years old. They have never seen it before, like they asked where the button is. There is no button, and you have to turn and dial. They also got to see how telephone and cell phone grow over time.

We went from the phone to the car, now they have the first car and powered vehicle, then moved to fashion and beautiful car like BMW. If you click on this right here, it is a video of a car (with sound). So it is the scene from the movie Tokyo Drift, a movie that I think they all probably have seen before. It shows how the modern car looks like. Here is a pop song to it that students are familiar with, so I am incorporating audio learners, so the theme of the car is like, watching a car race, I match it by putting a popular song that they would know, to engage the audio learners in the lesson. They hear the music and they see the car racing... The next thing was the Wright brothers' airplane. So they can see what the first airplane looked like. If you click here, it shows you the actual first airplane flying. You go to the black and white video, and it is about one minute and half. All my clips are short.

They got to see the first airplane that fitted two people and the first airplane flight, and how the airplane started. Now you have jumbo warrior planes and fighter jet which is pretty cool. I also showed students war airplanes used in warfare. A lot of the time male students were very much engaged watching this action and drop bombs, watching flares around. So it is very interesting. I am big on visuals and this allows me to use visuals. The theme of growth over time is extremely important for this lesson. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

Obviously, this PowerPoint presentation again showed Aaron's active technology application in his teaching. At the same time, his strength of connecting history with the present and being a male teacher are also reflected through this sample, because he mentioned that showing students the continuum of history is an important theme and he mentioned that his male students enjoyed watching the warfare airplanes video.

A PowerPoint on oppression in the United States: Reconstruction era. This PowerPoint presentation includes eleven slides and it is for an eighth grade U.S. history class. The first slide explained in very simple written language the civil rights amendments and its impact on African Americans, and the Ku Klux Klan group who oppressed African Americans. The second slide showed the photo image of a KKK man in disguise riding on a disguised horse, and there is a YouTube link. The third slide talked about the poll tax. The

fourth slide focused on the Black Codes, segregation and Jim Crow laws, and another YouTube link. Slides six and seven talked about the Freedmen's Bureau and there is a photo image of it. Slides eight and nine provided a graphic organizer showing what occurred from slavery to freedom to rights denied. The last two slides had a homework assignment and one video clip link of *A Girl Like Me*. During our second interview, Aaron shared with me how he thought about this lesson:

This is a city school district and there are many African American students. Students already knew what K.K.K. was, but they have never thought about it. So I told them how and why they started K.K.K., and they got the chance to see what the first K.K.K. looked like. How they rode horses. Once again I did video clips and I showed them video clips of modern K.K.K. group. It is video of a Michigan K.K.K. meeting that occurred in 2003. Students are able to see that K.K.K started long time ago, but they still exist today. That is very important. I am trying to connect the past with the present. They would be my strengths as a teacher.

We also looked at some laws and segregation. This is a video on Jim Crow Laws. They have got to check all forms of oppression and they got to see Rosa Parks that most of them are familiar with. The music was there, they also got the visual of seeing the "colored only" sign, "no Blacks are allowed here" sign, these are real signs, and the person was alive, and here is a sign that no colored people belong here. So showing them that is not just reading from the textbook. I think that is important thing, especially comes to history. Then they will know it is important and it occurred and it can manifest itself today.

At the end of the class, I showed them a video called "*A Girl Like Me*." It is a statement video clip that was done by a student at their age. We had a very interesting discussion about this and after the lesson, the things coming out of these fourteen years old boys and girls were phenomenal. Just realize that I don't know how it happened but society teaches us black is bad and white is good. (*Interview #2, p. 5*)

Like previous samples, this lesson represented Aaron's technology strength. He used lots of visuals and audios in his teaching. It also represented his strengths of connecting history with the present, and making connections with African American students.

A PowerPoint on the big three: Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Stanford. This is a U.S. history PowerPoint presentation with twelve slides. The first four slides had students'

names in the home group and mixed group, and there are brief instructions on what students are expected to do during the class. The remaining slides have short paragraphs introducing the three business leaders: Carnegie, Rockefeller and Stanford. There are no visuals and audios. Aaron told me that he brought this lesson because this lesson did not go well and as a teacher it is important for him to know where he struggled. When he prepared the lesson, he planned a jigsaw activity that hoped to be done within a few minutes, but it turned out wrong and the class became chaotic. Aaron looked back on his flaws in planning and reflected:

I think the flaws I made as a teacher was that I should have done a smaller jigsaw activity before so they would get familiar with it. This is the first time I have done jigsaw, so they had no idea. I assumed that they may know how to do it, I assume that I would give them experience within 5 minutes, when actuality, jigsaw is very difficult. This may take you four or five lessons to learn how to do it properly. I realized that I need to model for them how to do it and make sure to do smaller jigsaw. I did a big jigsaw. I just learned from it and I am thankful for that experience. *(Interview #2, p. 5)*

Aaron focused on his flaws while explaining this lesson, which surprised me because that was not what I expected. It seemed that he purposefully included this lesson plan in his professional samples to represent him as a whole person, with both strengths and weaknesses.

Connections between Aaron's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Aaron explicitly voiced his strengths and the samples that he chose effectively exhibited how he utilized his strengths in planning and teaching lessons. I saw a close connection between his strengths application and these samples. His professional samples support and provide strong evidence of how he used his strengths in teaching K-12 students. And these samples made it possible for him to explain his strengths in a more concrete way.

During the first interview, he mentioned his strengths such as being an African American, being young, being a male teacher, living in the city and being social, all of which

contributed to his good connection with his students. During the second interview, he identified incorporating technology into his teaching, linking history with the present, and having high expectations for students as his strengths. On the surface, these strengths looked different, but many of them are highly related. For example, during the second interview, with the support of the samples and his explanations, Aaron explained his strengths in more details and I was able to better understand his strength of being young that he identified in the first interview because as a young teacher, he integrated lots of technology in his teaching, compared with some old teachers who “just talk” (*Interview #2, p. 7*).

Although during the second interview, Aaron mentioned his strength of making history interesting and meaningful by connecting the past with the present – a strength that he did not address during the first interview, I believe this strength is related to his strength of making a connection with students because as he pointed out, students feel connected when they see a connection between history and their present life experience.

Aaron claimed that he contributed a lot to class discussions by breaking the ice to talk and by sharing urban education experiences, but I could not find evidence of that since all his professional samples were the lessons that he taught in his field placements.

Circumstances Influencing Aaron’s Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Aaron identified three circumstances that encouraged his strengths application. First, he claimed that he tried to use his strengths in the classrooms after knowing his strengths, which indicated that being aware of his strengths is the important step before he consciously capitalized on his strengths in teaching.

Second, he is consciously aware that “knowing that I want students to be successful helps me make sure that I did as best as I can” (*Interview #1, p. 11*). His passion and love about students is an encouraging circumstance for him to utilize his strengths in teaching.

Third, students’ feedback on his lessons and comments from supervisors and professors also encouraged his strengths capitalization in teaching. For instance, some students verbally said to him, “I like you teach us because I am not bored and your lessons were interactive and fun” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). After observing his lessons, some of the supervisors said to him, “you are a good emerging teacher” (*Interview #1, p. 10*). To summarize, his love of teaching, his strengths awareness and being recognized by others have encouraged Aaron to continue applying his strengths in teaching.

Jaeneisha

Jaeneisha is an African American woman in her early 20's. She displayed a sense of honesty and frankness during the interviews. She used "open-minded, easy-going, spontaneous, laid-back, very conscious, and try to keep a broad perspective and spectrum" (*Interview #1, p. 4*) to describe herself. She reported that her friends and family members saw her as a "positive and happy person most of the time" who "don't complain a lot and stay focused" (*Interview #1, p. 6*).

Jaeneisha is a senior at Stone University, majoring in elementary education. She has finished all her coursework and planned to graduate in May 2011. She had some field experience. All her pre-student teaching field placements were in an urban setting—a city where she was born and educated. Up to this point in her program of study, her field experiences included observing in first and second grade classrooms and teaching a few lessons in a fifth grade class. Through working experiences with the summer camp programs as a counselor and the summer school program as a teacher, she gained lots of practical experience with students.

Jaeneisha had mixed feeling about her program experience. She knew that her program had a good reputation, but she was very frustrated by her experiences with some professors who treated her like a child. She expressed to me her strong wish of being treated equal by her professors. But several professors, from her perspective, "hold lower expectation for me, and expect that I need more help" (*Interview #2, p. 2*) by talking to her very slowly or patting her on her back asking, "Is everything okay?" (*Interview #2, p. 2*) She interpreted that as "they think they are doing the right thing and they are good teachers to

reach out to the poor student. It is like condescending me and making me feel like a child” (*Interview #2, p. 2*).

Jaeneisha used the words *intimidating* and *lonely* to express her feelings of being the only minority teacher candidate in her education courses. Although her program aimed at preparing future teachers for urban schools, there were no other minority teacher candidates. Jaeneisha felt the pressure of having to represent and speak for all African Americans in class discussions. At the same time, she was intimidated because she felt she was being judged.

In spite of struggling with her negative program experiences, Jaeneisha is proud of being able to finishing all her coursework and she regarded completing all the required coursework as her biggest accomplishment, as there were lots of drop-outs in her cohort. She chose teaching because of her eagerness to work with children. She was also inspired to teach by her aunt, who was a teacher in a local elementary school before retirement.

In her spare time, Jaeneisha likes watching movies and meeting with her friends. She stressed that “I always have lots of friends from different cultures. I always have a mixed and I never have just Black” (*Interview #2, p. 8*). She also enjoys tap dancing and doing crafts. She considered herself to be very good at crafts and she taught art lessons as a summer school teacher. After graduation, Jaeneisha would like to go to graduate school to get a master’s degree in special education before teaching.

Jaeneisha’s Self-Perceived Strengths

Although during our interviews Jaeneisha confessed that “sometimes it is hard to say your strengths because sometimes you don’t just say that” (*Interview #2, p. 5*), she was still able to tell me what her strengths are.

I am good at troubleshooting. The number one strength that Jaeneisha self-identified is her troubleshooting skill. Although based on the interviews, I think a more suitable word would be *early prevention* or *preparedness*, I used her original word *troubleshooting* in the following paragraphs to show her perspective. In her eyes, her older sister who is twelve years older than her is kind of more a mother than a sister because she is “always very structured and prepared” (*Interview #2, p. 3*). She observed the benefits that her family got from her older sister’s preparation for unexpected events in life:

My older sister always has a back-up plan. She always thinks what could happen and she is always preparing for the worst situation, so she is always prepared. Her preparedness always comes in handy. It is a positive thing because we always need whatever she has, the knowledge, extra tires, or whatever. We always need her extra knowledge and extra back-up plan. We always need it. So, when I see a positive reaction based on her organized nature, I just want to be like that because I see the benefit of it. (*Interview #2, p. 3*)

Jaeneisha thought this strength came from the observation of her older sister through real life experience. She is able to transfer the value of possessing the troubleshooting skill from daily life to teaching at school. She believes that troubleshooting is a very important practical skill for all teachers:

I think it is important because the more you can assess and look for, the more you can take into account and think that may not be the best situation for the child, the less risk like accidents or injuries. The more chance you have students grasp the topic, the more smoothly things will go. When we got to the playground, I noticed a beehive. You want to make sure that you get them out of the playground to avoid the bee hive. A lot of children could be stung and there would be lots of injuries. It is the same thing as the classroom type of settings. I think the more you can avoid the better. Especially in a classroom setting, you want to make sure that the lesson flows smoothly and that each child has a fair understanding of what you are teaching. (*Interview #1, p. 4*)

The beehive example illustrated her alertness to the danger and her early prevention skills as a teacher. She valued her troubleshooting strength because that made her class safe and she could control situations before they got bigger.

Jaeneisha also gave me a couple of examples to show her troubleshooting application as a future teacher. The first example is about how she persuaded a student who stole something from the school book fair to return the stolen item:

There is a little girl in the fifth grade class. There was a book fair at the library. She only had one dollar with her. Most books there are five or three dollars. So when we went back to the classroom after the book fair, she had a toy with her and I asked her, “How you get the toy?” She replied, “My friend bought for me.” I had a feeling that her friend haven’t bought for her. I told her to bring it back. I ended up talking with the librarian, and asked whether anyone has donated any money or something, she finally was able to get a little smaller thing. It is very important for me to talk with her. I know the situation but it is still not right to steal and I tried to help her before she got into bigger trouble. (*Interview #1, p. 4*)

For Jaeneisha, being able to talk with her student and persuade her to return the stolen item illustrated her strength of solving problems. I think the word *troubleshooting* is more appropriate here than in the bee hive example. Jaeneisha believes that the example below also showed her troubleshooting skill:

Before you start the lesson, make sure everyone is in the right spot and make sure as low catastrophe can happen as possible. I was in one classroom and I have another girl in that classroom observing with me. When it was getting into the lesson, there were two children who should not sit together but they were sitting together. Before she started, I run over and told him to go to one table and her to go to another. Because at that time as long as they got together, I saw a little thing fell onto the floor. Other children looked around and said, “Look at that, look at that.” It is very distractible to the lesson. I tried to keep them as quiet as possible so that she can finish her lesson. (*Interview #1, p. 4*)

It seemed that Jaeneisha used early prevention and good preparation to assess situations and she tried to provide a good learning environment for students. Getting to know students is an important step for her preparation and early prevention because as she realized, it helped her see students’ different needs and arrange classroom settings accordingly.

I can quickly respond when unexpected situations happen. Jaeneisha is aware that her reflexes improved throughout several years of experiences as a summer program

counselor. I asked her what “reflex” is and she answered, “Reflex is like a high response and a quick action. If something were to happen, I would like to see a little bit and keep going, rather than stopping the flow of the classroom” (*Interview #2, p. 4*). So to her, being able to respond quickly is her strength. Her calmness of not stopping the flow of the classroom when unexpected situations happened reflected her rich experience.

Jaeneisha noticed this strength when she compared how she and her teammate responded differently to an urgent situation in this summer program’s art class:

You don’t know what will happen. What if someone has a bloody nose? It is so hot around the beginning of July. I had a little girl, like, I have never seen this bad of nose bleeding. I had to care about her safety and get her to the bathroom as soon as possible. I had a colleague in the classroom. She is an example of “being good at art does not make a good teacher.” She studies Art. So a lot time I noticed like, I don’t want to say bossy, but I was like directing her, “You do this, and I do that.” Like a leader kind of. She kind of had to be taught. The goal is not to disrupt the whole class, because once children get off task, they will get chaotic. So I have to respond as soon as possible without disturbing the class. It drains lots of your energy, and you have to keep everyone together. (*Interview #2, p. 4*)

According to Jaeneisha’s description above, she responded very quickly and behaved like a leader when something unexpected happened at school. This is in sharp contrast with what she told me during the interview that as the only minority teacher candidate in the university classroom, “I don’t think I am a good leader. I would tend to just listen and react upon what other people say about that” (*Interview #2, p. 6*). I think she possessed and showed leadership quality, especially when difficult situations came up unexpectedly in actual contexts.

