

# University School of Education Promoting Diversity Awareness and Initiatives

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## **Abstract**

*An abundance of research confirms preservice teachers are unprepared to work with diverse populations. This article describes an education program's efforts to support diversity initiatives and provide information and hands-on training to prepare teacher candidates for future work with the diversity they will encounter. Explanations of programs, coursework, professional development, and current and supportive literature are included.*

## **Introduction**

Imagine a world where all teachers are comfortable working with all students. They are prepared to meet the needs of every child based on academic abilities, physical and emotional constraints, and cultural, religious and domestic backgrounds. Imagine a world where classrooms are equipped with the necessities that provide for the ultimate learning experience for all children. They are filled with books from all cultures, in many languages; pictures representative of all people; manipulative materials to fit all hands; and decorations and wall art that is inviting to every individual. Imagine a world where all children can go to school unafraid, excited, and knowing they will be treated equally. Imagine a world where parents feel comfortable entering their child's school, talking to their child's teachers, and being involved in the education of the whole.

We call ourselves simply *The Diversity Committee* for our University's School of Education. While we cannot expect to make the description above a reality, we can and have worked toward that vision in our own smaller community. Our mission is to 1) cultivate and continuously improve a curriculum that will engage all faculty members as diversity responsive professionals, 2) pre-prepare all teacher candidates to function effectively in diverse classrooms, and 3) develop and nurture a relationship with partner schools and other university education programs that strive to promote diversity awareness and education.

Sonia Nieto (2006) shares a list of qualities (beyond those research reveals) that she believes good teachers should possess. They are 1) "a sense of mission," 2) "solidarity with, and empathy for, their students," 3) "the courage to challenge main-stream knowledge," 4) "improvisation," and 5) "a passion for social justice" (p. 463).

Wong et al. (2007) state "teacher quality must be defined beyond the parameters of content knowledge to include a teacher's ability to create optimal learning environments for students marginalized by the system because of their primary language, race/ethnicity, social class, culture, gender, and ability" (p. 10).

This paper provides a general outline of our committee's work with teacher candidates, colleagues, and PK–12 schools to promote diversity awareness and responsive teaching. It specifically breaks down best practice program initiatives we have found successful. We strive to promote quality teaching from a research standpoint: knowledge of subject matter; good communication and organizational skills; and training in educational pedagogy. Yet, we embrace those additional qualities listed by Nieto to help our teacher practitioners and professionals grow their knowledge, attitudes, and skills for working with a diverse student population. We make every effort to produce quality teachers as defined by Wong et al., to be knowledgeable in content and all-encompassing of diversity.

### **School of Education Unit Diversity Plan**

Nichols and Dong (2011) make a bold statement when they say, "The majority of today's American pre-service teachers just simply do not understand what multi-cultural education is" (p. 6). They go on to challenge education programs to "better prepare their students for teaching the multicultural student populations they will undoubtedly encounter" (p. 6). We believe, as a committee, our education unit is prepared to take this challenge.

Our committee begins each academic year by updating our "unit diversity plan," which one can access at <http://www.uscupstate.edu/academics/education/default.aspx?id=2489>. This plan focuses on diversity initiatives for teacher candidates, faculty, partner schools, and the unit as a whole.

Nichols and Dong follow some important researchers in the area of multicultural education with their prescriptions for education programs. Ladson-Billings (2001), Gay (2002), Banks and McGee Banks (2004) and Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) have all called for change and/or better preparation in multicultural teacher education. In keeping with this standard, the following list describes activities integrated into our curriculum and supported by our diversity committee and unit diversity plan.

### **Course Assignments**

Each year, course instructors update a unit Excel chart detailing diversity-related content for all education program courses. We ensure inclusion of diversity related topics in the majority of our program coursework.

### **Teacher Work Sample Diverse Learner Project**

As a part of the required teacher work sample portfolio implemented during the student teaching semester, preservice teachers are required to follow and work with a student from a diverse background. This can include racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, or other differences. They then report and reflect on the experience in the work sample portfolio.

### **SEDF 483 – *Organization and Management of a Diverse Classroom***

This course is specifically designed to detail practices supporting instruction in a diverse classroom. All teacher candidates are required to take this course the semester before student teaching.

### **[www.teachdiversity.org](http://www.teachdiversity.org)**

This website, a collaborative effort between USC Upstate and Furman University Education programs, "identifies resources for teaching and managing diversity in the classroom." It is valuable for teacher candidates, teachers in the field, and university faculty in that it provides valuable

diversity-related resources such as lesson plans and links to other websites. This website is shared with our public school partners and “seeks to help educators prepare for the next generation to deal positively with the opportunities and challenges that diversity affords.”

### **Field Experiences**

Dunn et al. (2009) advocate “faculties of education aim to ensure that all teacher candidates take part in field experiences that involve working in communities with diverse populations” (p. 553). Early field experiences and student teaching are essential parts of our programs. We have developed relationships with schools allowing us to place our teacher candidates in classrooms for observation and practice teaching. We also offer some of our courses on the K–12 school campuses. Our teacher candidates are placed in schools each semester after being admitted to the professional program. The field experience director makes certain they are placed in rural, urban, and high poverty schools for one or more of their placements. The teacher candidate population in our education program is approximately 70% Caucasian. During the senior year, our elementary education teacher candidates are placed in two very different schools for approximately 100 hours of field work: One school is predominately African American; the other is predominately of Hispanic culture. The response from the prestudent teachers is overwhelmingly positive.

### **Diversity Conference**

This one-day event for student teachers from USC Upstate and other South Carolina college and university education programs is a forum for sharing ideas and activities for supporting diversity. The conference, formally called the Diversity Collaborative, brings together future teachers from various cultural backgrounds to learn from professionals in the field and one another. The event is described in detail later in this paper.

### **Faculty Updates and Information**

Higbee, Schultz, and Goff (2010) commented, “although many educators would agree that integrating multiculturalism in post-secondary teaching and learning is an important goal, there is a dearth of resources for professional development for faculty and student services staff related to specific strategies for achieving this goal” (p. 50). The diversity committee strives to help provide opportunities for our faculty and staff. The committee chair and the Dean send out emails and other forms of diversity-related information to the education faculty on a monthly basis. The information is a combination of theory and practice related to diverse teaching methods and activities. The emails include current issues and trends as well as ideas and activities they can discuss with their teacher candidates. One example is an article written by Dr. Colette Rabin of San Jose State University entitled *Constructing an Ethic of Care in Teacher Education: Narrative as Pedagogy Toward Care* (2008). Also provided are websites with useful information, such as <http://www.nea.org/tools/1360.htm> and <http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/ui362.pdf>. We provide training videos during faculty meetings, and live speakers for our faculty and staff. We recently invited Michael Fosberg ([incognitotheplay.com](http://incognitotheplay.com)), an actor, writer, and presenter to speak at our annual diversity conference for student teachers and faculty.

### **Charles Lea Participation**

In June 2006, our School of Education and the Charles Lea Center for Rehabilitation and Special Education initiated a partnership to enable students with physical and mental disabilities to attend classes on a college campus. After participating in a number of on-campus learning experiences, students attend a graduation ceremony with faculty dressed in full regalia, and a keynote speaker addressing and congratulating the graduates and they receive their diplomas. Faculty and teacher education students participate in the course delivery and help with graduation ceremonies.

### **OSEP Grant**

As part of a grant provided by the United States Office of Special Education Programs to our School of Education, several elementary education courses were revised to integrate activities and assignments to help our preservice teachers better prepare for supporting children with disabilities. Extensive use of the [IrisCenter.com](http://IrisCenter.com) supplements the syllabi in our courses.

### **College Day**

Each spring, K–12 students are chaperoned by administrators and classroom teachers to visit our campus for the day. The students listen to a variety of campus speakers, including the Dean of the School of Education, an admissions officer, an international student, our “Street Team,” a group of college student athletes, a local hero, and other teacher candidates and faculty. They tour campus (library, bookstore, residence halls, classrooms and offices), and participate in an education course in process. They also have lunch in the campus cafeteria. The goal of the committee in this initiative is for young students to begin thinking about their academic futures at an early age. Schools with a high diverse population are targeted for this endeavor because of related statistics in low minority college enrollments and graduation.

### **Family Nights**

Our programs host a variety of family nights in collaboration with our school partners. For example one of our field experience groups planned and implemented a reading night with a partner school, where students and parents had dinner and participated in reading activities. Our preservice teachers planned and carried out all of the activities and acquired donations for dinner. We also have math and science nights with a similar format. These family night initiatives are an attempt to bring in families from diverse backgrounds with the hope of increasing their familiarity and comfort level in the school environment.

### **Diversity Collaborative with Partnering Universities**

Since the spring of 1994, groups of student teachers from universities and colleges across South Carolina have come together for a day of discussion and collaboration about diversity-related issues. Most colleges of education have not been “attentive to issues of diversity” (Irvine, 2003, p. 15) and have been producing preservice teachers “unprepared to teach students of diverse backgrounds” (Nieto, 2006, p. 471). We agree that “over the last decade teacher preparation programs have attempted to respond to the challenges of preparing teachers for the increasing diversity that is represented in public schools today” (Liggett & Finley, 2009, p. 33). With our programs and initiatives such as the diversity collaborative/ conference, we are striving to surpass what has been the norm in diversity education.

Our first diversity collaborative, focusing on cultural differences, consisted of 17 preservice teachers spending a day together in Charleston. It was an informal meeting led by an African American female professor and Caucasian male professor. The preservice teachers included one Asian female, six Caucasian females, three African American males, and seven African American females. It was simply a day to learn about one another—to ask questions and find answers.

“White, pre-service teachers have little cross-cultural knowledge, experience and understanding” (Irvine, 2003, p. xvi). “Teachers are unprepared for and misread cultural communication cues” (Davis, 2006, p. 15). “Teachers make negative assumptions about children with disabilities or impoverished backgrounds” (Davis, 2006, p. 25). Many teachers “perceive history as certain and assured knowledge and are reluctant to utilize an inquiry approach to history” (Banks, 2006, p. 29). It is the goal of the committee to provide student teachers with a day of diversity-related information to add to their coursework and field experiences and to be more prepared to teach in a diverse world.