I always like working with kids and I want to be a role model for African American students. When we talked about choosing teaching as a profession, Jaeneisha expressed her love of working with all children. At the same time, her concerns about homogeneity in suburban schools showed her supportive attitude toward school diversity. She expressed her comfort with, confidence in, and connection with African American

students. She would use some small talk such as “how about your mom, I like your hair, how to spell your name” (*Interview #2, p. 7*) to relate to her students. She explained why she is more willing to work with African American students:

I went to the city school and there are children that I would like to work with, because the suburban schools are so homogeneous. I think my racial background has a lot to do with how I teach when I work with a class full of many African American students. Or at least a couple of African American students, because a lot of the time I felt a little bit connection and confidence in knowing that there are other African American students in the classroom and the way they look at me kind of different from other children, I guess. It makes me confident. On the other hand, it is about a classroom full of Caucasian students. I think White students will automatically think you are cool because you are Black. They just assume that I know music or something. Students won't listen to the class unless you are pretty or you walk into the classroom with a box of chocolate bar or something. But it is different from what I can do with a classroom full of African American students. Then there is no assumption and no stereotype. Be bit of confidence and empowerment. I like teaching in an urban setting because in the Black classroom you feel more connection. (*Interview #1, p. 6*)

Jaeneisha's comfort with and confidence in teaching African American students came from her familiarity with her students who shared the same race and similar city school experience as her; more importantly, as a young teacher, she feels more connected and safe to be with students who have no assumptions and stereotypes about her.

Jaeneisha is aware of the important role that she can play in African American students' lives and she wants to be a good role model for them:

A teacher's role is not a small one; in fact, it is one of the most important roles in a child's life. I am a college student and I am in their class to learn to become a teacher, because I know some people that they met never go to college before, so I am trying to think of myself in a positive way. Every experience that they had with me can be transferred into their other experiences later. So I try to interact with children in a positive way. I try to be as a good role model. I try to ask about their future plan and know them better to see if there is anything I can add. I also think my racial color also make parents feel at ease. Parents of students of color, I always make them feel comfortable and better and at ease, and give them my interpretation of their children. (*Interview #2, p. 7*)

Jaeneisha made efforts to be a good role model for her students, but she did not want to attribute her commitment to her African American identity. Instead, she attributed it to her realization of the vital role that teachers play in their students' lives. Similarly, Jaeneisha did not want to use her race as an excuse:

I don't want to use my color as an excuse. I don't think my color is a bonus, it is just a reality. I don't use it to do anything better than anyone else. I am trying to be friendly and get to know them better. I am trying to make parents be more at ease. But I think this is my personality. I prefer to teach African American students and that makes me feel more comfortable, but we don't know who our students would be. You can't always rely on somebody in the classroom to make you feel comfortable.
(*Interview #2, p. 8*)

I am not sure whether her perspective of perceiving her race not as a bonus but as a reality can explain her comparatively lighter emphasis on race-related strengths than her practical strengths such as troubleshooting and reflex.

Jaeneisha's Self-Selected Professional Samples

During our second interview, Jaeneisha brought three professional work samples. They are: one educational philosophy, one field experience summary, and one English language arts lesson plan.

Educational philosophy. The first professional work sample that Jaeneisha shared with me is a two-page educational philosophy paper. She explained that she was very proud of it as it took her so long to finish. She also explained that her original educational philosophy was seventeen pages long, but she was asked by her professor to condense it.

When I asked Jaeneisha what strengths were reflected in her educational philosophy, she hesitated for a few minutes and then pointed her fingers at some lines from her educational philosophy and read:

While working with students, one must always have rules and guidelines. During this educational caravan there must be rules to the road. With no strict regimented

guidelines in place, students will usually get into mischief. An ideal classroom needs to have rules and disciplinary standards as well as a comfortable air of ease and enjoyment. A class without a specified course of action when a student misbehaves is not likely to be a very successful classroom. When a student does deliberately act out of line, necessary steps need to be taken to prevent and correct misbehavior and help children develop a sense of self discipline.

Children should be disciplined first and foremost with love and respect. Children should never be made to feel inferior or inadequate to any of their other classmates or their teacher. I believe any form of punishment a teacher chooses to use must include speaking to the student. A teacher must explain what the student has done wrong, and why that behavior is not okay. Punishment must also include the students having some sort of alone time. During this time a student can reflect on their bad behavior and why it was unsuccessful. (*Personal educational philosophy, p. 2*)

The paragraphs above were read by Jaeneisha during our second interview. It took her a few minutes to connect what she read with her strengths. After a few minutes' pause, she told me that these matched with her troubleshooting skill and her advocacy of using discipline and rules in a positive way to make classroom learning as smooth as possible. I found that she also addressed the unexpected events in life in this sample. For example, she wrote:

The journey to an education is filled with many twist and turns, unknown traffic, road blocks, detours and dead ends. Fortunately for those seeking education, there is a very useful tool in each classroom. There is a guide that will be more than happy to assist them on their way. A map that may not have every surprise charted, but can show where every pit stop to recovery is located. A teacher. Though the learning adventure might be scary, it is more than worth it. (*Personal educational philosophy, p. 2*)

I interpret that the above statements are consistent with her arguments that teachers can influence students in positive ways, and their impacts are especially important when students need teachers' guidance and supports in unexpected learning adventures.

Jaeneisha believes this sample "is from the students' perspective and how they see education" (*Interview #2, p. 6*). In this sample, I found some sentences that reflected her understanding of students and their nature. For instance, she wrote:

I believe the nature of children is to move and make noise. That is the one thing every child does equally without a distinction between grade level, gender, or brain development. Every child can, and will, move and make noise. I have always believed that it was unfair of teachers to ask a child to completely stop one of their most basic instincts, by making them sit still for an extended period of time. To be a good teacher, you have to understand that children were not designed to squarely intake information at school. They were designed to run, play, eat, sing and dance as well. Children are often most productive when they can move and make noise. Although not every subject can be taught by a fun game or song, I believe it would help children establish connections for that subject if they learned it in an atmosphere where they could release their energy, feel comfortable, and have fun. (*Personal educational philosophy, p. 2*)

I agree that this sample reflected her strength of loving and caring children because the words that she used were student-centered and filled with love.

Field experience summary. In this field experience summary, Jaeneisha listed four courses' names and the related field experiences, followed by a short summative paragraph.

Jaeneisha explained to me how she perceived this summary:

Each entry is a reflection of what I did for my placement. This was my very first year and we had to go to an urban school. I think a good thing that is reflected from my entry is my ability of being conscious of what is going on. The ability to learn from each experience you have really builds to your repertoire and makes you more prepared and capable as a teacher. It makes you constantly aware of anything. Always use your experience you have now later. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

Jaeneisha regarded being able to consciously know and reflect on what is going on in the field as her strength and she believes this sample reflected this strength. At first sight, this is a newly self-identified strength, but I interpret it related to her troubleshooting strength because she mentioned previously that her troubleshooting skill came from her years of serving experiences as a camp counselor and life learning experiences from her sister.

On her summary of one of her field placements, I noticed Jaeneisha's pride in being able to relate to students, especially to African American students, and her consciousness of

the potential empowerment that teachers have on minority students' lives. Below is an account that I noticed from her filed placements summary:

The children of this school came from low economic and multi-cultural backgrounds. Observing in a school like this was unlike any experience I had ever had in school before. I was able to work side by side with other teachers who, in some instances, were the only positive influences in a child's life. I was personally touched the first day I walked into my observation class. One of the first students I met, X, told me that I looked just like her mom, who had passed away. The comment has stayed with me over the course of my education at Stone University. I was flattered to even be recognized amongst someone so important in her life. (*Personal field placement summary, p. 1*)

Although Jaeneisha did not make the connection in the interview, I think her thoughts here is consistent with her strength of serving as a good role model for and relating to all students, especially African American students. The example illustrated her positive impacts on her students' lives.

Reader Theatre lesson plan. This work sample is titled Readers Theatre, which is a lesson designed for second grade English language arts class. Jaeneisha explained that this lesson required children to create their own plays and then read them aloud. This lesson plan was composed of seven sections: learning objectives; assessment; state learning standards; materials; lesson process; "if time"/extensions; and references. When I asked her to connect this sample with her strengths, she identified it with her troubleshooting strength:

I think definitely the troubleshooting. Knowing in advance that having a group of students helps. That is second grade, third grade level. It could be very chaotic. We are going to need extra adults in the room. Thinking about what potential things could happen really helped prepare for the lesson. I walked around and checked each group to make sure they are on task. That would be the opportunity to use my reflex skill as a teacher to see if they are not on task, what I can do to get them all on task? If there is a problem, how can I solve it? (*Interview #2, p. 7*)

Although Jaeneisha thought this sample reflected her troubleshooting strength, I saw her strengths of knowing her students well, good preparation and reflex as well.

The second strength that Jaeneisha believed was reflected in this sample is her open-mindedness as a teacher. This is a strength that she mentioned for the first time. She tended to keep an open mind toward teaching. She did not expect her lessons to go in a certain way and did not expect students to finish the assignments in one particular way. Instead, she encouraged students to express themselves in their own ways:

Another strength I would say is open-mindedness. I did not expect the lesson to be in a certain way. There is no restriction. What is the right word? I won't say, "You can't do this. You can't do that. You can't make a story of a flying pony because ponies don't fly." They can use their imagination. There is a teacher I was watching in the summer and when she asked children to color lions, she always said, "Pick brown, yellow or orange." You know, students could color the lions pink. There is nothing wrong with it and that is how they want the lions look. As long as they are on the task and do things appropriately, I don't have problems with that. So I really think it is a good thing to allow students to express themselves in their own way as long as it is appropriate. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

During our second interview Jaeneisha suggested that I go to her electronic portfolio website to get more on her professional samples and she even wrote down the website address, her username and password. But she did not take time to explain in her words which samples on her electronic portfolio represent her strengths and strengths applications. I do not know why she did not bring these samples to our second interview. It might be because she was too busy to go over all these documents. It is also possible that the strengths exhibited through these samples are not perceived by her as important as her dominant strengths.

Later I went to her website and found more professional writings that she prepared for her portfolio, including several lesson plans, her educational autobiography, her field experience reflection, her teaching philosophy and examples of technology usage in her field placement teaching. In the following sections, I describe some of the contents of these writings found in her online portfolio as her supplementary professional work samples. The two chosen ones, in my judgment, are connected with each other and reflected two salient

strengths of hers: her strength of embracing diversity and her strength of applying technology to teaching.

Educational autobiography. Jaeneisha's two-page educational autobiography introduced her personal schooling experiences as a student and how that experience impacted her perspective of diversity as a teacher candidate. I chose this sample because I think this sample reflected Jaeneisha's strength of welcoming diversity. In this paper, Jaeneisha wrote several paragraphs about her elementary school, a diverse setting that helped contribute to her perspective of school diversity:

The elementary school I attended is one of the most diverse schools in the state. When I attended this school there were many students from all over the world, including refugees from war torn countries. I am very proud of my background, and I feel like it has had a great deal of influence on my educational career, and on my decision to become a teacher. I met my best friend in elementary school. She was a reflection of the diverse multi-cultural atmosphere at my school. She is a family first born Vietnamese American who, like me, was born in this city... (*Personal educational autobiography, p. 1*)

Jaeneisha learned from writing this educational autobiography that her prior experience in the diverse school setting influenced her decision to become a teacher. Similarly, her high school experience also played an important role in shaping her diversity perspective:

Just like the other schools I had attended, my high school was an extremely diverse school, full of culture, violence, languages and lessons... I became more involved in the multi-cultural life of high school than I had been at any other school. During our time there, a lot of African Refugees began migrating to my hometown, and a lot of these people became students in my high school. It was quite a shock to me to suddenly see so many students dressed in native African garb along the school hall ways. It was also a change that was not welcomed at first by my classmates. Over time though, I began to appreciate these students. As a member of the culture club I worked in the ESL department as a tutor. I met students who were Lost Boys, or former members of the rebel armies in Sudan and the Congo. Meeting them totally changed my perception of diversity. It also encouraged me to do my absolute best work in school. I really wanted to be an example, someone other students could look up to. (*Personal educational autobiography, p. 2*)

Meeting students from different parts of world in her school life helped explain Jaeneisha's advocacy of diversity as a teacher candidate. In this way, she not only enjoyed working with African American students, but also enjoyed working with students from different countries.

Examples of technology implementation in teaching. In this document, Jaeneisha summarized five media types that she used in her teaching: audio story; game in education; enhanced podcast; educational movie; and fun movie project. Jaeneisha never said explicitly during the interviews that using technology in teaching is one of her strengths, but based on what I read from her writing of classroom usage of technology, I think she is familiar with media and she showed her technology strength to meet various learners' needs. I tend to conclude that using technology appropriately is one of her strengths because the ways she used technology in classrooms varied and it is incorporated with other teaching strengths.

Using an audio story is one way that Jaeneisha brought technology into her class teaching. She used a book titled *The Greedy Triangle* for grades one to three. She read aloud, recorded the story and played it to all students. As she reflected:

This particular type of media brings great value to students and teachers because it is accessible at school and potentially at home. With a few simple directions, children can listen to this story by themselves, as many times as allowed... Though math is strongly discussed in this book, there is also a minor theme of friendship and self-acceptance. This project addresses cultural responsiveness teaching by, teaching students that it is okay to be different and to be the same. Auditory learners will most likely be attracted to this type of media, because this information can only be taken in by listening to it. (*Personal examples of technology usage in education, p. 1*)

Jaeneisha argued that she chose audio story because it meets the needs of auditory learners and makes learning accessible at home and at school. The book that she selected did not serve for math purpose only; instead it integrated friendship and self-acceptance themes into math learning so it helps students know more about differences and diversity.

Jaeneisha also brought education games to her teaching. She explicitly argued how the game would benefit some learners in her fifth grade social studies class:

This particular lesson will involve competition, social interaction, and some form of prize. Because this game will be used in review for an approaching test and cover many of the test questions, even the losers of the game should feel that the experience was enjoyable, and feel confident in their level of understanding. The learning styles that will most likely be attracted to this form of media learning are auditory and visual learners. (*Personal examples of technology usage in education, p. 2*)

By adapting a popular television game show such as *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, Jaeneisha believes that she introduced competition and joys in her test reviews.

The third way of using technology in the classroom is to show students a podcast.

Jaeneisha explained in one example:

This media project is a brief podcast on proper eyeglass cleaning techniques and why it is important to keep your eyeglasses clean. This type of media in education is important because it is concise to the point, and a resource that students could refer back to again and again. With 5 or 6 of these media learning podcasts on different instruction, a substitute teacher would never have to worry over properly covering content for an excused teacher... Instructors must make sure they make the time to explain to their class that there is nothing wrong with wearing glasses. Visual learners would probably be the most attracted to this form of media learning. I believe auditory learners would also benefit greatly from this podcast. (*Personal examples of technology usage in education, p. 3*)

According to Jaeneisha, the benefits of using podcast in the class included its conciseness and convenience to refer to. The information expressed through this example told students that it is okay to wear glasses. Again, students learned to appreciate differences.

The fourth way of using technology is showing students educational movies. In this sample, Jaeneisha showed her fifth graders a movie named *The Bombing of Hiroshima in 1945*. She reflected:

This media project is an excellent way of using the traditional idea of reading a story to a class. I foresee media projects like this one having a great impact on classrooms. Particularly for sick children or students who happen to miss a lot of school, this type of instruction can help keep teach them from their own homes so that they will be

able to stay on track and not fall behind in their education... The Hiroshima bombing is not even considered a major event in History, because it did not affect the U.S. and the entire event happened in another country. Students will have to know a little about Japan, such as where it is, and what is known for, before they can begin learning of this one specific event. (*Personal examples of technology usage in education, p. 4*)

Showing educational movies is another way that Jaeneisha used technology in her teaching. She listed the benefits of this type of technology. What impressed me is the movie that she selected purposefully for her students. As she wrote, showing students the Hiroshima bombing history with images is more effective than reading the story to them.

Jaeneisha also used fun movie projects for her first graders. As she reflected:

This form of media is a story read and displayed with pictures in a podcast movie form. The book used is called *You're Not My Real Mother!* This form of media allows for a convenient 'story time' atmosphere, and that can be educational as well as effectively entertain children. It has the ability to have many students with literacy problems because it not only correctly recites words, it also visually displays them as well... The book not only addressed the issue of adaptation but it also touches race contentment and diversity. This book can be used as an opportunity to teach children about acceptance as well. Our culture is extremely diverse, and that diverse needs to be interjected into the classroom. (*Personal examples of technology usage in education, p. 5*)

Jaeneisha introduced the benefits of having movie projects at the beginning and explained in detailed example of her usage of this type of technology in her teaching. I was also impressed by the theme that she wanted students to learn.

As I mentioned previously, I was interested in a variety of technologies that Jaeneisha applied in her teaching. More importantly, I was impressed by the examples that she used to provide the explanation. I noticed that the themes that Jaeneisha selected mirrored her teaching philosophy of bringing diversity issues to her students. In some way, her strength of using technology and her diversity perspective mingled together, as the examples in her technology usage addressed a variety of issues such as differences and sameness, racial

diversity, being comfortable with who you are, and being empathetic to events that happened in a different country.

Connections between Jaeneisha's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Jaeneisha explicitly pointed out her strengths. I saw a connection between her professional work samples and her strengths and strengths application. Yet when I asked her to explain how her samples represented her strengths and strengths application, she seemed to need more time to make connections. One possible reason is that Jaeneisha did not have enough time to go over her professional samples before sharing, because when I interviewed her, she was busy with teaching in a very intensive summer school program.

The word *troubleshooting* is an important word for Jaeneisha and it seemed to me she used it inaccurately during our interviews. She used it frequently to describe her skill of preventing, assessing situations, and getting ready for unexpected events at schools.

Troubleshooting should be used to describe the problem-solving skill when problems come.

I observed that the samples that Jaeneisha brought to me during our second interview showed strengths not identified earlier. For instance, she pointed out that her reader theatre lesson plan reflected her open-mindedness strength as a future teacher, but she did not address this strength in our first interview.

Inspired by Jaeneisha's recommendation, I went to her portfolio website and chose two extra professional samples to represent her strengths and strengths application. Two strengths identified by me based on these two samples include her strength of embracing school diversity and her strength of using technology in teaching. But these two strengths were not identified by Jaeneisha.

Circumstances Influencing Jaeneisha's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Jaeneisha identified three circumstances that negatively influenced her strengths application. Although she highly valued teachers' practical skills such as troubleshooting, she did not think her program and professors valued her strengths. Therefore, the chief circumstance that Jaeneisha believes discouraged her troubleshooting strength application came from her program's grade-oriented and structured emphasis. She showed her frustration:

I don't think education classes give opportunities for me to show my strengths. I think a lot of time they were so structured and so grade oriented. I do not think they will change. Lots of professors only saw my weaknesses, such as having trouble writing details of papers, or having trouble organizing project. They don't have a chance to see my potential, but they do always see everything on paper. On paper I am not going to be a good teacher... Sometimes I thought the program was ineffective, 'cause I thought like being a student is not what I am good at. The program is very grade-oriented: if you get bad grade, you are going to be a **bad** teacher. It is not based on my experience or personality, or my disposition with children; it is all based on grades. So I guess being in the class is not good. I am not going to be a good teacher. It is based on the lesson plans. It is not based on anything else. It is just based on grades of paper. It is not based on what they saw me, my interaction with children, just grade-oriented, which frustrated me a lot. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

Under this situation, Jaeneisha did not think education classes ever gave her opportunities to show her strengths and she felt passive as a teacher candidate and felt frustrated to be reminded of her weaknesses instead of her strengths.

Secondly, Jaeneisha felt intimidated to share her strengths with others in her program when nobody seemed willing to listen. Thirdly, Jaeneisha identified challenging students as a discouraging circumstance for her strengths application. Although she tried to foresee some possible troubles and plan proper actions, she felt intimidated by some difficult children due to her lack of rich teaching experience.

I interpret that one important circumstance that encourages Jaeneisha to apply her troubleshooting strength in teaching comes from her understanding of the value of using this strength in daily life and teaching. Being able to foresee that students will benefit from her strength application reinforces her strengths awareness and enhances the possibility of capitalizing on this strength in her future teaching.

Yalissa

Yalissa is an African American woman in her 40's. She is very friendly and very talkative. Yalissa used “mother, funny, short, trustworthy, independent, outgoing, resilient, approachable, willing to tolerate, good nature, and African American” (*Interview #2, p. 7*) to describe herself. In her friends' and family members' eyes, she believes that she is a person with sense of humor who “makes jokes out of different situations” (*Interview #1, p. 4*).

Yalissa is a first-year graduate student in the M.S. dual program in Adolescent English Education and Special Education at Meadowland College. She has been a teaching assistant in a suburban school district for two years. She worked as a teaching assistant for children with special needs during the day and attended her classes on campus at night.

Yalissa grew up and was educated in United City. She decided to join the military after studying at a college in Georgia for a year. Then she served in the army for fifteen years. In the military, she was an instructor for two years teaching report writing, liaison, and interpersonal skills. Yalissa appreciated her military experience because it taught her to be more sensitive to people's needs and to have the courage to stand up and do the right things.

At the time I interviewed Yalissa, she had only one practicum field experience. She worked with one student in her field placement. Her student was an eighth grade student with special needs. Yalissa enjoyed this good learning experience because her student changed her perspectives on autism. She felt her professors are genuine and she was satisfied with her program. She was surprised to find that there are few males and fewer African American teacher candidates in the program, but she did not know why. In spite of being the only African American teacher candidate in her predominantly European American female classes, she was comfortable, with the exception of the moments when the younger

classmates treated her as an African American expert. Yalissa voiced that she could not represent other African Americans because of different backgrounds among African Americans. She identified herself as African American, and said that although she had ancestors who are American Indians, she would not claim being part of that culture because she did not get enough from that culture.

In her free time, Yalissa loves writing and performing poetry. She is aware of her talents because in performing poems she uses rich facial expressions. While in elementary school, she wrote short stories to make her friends laugh. She also enjoys cooking, and shopping in the mall.

The accomplishment that Yalissa is most proud of is getting her bachelor's degree in a state university as it took her so long to complete. Another big accomplishment is that she was awarded the bronze star in the military for bravery and acts of merit. She believes that her "driven personality" (*Interview #1, p. 5*) contributed to her accomplishments.

Yalissa chose teaching due to her thankfulness for teachers who made a difference in her, and she would like to join them to help more children. She focused on special education because she saw the need for soldiers' children with special needs while in the military. She admitted that she had to adjust herself a little bit as she got used to rules and she is aware that students are not soldiers; thus she could not be aggressive as she was before. Yalissa will graduate in May 2012 and currently, she is looking for a teaching position.

Yalissa's Self-Perceived Strengths

Strengths mentioned by Yalissa include her ability to understand and relate to students; her passion about teaching and her desire to be role models for minority students especially African American students; her empathy toward students who are

underrepresented; her technology skills; her flexibility and problem solving skills. Yalissa admitted that since she did not have many teaching experiences through field placements, some of her strengths were from her thinking and her experience as a teaching assistant, instead of from her actual teaching.

I always try to understand and relate to people. While in the army, Yalissa had been stationed in Germany, South Korea and Afghanistan. She also traveled to France and Spain on vacation. She noticed the differences between her and her friends who have never traveled far.

During these years, I met lots of people and I learned to see things outside the gate. I am always interested to know local people's experiences. They are incredible benefits. When I talked with my friends who have never left United City, they are so stereotyped and they believed the TV. It is not like they really relate to the people and it is not like they want to and they do not have the desire. When you visit a family in a country and meet with the people, it is a level of respect. You are vulnerable and you let your guard down and you learn things. It is not all about food. It is a whole different thing. (*Interview #1, p. 2*)

She believes these rich experiences abroad taught her important good virtues such as relating to other people and not stereotyping others. Drawing from her teaching assistant experience, she noticed that her students enjoyed being with her because of her broad life experiences and her efforts to understand people culturally.

At school, Yalissa is also committed to perceiving and understanding students from different perspectives. She holds that if teachers can relate to students, they are doing something positive. She said,

I understand difference among people. I try to understand students from different cultures. My parents are from the South and Deep South has very strong accent. I am very good at being with people with accent because that is all what I heard when I was young. Instead of making jokes, I just understand them. I think being able to understand and relate to the students is very important. This generation especially does not have the interpersonal skills. Everybody is on the computer, so finding

someone who can be face-to-face and related to you can break down the barriers.
(*Interview #1, p. 6*)

Learning from her parents also impacted Yalissa's capacity to make connections with her students. She perceives relating to students as important and necessary in this technology age when many people are involved in internet communication. She mentioned that remembering things about her students is one way to relate to her students. She reflected:

It is my strengths that I go out of my way to try to remember things about students. Like someone says their dad is sick, if I see him one year later, I would say, "How is about your dad?" I always try to connect with people. I tried to use it to help people. It is not that "I know I can do it." That's not me. I know I want people to know that they are valued. (*Interview #1, p. 1*)

Yalissa believes that showing students her caring about them and their families made students feel related and valued. She emphasized that she connected with people very naturally. During our interviews I could strongly feel Yalissa's strength of relating to others. When we arranged the time for our interview through emails, I happened to tell her that the interview day would be on my birthday. When we met on that day, she surprised me by offering me a box of Chinese longevity noodles and a box of birthday cupcakes.

I am passionate about teaching and I want to be a role model for minority students. During the interview, I asked Yalissa what her unique contributions are as a racial minority teacher candidate, and she replied that her passion about teaching and being a role model for minority students are her unique contribution. Being resilient is one way that keeps her passion fresh because she knew that "there are many pitfalls when you try to teach and you are not perfect" (*Interview #1, p. 8*). She explained as follows:

I am passionate about teaching so that it makes difference. I think that would be my unique contribution. Something that really fills me. I know that I am not going to be rich as a teacher. I know I am not going to be famous, but I will just be happy to make difference. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

Yalissa expressed her passion about teaching minority students and being a role model for African American students. Based on her sons' school experiences and her experience as a teaching assistant at a predominantly White school district, Yalissa was stunned that African American students were always taught by European American teachers. She believes that when minority students are only taught by European American teachers, they learn that minorities are not smart enough to become teachers. This is a detrimental signal that Yalissa thinks education should avoid:

I do not think that gives students the right role model. Like my son goes to kindergarten, and this is a school where ninety percent students are Black. The principal is Black but most teachers are White. It tells that Blacks are not smart to teach our students. Setting up a role model is very vital for students. You have to. Yes, we have a Black president. But that seems like mountains above and you need to have someone near you. You need that teacher from Monday to Friday. You need a role model. (*Interview #1, p. 8*)

To Yalissa, it is more important that minority students have good role models in their classrooms on a daily basis and that might explain why she is eager to serve as a role model for them.

My strength is empathy. It is not tangible but it is important. As a minority teacher candidate, Yalissa learned how important it is for her to advocate for people who don't have a strong voice. At the beginning, her focus was on minority students because "I am a minority and I think it is important to advocate for students that you know who do not have a strong voice" (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Then her attention expanded to children with special needs and finally to all children who are underrepresented in education. She stated that she is empathic toward all students who are under-represented:

Most time I think outside the box and try to include all students that I can. I care about children who are minorities, whether they are African Americans, Asian Americans, or Indian Americans. Recently I become more interested in children with

special needs. So it is all children, but I just put them into one big group, I guess it would be children who are less represented. (*Interview #2, p. 2*)

As Yalissa explained above, her empathy toward all students who are under-represented was not developed at one time. Instead, as her learning and experience became broader, she was inspired to think beyond minority students to include all students who are less represented.

Yalissa thought that her empathy is most likely from her father who taught her “not to do what you don’t want others to do to you”, her mother who “pays attention to details and remembers things well” (*Interview #2, p. 3*), her minority background and personality.

My tangible strength is my ability to incorporate my technology skills in the classroom. Yalissa seemed to define *strengths* as something concrete and tangible, and she seemed not to be fully satisfied with her intangible good virtues and attitudes and beliefs.

When she finally found a tangible strength – her technology skill, she shared it with me eagerly:

Before I came to my graduate program, when I was in the military I was teaching other soldiers. As an instructor I had PowerPoint, which was a big thing then. I would be the person that everybody went to. I always did things that I related to the audience to keep their attention. I have done a lot and I had a blog that I created. I wanted to incorporate a blog into a webpage when I set up as a teacher. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

I learned that while in the military, Yalissa had experiences of using technology in her teaching. Although currently Yalissa is not a full-time teacher, she expressed her eagerness to apply her technology strengths in her future teaching to facilitate students’ learning:

I am going to teach older children and children with special needs. Amazingly a lot of children with special needs would be just computer-smart as other children. I think older children and teenagers are good at games and videos, electronics and technology things. It would be helpful if it can be at their level and make it easier for them to communicate. The more I can bring technology to the classroom, the more enthusiasm they can keep. I don’t have my own classroom but I observed one teacher the other day and saw that she allowed children also to use technology and they were given a pen to go to the smart board to circle things. That is definitely the way that I am going to run my classrooms. I think technology skills are the tangible strengths

that I have. So my strengths here would be my ability to incorporate my technology skills in the classroom learning and teaching. (*Interview #2, p. 6*)

Yalissa's effort to integrate technology into teaching is not simply based on her prior experience and her own personal preference, it is also based on her understanding of her future students' learning preferences and experiences. For example, she understood that students with special needs might be good at using technology in their learning, and she acknowledged that many older students experience technology in their daily life so using technology in teaching might be a helpful way to relate to the students.

Yalissa's Self-Selected Professional Samples

The self-selected professional samples that Yalissa brought to our second interview included a research paper, a reading response, and a field placement journal. She believes that these samples represented her above-mentioned strengths.

A research paper on correctional training in states' institutions. This is a six-page long research paper that Yalissa recently wrote for her teaching and learning in a cultural contexts course assignment. Yalissa said that students were allowed to choose their own topics and write a research paper about it. Most of her classmates chose *No Child Left Behind* as their topic, but she chose prisoners in the jail as her topic. Although she is passionate about this topic, she noticed that it was not well received as she perceived that most of her classmates considered her topic as "somebody else's problems and that is not related to their world or their children" (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Yalissa said she understood their perspective because they are European American young students.

Yalissa wanted to share this research paper because it showed her strength of empathy toward the underrepresented and forgotten people. During our interview, Yalissa explained why she chose this group of people as her research topic:

Since a lot of people in jail are minorities and there is an increase in women and this is fascinating to me because the people would return into the society, what they bring to the table, whether they have some education, whether they go back to jail or become productive citizens for the society. This topic, to me, is just as important as No Child Left Behind. People in prisons are people who are always forgotten. It is supposed to be rehabilitated but the fact is that most of them just sit there and they do not learn anything and they do not seek any psychological help. (*Interview #2, p. 1*)

In this sample, Yalissa showed her concern with the increasing number of African American males and the higher proportions of women, the poor, and the mentally ill in the jails. She believes that whether receiving a qualified education in prison may have direct impact on prisoners' and their family members' future lives after they are released.