Since the first diversity collaborative, the initiative has grown and evolved to include up to 350 student teachers from up to 10 different South Carolina colleges and universities. Over the years, we have adjusted and adapted our formats to meet the needs of our teacher candidates and the changes in the public schools where we live. We have attended the South Carolina Early Childhood Association conference where students met together, joined sessions, and presented papers. We have met at parks where teacher candidates had a cookout and participated in a team-building nature trail activity. Today, our School of Education diversity committee hosts a more formal diversity conference each spring for student teachers from across South Carolina. Benedict College, our partner institution, hosts a similar conference each fall.

Davis (2006) gives the following description of diverse learners:

They are the homeless children, the migrant children, the immigrant children learning English, children dealing with gender issues, children with learning disabilities, special needs children, and children from diverse cultures – students perhaps not previously included or successful in our classrooms. (p. x)

Our earlier initiatives focused mostly on cultural differences. Today, we strive to represent a wider variety of diverse groups.

Past diversity conference themes include: Diversity: Bridges to a Common Goal; Influencing the Future through Voices from Our Past and Present; Creating a Sense of Belonging in the Classroom; and Today’s Classrooms: Diverse Needs, Diverse Responses.

Each conference lasts approximately six hours with a keynote speaker, discussion sessions, a catered lunch with public school entertainment, and breakout sessions presenting strategies for working productively with diverse school populations. Past keynote speakers include authors and presenters such as Louise Derman-Sparks, Michael Fosberg, Donna Gollnick, Gloria Boutte Freeman Owle, and Paul Gorsky. Children’s groups from the surrounding schools provide entertainment, such as local school choirs, step and dance teams, and percussion bands.

Preservice teachers generally participate in two small-group, breakout sessions with guest speakers, where they have opportunities to share perspectives while discussing relevant issues on diversity. Examples of breakout presentations include *Teachers supporting the education of homeless children; Supporting the adopted child and their families; Helping students unlearn stereotypes of American Indians; Diversity and at-risk students; Multicultural children’s literature; Ten traits of highly effective teachers;* and, *So*

*you have English learners in your class.* These interactive sessions continue during an informal round table discussion at lunch.

Vygotsky (1978) maintained that the way students talk and interact with one another helps them to internalize new information and shapes the way they think and learn. This is true for very young students, as well as college age students. During the conference, preservice teachers take part in the many opportunities to interact with other preservice teachers from cultural and ethnic groups that differ from their own. This allows for an opportunity to listen to and share perspectives that offer insight on different ideas and thoughts that children may bring to the classroom. Having a chance to discuss these experiences not only helps preservice teachers become sensitive to cultural differences, but also helps them develop effective skills for working with children and families from diverse backgrounds. "Colleges of education should assume a leadership role in reversing the cycle of failure among students of color by producing teachers who are culturally responsive and advocates of social justice" (Irvine, 2003, p. xxiii). To increase cultural awareness, teacher education students may choose a small candy bar upon registration and later divide into groups who have the same candy wrapper, or they may sign up early to go on a lunch date with someone they have never met. The goal is to mix the participants for positive and productive interaction.

Past preservice teachers have been extremely positive in their evaluations of the conference. Sample comments include: "I loved the entertainment"; "The information and resources obtained at this conference will be useful to me as a future teacher"; "The keynote speaker was very inspiring"; "I enjoyed meeting new people"; "I learned a lot about how to incorporate culture into my future classroom"; "Getting to catch up with other student teachers was great"; and "The sessions were very informative and the speakers were very well prepared."

### **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that "Most teachers reject the notion that gender, class and ethnicity should be considered in designing instructional programs" (Irvine, 2003, p. 21). This spans all levels beginning in preschool and continuing through college or university.

We feel, as a partnering university, it is partially our responsibility to ensure that young people in our community schools receive equal opportunities and treatment; that new teachers, upon entering the classroom, are prepared to work with a diverse population; and faculty and staff are educated to carry out necessary diversity-related initiatives.

It is for this reason our committee strives to help all teachers (in our small sector of the world) be comfortable working with all students and prepared to meet the needs of every child. Through the School of Education diversity initiatives, we help ensure classrooms are equipped with the necessities that provide for the ultimate learning experience for all children: books from all cultures, in many languages; pictures representative of all people; manipulative materials to fit all hands; and decorations and wall art that is inviting to each and every individual. Through simple outreach, teaching, and work with local schools, we are encouraging and supportive of a community where all children can go to school unafraid, excited, and knowing they will be treated equally, and where parents feel comfortable entering the school, talking to their child's teachers, and being involved in the education of the whole. Finally, through our "college bound" programs, we are providing opportunities where many children have the opportunity to visit a college campus, learning about higher education and choices for their future—perhaps to attend that same campus as a young adult without disparity and superfluous

challenges because of their race, economic standing, and/or cultural background. We hope and believe we are making a difference.

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# The Perceptions of Primary Grade Teachers and Elementary Principals about the Effectiveness of Grade-Level Retention

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to ascertain the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention. Because grade retention is typically initiated in the primary grades, it is important to understand educators' beliefs about it as a viable option for low-performing students. A paper survey was sent to teachers and principals in one school district, inviting them to provide their perceptions about the reasons for grade retention, the most appropriate time to retain students, and the effectiveness of interventions in deterring the use of grade retention. Overall, teachers and principals believed students should be retained because of academic performance and perceived parental involvement as the most promising intervention to deter the use of grade retention. Teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention helps prevent future failure and maintain standards, helps teachers provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. Additionally, teachers and principals perceived a benefit to self-concept when students are retained in the primary grades, especially in kindergarten, but did not differ significantly concerning their views about the most appropriate time to retain students.*

Opponents of social promotion, advancing students to the next higher grade despite being developmentally behind peers, contend that it does low-performing students a disservice by placing them into classrooms in which they are ill-equipped to be successful (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Martin, 2009). As a result, grade retention, requiring students to repeat a grade because they have not demonstrated mastery of the curriculum (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008), continues to pervade public schools. The use of grade retention has resurfaced due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) and the adoption of high stakes promotion policies in states such as Florida and Texas, as well as in large school districts such as New York and Chicago (Burkam et al., 2007; Murray, Woodruff, & Vaughn, 2010). As a result, about 10% of students in kindergarten through eighth grade have been retained at one time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

However, the political push to use grade retention does not align with the majority research that concludes retained students are harmed academically and socio-emotionally (Bowman-Perrott, Herrera, & Murry, 2010; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). Although some research suggests retained students show short-term gains in achievement, this is usually followed by a fade in progress as well as negative attitudes toward school (Burkam et al., 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). In the United States and internationally, researchers have estimated that grade retention costs



educational systems more than 14 billion dollars annually with little return in learning (Ehmke, Dreschsel, & Carstensen, 2010; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Thus, Biegler (2000) succinctly stated that if the preponderance of research suggests grade retention is of little use in remediating learning difficulties, the onus should shift as to why practitioners continue to recommend retention for low-performing students. This study attempts to fill this void and examines the attitudes of primary grade teachers and elementary principals about grade retention in three areas. Specifically, it highlights their views on reasons for retention, the most appropriate time to retain students, and the best interventions to deter the use of retention.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review that follows is designed to frame the direction of the study. First, an overview of the effectiveness of grade retention, including research that reports both its pros and cons. Secondly, the review spotlights interventions that have been found to increase the outcomes of low-performing students. Finally, the review highlights literature concerning educators' beliefs about retention, with an emphasis on why researchers believe practitioners' positive views about grade retention exist.

#### **Effectiveness of Grade Retention**

Literature reporting the effectiveness of grade retention focuses on two student outcomes: (a) the academic achievement of students (Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009), which includes increasing the likelihood students will drop out (Allensworth, 2004; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2009), and (b) the socioemotional outcomes of students (Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson, 2002; Hong & Yu, 2008). Empirical research in both areas is inconsistent due to variable research designs (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009; Burkam et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010), yet grade retention is strongly characterized as negative.

First, the results of most longitudinal studies find retention does not benefit students academically (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Although some studies indicate students exhibit short-term benefits, these gains quickly fade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Beswick et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2010; Xia & Glennie, 2005), especially when students move into the secondary grades (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). For example, Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersley (2010) found that retained students' reading achievement was worse than a low-performing but promoted peer group during the retention year with deficiencies still prominent when students reached the 10th and 12th grades. This longitudinal decline also seems to explain why researchers report that a higher percentage of retained students eventually drop out of school (Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson et al., 2002; Xia & Glennie, 2005). However, other studies have concluded that retention benefits students academically (Greene & Winters, 2004; 2006; 2007; 2009; Griffith et al., 2010; House, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010; Ladner & Burke, 2010). Many of these studies were conducted in states or districts in which students were held to competency standards before being promoted. For example, Lorence and Dworkin (2006) concluded that Texas's high-stakes promotion policy improved the reading performance of students.

Secondly, although to a lesser extent, retention's negative impact on students' socioemotional outcomes is discussed in the literature (Gleason, Oi-man, & Hughes, 2007). Recommendations from these reports also make it difficult to draw any firm conclusions (Bonvin et al., 2008). For example, Martin (2009) found that retention caused serious harm to students' self-esteem, and Anderson et al.

(2002) found sixth graders viewed retention as the most significant negative life event they could experience. Additionally, other studies found grade retention negatively impacted retainees' attitudes toward school, with these students exhibiting more behavior problems (Murray et al., 2010). Yet, McCombs et al. (2009) found the emotional well being of retained students was not negatively impacted, even four years after the retention year. Similarly, Gleason et al. (2007) reported that grade retention increased the peer acceptance of first grade students the following year.