In this research paper, Yalissa reviewed three different studies on educational programs offered by state correctional services to prisoners. She summarized the results and pointed out limits of each study. In the last paragraph of this paper, I noticed her attempt to compare correctional education and mainstream education:

The correlation between correction education and mainstream education is unique. Both have a responsibility to provide a service to members of society to include the "undesirables". The standard of service is heavily influenced by funding. There are state, federal and private prisons. The funds for facilities come from various sources with different reporting requirements, funds allocated within other state departments. The goal of assisting our country's most disadvantaged population will make the biggest step towards progress when states don't feel reprimand for par programs... The main consideration of these programs should be empowering the inmates serious about their future. Their knowledge, confidence, and skills will give them better choices in a work setting and hopefully, break the cycle of deterioration. (*Personal research paper, p. 5*)

Yalissa's effort to connect her research topic with education is interesting and exciting. She discovered several similarities between correctional education in prisons and mainstream education at schools such as the inclusive and empowering nature of education in both settings, the impacts of the funding on services, the different types of services, and so on. It helped me to understand how she made the connections.

A reading response. The second professional sample that Yalissa shared is a two-page reading response to the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Yalissa chose this sample because it reflected her strength of being flexible as a teacher. During our interview, Yalissa explained why she liked this reading response in detail:

The reason I like this one is because after figuring out something does not make sense, I went on to different roads. I think I was being more flexible. Sometimes you have to do that in the classroom and you have to adjust because not every student are going to understand in the same way and you might need to take more time or less. You may have to take a break and then come back... Although we have a lesson, everything just can't be so rigid. Sometimes you have to make adjustments. Students may ask you questions that you may never think of. So you have to readjust and you have to be quick. I also learned to be flexible in the military even although there are rules that you have to follow. Lots of the time when you are not flexible, you think it is not convenient, but when you are flexible you are doing well for the students.
(Interview #2, p. 4)

By doing this reading response assignment, Yalissa learned that she should be flexible as a teacher. She came to realize that teachers' flexibility and adjustment to new situations will benefit their students. I assume Yalissa's flexibility came from two sources. First, her flexibility in the military might be transferred to her flexibility in a school setting. Second, Yalissa's flexibility in teaching came from her passion for her students. As she said above, in spite of inconvenience for the teachers, teachers' flexibility will benefit the students.

A field journal entry. Yalissa also presented a five-page field observation journal. In this entry Yalissa described her observation as a substitute teaching assistant in a local elementary school. There are some personal comments but most of the writing is about her observation of this fourth grade class. She commented on incorporating technology in teaching as follows:

In the math class, the lesson was taught using the Smart Board. This is an advantage for the students because they could follow along looking up rather than dealing with a bulky book on their desk. Some students moved the compass to make a big circle. When they attempted this, it came out as a dot. The teacher and I tried and the same

thing happened. She laughed and made the comment, “Well, these things don’t always come out perfect. Let’s move on.” I was glad she didn’t have the students do this exercise over and over in an effort to make a circle. She acknowledged the flaw and continued onto something... I also enjoyed how the social studies teacher used technology to assist students’ learning. She had a globe uploaded to the Smart Board. I think this helped students pay attention because it was difficult to tell who would be called next. Also, it appeared to make them feel comfortable with the classroom technology. This methodology is similar to my teaching style. I am a firm believer in using technology because it’s an important tool for young students to stay connected with educational resources. As they get older, more teachers will put homework on school websites. There are some innovative teachers using Blogs as a part of the learning process. (*Personal field journal entry, p. 2*)

In this journal entry, the contents related to Yalissa’s strengths include her comment on the usage of technology in classroom, her comment of her host teacher’s flexibility, and her comment on being sensitive to diverse learners. Because she had very limited field experience as a teacher candidate, some of the comments were based on her vision of how she would run the classroom as a teacher in the future, not her actual teaching experience. So I interpret that what she said showed her awareness of strengths, not her strengths application.

In the same field journal entry, Yalissa talked about how students should be perceived in a larger picture and what teachers should do to avoid singling out students:

This classroom was not diverse. There were two students from different cultural backgrounds out of twenty-two. There was an Asian girl and an African American girl. I will call the latter Tiffany, for the purpose of this paper. Tiffany made small talk with me throughout the day. I made an effort to smile at her throughout the day and gave her a compliment about her cornrow hairstyle. During my planning time, I saw the students had completed “all about me” posters. They included their names, family members, career goals, etc... However, this poster had one additional statement. It said, “I live in a _____.” All children filled in “house” except Tiffany. She filled it with the word, “apartment”. I looked at her family members. She did not label them with names but had pictures of six different bodies. She either lived with an extended family or had a large nuclear family. I did not think this is something that is good for this little girl. I think her teacher could have been more sensitive to this student’s different living conditions. She could have told the class to leave that area blank. If she did not realize the situation until the task had been completed, she could have them color over the answer. I believe her kind nature

limits her view of the children as the one similar group of learners. The fact of the matter is that children pick up on differences and it's up to the teacher to make the climate as safe as possible. It is not necessary for this girl to be singled out. I do not think the child should be defined by the statement she said and she is bigger than that. Children do recognize that houses are big and nice, and apartments are usually small. Teachers should be more sensitive to the needs of that child...I possess empathy and experience with diverse groups that I will enable me to recognize an opening to incorporate culture in the lesson. (*Personal field journal entry, p. 4*)

This example reflected Yalissa's strength of being sensitive to and empathetic toward the underrepresented students. It indicated her commitment to making every student feel safe and included in the classroom. Her comments on how her host teacher should have modified her teaching right after finding that only Tiffany wrote "apartment" reflected her belief that she would be flexible when new teaching moments came.

Connections between Yalissa's Professional Samples and Self-Perceived Strengths

Based on our interviews and the written professional samples that Yalissa shared, I think, on the whole, Yalissa's professional samples represented her strengths and strengths application as an emerging teacher. Being flexible and being empathetic are strengths that she identified only during the second interview, but I can see a connection between these strengths and the strengths mentioned during the first interview. For example, the strength of being flexible is connected with the strength of being passionate about teaching because according to her, teachers are willing to be flexible to meet students' needs if they care about students. The strength of being empathetic is related to the strength of understanding and connecting with people. When teachers try to understand and relate to students, they would be empathetic and make efforts to include all students in the classroom.

Some strengths application, such as the strength of using technology in teaching, can't be seen from the samples themselves. It is not based on her actual teaching experience but based on her thinking and perspectives. I attributed it to her lack of field experiences as a

teacher candidate. When I invited Yalissa to participate in this study, she showed her great interest in the topic but at the same time she showed her concern that she only had a very limited number of items to share. If I interviewed her after she gained more field experience, she might be able to provide me with more evidence and I might be able to see a clearer coherence between her strengths and samples. At the same time, I think some lack of connection between Yalissa's professional work samples and self-perceived strengths is related to her limited strengths awareness level because she mentioned during our interview that she seldom thought of or was aware of her strengths.

Circumstances Influencing Yalissa's Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Yalissa identified three encouraging circumstances for her strengths awareness and application. First, participating in this study pushed her to think more about and reflect on her strengths. She admitted that many times she was not aware of her strengths. Second, she was encouraged by one of her professors who not only recommended her to the program but also recommended her to this study. Although she is in the program for only one semester and she took this professor's one course, she was amazed and encouraged by how her professor verbally recognized her strengths. Third, based on her teaching assistant job experience, she believes that students encourage her strengths application. She is encouraged that students liked being with her because of her rich abroad experiences and her interpersonal skills.

The circumstances that Yalissa identified as discouraging include the standardized testing and her deficit-based thinking habit. Yalissa used a metaphor to compare the pressure that teachers get from standardized testing and the pressure that military supervisors got from rank promotion. In the military, supervisors of an overweight soldier may not get promoted. Supervisors are not the person lacking self-control when it comes to eating. However, "you

will be punished because the military views it as a lack of leadership when you can't motivate soldiers to be their best/look their best" (*Personal communication*). To her, it is similar to the way teachers are viewed as ineffective when their students cannot pass certain tests. Yalissa stressed that based on her teaching assistant experience standardized testing might discourage her from being flexible and creative in her future teaching and discourage her from using her interpersonal skills to interact with students.

Another circumstance that Yalissa self-identified as discouraging is her deficit thinking habit that "is sticking in my mind that I wish I could change it" (*Interview #1, p. 9*). In her words, "I know what I am bad at. I am more aware of things that I do wrong and weakness instead of the strengths" (*Interview #2, p. 6*). Even though during the interviews I did not ask her weaknesses, she told me that she was terrible with mathematics and puzzles. With more attention given to weaknesses, Yalissa is likely to pay less attention to her strengths.

Chapter Six – Findings

In Chapters Four and Five, I provide a written portrait of each of the eight participants hoping to present an integrated picture of each individual participant. As in these two previous chapters, in this chapter, I choose to make individual participants visible. By employing both semi-structured interviews and document analysis to conduct this qualitative research study, I was able to find strengths that were perceived by participants themselves, some of which were not documented by the existing literature. I noted participants' varied strengths awareness and a variety of ways through which they applied their strengths in teaching and non-teaching venues. I also found that the participants reported different sources that may explain the origins of some of their self-identified strengths, and uncovered some of the beginnings of their awareness of some of their strengths. I noted several external influences and internal qualities that participants believed may influence their awareness and utilization of their own strengths. Finally, I observed some similar and different reports among the participants.

In the following paragraphs, I display the findings that I observed among all participants and address the four sub-questions proposed in Chapter One in the order these questions were asked.

Self-Perceived Strengths

The first sub-question of this study is: *What are racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' self-perceived strengths that they believe contribute to teacher preparation programs and learners in K-12 classrooms? Are these strengths prompted by their racial and/or ethnic identity only?* This study disclosed a wide range of strengths that the eight participants identified about themselves, some of which did not fit neatly into the strengths

category found in the existing literature. As discussed in Chapter Two, the few inquiries sporadically exploring racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths seemed to relate their strengths largely to their racial, cultural and linguistic minority identity.

Seven participants in this study explicitly named and described their strengths; the other participant, Laleh, with my probing questions, identified her strengths. All participants seemed to take a “me as a whole person” insider perspective when talking about their strengths, which is quite different from researchers’ “you as a minority” outsider perspective. Similar to the findings in the literature review, this study found many of the strengths identified by participants themselves related to their cultural and linguistic identity. Equally important, this study also noted some self-identified strengths related to other aspects of participants’ lives, including their strengths of being passionate about teaching, personality strength, technology strength, and skill strength. The variety of self-identified strengths is found in Table 2.

Table 2. *Variety of Self-Identified Strengths*

Strengths	Strengths related to racial and ethnic backgrounds	Passion about teaching strength	Technology strength	Personality strength	Skill strength
Participants					
Laleh	X	X			
Miranda	X				
Nathan	X			X	
Tina	X	X			X
Xin	X				X
Aaron	X	X	X	X	
Jaeneisha	X	X			X
Yalissa	X	X	X		

Strengths That Are Related to Participants' Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds

All participants in this study were able to identify some strengths that were related to their racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, which include open-mindedness (5), empathy with underserved students (5), language, culture and race strength (4), connection with students (4), serving as role models for minority students (3), bringing diversity (3), contributing to teacher education programs (2), and holding high expectations for minority students (1).

Open-mindedness. Being open-minded is a strength identified by five participants. These participants held varying connotations of it, which include Laleh's never judging students too quickly and being open to all possible reasons that might explain students' particular behaviors, Nathan's caution of ignorance and single-angle perspective as a teacher, Tina's representing another culture in a full picture, Xin's teaching students different perspectives of historical events, and Jaeneisha's tolerance of allowing lessons to go in different ways and giving students opportunities to express themselves in their own means.

Empathy with underserved students. Researchers have noted racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' empathy with English language learners (Lu, 2004; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002). Aligned with previous findings, this study disclosed a similar finding. Five participants—Laleh, Miranda, Nathan, Tina and Yalissa—identified understanding and empathizing with students who are traditionally neglected and underserved as their strength. The students that these participants empathized with are not necessarily students who share the same race or ethnicity with them. In fact, they include English language learners, students with special needs, students with behavior problems,

Hispanic heritage learners, and other students who are less represented in American education.

Language, culture and race strengths. Aaron identified his African American identity as one of his strengths in teaching African American students in urban schools. Four participants—Miranda, Nathan, Tina Xin—identified language and culture as their strengths. These four participants who reported their language or culture as strength are the ones who seemed to retain a strong connection to their linguistic and cultural heritage. The reports of language and culture strengths by Tina—a U.S.-born Korean American, and by Nathan—a U.S.-born Latino American, are interesting because they are different from what some of the existing literature suggested— that U.S.-born teacher candidates may not readily possess their home country languages and cultures (Mullen, 1997; Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Sheets & Chew, 2002). Both Tina and Nathan not only possess their culture and language heritages, but also identify them as their personal strengths. In addition, these five participants displayed different attitudes toward these strengths. Four participants—Miranda, Nathan, Tina and Aaron—took pride in their heritage language and culture strengths or racial identity strength. Xin showed a mixed attitude toward her strengths and emphasized that her linguistic and cultural strengths did not make her feel special because like any other teacher candidates in her program, she had to fulfill her program requirements.

Connections with students. Four participants, including Laleh, Aaron, Jaeneisha and Yalissa, identified making connections with students as their strengths. Their connections with students apply to all learners, instead of learners who shared the same race. Students here include English language learners, African American students, students with disabilities, and all other students.

Serving as role models for minority students. Three participants—Aaron, Jaeneisha, and Yalissa, —perceived serving as role models for African American students as one of their strengths. They all voiced their commitment to serving African American students. Since they all are African American teacher candidates, this result is aligned with prior research findings that some minority teacher candidates are particularly interested in serving those who have the same race (Battle & Cuellar, 2006; Gomez, et al., 2008; Kauchak & Burbank, 2003; Milner & Howard, 2004; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002).

Bringing diversity. It is argued that minority teacher candidates have positive impacts on all learners' understanding of diversity (Dilworth, 1992; Foster, 1993; Shaw, 1996). Four participants—Miranda, Nathan, Tina and Xin—expressed teaching others about diversity as their strengths and they all believe that understanding diversity is a necessity for K-12 students' healthy development. Both Tina and Xin also discussed the diversity that they brought to their universities and local communities.

Contributing to education programs. Two participants—Aaron and Xin—explicitly expressed the strengths that they brought to their individual programs. Aaron addressed his contributions to the class discussions on urban education. Xin shared her experience and perspectives with her classmates. This is in line with the finding that minority teacher candidates made efforts to educate their peers and colleagues (Darling- Hammond, et al., 1997; Dilworth, 1998; Gomez, et al., 2008). Unlike the Vietnamese-born teacher candidate who perceived diversity as an obstacle to overcome in Kauchak and Burbank's (2003) study, Xin advocated program and school diversity in spite of the fact that she struggled with cultural and linguistic adjustments in a new country.

Holding high expectations for minority students. Aaron is the only participant who clearly identified this as his strength. His belief is that students will achieve more if teachers express high expectations of them. Although Laleh showed her belief in international students' capacity in doing math in her class, she did not identify high expectations as her strength.