In sum, grade retention research in both areas is inconclusive, resulting in Murray et al. (2010) arguing that educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners would be better served in studying formative interventions aimed at improving the outcomes of struggling students. Unlike grade retention, formative interventions are less costly and most have literature bases that are less polarizing than grade retention research.

### **Interventions to Deter Retention**

When educators encounter students who struggle with curriculum, they have a variety of interventions to administer; the most summative (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011) and least proactive is grade retention. Retention is a relatively easy intervention to administer, and most schools simply cycle students through the same curriculum with which they did not find success the first time (Abbott et al., 2010; Burkam et al., 2007; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011). Because grade retention research does not provide a clear picture of its effectiveness (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011), its application makes little sense in light of more cost-effective interventions (Murray et al., 2010; Thompson & Cunningham, 2004).

The most promising practice to decrease grade retention rates is early identification of low-performing students (Bowman-Perrott, 2010; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Range et al., 2011a), followed by intense, formative interventions. Interventions include extending the school day with tutoring, summer school, supplemental reading programs taught by trained tutors, flexible scheduling to allow for more reading instruction, smaller class size, and personalized learning plans (Clay, 2005; Davenport, Selgado, Meisels, & Moore, 1998; Jimerson & Kauffman, 2003; Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2007; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004). Interestingly, past studies indicate educators viewed parental involvement as the most important intervention for struggling students (Range, 2009; Range, Yonke, & Young, 2011) and recommend using extended family as support, meeting in facilities that are convenient to parents, offering afterschool and evening programs for families, hosting parent education programs about literacy, and encouraging student-parent reading time (Benson & Martin, 2003; Meir & Sullivan, 2004). As a result, continuing to explore practitioners' beliefs about grade retention and interventions that might decrease its use is an important research endeavor (Range et al., 2011b).

### **Educator Beliefs and Retention**

Although there has been considerable research about the effects of retention on student outcomes, research about why educators recommend it for students is underdeveloped (Bonvin et al., 2008). This research area is important to understand because, "retention is typically viewed as a school-level decision made by principals and teachers" (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). Past inquiries have found teachers' beliefs about retention are influenced more by peers rather than by research (Bonvin et al., 2008; Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004), causing teachers to recommend retention for students who have similar characteristics such as being male, minority, and from low socioeconomic

backgrounds (Burkam et al., 2007; Cannon & Lipscomp, 2011). The most frequent reasons cited by teachers for recommending retention include poor academic achievement and lack of maturity (Range et al., 2011b; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Expanding on this, Beswick et al. (2008) reported educators perceive immaturity as the cause of early learning problems and believe students simply need more time to develop. Others argue that when low-performing students are retained, resulting classrooms will be more academically homogeneous, which in turn improves teachers' ability to differentiate instruction (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Finally, researchers have found most teachers feel retention should occur in kindergarten rather than later grades (Range et al., 2011b; Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006).

Principals' beliefs concerning grade retention are also important to understand (Bowman-Perrott, 2010), especially since there is little research concerning their attitudes about retention (Murray et al., 2010). Principals serve as instructional leaders for schools and help shape teachers' beliefs about child development as well as informing them about the consequences of interventions, including retention. Interestingly, principals' views about retention are similar to teachers' in that they report low academic performance and maturity as reasons to retain students and feel retention should occur in kindergarten as opposed to first or second grade (Cannon & Lipscomp, 2011; Range, 2009). Additionally, Murray et al. (2010) found principals identified parental support as a vital characteristic of students who were good candidates for retention.

Despite the one-sided nature of research that argues grade retention is not effective, why do educators continue to perceive grade retention as beneficial? Research in this area is underdeveloped, necessitating further exploration (Biegler, 2000; Range et al., 2011b; Witmer et al., 2004). Additionally, very few studies differentiate the attitudes of teachers and principals about grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009), and as a result, the findings of this study are important in explaining educators' beliefs about the use of retention.

### **Methodology**

The goal of the study was to illuminate how primary grade teachers and elementary principals in one school district perceive grade retention. Thus, four research questions guided the study:

1. How do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their perceptions of reasons for grade retention?
2. How do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about when grade retention is appropriate?
3. What interventions do educators (primary grade teachers and elementary principals) consider most effective at keeping struggling students from being retained?
4. Overall, how do primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about reasons for grade retention and the most appropriate time to retain students?

The study followed a descriptive tradition and used a survey to measure respondents' perceptions. Dillman's (2007) protocol for surveying a sample was used and consisted of: (a) a precontact letter, (b) a cover letter with survey, and (c) a postcontact letter with survey. Prior to the survey being mailed out, precontact with all 332 possible respondents was made with a precontact letter that notified the teachers and principals the survey would be arriving soon. Two weeks later, the survey was sent to all teachers and principals in a sealed envelope. Surveys were coded so researchers could determine who

participated in the study. Two weeks later, a second letter reminder and a second copy of the survey were sent to teachers and principals who had not responded to the original survey. Of the 293 teachers who received the survey, 206 returned surveys, and all 39 principals returned surveys. Thus, the overall response rate for the study was 74%.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in data collection was a revised version of the Teacher Perceptions about Retention Survey (TPARS) developed by Tomchin (1989) and used in other retention studies (Hurt, 2001; Pouliot, 1999; Quarterman, 2004; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004). In sum, section one of the survey included 18 Likert scaled items (4 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) and consisted of the following constructs: (a) nine statements concerning reasons for retention, and (b) nine statements concerning timing of retention in the primary grades. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for all 18 Likert scaled items and was 0.82.

Section two of the survey asked primary grade teachers and elementary principals to select one factor they considered to be most important when making a decision to retain a student. The third section of the survey asked teachers and principals to rate the effectiveness of interventions at keeping a struggling student from being retained. These interventions are grounded in the literature and were prevalent in the school district's culture. They included the following: (a) additional reading programs, (b) summer school, (c) parental involvement, (d) public school tutoring (carried out by employees of the school district after hours), (e) private tutoring (hired by parents for a fee), (f) direct instruction strategies, (g) formative evaluations, (h) multiage classrooms, (i) smaller class sizes, (j) mental health support, (k) before- and afterschool programs, (l) personal learning plans, (m) special education services, (n) cooperative learning, (o) group work, and (p) looping. The survey concluded by asking respondents one open-ended question about their overall beliefs concerning grade retention and one forced choice item asking their feelings concerning grade retention based on prior experiences retaining students.

### **Context**

This study was conducted in a school district located within a state with a mandatory retention statute at the fourth grade, leading to 83 student retentions in the primary grades during the school year (kindergarten = 52; first grade = 22; second grade = 9). The school district's total student population was 24,247 students, and of that population, 45% qualified for free or reduced lunches. Population by race was as follows: 86% Caucasian, 7% African-American, 3% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and less than 1% Native American. The district contained 39 elementary schools, configured in one of three ways: (a) prekindergarten through fourth grade, (b) kindergarten through fourth grade, or (c) kindergarten through fifth grade. These schools employed 293 prekindergarten through second grade teachers, and 39 elementary principals supervised these teachers for a total of 332 possible respondents.

### **Study Participants**

Of those primary grade teachers who responded to the survey, most were female (97%) and Caucasian (99%). A majority of the teachers taught kindergarten (33%), while 30% taught first grade and 31% taught second grade. The age range was distributed as follows: 27% in the 40–49 age group, 26% in the 50–59 age range, 21% in the 20–29 age group, and 22% in the 30–39 age group. Most teachers

reported that they held a masters degree (61%), and 37% reported that they held a bachelors degree. The average years of teaching experience for the entire sample was about 13 ( $M = 12.98$ ).

A majority of the elementary principals were female (69%) and Caucasian (97%). The age range was distributed as follows: 25% in the 30–39 age group, 44% in the 40–49 age group, and 71% in the 50–59 age group. Forty-six percent of the principals held a specialist degree; 28% held a masters degree; and 26% held a doctorate. The average number of years in administration was about nine ( $M=8.90$ ).

### Findings

Quantitative survey items were analyzed descriptively and inferentially using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.0. For Likert scaled items, both means and standard deviations were calculated. Qualitative responses to the open-ended question that asked respondents about their overall view of grade retention were coded and recoded by the researchers until 100% agreement was reached (Hatch, 2002). Principals' responses to the open-ended item resulted in only one theme: that grade retention was *not effective* at remediating struggling students. For teachers, themes identified as to why students might be retained included *maturity* and *size/age in relation* to other students.

For those who had retained students in the past, respondents were asked one forced choice item concerning their current views about retention. Approximately 64% of teachers and 68% of principals stated they would use retention again. Only 3% of teachers and 8% of principals reported they would not recommend retention again based on the outcomes of their previous decisions. Additional findings are organized by each research question.

### Research Question One

The first research question addressed how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their perceptions of reasons for grade retention. This question was answered by nine statements in section one of the survey. Table 1 lists their responses, including means, standards deviations, t-test results, and effect sizes. An overall significance level of .05 was used for the t-tests. Using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error, the significance level was set at .006 (.05/9) for each of the nine t-tests. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's D (Cohen, 1988).

**Table 1**  
*Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Reasons for Grade Retention*

Reasons	Teacher		Principal		<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> )	ES
	M	SD	M	SD		
Prevents future failure	2.80	0.74	2.31	0.66	<b>3.85 (<i>p</i>&lt;.001)</b>	0.70
Maintains standards	2.43	0.73	2.00	0.65	<b>3.75 (<i>p</i>&lt;.001)</b>	0.62
Prevents wide ranges in ability	1.89	0.61	1.82	0.68	0.65 ( <i>p</i> =.515)	0.11
Increases student motivation	1.90	0.62	1.62	0.54	2.67 ( <i>p</i> =.008)	0.48
Increases parent motivation	2.61	0.66	2.36	0.67	2.18 ( <i>p</i> =.030)	0.38
Provides support for non-supported students	2.14	0.70	1.89	0.65	2.02 ( <i>p</i> =.045)	0.37
Provides support in communication arts	2.32	0.66	2.08	0.66	2.09 ( <i>p</i> =.037)	0.36
Provides support in math	2.17	0.58	1.87	0.47	<b>3.05 (<i>p</i>=.003)</b>	0.57
Motivates students to attend school	2.74	0.67	2.39	0.68	<b>2.94 (<i>p</i>=.004)</b>	0.52

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree; bold type indicates significant differences at  $p < .006$ .