Strength of Being Passionate about Teaching

Gay (2000) perceived caring for students as “one of the major pillars of culturally responsive pedagogy for ethnically diverse students” (p. 45). Studies (Belcher, 2001; Kauchak & Burbach, 2003) reported minority teachers' desire to work with minority students and to help them succeed at school. Although passion about teaching and caring for students are important teacher qualities, they are not usually identified by the existing literature as the strength of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. Yet for this study, passion about teaching and caring for students are strengths prominently identified by most participants. Five out of eight participants explicitly reported passion about teaching as their strength and discussed the positive influences that this strength had on their teaching. The rest of the participants shared their passion about teaching but did not identify it explicitly as their strength. Based on conversations with the participants, I learned that they are passionate about teaching not because of the salary and two month holidays that the teaching job entitled to teachers. They reported that they are passionate about teaching mainly because of their caring for students and their eagerness to contribute to students' growths.

Laleh's passion for teaching inspired her to spend several years to get prepared for her teaching career. Jaeneisha's passion for teaching inspired her to work with minority students, especially African American students in city schools. Both Tina and Aaron were

aware that their passion for teaching encouraged them to do the best they can to help their students. As Tina claimed, “Without that passion, you are not going to put much effort in teaching” (*Interview #1, p. 8*). Similarly, Aaron was aware that “Me knowing that I want students to be as successful as they can also helps me make sure that I did as best as I can” (*Interview #1, p. 11*). Yalissa’s willingness to be flexible in her teaching also seemed to be closely related to her passion about teaching and her students. Yalissa suggested, “Lots of the time when you are not flexible you think it is not convenient, but when you are flexible you are doing something good for the students” (*Interview #2, p. 5*). It is her passion for teaching and students that led her to actively adjust teaching to meet the needs of her students.

Technology Strength

Studies called for teacher candidates’ preparedness for teaching in the information age. This is an area that the existing literature did not address in regard to racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates’ strengths. Both Aaron and Yalissa in this study regarded integrating technology with their teaching as their strength. It is worth mentioning that they both advocated for technology integration in teaching not simply because of personal preferences and experiences, but because of their awareness that many students are using technology in their daily lives. Aaron provided ample samples as evidence of his technology strength application, but Yalissa was not able to provide samples to support her argument. Because of her limited teaching experience, it is more based on her vision rather than on her actual teaching. Jaeneisha did not identify her technology strength, but based on her online portfolio, I identified it as one of her strengths.

Personality Strength

This study found some strengths that were related to participants' personalities. In the review of the literature of racial and/or ethnic minority teachers and teacher candidates, I noticed resourcefulness (e.g., Tellez, 1999) was discussed as personality strengths. This study found some participants identified personality strengths that are unrelated to their racial and/or ethnic minority identity, including Aaron's social personality and Nathan's "doing things my way" personality. Both Laleh and Xin mentioned their good personality such as positive attitude toward life, but they did not expressly identify them as their strengths.

Skill Strength

Here skill strength is summarized as a category to include troubleshooting and reflex skills, musical skill and leadership skill. Three participants identified their skills as strengths. Troubleshooting and reflex are two important practical skills in Jaeneisha's teaching because these skills helped her to set up a safe and non-disruptive learning environment for her students. Both Tina and Xin mentioned their musical strength, a unique skill that they brought to their teaching. Both of them believe that musical skills are important for elementary school teachers. Tina also identified leadership as her strength and she believes that teachers need that skill to manage their classrooms.

Dominant Strengths

As discussed above, the eight participants in this study identified a variety of personal strengths. I noticed that for each participant there were one or two particular strengths that stood out in their thinking and that they emphasized and spent more time introducing or illustrating these strengths during the interviews. I named these strengths dominant strengths because they were repeatedly discussed by the participants and their self-selected professional work samples mainly focused on these strengths. These strengths seemed to be

particularly important for individual participants and they varied among the participants. Among the variety of strengths that each participant shared during the interviews or through professional work samples, I summarize that the dominant strengths include Laleh's strength of relating to diverse students and adapting teaching to meet their special needs; Miranda's mastery of Spanish language and culture; Nathan's cultural sensitivity and diversity advocacy; Tina's passion about teaching and bringing diversity and inclusion to the classroom; Xin's diversity strength; Aaron's relating to students and technology strengths; Jaeneisha's practical skills including troubleshooting and reflex; and Yalissa's being empathetic and related to students. Most but not all of the dominant strengths seemed to relate to their racial, linguistic and cultural identities.

Unidentified Strengths

As I discussed in the participant portraits, by reading participants' professional work samples, I observed some strengths that the participants did not identify themselves. For instance, by going over the examples that Miranda shared with me during the interviews, I found that she exhibited her strength of using authentic learning materials in teaching Spanish. By reading Tina's lesson plans, I noticed her strengths such as using different teaching strategies, collaborating with other teachers, and allowing students to use different writing tools and presentation forms. By reading Xin's lesson plan, I noted her strengths of making a connection between students' prior knowledge and new lessons, giving students choices to use their favorite learning tools, and organizing information with visual charts. By surfing her portfolio website, I read and selected two additional writings, and I noticed her technology strength; her technology sample addressed a variety of diverse topics.

The unidentified strengths had three possible meanings to me. First, it may show the potential differences between my perception and the participants' views of themselves. Second, it may indicate that some participants have not realized some strengths that they actually possess. Third, it may indicate participants' overemphasis on their dominant strengths.

Weaknesses

One salient theme came out when the participants shared with me their strengths and strengths application: the discussion of their areas of weaknesses. Although I never asked about their weaknesses, interestingly, all participants initiated discussion of their individual weaknesses. Most of them brought up this topic while discussing their strengths.

Laleh mentioned her lack of patience with students when they were loud. Miranda talked about her accent. Nathan talked about his preference of doing things in a certain way. When addressing her musical strength, Tina confessed her weakness with art. Xin regarded her self-perceived low oral English proficiency as her biggest weakness. Aaron mentioned his weaknesses such as not being flexible and sometimes being impatient with adults. Jaeneisha admitted that she is no good at writing. Yalissa shared her weakness of doing mathematics and puzzles.

I postulate some possible reasons for why most participants talked about their weaknesses while addressing their strengths: (1) they wanted to show that they are not too boastful; (2) they wanted to depict themselves as a whole person with both strengths and weaknesses; (3) they have been educated in educational systems that prompted them to talk and think more about their weaknesses; or (4) they like to contrast their strengths and weaknesses.

Origins of the Strengths Identified

Part of the first sub-question explored the origins of the identified strengths. All participants seemed able to uncover origins of some of their strengths. This study found that participants' strengths did not originate from their racial and/or ethnic identity solely. A good illustration would be Yalissa's reply when I asked her whether racial background gave her particular strengths, "It is hard to say. Because lots of who I am probably has to do with that, but it is also related to where I was born, where I go to school and travel" (*Interview #1, p. 8*). In fact, the identified origins of all participants' strengths include a wide range of sources, including personal experiences (7), background (4), personal interests (4), race and/or ethnicity (3), and personality (2). It is also evident that most strengths originated from one specific source, but some strengths originated from more than one origin. In the latter case, the origins overlapped and interacted with each other to influence the participants' strength formation.

Personal experiences origin. All participants except Miranda attributed some of their strengths to their personal experience origin. Some of these personal experiences are related to their minority identity, some are not. Among these seven participants, four attributed some of their strengths to their personal experiences abroad. Laleh is the only one who related all of her strengths to her experiences as a student in Iran. She drew on lots of her student experiences while talking about her strengths, such as her experience as an "international student" moving from the U.S. to Iran, her experience with teachers who had a positive impact on her, her experience of the war in Iran and her struggling mathematics learning experience. Nathan attributed most of his strengths to his living and studying experiences in the Dominican-Republic. Without rich educational and life experiences, he

did not think his racial identity alone would have enabled him to draw the conclusion that “what is true for the U.S. may not be true for the Caribbean Islands” (*Interview #2, p. 6*). Xin identified her experience in China as where her strengths originated. I believe her strengths were facilitated by her international student identity, as her interpretation of her strengths focused on what she as an international student brought to the U.S. Yalissa believes that her strength of relating to others mainly came from her traveling experience in different countries while serving in the military.

Tina believes that her passion about teaching originated from her positive personal experience with her fourth-grade teacher and her experience as a volunteer in her church’s summer school program. She also believes that her leadership strength came from her experience as a pastor’s daughter who had high expectations to be a role model for others.

Aaron claimed that his technology strength came from his daily experience with technology and that his strength of relating to students originated from his own mathematics learning experience as a student who hated abstract concepts and examples. In addition, Aaron believes that his living experience in New York City partially contributed to his adding to class discussions on urban education.

Jaeneisha believes that her reflex skill was gained through her years of experience working with students as a summer camp counselor. She attributed her passion about teaching African American students in urban schools to her contrasting field experiences: with African American students who were from the similar backgrounds, and with European American students who had assumptions and stereotyping toward her.

Background origin. Four participants reported some of their strengths originated from their backgrounds. Personal backgrounds here include participants’ family background

and the communities where they came from. Some are related to their minority identity, some are not. Although Tina was born in the U.S. and she is fluent in English, her mom's struggling experience with learning English and her father's experience as a first generation immigrant in the U.S. helped explain her efforts, as a teacher, to make sure to include all students especially English language learners in her class, even though she did not experience these challenges personally.

Living with an older sister who always prepared well for unexpected events, Jaeneisha believes that her troubleshooting strength originated from observing her sister using that strength in daily life. Yalissa believes that her empathy strength partially came from her father who taught her "not to do what you don't want others to do to you" (*Interview #2, p. 3*). She also attributed her comfort with people who have accents to her living in the South. Aaron claimed that living in the city made him more aggressive and he stood out a lot at his university.

Personal interest origin. Four participants suggested that hobbies helped form some of their strengths. Both Aaron and Nathan attributed their strength of doing their best in teaching partially to their video games or sports hobbies. Tina and Xin also formed their musical strengths out of hobbies starting at young age.

Racial and/or ethnic identity origin. Three participants traced some of their strengths to their racial and/or ethnic identity origin. Nathan drew on his minority perspective when he talked about his comfort with diversity and his empathy with the underserved students. Tina's strength of teaching students about diversity so that they don't grow up biased came from her racial and ethnic minority perspective. Yalissa's passion about serving

as a role model for African American students came from her minority background knowing they always lacked a voice in education.

Personality origin. Two participants traced some of their strengths to personality. Aaron believes that his passion about students came from his personality of helping people succeed. He also partially attributed his social personality to his eagerness to contribute to his education classes. Nathan's "I do things my way" strength originated from his personality.

Strengths Utilization

The second sub-question this study asked is: *To what extent and how do racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates capitalize on their self-perceived strengths?* As I employed interview and document analysis to collect data, I totally depended upon the self-selected examples that the participants shared with me during the interviews and their interpretations of their samples as evidence to decide whether and how they used their strengths. The judgment of the participants' strengths awareness level was based on whether they were able to explicitly and clearly tell what their strengths are, and their comments on their own strengths awareness. The judgment of the participants' strengths application depended on whether they could use examples or their professional samples to explain their strengths application.

Quioco and Rios (2000) argued that being a minority won't guarantee effectiveness in teaching, but their experiences and skills will "strengthen their potential for effectiveness in teaching" (p. 488). This study found that in general, by using their professional samples and through the one-on-one dialogue, all participants were able to provide evidence of their application of some of their personal strengths to reach their students effectively. Yet some

participants seemed to utilize their strengths more consciously, whereas others used their strengths without explicit awareness.

All participants except Laleh told me explicitly what their strengths were, which, in my opinion, indicated their awareness of strengths; Laleh is the one participant who needed more probing before she talked about her strengths. As she said, she had never thought about her strengths before our interviews. Among the seven participants who showed their higher strengths awareness level, five participants—Tina, Xin, Aaron, Nathan and Yalissa—clearly described their strengths. The other two participants used either general or inaccurate words when expressing their strengths. For instance, Miranda pointed out culture and language as her strengths, but she seemed to be somewhat inarticulate and have difficulty in expressing them in a more concrete and specific way. Jaeneisha used the word *troubleshooting* to describe her capacity to anticipate potential pitfalls and her ability to design contingency plans; that word seemed to be off target of what she meant.

During the interviews, all participants were able to verbally share with me examples of how they used their strengths, and most participants forged a clear connection between their professional samples and strengths utilization. Among the eight participants, Laleh, Xin, Tina, and Aaron explained in clearest ways why they thought their professional samples reflected their strengths application. Miranda provided me with only one professional sample, and her explanation of this sample was not very clear, which may have been due to her busy schedule with student teaching and state certificate exams preparation by the time I interviewed her. Jaeneisha took a long time pausing before figuring out the connections, and some connections made were not very clear; I am not sure whether it is because she didn't have enough time to go over her professional samples when she was busy with summer

school teaching. Although Yalissa provided ample evidence of her dominant strengths application, some of her arguments lacked support due to the fact that she just started her program and needed more field experience; she mentioned her commitment to integrating technology with her future teaching, but it is based on her thinking not actual teaching. I noticed some inconsistency between Nathan's verbal comments and his professional samples: he mentioned his cultural sensitivity strength and culturally responsive teaching, but his lesson plan only reflected his attention to the gifted and talented students.

To summarize, Tina, Xin, and Aaron showed the highest level of strengths awareness and they appeared to have consciously capitalized on their strengths. Miranda, Nathan, Jaeneisha and Yalissa exhibited awareness of their own strengths and conscious application of their strengths, but their professional work samples didn't provide coherent or ample supports. Laleh showed the lowest strengths awareness, but interestingly she was able to articulate and provide examples of her usage of strengths through her professional work samples. I conclude that she used her strengths in her teaching without explicit awareness.

Ways to Apply Strengths

Participants in this study applied their strengths in numerous ways to make contributions to the teaching and non-teaching fields. I summarize them in the following five categories: (1) commitment to teaching; (2) instruction; (3) learning environment; (4) collegial sharing; and (5) contributions beyond programs.

Commitment to teaching. Participants in this study exhibited their strengths by being committed to their teaching in the following ways: being persistent in pursuing the teaching profession, doing more than required, and doing research and advocating for underserved students.

Being persistent in pursuing the teaching profession. Two participants were persistent in becoming teachers in this country. As mentioned earlier, both Laleh and Miranda were educated and got their associates degrees in countries other than the U.S. It took Laleh nearly ten years to become a mathematics teacher and it took Miranda several years before being admitted by her current teacher preparation program. Both never seemed discouraged by the long journey before reaching their ultimate teaching dream.

Doing more than required. Two participants—Tina and Aaron—mentioned that they used their strengths by doing more than required by their education programs. Because of their passion about teaching, they worked hard to serve their students. This is reflected by their conscious efforts in designing their lesson plans. When planning her math lesson, Tina put extra efforts to integrate community building; when planning her lesson in Kenya, she chose to expose students to a variety of cultural pictures in Kenya, although that meant more time and more work for her. When Aaron designed his lesson plans, he purposefully selected lots of visuals to engage his students and help them form a connection between history and the present.

Doing research and advocating for underserved students. Gomez, et al. (2008) and Kauchak and Burbank (2003) noted minority teacher candidates' commitment to speaking for minority students. This study found that three participants wrote research papers to advocate for students who are historically misunderstood and underserved. Research papers showed Tina's advocacy for English language learners, Miranda's advocacy for Hispanic heritage learners and Yalissa's advocacy for people who are forgotten and less represented. All of them conducted inquiries not because of the topics' popularity but because of their

attachment to the topics. Nathan advocated for students who are misunderstood and mistreated, but he did not use research for his advocacy purpose.

Instruction. Participants in this study also displayed their strengths application in their instruction, which includes teaching about diversity, using differentiated instruction, avoiding ineffective teaching, and integrating technology and music in teaching.

Teaching about diversity. Four participants taught all their students about diversity, yet in different ways. As we learned in Chapter Five, Jaeneisha introduced diversity topics to her students through technology. The other three participants, Miranda, Tina and Xin, brought diversity to students by directly teaching them their home languages and cultures. They are all bilingual and bicultural. Tina also tried to provide a whole picture of a different culture in her teaching.

Using differentiated instruction. Two participants purposefully employed differentiated instruction in their teaching. Differentiated instruction used by Laleh included visuals, hands-on and fun activities, real life examples, real objects, word highlighting, word repetition, personalized worksheets, and group work to help all students learn, especially those ESL students and students with learning disabilities. Differentiated instruction used by Nathan included bilingual instruction to Spanish native speakers and different grouping strategies and assignments for gifted students.

Avoiding ineffective teaching. Teacher candidates' experiences as students were reported to have impacts on their future teaching (Lu, 2005; Nguyen, 2004; Nguyen-Lam, 2002). From their memories of personal schooling experiences, three participants in this study consciously avoided what they perceived as ineffective teaching and provided alternative services to their students. Laleh seemed to interpret ineffective teaching as being

characterized by teacher's lack of adaptation to meet language learners' needs, difficult mathematics materials, and a boring and tedious mathematics learning process. In her field teaching, she avoided these ineffective teaching approaches by providing English language learners with a variety of teaching adaptations and making mathematics lessons easy and fun for all students.

From Tina's point of view, ineffective teaching is characterized by teachers' ignorance and frustration toward non-native English speakers. In her field placement, Tina tried to set up a safe and inclusive environment to make all students feel accepted.

Aaron connected ineffective teaching with teaching that is abstract and distant from students' life experiences. He purposefully avoided these ineffective teaching practices by bringing technology into teaching and by making his lessons connected with students' contemporary life so that they see meaning and connections.

Integrating technology with teaching. Two participants actively used technology in their teaching. Aaron actively included in his teaching PowerPoint slides, video clips, photo images, web links, pop song clips and diagrams. Although Jaeneisha did not identify using technology as her strength, I observed lots of evidence of technology usage in her teaching. As I mentioned earlier, she used audio stories, games, podcasts, educational movies, and fun movie projects. Since Yalissa just started her program, her technology strength is not based on actual teaching, but on her previous technology teaching experience in the military.

Implementing music in teaching. Tina and Xin used music strengths in their field teaching. Tina played Kenyan contemporary music when she taught a lesson on Kenya. She also showed students how to sing the "head and shoulders" song in Korean when she taught a lesson on Korea. Xin also taught her students birthday songs and other songs in Chinese.

They both expressed their determination to play music daily once they have their own classrooms.

Learning environment. Wiseman and Hunt's (2001) study summarized good teaching practices that help increase student motivation. One of most important practices is to make students have a sense of belonging in classrooms. When the learning environment makes students feel included, they treat class goals as their personal goals and their school performance improves. The participants in this study also applied their strengths by providing safe and inclusive learning environments. Five participants made efforts to set up safe and inclusive learning environments for their students. As a person who experienced war personally, Laleh endeavored to provide a safe learning environment for her students and she showed her willingness to spend time to understand her students instead of making any quick judgments. Whether it was English language learners, students with special needs, or students who were quiet, she observed and talked with them in order to better serve them.

A safe and welcoming learning environment also means a place where teachers try not to offend students. Before teaching, Nathan would explore students' different personality and cultural backgrounds so that he would offend nobody. He also used his bilingual strength in teaching to make bilingual students feel at home. Tina made efforts to make all students feel included and accepted by fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment for them. She integrated community building with her mathematics lessons to foster social interactions among her students.

Jaeneisha valued highly practical skills because she wanted to provide students with a safe and smooth learning environment where learning would not be disturbed. She showed her leadership quality and reacted quickly to reduce disturbances of the class.

Yalissa tried to include all students as best as she could. She showed her empathy toward an African American student in a class of predominantly European American students, who was singled out by her teacher's class assignment. While criticizing the teacher's lack of sensitivity to the student's needs, she suggested the teacher be flexible and take action to make the student feel included.

Collegial sharing. Aaron and Xin shared their background and/or cultural experiences with their peers and professors during class discussions. Aaron shared his urban education experience with his peers. Xin shared her educational experience in China with her peers. They all believe that collegial sharing is contributed to their classmates' learning.

Contributions beyond programs. Because the purpose of this study was to explore the participants' strengths awareness and utilization in their teacher education programs, I did not expect that some participants would share their experiences of applying their strengths beyond their programs. Two participants in this study—Tina and Xin— applied their strengths in different arenas. Both of them served as volunteers in their universities and local communities. Tina served as a volunteer teacher at her local church. Xin served as a volunteer teacher at a local church when she was invited. Both of them also volunteered on their university campus to promote diversity.

Variety of Samples

Although I told participants that they could bring any professional work samples to represent their strengths and strengths utilization, I was still surprised by the large variety of the submitted samples. All were in response to participants' course or program assignments except resumes. The different types of samples are found in Table 3.

Table 3. *Samples Used to Represent Participants' Strengths and Strengths Utilization*

Samples Participants	Lesson plan/Unit and lesson plans	Research paper	Reading response	Field-related journals	Evaluation form	Educational philosophy and autobiography	Other forms
Laleh	X						
Miranda		X					
Nathan	X				X		X
Tina	X	X					
Xin	X		X				X
Aaron	X						
Jaeneisha	X			X		X	
Yalissa		X	X	X			

For this study, written format presentation is more than visual format presentation and lesson plans dominated the samples chosen by the participants. All participants except Miranda and Yalissa used lesson plans to represent their strengths and strengths application. Although Miranda mentioned two mini lesson plans during the first interview, she did not bring them to our second interview. The fact that Yalissa just started her program as a full-time graduate student may explain why she did not select lesson plans. The second most popular sample format is the research paper. Three participants—Miranda, Tina and Yalissa—selected research papers. Three participants—Xin, Jaeneisha, and Yalissa — selected other coursework or program assignments such as reading response, educational philosophy and field-related journal entries to reflect their strengths. The unexpected sample formats include Xin's resume, and Nathan's evaluation form, high school diploma, honor certificate and recognition diploma.

All participants in this study except Yalissa have been in their programs long enough to have been preparing for their professional portfolios to demonstrate they meet program requirements. They seemed to be familiar with and comfortable with using work samples such as lesson plans, field-related journal entries and educational philosophies as evidence to illustrate their strengths application in teaching. In fact, some of the samples were directly from some participants' portfolios. For example, by reading the cover page of Nathan's lesson plan, his evaluation form, his artifacts including high school diploma, honor certificate and recognition diploma, I realized that all these samples were from his professional portfolio required by his program. Jaeneisha's samples including her lesson plans and educational philosophy also came from her online portfolio.

On the whole, the strengths and strengths practices reflected through these samples focused mainly on the contributions that participants perceived they made to K-12 learners in their field placements. Strengths identified by participants that contributed to their programs and those related to their personality strengths were rarely reflected through these samples, with the exception of Xin's and Nathan's cases. Xin offered her resume because she believes that "it usually will manifest the writer's strengths" (*Interview #2, p. 7*). By reading Xin's resume, I saw her strengths both in academics and in life. Her resume reflected a comparatively comprehensive picture of her when compared with her lesson plan and reading response samples. Nathan's personal accomplishments can be observed through the artifacts that he offered: his high school diploma earned in the Dominican-Republic and his honor certificate and recognition diploma earned when he moved back and studied in a higher education institution in New York City. His evaluation form as a sample also provided a comparatively complete picture of him as a teacher, including his attitude toward students

and colleagues, his teaching capacity, and so on. Although Aaron discussed his strength of contributing to class discussions, he did not provide me with samples.

Circumstances Influencing Strengths Awareness and Utilization

This study's third sub-question asked: *What accounts for racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths awareness and utilization? What experience do they see as encouraging or discouraging their strengths awareness and utilization?* Based on the analysis of participant portraits, I drew the following conclusion: This study noted a wide variety of sources that may account for participants' strengths awareness; It is not possible to tell the origins that caused participants to utilize their strengths, based on the current data, but I did discover some circumstances that may encourage participants to utilize their strengths. This study also found that outside-related experiences were evident as both encouraging and discouraging circumstances for participants' strengths awareness and application.

Causes for Strengths Awareness and Utilization

This study disclosed some beginnings that seemed to lead participants to start being aware of their strengths, which include conscious comparison with others (3), comments from host teachers, colleagues or professors (2), living in a new country (2), self-understanding at college (1) and effectiveness (1). Refer to Table 4 for an overview.

Table 4. *Accounts for Participants' Strengths Awareness and Application*

Participants	Causes for Awareness of Some Strengths				
	Conscious comparison with others	Self-understanding at college	Living in a new country	Outside comments	Effectiveness
Laleh	X				
Miranda			X		
Nathan				X	
Tina		X			
Xin			X		
Aaron				X	
Jaeneisha	X				
Yalissa	X				X

Three participants reported being aware of some of their own strengths after conscious comparison with others. Laleh became aware of her strength of connecting with students after comparing her experiences of studying and living in two countries with her colleagues' lack of global living experiences; Jaeneisha knew that she is "able to see what they did not see" (*Interview #1, p. 4*) after comparing herself with her colleagues in the summer camp and the summer programs; and Yalissa believes that her awareness of her strength of relating to others came from comparison with her friends who have never left United City.

Two participants reported being aware of some of their strengths by listening to comments from their host teachers, colleagues or peers. Nathan suggested, "I might have more strengths than I had mentioned. I mentioned some strengths because people have told me" (*Interview #2, p. 2*). Aaron's host teachers played a vital role in raising his strengths

awareness, particularly his identity strengths such as being young, being a male and being a minority.

The change of the living environment from their home countries to the U.S. ignited two participants' strengths awareness. Miranda and Xin realized that their home languages, cultures and prior experiences can contribute to other people's learning about diversity. This interesting finding supports the argument made by some researchers (Brislin & Pedersen, 1976; McKay & Montgomery, 1995) that a distance from one's familiar culture and language makes one more aware of and offers a better understanding of one's home country culture and language.

Tina explained that her self-understanding at college made her aware of and accepting of her strengths and weakness as a person. To her, being aware of her strengths is an important part of her self-understanding and personal growth. This is consistent with what some researchers have argued that self-awareness and self-understanding and strengths awareness are related (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Burke & Cottesfield, 1986; Clark & Flores, 2001; Goleman, et al., 2002).

Yalissa reflected that "if it has been effective all the time, I will realize that is my strength" (*Interview #2, p. 7*). The consistency and effectiveness feature of some quality helped her realize her strengths. In another words, if something is effective consistently in helping her perform well, it tells her it might be her strength.

Circumstances That Encourage/Discourage Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Based on the interviews with the eight participants, this study found that for both encouraging and discouraging circumstances for participants' strengths awareness and application, external circumstances dominated. Refer to Table 5 for details.

Table 5. *Circumstances Encouraging/Discouraging Participants' Strengths Awareness and Utilization*

Participants	Encouraging Circumstances		Discouraging Circumstances	
	self	outside	self	outside
Laleh		X	X	X
Miranda	X	X		
Nathan	X	X		X
Tina		X		X
Xin		X	X	X
Aaron	X	X		
Jaeneisha	X			X
Yalissa		X	X	X

External encouraging Circumstances. All participants except Jaeneisha claimed that external experiences encouraged their strengths awareness and/or application. To be more specific, external circumstances identified in this study that are believed to be relevant to enhanced strengths awareness or increased application include good evaluations from host teachers, professors, supervisors, peers, or students (5), shown interest from professors or peers (1), home country's growth (1), attending a race and ethnicity course and multiculturalism course (1), and interview impact (2).

Among all these outside circumstances, the reported encouraging experience with positive evaluations and comments from professionals including host teachers, professors and supervisors dominated. It is worth mentioning that these evaluations and comments were verbal and informal or written and formal, or both.

Internal encouraging Circumstances. Four participants—Miranda, Nathan, Aaron and Jaeneisha—reported circumstances that encourage their strengths awareness or

application came from themselves. These circumstances are: confidence in teaching one's native language and culture (1), persistent personality (1), passion about teaching (1), awareness of one's strengths (1), and understanding of the value of one's strengths (1).

External discouraging circumstances. Six out of eight participants reported external circumstances that either discouraged or will discourage their strengths awareness and application. Among the external discouraging circumstances are standardized testing (2), challenging students (2), peers' prejudice and ignorance (2), competition with peers (1), discouraging feedback from various sources (1), and program's grade-orientation (1).

In addition, I speculate that, to some extent, Persian culture, Chinese culture and Korean culture might discourage Laleh, Xin and Tina from being aware of their strengths and/or talking about their strengths as they all expressed their culture's expectation of being humble about one's strengths. This is in line with Eland's (2001) study result that international graduate students reported differences in how people in the U.S. and people in their home countries talked about themselves. Similarly, Southeast Asian American teacher candidates in Nguyen-Lam's (2002) study reported that their cultures that placed high value on humility and harmony made it hard for them to share their background and experience on their own, but they would do so if invited.

Internal discouraging circumstances. Three participants suggested internal circumstances that had discouraged their strengths awareness and/or application. These circumstances include deficit thinking habit (1), unawareness of strengths (1), and self-perceived low English (1).

Derived from dialogues with Xin, I identified that her eagerness to be treated equal so that she won't stand out in her university might have discouraged her from actively applying her strengths to make contributions.

In conclusion, this study showed that comments and evaluations from host teachers, professors and supervisors can largely influence how participants' perceive and/or apply their strengths in teaching. When teacher candidates are encouraged, they will enhance their strengths awareness and apply their strengths eagerly in teaching; when they are discouraged, they will lose confidence and exhibit lack of interest to apply their strengths in teaching.

Different Reports

The fourth sub-question of this study is: *Within racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates group, are there any different reports of strengths awareness and utilization that are related to different characteristics? And what accounts for these differences?* When I designed this sub-question, I had planned to explore whether there are different reports between international teacher candidates and minority teacher candidates. As I mentioned earlier, some participants in this study were born and educated in other countries, and because of their racial and ethnic identity, they were mistaken as international students by their program coordinators. My further inquiry about their minority identity showed that they are Americans not international students. Because of the unbalance in numbers of seven minority teacher candidates and only one international teacher candidate in this study, it is challenging for me to compare these two groups of participants and draw fair conclusions. But I found that minority teacher candidates who grew up and were educated in their home countries shared a lot of similar experiences with international teacher candidates. To some extent, the citizenship and permanent residency seemed to be the big difference to categorize

them into different groups. Laleh was born in the U.S., but she moved with his parents to Iran when she was very young and moved back to the U.S. in her 20's. Miranda was born and educated in Ecuador and migrated to the U.S. in her 30's. Both of them are American citizens, but they shared lots of similarities with Xin, the international student in this study. For instance, they all possess a native language that is different from English; they all were educated in their home countries.

At the same time, I did find some different reports between participants who are bilingual/bicultural and those who are monolingual. I also noted some different reports due to other characteristics of the participants.