In sum, teachers agreed with the following reasons ( $M > 2.50$ ): retention prevents future failure ( $M = 2.80$ ), retention motivates students to attend school ( $M = 2.74$ ), and retention increases parent motivation ( $M = 2.61$ ). These reasons were also present in teachers' responses to the open-ended item. For example, one teacher indicated that she retained a student because he ended his kindergarten year without displaying first grade readiness skills (*prevents future failure*), and another teacher retained a student because she had approximately 60% attendance (*motivates students to attend school*). Principals' top reasons for student retention were not similar to the teachers' reasons, and none of their ratings revealed a mean of 2.50 (agreement) or greater.

When comparing teachers' and principals' perceptions of these nine reasons for retention, teachers agreed more with all of them compared to principals. Teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention helps prevent future failure, maintain standards, helps them to provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. These four effect sizes were in the medium range, indicating that teachers are noticeably in more agreement than principals that these reasons can make a difference for students.

Research question one was also answered by asking teachers and principals to select one factor they considered most important when making a decision to retain students. Teachers perceived academic performance (58%) as the most important factor to consider. Ability level (20%) and emotional maturity (16%) were selected less frequently. Interestingly, principals concurred and selected academic performance (47%) as the most important factor, also followed by ability level (25%) and emotional maturity (22%). Factors chosen by both teachers and principals much less often were self-esteem, effort, and age. Principals commented on academic performance and ability in their open-ended responses as well. For example, one principal stated that his decision to retain students in the past was based on their *academic performance* and not their perceived *ability*. Another principal stated that although the student she retained would have been retained due to state statute, his academic performance in school was inadequate when compared to peers.

### **Research Question Two**

The second research question asked how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differ in their views about when grade retention is appropriate. This was answered by nine statements in the survey. Table 2 displays teachers' and principals' responses, including means, standard deviations, t-tests, and effect sizes. An overall significance level of .05 was used for the t-tests. Using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type I error, the significance level was set at .006 (.05/9) for each of the nine t-tests. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's D (Cohen, 1988).

**Table 2**  
*Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Most Appropriate Time for Grade Retention*

Time	Teacher		Principal		<i>t</i> ( <i>p</i> )	ES
	M	SD	M	SD		
Kindergarten:						
Improves self-concept	3.16	0.57	3.03	0.67	1.14 ( <i>p</i> =.254)	0.21
Aides immature students	3.14	0.69	3.05	0.56	0.91 ( <i>p</i> =.366)	0.14
Should occur by the end of kindergarten	2.36	0.70	2.56	0.88	1.38 ( <i>p</i> =.175)	0.25
First grade:						
Improves self-concept	2.84	0.66	2.67	0.84	1.22 ( <i>p</i> =.227)	0.23
Aides immature students	2.77	0.75	2.51	0.72	1.95 ( <i>p</i> =.052)	0.35
Should occur by the end of first grade	2.47	0.73	2.54	0.79	0.54 ( <i>p</i> =.587)	0.09
Second grade:						
Improves self-concept	2.36	1.04	2.08	0.71	1.35 ( <i>p</i> =.179)	0.31
Aides immature students	2.26	0.70	2.11	0.76	1.24 ( <i>p</i> =.218)	0.21
Should occur by the end of second grade	2.54	0.83	2.56	0.85	0.16 ( <i>p</i> =.877)	0.02

Note. 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree

Teachers agreed that grade retention in kindergarten and first grade improved student self-concept ( $M > 2.50$ ), but agreed most strongly that self-concept increased if retention occurred in kindergarten ( $M = 3.16$ ). Teachers also agreed that grade retention in kindergarten aided immature students ( $M = 3.14$ ) more than if it occurred in first grade ( $M = 2.77$ ) or second grade ( $M = 2.26$ ). Maturity and its connection to kindergarten retention was also evident in teachers' open-ended responses. For example, one teacher stated that kindergarten students who are younger compared to others exhibit maturity issues and are therefore more likely to be retained. Similarly, principals agreed that students' self-concept improved if grade retention occurred in kindergarten ( $M = 3.03$ ) as opposed to first grade ( $M = 2.67$ ) or second grade ( $M = 2.08$ ). Principals also agreed that retention in kindergarten ( $M = 3.05$ ) benefited immature students more than if it occurred in first grade ( $M = 2.51$ ) or second grade ( $M = 2.11$ ).

When comparing teachers' and principals' perceptions of these nine items related to the time when retention took place, teachers were generally more agreeable than principals. However, t-tests yielded no significant differences using the conservative significance level of .006. When examining effect sizes, teachers were moderately more agreeable than principals that retention in kindergarten leads to improved self-concept. However, the difference between their perceptions was greater for retention in the first grade and in the second grade. In other words, teachers agreed much more strongly that retention leads to improvements in self-concept compared to principals for children retained in the first or second grade. Generally, both teachers and principals perceived self-concept as being positively impacted by retention, but less so as the child reaches later grades. Small differences in perceptions between teachers and principals were shown when they considered retention helping immature students or when they considered if retention should take place in kindergarten, first grade, or second grade. Not only were the effect sizes small, but also retention in kindergarten was the only grade in which teachers and principals viewed a benefit for immature students. Overall, teachers and principals

saw a benefit to self-concept when students are retained in the primary grades; they differed greatest for benefits in the second grade, but not significantly. Both groups were generally in agreement with each other.

### Research Question Three

Research question three asked what interventions educators (primary grade teachers and elementary principals) considered most effective at keeping struggling students from being retained. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 17 interventions as alternatives to retaining students. Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations for these interventions.

**Table 3**  
*Teachers' and Principals' Perceptions of Interventions to Deter Grade Retention*

Intervention	Mean	SD	N
Parental involvement	3.78	0.49	242
Smaller class sizes	3.69	0.59	243
Additional reading programs	3.58	0.59	239
Direct instruction	3.33	0.72	242
Private tutoring	3.27	0.67	238
Special education	3.27	0.69	241
Public school tutoring	3.14	0.76	243
Personal learning plans	3.01	0.76	241
Mental health support	3.00	0.81	239
Summer school	2.90	0.78	243
Cooperative learning	2.79	0.82	242
Looping	2.70	0.84	237
Formative evaluations	2.58	0.88	239
Before and after school programs	2.54	0.84	242
Peer tutoring	2.50	0.72	242
Group work	2.34	0.90	242
Multiage classrooms	2.21	0.84	235

*Note.* 1 = no effect, 2 = slight effect, 3 = moderate effect, and 4 = great effect

Respondents perceived nine of the interventions as at least moderately effective at deterring grade retention ( $M > 3.00$ ). The intervention rated the most effective by primary grade teachers and principals was *parental involvement* ( $M = 3.78$ ). The idea of parent support being paramount to the success of grade retention was also present in both teachers' and principals' responses to the open-ended item. For example, one teacher and one principal stated that they did not feel a retained student benefited from the intervention due to lack of parental involvement and support for the decision. Respondents rated *group work* and *multiage classrooms* as least effective at preventing grade retention ( $M < 2.50$ ).

### Research Question Four

Research question four asked how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differed in their overall views of reasons for grade retention and the most appropriate time to retain students. This



question was answered by averaging the 9 items addressing reasons for retention and the 9 items related to time for retention; their averages were then compared using independent samples t-tests. Table 4 displays the overall means and standard deviations for teachers and principals related to reasons and time to use grade retention.

**Table 4**

*Primary Grade Teachers' and Elementary Principals' Perceptions about Reasons and Time for Grade Retention*

Factor	Teachers		Principals	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reasons*	2.34	0.42	2.04	0.39
Time	2.64	0.39	2.57	0.37

*Note.* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree;

\*  $p < .001$

Results of the independent sample t-tests indicated that overall, teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention in the primary grades is effective ( $t = 4.26, p < 0.001$ ). There was no significant difference between teachers and principals when comparing their overall views about the most appropriate time to retain students ( $t = 1.05, p < 0.001$ ).

### Discussion

The intent of this study was to illuminate how teachers and principals perceived and differed in their views concerning grade retention. Generalizability is limited in that data were obtained from one school district in one state. A majority of teachers (64%) and principals (68%) indicated that, based on past experiences using retention, they would use it again as an intervention for struggling students, a finding which reaffirms what other researchers have found concerning the supportive attitudes of educators about grade retention (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Oklpala, 2007; Range et al., 2011b; Witmer et al., 2004; Xia & Glennie, 2005). It appears that empirical research has done little to sway the views of primary grade educators who hold positive beliefs about grade retention, because they do not observe students immediately after they are retained nor follow their long-term academic trajectories (Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Range et al., 2011a; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Witmer et al., 2004).

Findings reaffirmed what other researchers have found in that teachers agreed that students who displayed poor academic performance were candidates for grade retention and retention prevents future failure and motivates students to attend school (Range et al., 2011b; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004). Although researchers have reported teachers believed grade retention prevents future failure (Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; Range, 2009), the notion that it will motivate students to attend school is usually not valid because parents control absenteeism in the primary grades, not students (Grant, 1997). Interestingly, teachers also believed that grade retention increased parents' motivation to work with their children, a reason not as prevalent in prior literature. This view of parental involvement and motivation as a reason for grade retention is important to highlight. Specifically, by attributing students' poor performance to reasons that are outside the teachers' control (i.e., parent involvement, socioeconomic status, lack of ability), these teachers send the message that some students are too difficult to teach given their backgrounds (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Grant (1997) concurred with this idea by stating that today's schools face a wide variety of societal problems

that make teaching all students difficult. However, effective teachers look past the obstacles and believe they can make a difference in all students' academic performance, despite differing demographic variables (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Principals did not agree with any of the reasons provided in the instrument as a reason to administer grade retention, but like teachers, they felt the most important factor to weigh when retaining students was their academic performance, a finding that concurs with others (Murray et al., 2010).