Language, Culture and Diversity

Based on the participants' dominant strengths, it seemed that the five participants who were either educated in a different country than the U.S., or who learned heritage languages and cultures at home, stressed the culture, language and diversity strengths that they bring to American education. Three participants—Miranda, Tina and Xin—explicitly expressed the need of diversity in American education and their responsibility to teach others about diversity. Kauchak and Burbank's (2003) study noted that the teacher candidate born and educated in their home countries regarded diversity in American classrooms as a challenge for teaching, yet in this study, diversity is advocated and perceived as a personal strength by the international teacher candidate, as shared by the other two minority participants. I tend to conclude that within racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates group, teacher candidates who are bilingual and bicultural and teacher candidates who are monolingual seemed to share different reports in terms of self-identified strengths. Due to the mastery of another language and culture, some participants stress their culture, language and

diversity strengths while participants who don't have these experiences tended not to stress those strengths.

Diversity in the Department

Two participants in this study—Xin and Jaeneisha—had similar reports in that they both exhibited strong awareness of their strengths and both voiced lonely and intimidated feelings toward their teacher preparation programs. As you may recall, Xin shared with her classmates her thoughts about Columbus's discovery of the New World and her comments were not taken seriously by her classmates who laughed and thought she was joking. Jaeneisha perceived herself being treated as a baby by some of her professors who exhibited low expectation toward minority students like her. Although Xin studied in the master's degree program and Jaeneisha studied in the undergraduate program, they happened to study in the same department at Stone University. As both of them suggested, lack of student diversity in the programs and on the campus, classmates' showing ignorance of diversity, and some professors' stereotypes toward teacher candidates from racial and/or ethnic minority backgrounds in their department made them feel stared at and judged all the time, which discouraged them from actively using their strengths. Therefore, their shared feelings seemed to be from the lack of diversity in the department in the same university context.

In contrast to their experiences and interpretations, Miranda and Nathan, who were both enrolled in Smooth University, were grateful for their programs' caring for them and neither pointed out any discouraging circumstances related to their programs or the university. In spite of being among the few minority teacher candidates, they both felt encouraged and taken good care of. Therefore, diversity in the department not only means the obvious diversity in teacher candidate population numbers, but also means the unspoken

attitudes that people in the department hold toward diversity and students from different cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. I assumed how they perceived they were treated and valued by their programs made them feel attached, even though there is also a lack of minority student representation in their programs and on the campus. This supports the argument made by Nguyen-Lam (2002) that most efforts to improve program diversity focused on numeric data, less-easily measured circumstances such as individuals' and institutions' beliefs, perceptions and practices related to race, language and culture are typically ignored.

Connection between Strengths and Weaknesses

Researchers argue that strengths are not the opposite of weaknesses (Carman, 2005; Clifton & Nelson, 1992; Liesveld & Miller, 2005) and “each has its own unique configuration” (Carman, 2005, p. 108). Compared with four participants who held a dualistic attitude toward strengths and weaknesses, four participants who perceived strengths and weaknesses as related and dynamic had a more sophisticated understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Aaron, Nathan and Xin, all expressed that their personality strengths would make up their weaknesses. Aaron and Tina voiced their willingness to receive constructive criticism and efforts to change weaknesses into strengths. Their understanding of the interaction between strengths and weaknesses seemed to explain why their reports were different from those of other participants.

Chapter Seven – Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

Discussion

Although there is a growing voice in the literature that calls for acknowledging the strengths of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, there is no empirical study that has explicitly explored what strengths these pre-service teachers believe they bring to education and how they work with their strengths in their teaching.

In this study, I attempted to provide narrative data to enrich our existing knowledge of the strengths and the utilization of strengths by teacher candidates from diverse cultural, linguistic and racial backgrounds. I believe that overall, this study made the following achievements: First, this study contributed to our knowledge base of the strengths of teacher candidates from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The variety of strengths found include many cultural and linguistic strengths that the literature suggested as well as many other strengths that may not fit neatly into the strengths box that existing literature drew for racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates; second, different from the studies that have identified strengths through tools such as StrengthsFinder, this study explored strengths awareness from the participants' perspectives. It found various sources where some of their strengths may come from and uncovered several beginnings that they believe contributed to their strengths awareness. This study showed the potential of using self exploration and reflection to help the participants to identify and interpret their strengths; third, this study provided a comparatively richer data and concrete and situational evidence of how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates utilized their strengths in teaching, as the data came not only from verbal comments from the interviews, but also from a variety of sources such as lesson plans, field journals, reading assignments, portfolios, resumes, etc.

The question this study set out to address was: *In what ways are racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates aware of and able to utilize at least some personal strengths in teacher education programs?* Findings discussed in Chapter Six reveal that most participants were aware of their own strengths and all were able to provide evidence of how they applied their strengths to make positive differences in the teaching field and non-teaching fields, although there are varied levels of exhibited strengths awareness and practices among the participants. This study noted a variety of sources where some of the participant-identified strengths came from, and noted participant-perceived origins that made them aware of some of their strengths. This study also identified complicated internal and external circumstances that the participants believed influence their awareness and application of their strengths in their programs. In this chapter, I discuss what emerged from the findings.

The Variety of Strengths

Different people define and perceive the word *strength* in different ways. It can be abstract or concrete. Some participants in this study perceived strengths in very concrete ways. For example, one participant told me that when she heard the word *strength*, originally she tried to think about specific things that she was good at, which was related to literature such as Shakespeare's work. Some participants perceived strengths in more abstract ways. For example, many participants in this study regarded espousing and advocating diversity as their strengths. Findings in this study show that strengths exhibit in a variety of ways. It can be skills, knowledge, values or personal characteristics. In this study, strengths were interpreted and reported by each participant.

Existing literature (e.g., Nguyen, 2004) suggests that teachers and teacher candidates who are ethnically and culturally diverse can serve as home-family link. Interestingly, this

unique strength was not discussed by most participants in this study. Laleh mentioned briefly her understanding of an Indian student's father's call to her about a grading issue, but she did not identify it as her strength. Jaeneisha shared that her African American identity made some of her African American students' parents feel at ease, but she did not give specific examples and also did not identify it as her strength. The other six participants did not mention their responsibility as a bridge between their students' home and school. I speculate that it is possible that the participants in this study had limited and indirect connection with their students' parents through their field experience or it is possible that they did not think serving as a bridge between family and school is a very important strength at the point when I interviewed them, although they all expressed their strengths of serving their students especially minority students.

Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates

Four findings in this study provided further evidence to support the recruitment of teacher candidates from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in this country. First, most participants in this study perceived their passion about teaching and caring for their students as an important strength. Second, all participants in this study were aware of the unique strengths that they brought to education as racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates and that they were able to use concrete evidence to illustrate their strengths utilization in a variety of ways in academics, their universities and their communities. This study expanded our understanding about racial and/or ethnic teacher candidates' strengths. On the whole, the racial, cultural and linguistic strengths that the existing literature suggested about racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates match how the participants in this study perceived themselves in these areas. Third, this study found that the origins of diverse teacher

candidates' strengths can be from a variety of sources including personal experiences, backgrounds, race and ethnic identity, and personality. Not only because of their race and ethnic identity but also because of their unique experiences, perspectives and characteristics, they showed their keen caring about students who are historically ignored and underserved by the educational system and exhibited their dedication to advocating for and bringing a positive change in all students. Four, this study found that all participants believe that they have the potential and capacity to teach students from ethnically and culturally diverse groups. They all voiced their confidence in their potential to relate to minority students better and teach them more effectively than their European American peers.

Teacher Education Programs

The importance of teacher education programs in influencing racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths awareness and utilization is evident in this study in the following areas: (1) orientation, (2) diversity, (3) peers, and (4) professional educators.

Program orientation. As indicated in Chapter Six, most participants seemed to be familiar and comfortable with using portfolios to represent their strengths and practice with strengths. Representation formats were dominated by their lesson plans, followed by research paper, reading responses, field journal entries, and other formats based on their courses' or programs' requirements. Most submitted professional work samples focused on the contributions that participants made to K-12 students. To me, there are two findings evident. First, although participants of this study came from a variety of teacher education programs at different study levels at four different universities, their programs all seemed to emphasize the development of teacher candidates' writing skills. Second, their program orientation

seemed to focus on making a connection between pre-service teachers' program performance and their contributions to K-12 learners.

Under this orientation, participants who possess other types of strengths will be less likely to pay attention to other strengths that may lead to personal development; and they will be less likely to be given opportunities to express and show their diverse strengths, even though they may be aware of and are eager to exercise these strengths in their teaching. For example, troubleshooting and reflex are two important strengths self-identified by Jaeneisha. In the literature the importance of the skill of reacting before problems happen has been discussed. In the book *So You Want to Be a Teacher?: Everything Nobody Wants to Tell You about Teaching*, Calabrese (2002) wrote,

The way a teacher acts before problems have a chance to occur or get worse can be of vital importance. That is, teach in a way that makes problems less likely to occur... Teachers who have the ability to know when bad behavior may occur and react quickly can usually avoid it to some extent. (p. 116)

Because her educational courses did not ever give her a chance to show these two skill strengths and she was judged only by her performance of writing details in paper or organizing projects, Jaeneisha learned that she is perceived as a bad teacher because she is not good at writing. She was very frustrated by her program's overemphasis on the written format.

Program diversity. It is reported that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates described about social and emotional isolation due to lack of minorities in their programs (Battle & Cuellar, 2006; Guyton et al., 1996; Oling Ottoo, 2005), and that they experienced racial discrimination and racial comments by their European American classmates (Gomez, et al., 2008; Guyton, et al., 1996; Kohli, 2009). Most participants in this study expressed their concerns about the lack of racial and/or ethnic diversity in their programs. Although some

participants, because of their social and out-going personality, said they did not mind being the only minority students in their programs, others apparently were bothered. These participants voiced their strengths awareness, yet they were discouraged from actively utilizing their strengths in teaching because of lack of representation of racial and/or ethnic minority peers in their programs, and the attitude that the department and schools hold toward diversity, and some European American professors' inappropriate behaviors and comments. The lack of program diversity made some racial and/or ethnic minority pre-service teachers feel singled out and stared at and judged all the time. To some extent, lack of program diversity discouraged these prospective teachers who are present in teacher preparation programs.

Peers. Peer impacts can be positive or negative. On the one hand, peers' interest in racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' linguistic, cultural and experiential backgrounds make them feel valued and encourage them to share, as in the case of Xin, the only international teacher candidate in this study, who shared information about the Chinese educational system with some of her peers. On the other hand, it is believed that peers impact minority teacher candidates' willingness to share their voices (Burant, 1999). According to Burant, the Mexican American teacher candidate in his study stopped sharing her perspectives during class after observing her classmates' negative behaviors toward another student who challenged their commitment to diversity. This is also reflected well by Xin, who shared with her peers her thoughts about Columbus's discovery of the New World and her comments were taken as jokes by them.

My study also noted the strong influences that the participants' peers had on their strengths awareness and application, some of which were positive and some were negative.

Comparison with peers was identified as one of the causes leading some participants to be aware of their strengths; positive feedback from peers also encouraged some participants to continue utilizing their strengths; yet competition with peers and prejudice and ignorance exhibited by peers caused some participants to doubt their strengths or to discourage them from applying their strengths. Due to the lack of teacher candidate diversity in many teacher preparation programs, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are very likely to experience situations when their European American peers show no interest in their backgrounds or experiences, which potentially discourages them from expressing their strengths and making contributions to the class.

Professional educators. Professional educators here include professors, supervisors and host teachers who are responsible for educating teacher candidates in the teacher preparation programs. It has been reported that host teachers in the field placements, university professors, and supervisors impacted racial and/or ethnic minority prospective teachers' strengths application (Nguyen-Lam, 2002; Waldschmidt, 2002). As mentioned in previous chapters, McEntarffer (2003) and He (2009) suggested that focusing on mentors' and mentees' strengths offered a unique way to develop a positive mentor-mentee relationship.

Two participants in my study talked about the importance of having a healthy relationship with host teachers to succeed and get the most out of their field experiences. The findings of this study show that positive feedback from professional educators, whether formal or informal, was identified as the leading encouraging circumstance for participants' strengths utilization. Positive feedback is also one of the reasons that caused participants' strengths awareness. When professional educators focused on the strengths of these teacher

candidates and offered encouraging feedback, candidates were encouraged and they actively used their strengths more often. This is in line with the findings from Janowski's (2006) study that experiences of success in academic and extracurricular life is one of the necessary circumstances to make strengths utilization occur after the identification of strengths. Successful experience with professional educators is important for prospective teachers to use their strengths.

Oling Ottoo's (2005) study showed faculty members did not intentionally use the insider cultural and linguistic knowledge that teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds brought to their courses. Similarly, in my study, professional educators' ignorance of teacher candidates' strengths and low expectations that some participants experienced led them to conclude that these two were discouraging circumstances for their productive strengths application.

Environment beyond the Program

This study found that environment may influence how the participants perceived themselves and utilized their strengths. Environment here can be countries, cultures, universities where the participants were enrolled, the educational systems or the students that the participants will teach. Some participants attributed their strengths awareness to experiencing multiculturalism after moving to the U.S.; some believe that home country's development will encourage further strengths application; and some indicated the lack of diversity on their university campuses played a negative role in their active strengths application. As argued by Clabaugh (2005), "strengths cannot be built on if the school environment fails to provide outlets for them in the first place" (p. 169); without a supporting environment, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates will not be able to realize

strengths or build on their strengths to make contributions. Standardized tests, challenging students and coming from cultures that value humbleness were also identified as discouraging circumstances for their strengths awareness and application.

Strengths Awareness and Strengths Articulation

It seemed that strengths awareness and strengths articulation are related. This study found that participants who were able to name and explain their strengths in words tended to be those who had thought about their strengths before. Similarly, those who showed strengths-related knowledge about themselves tended to be more capable of articulating their strengths in words than those who were less aware of their strengths.

Those who had consciously thought about their strengths or who had been inspired to think about their strengths before participating in this study tended to be more aware of their strengths and capable of articulating their strengths more clearly. To be specific, those who seemed very articulate when communicating about their strengths were those who had been told their strengths by professionals, who had consciously compared themselves with peers, and who had been impacted by American multicultural social environment. Those participants who seemed not to be able to name their strengths were those who had never thought about their strengths before or who had a deficit thinking habit. In addition, the participants' verbal communication skills also appeared to have some impacts on their strengths articulation.

Strengths Awareness and Utilization

Studies argued that strengths awareness precedes strengths application (Bowers, 2009; Fox, 2008) and because of that assumption, some argued for the necessity of

identifying one's strengths (Buckingham, 200; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Understanding one's strengths may create some positive changes in a person's life.

With empirical data, this study found that those participants who exhibited strong strengths awareness used their strengths more consciously and consistently. This is consistent with what Bowers (2009) argued, "By capitalizing on strengths, individuals turn personal strengths into personal advantages" (p. 29). In addition, awareness of one's strengths and the attitude one held toward its value were identified by some participants as encouraging circumstances for their strengths application; a deficit thinking habit and unawareness of one's strengths were identified by some participants as discouraging circumstances for strengths application.

This study also found that for some participants, their strengths have been part of who they are and they lived with and used their strengths, without clear strengths awareness. For example, one participant had never thought about her strengths, but she used her strengths in teaching, as evidenced in both her professional samples and her verbal arguments. One participant told me, "Sometimes, you utilize it but you do not think you know that is your strengths" (*Yalissa, Interview #2, p. 6*). These findings seemed to indicate that strengths awareness does not always precede strengths application and it is not a must, but in order to consciously and purposefully take advantage of and use one's strengths, strengths awareness is important.