Few studies compare the view of teachers and principals concerning grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009; Witmer et al., 2004), an important focus of this study. When comparing teachers and principals on their perceptions of overall reasons for retention, teachers agreed significantly more than principals. Specifically, teachers believed retention helps prevent future failure, maintain standards, helps them to provide additional math support, and motivates students to attend school. Haberman and Dill (1993) suggest teachers support grade retention because they view themselves as accountable to groups of students and not to individuals, causing them to perceive anything that might interfere with group instruction as a hindrance to the learning of the group. As a result, their solution is to retain them, hoping eventually they will mature to the level of the group (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

A handful of studies have looked at educators' beliefs about the most appropriate time to retain students (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). In this study, teachers were again generally more agreeable than principals that retention in the primary grade is beneficial and leads to improved self-concept. Specifically, teachers agreed that grade retention in kindergarten and first grade improves student self-concept, with retention occurring in kindergarten as the most beneficial for immature students. This finding supports the literature in two ways: First, primary grade teachers believe that students in the primary grades are too young to be stigmatized by retention (Tomchin & Impara, 1992), and their self-concept is not negatively affected by repeating a grade (Wynn, 2010). Thus, primary grade teachers view early grade retention as a formative and not summative intervention (Silberglitt et al., 2006). Secondly, teachers in this study believed that early grade retention benefits immature students in kindergarten and first grade, also a finding of other studies (Range et al., 2011b). Grant (1997) calls the connection of grade retention to maturity the *readiness dilemma* in which teachers believe learning is sequential and primary grade students simply need more time to learn (Beswick et al., 2008; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). For principals, they too agreed that retention in kindergarten benefits immature students more than if it occurs in first grade or second grade, a finding that supports the notion early grade retention is more beneficial than later grade retention (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011).

Finally, there is limited research on what interventions educators believe are the most effective at preventing grade retention (Murray et al., 2010; Range, 2009; Range et al., 2011b, Thompson & Cunningham, 2004). Respondents perceived nine interventions as at least moderately effective at deterring grade retention, with the most effective being parental involvement. Others have highlighted the beliefs of practitioners who feel the decision to retain students and the immediate success of that decision is dependent upon parental involvement and support (Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Murray et al., 2010; Grant, 1997). This rationale again supports previous discussions, namely that teachers view factors outside the classroom as not only reasons for administering grade retention, but also as interventions to deter it (Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

Why are these findings important and what do they mean? First, as standards-based education continues to be the norm, educators view grade retention as proof of their high standards (Frey, 2005), despite the preponderance of research that suggests it is not beneficial. With more states and districts adopting high-stakes promotion policies, this positive view of grade retention will likely expand. To

deter grade retention's use, Bowman-Perrott (2010) argue that intense early intervention implemented by knowledgeable practitioners is one key to preventing grade retention. Early identification coupled with teachers and administrators who advocate for policies that expand tiered intervention services, like Response to Intervention (RtI), as opposed to policies that mandate grade retention (Murray et al. 2010) might also help deter its use. Finally, research suggests that schools that adopt a *sense of community* when planning instruction and professional development devote considerable time to identifying and overcoming outside barriers that prevent struggling students from feeling connected and engaged to the classroom (Royal & Rossi, 1997; Wehlage et al., 1989). Identifying such barriers aids teachers in understanding student achievement variables with which they have direct control.

### Conclusion

Educators in this school district clearly show what others have found: that current research does little to sway the views of practitioners. Most importantly, this study differentiated between the views of teachers and principals, with teachers being much more supportive of the use of grade retention. Universities must do a better job at educating preservice teachers concerning the negative consequences associated with retention and training them on research-based interventions that support struggling students. For further study, a qualitative analysis surrounding the reasons, timing, and interventions that might deter grade retention might help explain the findings of this study. Specifically, educators rated *parental involvement* as the most effective intervention to keep students from being retained, and further follow-up is recommended in this area. Parental involvement in schools can take on many forms. If educators perceive parental involvement as an effective intervention, the attempt to more clearly define what they perceive as effective parental involvement would be an important research endeavor.

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# Critically Reflective Thinking in Urban Teacher Education: A Comparative Case Study of Two Participants' Experiences as Content Area Teachers

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## **Abstract**

*As teacher educators, we explored the impact of a range of teaching approaches to encourage the development of critically reflective thinking (CRT) in teacher candidates. Our study, the second in a series of three investigations, examined differences in two preservice secondary teachers' responses to CRT as part of a teacher licensure program. We discuss the influence of content area conventions and views on curriculum when preservice teachers are exposed to tools that promote CRT. Our study includes data analyses of the experiences of preservice teachers' work in urban student-teaching classrooms, along with the university coursework in a teacher preparation program.*

*Our research questions examine the perspectives of two preservice teachers and address the following: On completion of a year-long teacher preparation program focused on encouraging CRT, what are the differences between two preservice teachers in their critically reflective thinking as evidenced by their reflections on teaching? In what ways do the perspectives differ between two content area teachers? And after a first year of teaching, what are these same teachers' CRT perspectives? Our study is designed to produce usable knowledge—that is, findings that other teacher educators should consider in the design and implementation of field-based experiences and curriculum development for preservice teachers working with diverse student populations.*

## **Theoretical Framework**

Students' success in school hinges in part on the teachers' views of children's language, race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Comber & Simpson, 2001). These differences may, for teachers newly faced with a diverse group of students, evoke notions of deficit or deficiency (Milner, 2008). If teachers adopt deficit views of students' cultures and languages, they strive to "fix" students they see as the "problem," rather than the curriculum, society, or school policies that result in segregated classrooms and exclusion from success in school (Banks, 2002; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 1999). Likewise, deficit thinking adopts a "blame the victim" stance that can prevent students in urban contexts from reaching their full potential, as teachers may not adequately challenge students of diversity (Milner, 2008; 2010). In this study, CRT is explored to examine the impact of pedagogical and field-based practices that challenge deficit thinking, and to question assumptions.



While CRT typically prompts examinations of how teachers reflect on question identification and their understandings for problem solving, researchers have conceptualized CRT in a variety of ways (Loughran, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Shandomo, 2010). Similar to what some researchers call “critical reflection,” CRT involves problem identification or framing, reflection on the basis of that identification (perhaps historical, social, or cultural in nature), and action planning to address the perceived problem (Brookfield, 1995; Shandomo, 2010). The CRT process is complex in nature, requiring introspection about how one’s beliefs, assumptions, and experiences influence perceptions of self and the social world (Shandomo, 2010).

Many preservice teachers enter their education programs with unexamined beliefs and assumptions of students, as well as problematic conceptions of the role of schools in society; yet it is imperative that educators develop stances that allow them to view “problems” from multiple perspectives and actively question assumptions, routines, practices, and standing explanations that are taken for granted (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Loughran, 2002). That is, teacher educators must help preservice teachers identify why a problem exists and examine the factors that have influenced its identification.

Like problem framing, seeking solutions requires a reflective process from educators that extends beyond strategy implementation. Educators must consider the factors that influence why problems occur, examine why problems are identified as significant, and develop strategies for responding that reflect an open-mindedness that is informed both by other educators and theories of practice (Dewey, 1933). The intensity and mindfulness of reflective thinking extends beyond problem solving in terms of depth and focus (Dewey, 1933), requiring what Larrivee (2008) suggests is a complete paradigm shift from “viewing problems as needing to be dealt with to seeing them as opportunities for self-reflection and the emergence of new possibilities” (p. 101).

Van Manen (1977) defined critical reflection as using criteria of justice and equity to consider the political, moral, and ethical consequences of teaching practice. Larrivee (2008) similarly suggests that critical reflection is an opportunity for teachers to “reflect on the moral and ethical implications and consequences of their classroom practices” (p. 90), a process that requires examination of how one’s personal and professional belief systems might impact students and their learning

For teacher educators, efforts intended to promote critically reflective practice have been limited in terms of the impact on teachers’ thinking. For example, case analyses and discussions, reflective journaling, and action research provide tools for staging reflective thought (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; cf. Harrington, Quinn-Leering, & Hodson, 1996; Leland, Harste, & Youssef, 1997; cf. Moje & Wade, 1997; Nolan, 2008; Risko, Roskos, & Vukelich, 1999; Wade, Fauske, & Thompson, 2008). However, findings have indicated that the degree to which reflective thinking takes place by teachers is often limited.

Like others, we assumed a combination of approaches to teaching critically reflective thinking in connection with field experiences would provide support for the development of CRT and teaching practices. We hoped adopting a contextual approach would enable our preservice teachers to engage in CRT in meaningful ways by connecting coursework and fieldwork (Shandomo, 2010). Specifically, we included opportunities for problem-framing activities, critical analyses of literature through in-person and online discussions using scenario prompts, and investigations into real-world teaching experiences coupled with action research projects.

### Teacher Development and CRT

The implementation of CRT and the manifestations of practice within teacher education programs is not a simple effort infused with fool-proof strategies or tools. An historical review of curricular and field-based trends in teacher education illustrates how attention to how crucial reflection on topics such as diversity and multiculturalism have developed in nuanced ways over time, reflecting changes in content and course-related experiences (Castro, 2010). While these developmental dimensions of program changes document the evolution of depth in program delivery, focus, and intent, the outcomes for preservice teachers in their daily practices have varied considerably.

In his article on analyses of documented research on approaches to increasing preservice teachers' understandings of cultural diversity in teacher education during the past 30 years, Castro delineates the success with which programs have addressed student teachers' engagement and understanding of cultural diversity. This in-depth review of previous research challenges teacher educators to consider how various program-based pedagogies, curricula, and field experience move teacher thinking beyond more superficial understandings of diversity.