As the participants explained in the interviews, various circumstances influenced their utilization of strengths, some are encouraging and some are discouraging. Thus, the utilization of strengths is very complicated and contextual. Some external circumstances are beyond one's personal control, but for some participants, they were able to transform

external negative circumstances into encouraging circumstances and that capacity largely depended upon their personality and attitude.

It is important to note that although this study has been conducted by focusing on individual teacher candidates as both the sources of data and the unit of analysis, it would be an incorrect conclusion to place the responsibility for the identification and use of strengths on individual teacher candidates alone. Rather, I understand that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' awareness of their strengths and their use of their strengths to make contributions happen in the context of teacher education programs and institutions. As the study findings indicate, program and institutions may serve as important facilitators or hindrances for their strengths awareness and utilization, thus the responsibility of teacher education programs and institutions in supporting strengths identification and utilization should not be ignored.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations, which are related to the participant characteristics, document analysis method, data analysis and presentation, and my "insider" attitude.

Participants

First, in this qualitative research, although I used maximum variation sampling method to make participant selection as diverse as possible, and although participants in this study represented a comparatively wide range of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates, including African Americans, Chinese, Ecuadorian, Korean American, Latino American and Persian American, the eight participants are all from formal teacher preparation programs in the Northeastern region of the U.S. Thus, this study only explored a small group of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' experiences and their

experiences may not be representative for other racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. For example, racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in alternative teacher preparation programs may feel less isolated and they may disclose different perspectives. Those from different regions in the U.S. may have different stories to tell.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, different stages of their program may cause the different reports among the participants. This is evident between participants who had rich field experiences and those who just started their program. The samples that the participants provided reflected their different levels of field experience participation. Participants who were in their student teaching stage had prepared and taught several lessons, so they were able to bring lots of professional samples to represent their strengths and how they utilized their strengths in their real teaching. Participants who were in their early state of program were not able to provide many samples and their comments were drawn more from their thinking rather than from their actual teaching experience.

Methodology

For this study, I combined semi-structured individual interview method with document analysis method. On the whole, I believe the mixed methods put me into an advantageous position when compared with a single method and they mingled together to support each other. Without interviews, the analysis of the documents would be simply from my own perspective and may not fit the goal of this study—to understand how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates themselves perceive their strengths and strengths application. As I mentioned in the preceding chapters, most work samples are as long as fifteen pages and some are more than forty pages. Without participants' guidance of what strengths and strengths-related practices were reflected and where to look for these strengths

in the samples, it would have taken me a long time to figure that out by myself. More important, what I perceived may not be the same as those perceived by the participants.

Similarly, without the provided documents, evidence of participants' strengths application would be limited to their verbal reports only and many participants' strengths applications would not be evidenced explicitly. Actually, through explanation of their professional work samples, some participants refined the strengths that they identified previously by either making clearer statements or by adding strengths that they did not identify earlier. With the professional samples, all participants in this study were able to provide me with detailed examples or contexts of how they applied their strengths.

Yet these do not mean that the methods for this study do not have any limitation. One area of limitations is related to the use of document analysis. I noticed that some strengths were hard to be represented through traditional professional samples, such as some participant's ability to react quickly when unexpected events happened at school, or the participants' personality strengths. Although a couple of participants verbally mentioned their strengths that were related to their program contribution, it is not easy for them to find suitable samples to show these strengths.

Second, although during the interviews some participants verbally shared with me inspiring examples related to their strengths application in teaching, for different reasons such as losing it and never recoding it, they did not provide a copy to me. In another case, one participant provided me with her original written research paper in Spanish; since I cannot read Spanish, all my comments about this sample were based on her verbal sharing and I could not quote any sentences directly from the document itself.

In addition, since many work samples that the participants shared existed long before this study, it is possible that participants had difficulty remembering the contents well, as evidenced by some participants who needed time to figure out the connections during our interviews. This is similar to what Patton (1980) argued that during the interviews questions about the past was harder for the participants than the questions about the present. Therefore, to some extent, how well the participants were able to recall their work samples may influence their description and interpretations.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Another limitation is the editing and analysis of the data. The way I portrayed my participants were based on reducing and reorganizing the data and my interpretation of the data. Since I can neither include all stories or events that the participants shared with me during the interviews nor include all parts of their samples in this study, it is possible that I excluded some information that may have important meanings to the participants. I also realize that I played an active role in data analysis. It is I who interpreted the collected data and with portraits; it is about what I saw and how I made sense of the collected data.

My “Insider” Status

A final limitation is related to my “insider” status. Because I perceived myself as an insider, I may take things for granted and ignore the nuance expressed by the participants. For example, by rereading interview transcripts, I realized that I should have asked some participants to clarify their thoughts and offer more examples, but because I thought I knew what they meant, I missed some valuable communicative opportunities. I also learned that membership in one racial and ethnic group did not give me full insights into other racial and ethnic minority groups. For example, I am aware of the different languages and cultures

among Asians such as Koreans, Japanese and Chinese, but I am not sensitive to the possible variation among African Americans. Assuming that they are from the same culture and having the same language potentially discouraged me from asking them helpful questions to better understand them and their experiences.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have a number of implications, which include applications for K-12 educators, teacher preparation programs, and the future research.

K-12 Educators

This study found that participant-identified origins of their own strengths include their personal experiences, backgrounds, personal interests, race and ethnicity, and personality. There might be some other sources unidentified. I believe this finding offers an important implication for K-12 educators. With the wide range of strengths sources in mind, K-12 educators will realize that every student possesses some strengths; strengths do not belong to talented students only and strengths do not belong to minority students only, instead, strengths belong to all students, because each student has her/his personal experiences, backgrounds, personal interests and personalities from which some of their strengths might start. When K-12 educators perceive each student as a person with some strengths, they are likely to help students further develop and apply their strengths.

In recent years, with the pressures from mandated standardized tests and teacher accountability, it is possible that teachers perceive and assess students based on their test performances and ignore any other shining aspects exhibited by the students. Most participants in this study were aware of their weaknesses and most shared their weaknesses without being asked. One participant further suggested that a deficit-thinking habit has

blocked her from perceiving her strengths. Perceiving oneself and others through the strengths-based perspective is a good habit and should start early. The strengths-based perspective will equip K-12 educators with a more humanistic lens to teach and evaluate students. Students know whether their teachers perceive them in a positive way and more importantly, the way that teachers perceive students may impact how students perceive themselves.

Teacher Preparation Programs

The findings of this study reveal that many participants believe that the positive feedback from their host teachers, supervisors, professors or peers inspired them to be aware of some of their strengths, and most participants regard feedback from the professional educators or their peers as important external circumstances influencing their strengths application in their current and future teaching. Similar to the findings observed by Nguyen-Lam (2002) that teacher education programs that value and utilize minority teacher candidates' strengths have positive impacts on their program experiences, the findings of this study also reveal that even when there is lack of racial and/or diversity in student population, the participants with experiences with professors who expressed their acknowledgement of their strengths felt satisfied with their programs. These findings indicate a potential that when teacher education programs use a strengths-based perspective to appreciate teacher candidates' strengths, teacher candidates are likely to become aware of their strengths and they are likely to be encouraged to use their strengths to make contributions. As previous studies suggest, the strengths-based perspective has the potential to change the relationship among people in positive ways (Clifton et al., 2006; He, 2009; McEntarffer, 2003; Rath,

2007). When teacher candidates feel encouraged, they may form a strengths-based perspective to look at others in their programs and their students in the classrooms.

I believe the above findings lead to four implications to the teacher education programs. First, one of the most important components of teacher candidate evaluation either on the campus or in their field experiences is to articulate and confirm the strengths that teacher candidates bring to their programs and their students. It is important to let teacher candidates know what specific strengths they possess and exhibit to inspire their further thoughts in their personal strengths. The identification and articulation of the teacher candidates' strengths should neither be superficial nor be for courteous purposes. It should be a strong component of the evaluation of teacher candidates. Without the articulation and identification of their strengths by their host teachers, professors and supervisors, some participants in this study may not have known their strengths and they may not have realized that they criticize themselves too much.

Second, teacher education programs should work hard to provide non-threatening learning environments for all teacher candidates, especially for teacher candidates from diverse racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Increasing the numbers of diverse population in the programs can make them feel safe and feel that diversity is valued and appreciated. Like the study conducted by Cabello and Eckmier (1995) who reported that the development of a peer-based social network helped minority teacher candidates overcome feelings of isolation and allowed them to share resources and strategies, this study suggests that teacher educators offer opportunities for teacher candidates to be familiar with their peers and do peer-reviewing in a constructive and strengths-based way.

Third, this study indicates the potential of using other types of formats to present teacher candidates' strengths as qualified future teachers. Some participants in this study used resume, evaluation, diploma and certificate to show comprehensive pictures of them and some suggested video of actual teaching would exhibit his strengths. Although this study found that lesson plans, research papers, reading journals and other class assignments served as main tools for many participants to represent their strengths awareness and application, it also showed its limitation. For instance, some participant' contribution to their peers' learning was not evident through the course related assignments; and some participant' subtle communication with students in real teaching was not able to be well illustrated by these assignments. This study argues that when teacher candidates are freed to use any formats to represent themselves, they are more likely to present their strengths in a variety of ways. Meanwhile, encouraging more presentation formats provides the potential to broaden teacher education programs' tunnels to evaluate and appreciate teacher candidates' strengths and contributions.

Last but not least, this study showed that besides outside comments and evaluations, self-awareness and self-understanding are also important circumstances to cause the participants' strengths awareness. When teacher candidates have a better understanding of themselves, they start realizing their strengths. Therefore, self-understanding and self-awareness are important for strengths awareness. The implication of this finding in teacher education programs is that teacher education programs should offer teacher candidates opportunities to explore and know themselves better.

Overall, based on the findings in this study, I suggest teacher candidates be given ample opportunities to explore, express, share and apply their self-perceived strengths.

Future Research

The findings of this study point to three suggestions for future research. First, this qualitative research study was an attempt to use the strengths-based perspective to explore the racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths awareness and application. Most of the findings were based on minority future teachers' perspectives and experiences due to the low number of international prospective teachers in the potential participant pool. Future studies can recruit more international teacher candidates to compare the different or similar reports among racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates.

Second, based on this study, it seemed that different stages of the participants' programs had some impacts on their experiences. Those participants who had rich field experiences seemed to be able to bring more professional samples to represent their strengths applications in practices and seemed to have more to tell. Future research can recruit participants at the same program stage to determine whether program stage influences participants' perspectives and experiences.

Third, this study used one-on-one semi-structured interviews and document analysis approach to collect data. They are successful in that they helped answer my research questions. But future research can use other ways to identify and interpret the strengths application of racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. For example, participant observation or videotaping of actual teaching can be used for data collection and analysis.

Appendix A
Invitation Letter to Potential Participants

Dear pre-service teacher,

My name is Hui Chen, and currently I am a doctoral candidate in Teaching and Curriculum Program at Syracuse University, NY. I am writing this letter to invite you to participate in my dissertation study *An Investigation of Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates' Strengths Awareness and Utilization*, which explores how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs make sense of and capitalize on their personal strengths to contribute to teacher education programs and K-12 classroom learners. The assumption of this study is that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates like you bring unique strengths to American education. Your generous participation and personal voices will help teacher education programs and teacher educators better understand and serve racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates. By sharing your experiences and perspectives, you will reflect on yourself and hopefully enhance more awareness of and confidence in strengths implementation in your future teaching.

For this research, I will conduct two semi-structured one-on-one interviews with you, and each interview will last for about 1.5 hours. With your permission, I will use a digital voice recorder to audiotape our interviews for transcripts. With your permission, I also would like you to share with me parts of your professional work that describe and represent your utilization of your strengths in teaching. The data can be field placements journals and reflections, coursework assignments, practicum/student teaching lesson plans, teaching materials, teaching portfolio, photos, etc. All mentioned names will be substituted with pseudonyms and all collected data will be kept confidential.

As racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates are underrepresented in the majority of teacher education programs in this country as well as in teacher education literature, your voluntary and generous participation in this research is extremely valuable. Your generosity also means a lot for me and my study. Within the next week I will contact you and ask whether you are willing to participate in this study. You are welcomed to email me at hchen22@syr.edu. Or you can call me at 315-481-2789. My dissertation advisor is Dr. Gerald Mager, at Teaching and Leadership Department at Syracuse University. Professor Mager can be reached at gmmager@syr.edu, or at 315-443-4752.

Sincerely Yours,

Hui



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Teaching and Leadership Programs

Consent Form

*An Investigation of Racial and/or Ethnic Minority Teacher Candidates' Strengths
Awareness and Utilization*

My name is Hui Chen, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at School of Education at Syracuse University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

I am interested in learning more about how racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates in formal teacher education programs make sense of and apply their personal strengths to contribute to teacher education programs and K-12 classroom learners. I will conduct two individual one-on-one interviews with you. I plan to audio tape the interviews for the purpose of data analysis. You can either accept or refuse audio taping. Each interview will take approximately 1.5 hours of your time. I would also like you to share with me parts of your professional work that you believe describe and represent your utilization of your strengths in teaching. At the end of the second interview, with your permission, I would like to collect a copy of your self-selected professional work samples for the purpose of data analysis. Suggested professional work samples can be your field journals and reflections, coursework assignments, lesson plans and teaching materials, teaching portfolio, photos, and so on. All mentioned names will be substituted with pseudonyms and only I have access to the collected data. Your name will not appear anywhere and your specific answers will not be linked to your name in any way. All interview tapes will be erased and all copies of your professional work samples will be destroyed when the study is complete.

The potential benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates' strengths awareness and utilization. This information has the potential of helping inform teacher educators, teacher education programs and policy makers with the specific strengths that racial and/or ethnic minority teacher candidates bring to the teaching profession and thus provide more evidence and knowledge to support teacher candidate diversity in this country. It also has the potential of helping you reflect on and become more aware of your uniqueness and contributions that you may make to American education. Participation in this study would not have any impact on your course grades.

The risks to you of participating in this study are minimal. A possible perceived risk might be that some interview questions might make you uncomfortable to address. In addition, you might be unwilling to share your professional work. You have the rights to

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refuse to answer any interview questions during the interviews and you have the rights to refuse to share with me your professional work.

If you do not want to take part, you have the right to refuse to take part, without penalty. If you decide to take part and later no longer wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty.

If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research, please contact my dissertation advisor Dr. Gerald Mager at 230 Huntington Hall, School of Education, Syracuse University. He can also be reached at gmmager@syr.edu. His office phone number is 315-443-4752. If you hope to know details of this research, you can contact me either at hchen22@syr.edu or at 315-481-2789. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you have questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, contact the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board at 315-443-3013.

Any of my questions have been answered, I am over the age of 18 and I wish to participate in this research study. I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____ I agree to be audiotaped

_____ I do not agree to be audiotaped

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed name of participant

Signature of researcher

Date

Printed name of researcher

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Appendix C
Member Checking Request Letter

Dear participant,

How are you? I really hope you are doing fine.

I am writing this email to ask you to do me one more favor. Based on the two interviews with you and the professional samples that you provided me with, I wrote a participant portrait of you, which will appear in my doctoral dissertation (For safety reason, I had to change all real names including your name). I hope that you can take some time to read it and provide me with some feedback. Please don't hesitate to correct me if I am wrong. You are also free to add any more information that you think necessary for people to know more about you, and your strengths awareness and application. How I perceive and present you might be different from your perspective. Your feedback would be very helpful for me and my dissertation.

Thanks again for your generous help!

Hui Chen

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