While an increased awareness of the complexity of multicultural understandings have been fostered among preservice teachers through a range of efforts, the results for most preservice teachers have been rather narrow (Castro, 2010). Although iterations in course- and field-based experiences that included direct work within communities, personal reflections, and examinations of beliefs and backgrounds have been infused within teacher education programs over time, the impact has not been significant. More substantive change has occurred, however, within programs that tap into what Castro describes as a greater awareness of and acceptance of diverse communities. He cites these changes in groups he identifies as among the "millennial" generation of students. He reports that while this group tends to be more interactive and engaged within diverse communities, deep understandings of diversity are still quite limited. In addition to maintaining relatively simplistic views of diversity, analyses of these research findings indicate a lack of critical consciousness regarding fundamental beliefs about diversity.

Some might argue that more superficial beliefs and teaching practices among preservice teachers are simply a feature of teacher development (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Zeichner, 1992). That is, teacher development takes place along a continuum where the early stages of learning to teach are often based upon gaining general knowledge about teachers' work (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Rosenholtz, 1989). With time, researchers argue, the "sensemaking" (Coburn, 2001; 2004) takes place among educators based upon interactions between the knowledge about teaching and the knowledge gained through experience. A give-and-take between these levels of knowledge is refined over time into the praxis within a teacher's repertoire.

In addition, to influence of general growth in learning to teach, others argue that the conventions of content areas may also lead teachers to adopt teaching practices and beliefs about student learning that align with more commonplace practices in their content areas regarding the ways in which curriculum and instruction are typically approached, ultimately socializing teacher behaviors in K-12 classrooms (Gossman, 2008; Neumann, Parry, & Becher, 2002).

Our study is designed to foster a greater understanding of the impact of critical reflective teaching for two content area teachers, with an examination of similarities and differences regarding their perspectives on teaching as it relates to diversity. We address direct efforts using critical reflective

teaching designed to move beliefs and attitudes to the more advanced developmental levels cited by Castro (2010).

The literature is replete with arguments for practices in teacher education that examine issues of power, privilege, and multicultural awareness (Sleeter, 2001; Thompson, 2003). Current research advances teacher educators' understandings of diversity through examinations of content area preparation that explore social justice and equity in ways that are explicit and defined (Adair, 2008). Through emphases that embed critically reflective thinking and practice within content area discussions, our study examines the underpinnings of content area curriculum and traditional student-teacher roles and their impact on teachers' daily activities. Without deliberate efforts to broaden our understanding of the influence of content area conventions on curricular and instructional decision making, efforts to address equity and access through CRT become generic, superficial, and predictably formulaic. We explore how content area preparation informs CRT, including teachers' receptivity and their ability to implement CRT, highlighting the influence of content area curriculum and instruction on CRT thinking.

### **Research Methods**

We used case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994) employing both qualitative and quantitative data to study the professional development of two teacher candidates enrolled in a Masters of Arts (MAT) secondary teacher licensure program within an urban teacher education program.

The case studies focused on two preservice teachers in their third and fourth semesters of a four-semester program. During this time, project participants completed three courses, including curriculum studies, assessment, instruction, and classroom management. These courses accompanied field observations and a semester-long student-teaching experience. Following this coursework, study participants completed student teaching in an urban high school rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. A 20-year partnership in teacher preparation with this specific school provided a school-based setting for our preservice teachers in ways that aligned with our program goals.

Data sources focused on candidates' work samples, including a content biography, study of school cultures in urban schools, a classroom diversity study, a classroom management plan, a unit plan, action research projects, teaching reflections, course surveys, and personal teaching texts (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001). We collected data on curriculum themes related to access and equity for a range of urban learners. Additionally, a graduate assistant conducted interviews with each participant about their preservice experiences at the end of their licensure year and during their first year of teaching. Interview questions and prompts included general reactions to their course and field experiences (e.g., "Tell me about your licensure year"), as well as discussions on perceptions of diversity, reactions to course-specific assignments, and learning opportunities. The interview questions also asked participants to consider how their third semester coursework and experiences with critical reflective practices influenced their teaching practices and approaches to reflection within the context of action research projects. The graduate assistant conducted, recorded, and transcribed these interviews prior to our analysis.

Because of the numerous data sources, we constructed a complex matrix to facilitate data analysis. Independently, research team members read the interview transcripts and work samples through a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), identifying initial categories for coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We used the codes to create an improved matrix, which was helpful

in revealing similarities and differences between the two focal candidates, as well as in keeping data organized and manageable.

### **Participants**

We selected two project participants, Donna and Tanya (pseudonyms), because their stories represent divergent views on how they reflect and act on learner differences in teaching in a diverse urban high school. We selected the differing content area expertise to investigate the influence of field of study on teaching attitudes and beliefs (Stodolsky, 1988).

As part of her licensure requirements, Donna, a White woman in her late twenties, student taught Spanish. In addition to her Spanish degree and coursework affiliated with her teaching license, Donna completed a minor in painting and drawing, and she self-identified as an artist. She openly shared with others her drawing and painting competencies.

Tanya, a White woman in her early twenties, completed her student teaching in a chemistry classroom. Tanya self-identified as being from a lower middle-class suburb, and, in high school, as having excelled in math and science and competed as an athlete.

Participants were interviewed immediately after their year-long licensure program and during the winter of their first semester of professional teaching. Donna, after her urban high school student-teaching experience, spent her first year teaching Spanish at a suburban junior high school. Tanya accepted a high school chemistry teaching position in a predominately White, upper-middle class community. Initial interviews investigated views about teaching for diversity in the following areas: planning, instruction, classroom management, motivation, assessment, and working with English language learners. Follow-up interviews addressed these same elements, allowing the researcher team to explore changes in perspective over time and to investigate the intersection of thinking and practice within their first-year teaching context.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Our data reveal significant differences between our two teacher candidates. While the structures for CRT were in place, examinations and analyses unearthed interesting findings. Specifically, our data revealed critical differences in the impact of content area curriculum, conventional pedagogy, and the composition of students in classrooms on preservice teachers' critically reflective thinking and in their overall ability to examine practice.

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that Donna and Tanya both entered their teacher education program with a shared commitment to developing as educators. Their approaches to teaching resulted from their individual life experiences, including family background, school-related experiences, and social encounters. Both relied heavily on their previous experiences with diversity and used their backgrounds to interpret and make sense of their student-teaching experience. Donna's examinations of the Spanish language and culture and her awareness of diversity through art provided a foundation that informed her reflections on learner diversity within her student-teaching classroom setting.

Tanya often referred to both her background and her content area as lacking in diversity and "mostly White" (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 2). While not always sure of how she would diversify the curriculum in her teaching, she consistently voiced an awareness of the potential to broaden its scope. She expressed an awareness of potential linkages between cultures and individuals that would allow

her students to think about science where "...not just the old dead white guys do science. There are other people out there" (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 4).

### **CRT: More than Thinking Hard**

Based upon our data, participants' conceptions of critically reflective thinking centered on "bringing everything together" (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 9) and "broadening definitions" (Donna, Interview 1, p. 9) of how knowledge is defined and valued. Both reported that CRT resulted in changes in their practice. Tanya noted that the tools of critically reflective practice affiliated with her action research project (i.e., problem identification, reflection, examination of influences, and action planning), changing her understanding of student differences, which she described as "a good thing" (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 9). Tanya reported that her diversity study, completed as part of her coursework, pushed her to examine the perspectives of a range of learners within classrooms through her examination of how language and culture impact curriculum and pedagogy. She commented positively that a general understanding of learner needs increased her awareness of the importance of relevant curriculum as a way of creating a "sense of unity" among diverse students (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 9). For Tanya, her perceptions of diversity were clarified through strategy identification designed to make her a better teacher. Her action research project provided a technical format for CRT, using a formulaic approach to addressing the curriculum based upon learner needs. Following general skill assessment, Tanya created a series of layered curriculum assignments based upon typical ability levels for her students.

Donna found that CRT allows teachers to build on student strengths and "come at it [teaching] from a different perspective"... one that moves away from a deficit view of diversity (Donna, Interview 1, p. 10). For Donna, the skills affiliated with CRT practices, such as action research, provided an invitation for greater depth in her understanding of the factors that impact student learning and well-being in classrooms. While Donna, like Tanya, recognized the technical elements of her teaching within the context of her action research study, she also considered broader issues related to the type of classroom culture she hoped to create. Her use of "resident experts" utilized the native language skills of students in her classes as a way of engaging all students in her lessons and valuing them as individuals.

### **CRT: Not a Panacea**

Looking at the data in more depth revealed two major themes. First, critically reflective thinking is closely tied to the way preservice teachers view their content area, their students, and the pedagogy within their classrooms. Tanya viewed hers as a subject in very stark terms where there "isn't much multicultural education in it naturally" (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 2). She described her students as "about as white as you can get" and felt that "everyone's basically the same ability" (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 4, p. 1). She believed chemistry is a course that attracts this particular type of student and "scares" others away (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 9). She viewed diversity and multicultural education as social issues that are not essential to her academic courses. Because Tanya viewed her content area and her students as relatively generic in need and ability, she disassociated from broader issues of diversity that related to language and cultures. When asked about her preparation program and its focus on issues of language and cultural diversity, she reported that the emphases prepared her to "deal with stuff like this," and clarified that her experiences with learner differences centered around "discipline problems" and

“students who aren’t turning in work” (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 5). For Tanya, learner diversity was manifest in poor academic skills and related classroom management difficulties.

Tanya’s views of learner diversity were quite narrow and were limited to the context of her classes. That is, the academic struggles of her students defined her understanding of learner differences and tended to override the concepts of diversity discussed in her coursework and related field experiences. Further, the demographic composition of her chemistry student-teaching placement did not reflect the greater ethnic diversity within her school and further reinforced her notion of cultural and ethnic diversity as the “stuff” she experienced in coursework but was absent in her day-to-day teaching experiences. Discrepancies between the demographic composition of her classes and that of the wider school community never appeared to capture Tanya’s attention. When asked about the lack of diversity among her students, Tanya reiterated the accepted homogeneity of typical chemistry classrooms and neglected to think critically about the lack of access for some students.

While Tanya failed to define diversity in terms of race or language, she did distinguish students in terms of achievement, often dichotomizing “general” students and “honors” students, equating general students with “problems” (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 8). She referenced negatively English language learners (pg. 10) and equated “good” with limited linguistic, cultural, or ethnic diversity (p. 9). Tanya’s stance echoed Milner’s (2005) suggestions that teachers who hold these views may “water down” the curriculum or lower their expectations for particular learners because they believe the students are incapable of success in that area of study or in academically rigorous courses in general (p. 771).

Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, and Reck (1999) discuss the dichotomy of diversity—on one side, teachers view diversity as a problem, and on the other, diversity as a resource. These authors suggest that teachers who view diversity as a problem teach as if their classroom is a homogeneous body that shares the teacher’s cultural characteristics. These teachers believe students from backgrounds other than the teacher’s are incapable of success, and they “abdicate any responsibility” for helping students achieve academically (p. 207). Tanya showed evidence of this type of thinking, and her action research project further substantiated her attention to clear-cut problem solving through generalized strategy implementation.

The students Tanya did identify as diverse included only a student with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), a student with an undefined communication problem, and a foreign exchange student. When asked about these students individually, she explained that the student with the communication problem dropped out of her class, and the student with ADHD “manages it on his own” (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 3). The foreign exchange student required no help because she “doesn’t actually show up to class” (p. 3).

Tanya failed to demonstrate evidence of critically reflective depth in her thinking and beliefs regarding students of diversity or in her content area. When asked about reflection, she admitted that “it’s not something I think about very often” and that she “never did a lot of it” (Interview 1, p. 6, 5). When she did reflect, Tanya focused on the “small, everyday things” rather than broader social, political, and moral aspects of teaching (Tanya, Online discussion post #3).

Part of CRT is questioning the status quo and examining the social context of education, which Tanya did not do. She viewed her students not as a diverse group of learners, but rather as a homogeneous group with the same interests, ability levels, academic expectations, and experiences with math and science. And although she mentioned that “with chemistry you don’t get as wide a range” of students (Tanya, Interview 1, p. 1), she did not question the reasons behind the homogeneity

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of her classes in comparison to the larger school population. When asked why she thought the population of students in chemistry classrooms are not more diverse, Tanya commented that it “might not be normal for someone from their social class or their ethnic class” to take higher-level science classes. She made this statement as a matter of fact, without critically reflecting on the issues and related implications.

Tanya’s perspective on diversity and reflection, combined with her view of her content area as a static “old, dead, White guy” curriculum where diversity and multiculturalism are not factors (in-class comment, fall 2007) allowed her to center reflection on the technical aspects of her teaching rather than sociopolitical aspects. Her concerns overwhelmingly centered on a traditional view of content area knowledge and on fairly narrowly defined ability levels of students. She addressed perceived problems globally and attacked them through generic instructional and curricular adaptations rather than engaging in critical reflection that might consider the needs of individual students. She felt that she didn’t have the time to “really focus on reflecting on everything” and stated that thinking about the next day’s curriculum was “about the extent” of her reflection (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 5).

At times Tanya’s thinking reflected the potential to look at her students more individually, in terms of their diversity. When commenting on the makeup of some of the chemistry classes at her school, Tanya noted:

The thing that kind of disturbed me is that you don’t get much [sic] minorities in the honors classes, or in the AP classes. There was [sic] two out of thirteen in the AP chemistry class. But I wasn’t teaching—it was my mentor teacher. So I think you need to be able to encourage the people who may not normally go into an AP class, who may just be in your general class—you see that they have the right skills and the right abilities to do it, to encourage them to try something that might be a little bit harder, might not be normal for someone from their social class or their ethnic class. (Interview 2, p. 1)

While Tanya’s observation of the overwhelmingly homogenous composition of the honors and AP classes suggested Tanya’s potential to view classrooms through a more critical lens, the depth of her reflection was rather superficial and perfunctory. That is, she saw students’ ability to achieve as generally within their capabilities (with the help of teachers), and she failed to address connections to the systems of school or to the work of teachers as contributing to limited access to certain kinds of classrooms. Further, she did not show any evidence of CRT beyond a superficial examination of lesson planning and assessment, and she failed to admit potential flaws in her views with regard to students, teaching, curriculum, and learning within the context of an advanced science course.

What is not clear from this study is whether Tanya lacked the ability to think broadly about the impact of language and culture of her students and their personal connections to curriculum, or whether a fixed view of curriculum bound Tanya’s decision making when attempting to support her students. When asked about responding to her students, Tanya commented,

... I set it up so that it was more of a multiple intelligences approach. I had something that addressed every single intelligence, and they got to make models and posters. They got to work in groups; they got to act things out; or dance or write songs, just whatever. And they also could just make their own experiments—whatever worked for them. And I’d print off my PowerPoint notes

for the students so they wouldn't have to try to write it all down. I tried to find any terms that I knew they might have a hard time understanding or they might not be familiar with. (Interview 1, p. 1)

Tanya's reflections did imply potential for an awareness of the need to respond to students' varied needs, though the emphasis still remained pedagogically neutral.

In contrast to Tanya, Donna, a foreign language teacher, saw a connection between her content area and her orientation toward multicultural education and student diversity. She recognized and spoke about diversity in terms of race, class, gender, language, culture, and ability. Unlike her student-teaching setting (i.e., ethnically and culturally diverse) during Donna's first year of teaching, she was employed at a middle school that she estimated to be approximately 90% White and where "most students are upper middle class." She recognized that her students were not a homogeneous group with the same needs, interests, goals, and experiences even though she made the point that there is a "majority of one race and one SES" (Donna, Interview 2, p. 1). She noticed that the culture of the school was such that the "kids that are a little poorer sort of are marginalized and kind of ignored," and she tried to turn that around in her own classroom, emphasizing that "every student matters" (p. 2). She kept individual students in mind when she developed "personalized" curriculum and incorporated classroom structures that allowed success for students of all backgrounds (p. 4). She made efforts to value and incorporate the ethnic and cultural diversity her students bring to the class, allowing them "power in the classroom" (Donna, Interview 2, p. 3). Thus, she saw diversity as a resource to her curriculum rather than a problem (Easter et al., 1999).

Data collected from Donna demonstrated critically reflective thinking that clearly connected her content area and her views of diversity. Donna saw her content area as a platform for making connections between language, culture, experience, and worldview. She strived to help her students learn from other cultures and "see themselves as experiencing the world" (Donna, Interview 2, p. 4). More importantly, Donna engaged in regular, systematic reflective thinking and writing, and all of it as an interactive, cyclical process that "will pay for itself tenfold" (p. 10). For example, within the context of her curriculum, Donna examined diversity through the integration of literature, culture, and language. While it may appear that Spanish language instruction would naturally lend itself to this approach to curriculum, we cannot assume that this is the case. Many language teachers focus solely on the mechanics of language instruction. Donna's critical reflection on issues that affected her students, both those in and outside of the majority helped her become an agent of change. She consciously worked to disrupt the normalization and dominant culture that she believed is perpetuated by schools, making her own classroom a place where power hierarchies are deconstructed and students are seen as "experts" with a voice in their learning process.

In addition to Donna's awareness of her students' impact on her curriculum and instructional choices, as well as how these choices impacted students, Donna also considered the broader impact of school contexts on her work. When reflecting on her school site,

[At my school] there were a lot of different cultures and everything. So there were English language learning needs.... And they [the school] wanted to embrace them, but it didn't ever come into the mainstream of the curriculum. From what I saw, it was just—it was always on the sidelines. Always "We accept you" instead of ... so it was always the us/them division. "This is our school, and we're



welcoming you to our school. Of course, that's better than 'we're not welcoming you,' but for the kids who were always the ones who were the accepted rather than the acceptors, they never seemed to feel that was their school. (Donna, Interview 2, p. 2)

Donna's analyses spoke to the broader culture within her school that enabled systemic barriers to access to remain intact. While there were clear efforts that seemingly embraced the diversity within her school, the message was clear, you are here, on our turf. Welcome! For Donna, this ethos had an impact on her students' lives, in ways that extended beyond the impact of her course curriculum and instructional practices.

Donna's perceptions of the nuanced knowledge of schools and school systems were clearly impacted by her preservice experiences and how her instructors viewed and modeled reflective practices. When asked to comment on the impact of her course experiences, Donna reported:

I think it [reflection] was huge for her [course instructor] too. She always threw out this quote that was Dewey—that you just act and reflect and act again with revised action based on your reflection. And you could tell that she always reflected. You can just sort of tell people that do and people that don't. (Interview 2, p. 7)

I: How can you tell?

It's almost like, people ... are a little bit more sensitive ... you can tell that they know that they're not perfect. And you can tell that they are not trying to be perfect, but they are just trying to do better and better and better. Because she always talked about how teaching wasn't about just memorizing the right techniques, but about being able to react in the moment, in the right way. Which if you don't know what the moments are, if you're just planning on learning a technique or something, it's not going to work. So, in order to be able to react in the moment, you have to be aware, and I think that awareness comes from reflecting on past experiences. (Interview 2, p. 8)

Donna's experiences and observations as part of her preservice teaching modeled a depth of reflection that moved beyond more superficial technical skill implementation. Her commitment to examinations of institutional practices, using the tools as of part of her preservice experience, were somewhat difficult pursuits during her first year of teaching:

It is very hard, because that is how the students have been, all of their years of schooling, thinking it's been like that ... where they've dominated the whole class ... the ones that have the power, or their parents have the power in society. (Interview 2, p. 5)

Her action research project during student teaching provided an opportunity to explore microcultures within her classroom using native language speakers as content experts. Critically reflective thinking helped her recognize the power structures that existed among students in her school and work to disrupt those in her own classroom. In addition, she reported that engaging in CRT as a practicing teacher helped her understand her own role in the perpetuation of dominance and power in the past, and she subsequently made efforts "to go against it as much as I can, try to offset it" in the

way she approached classroom management, curriculum, assessment, and interactions with students (Donna, Interview 2, p. 5).

### **Making CRT a Priority for Novices**

Our analysis of Donna and Tanya revealed a second theme. CRT among preservice teachers may be linked to their levels of professional maturation and exposure to diverse perspectives. As we prepare teachers for diverse school contexts, it may be necessary to consider how the immediacy of technical skill development can be coupled with more in-depth reflection on practice while embedding “diversity” within those school experiences. Specifically, Milner (2005) suggests that preservice teachers who have had few interactions and experiences with diverse individuals and contexts may not yet be “in spaces, developmentally” to engage in CRT and may not show significant change in beliefs and practices over the course of a teacher education program (p. 777). Likewise, Garmon (2004) studied factors that influence a prospective teacher’s “readiness (or lack thereof) to learn from their intercultural and educational experiences” (p. 211). Courses in diversity and multicultural education and fieldwork in diverse contexts are widely regarded as important in teacher preparation (e.g., Milner, 2005; Milner, Flowers, Moore, Moore, & Flowers, 2003; Taylor & Sobel, 2001; Weisman & Garza, 2002). However, these experiences may be insufficient if students are not “ready” to receive the instruction and experiences presented to them. Further, readiness must be cultivated through exposure to the manifestations of diverse topics as they relate to the specific curriculum and pedagogy within daily classroom settings. Our study of Donna and Tanya supports these suggestions and may account for the vast difference in the way they reflect on diversity in their teaching.

Tanya, despite coursework and field placements that specifically focused on diversity and promoted critically reflective thinking, continued to hold deficit views of students and very narrow definitions of learners’ abilities, interests, and backgrounds. Her beliefs stemmed mainly from her own educational experiences in which she was a successful student in math and science. These unexamined beliefs influenced the expectations she had of students and the way she approached her curriculum. In addition, based upon her experiences as a student of chemistry, multicultural education was not inherently part of her experiences with science curricula, but rather something she would have to add to her course to “promote tolerance” and give students a “different perspective” (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 1). However, when asked about specific ways she teaches for diverse learners, she stated that she did not “have time to sit there and go through all that kind of stuff” (p. 4). Students were expected to have “basically the same ability” and the same “basic understanding” of math and science to take her class, making accommodations and individualized instruction unnecessary (Interview 2, p. 2, 3). For Tanya, there was a narrow band through which she defined diversity. That is, her ability and willingness to imagine how diversity might manifest itself beyond a very prescriptive formula were challenging, at best, resulting in limited interest or investment in the principles and practices of CRT.

The knowledge and experiences Tanya gained in her teacher education program were only vaguely helpful, something she saw as a “good idea” (Interview 1, p. 2). The process of problem identification was certainly a “tool” in her repertoire. However, her ability to examine the factors related to her problem framing was shallow and predictable. When interviewed during her first year teaching, she had difficulty remembering anything specific about her coursework. She felt much of it had too little focus on her content area and that it was too generalized and irrelevant for her specifically. She viewed student teaching and affiliated coursework related to diversity as “just good practice” that “makes me a

better teacher anyway” (Interview 1, p. 5), an attitude countered by Ladson-Billings (1995) who insists “just good teaching” is neither as simple as it sounds nor an effective way to educate in urban contexts. Despite her assertions, when asked specifically for examples, Tanya stated that it [coursework in diversity] helped her “deal with” problems (Interview 1, p. 5). For Tanya, diversity is a component of teaching that requires, when necessary, a formulaic process of plugging in strategies for problem solving. These solutions are generally predictable and generic in focus. While Tanya’s practice is not devoid of problem framing and identification, it lacks an awareness of the big picture and the critique necessary for reflective and in-depth decision making.

Tanya’s comments, both as a teacher education student and later as a practicing teacher, showed that a program centered on diversity and critical reflection cannot guarantee a teacher will emerge with transformed, or even recalled, beliefs and practices. For Tanya, unexplored beliefs resulted in “perpetuating antiquated and ineffectual teaching practices” (Tanya, Interview 2, p. 1) despite our best efforts to foster the habits of critical reflection and provide meaningful experiences with diversity (Easter et al., 1999, p. 209). Perhaps Tanya was simply not developmentally ready to benefit from the opportunities her education program afforded. That is, her student-teaching experience, while positioned within the context of an urban school, did not provide in-depth opportunities to tease out how her practices moved beyond pro forma strategy implementation. Further, perhaps as suggested by Castro (2010), her preparation did not reach the levels of exposure to and support for CRT that might have allowed her to see the related curricular and instructional applications—issues that require further study.

Donna, on the other hand, spoke often of the impact of her knowledge of Spanish culture, coursework, and field-based assignments in diverse contexts on her current views. Her past experiences with diversity, as part of her teacher education program, provided a broader view of her students and an appreciation for what all students bring to the classroom as individuals. A broader worldview allowed for greater depth and informed her CRT practices as a student teacher and in her first year of teaching. She preferred settings that were heterogeneous, commenting somewhat apprehensively that her first year teaching position in a white, upper-middle-class school “sort of bugs me” (Interview 2, p. 13). She admits, “I would have rather worked with kids that are more like me,” self-identifying as from a lower, marginalized socioeconomic population (p. 13). Donna’s admission reflects a preference to working in settings that mirror her experiences as a student. She sees the power differential among students from varied backgrounds and works to rectify her own involvement in it—“I was part of, I am part of this culture too. So, I go against it as much as I can ... try to offset it” (Interview 2, p. 5).

For Tanya, her experiences with “diversity” are her membership in a working class community and, while she is cognizant of the general need to respond to learners, her methods are generalized and generally prescriptive. Specifically, her action research project included the integration of a layered curriculum that was intended to diversify assignment options for a range of students based upon general ability. For the most part, the assignments varied only in terms of required reading and writing. While clearly an attempt to be responsive, her project was developed largely prior to working with her students directly and was limited in its attention to the specific needs of students in her classroom. Rather, her efforts were what she considered “just good teaching.”

Upon entering her teacher education program, Donna already had a range of experiences with diversity in life, in school, and in her prior experiences as an artist. Yet, she still showed change over

the course of the program. Milner (2005) suggests that change in prospective teachers' beliefs and practices are linked explicitly to their interactions in and experiences with diverse contexts in their teacher education programs. Milner (2005) reports specified experience allows students the opportunity to "visualize the 'big picture' of diversity" as it applies to their particular content, experiences, and students (p. 782). Students who had prior experiences with diversity, either as learners or as teachers, "got more out of our discussions in class, the assignments, and readily recognized the importance of studying such issues" (p. 782). Donna was cognizant of clear connections between her perspectives as she gained experience working with diverse communities. As a result, her practice changed. In her teacher education coursework, Donna recognized the emphasis on diversity and critical reflection. Donna reported that her coursework "didn't have specific meaning for me until now" (Donna, Interview 2, p. 5, 6). Likewise, she only later appreciated the field component of her program—"it was so valuable, and I didn't realize it" (p. 7). At first, she knew only that "they emphasized it [critically reflective thinking], so I knew it was important for some reason, but it didn't have as much meaning as it does now.... And they really can't tell you the reason; you have to discover it for yourself" (p. 10). She came to understand experience and CRT as a cyclical process. She would experience something in her coursework or fieldwork, write about it, "and then I see everything sort of relates" (p. 9). For Donna, coursework and fieldwork made evident the connections between critically reflective practice and its applications in her daily work. While the connections were not always apparent within her time in the program, she was later able to see applied connections. For Tanya, the CRT was limited to a generic view of lesson planning and assessment that constituted a "one size fits all" view of the students in her classes. Tanya rarely reflected on individual needs that failed to meet her preconceived understanding of learners struggling with the chemistry curriculum. Our study failed to address, however, Tanya and Donna's long-term practice. Further study in this area is essential as beginning teachers are absorbed into the contexts of contemporary school communities.

### **Implications**

Findings from this study underscore teacher preparation where future teachers possess practices that are responsive to the diversity of students in today's classrooms. Our findings speak to the work of others who have emphasized that to be critical, results must transform curricula and practice or alter the status quo (cf. Brookfield, 1995; Larrivee, 2008). Where past research speaks to the need to advance basic problem solving in ways that go beyond questions of immediacy to consider why something works and for whom (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), our study highlights the need for an awareness of the embedded impact of content area conventions on how teachers reflect, for what reasons, and how the consequences of this reflective thinking impacts teaching and learning. Being critical, thus, "has the power to change the pedagogical process from knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation" (Leonardo, 2004).

To begin, our work suggests the value of examinations of critically reflective practices embedded within contexts that provide opportunities for problem framing and solution identification in linguistically and culturally diverse student communities (Shandomo, 2010). For teacher education, our findings inform practices that guide students through experiences designed to foster culturally responsive teaching practices over time. One implication of our findings is that experiences with diversity should permeate all courses so that it is not viewed as additive, and so that time is not wasted convincing students of its importance (Milner, 2005; Sleeter, 2001, 2008). Ideally, this level of infusion

allows us to help teacher candidates develop pedagogical approaches that respect and validate future students.

A second implication of our work is the need for exposure to diversity that moves from sweeping reviews of best practices that lack depth and application to content-specific curriculum (Castro, 2010). Instead, we argue for examinations of curriculum deliberately coupled with the problem framing of CRT. Adair's (2008) work emphasizes the need for deliberate discussions of equity and justice within content area preparation in secondary teacher education programs. Mensah's (2009) work focuses on preservice teachers confronting their assumptions and biases within urban science classrooms. Through well-planned examinations of equity and social justice, preservice teachers are exposed to discussions that consciously illuminate and focus attention on the realities of critically reflective thinking and practices embedded within broad-based content area discussions. Not only do these practices illustrate embedded connections between content areas and social justice, but in-depth critical reflective examinations increase opportunities to explore curriculum through culturally responsive lenses.

Our findings support those of Milner (2005), who found that prospective teachers often "separated diversity from the subject matter they were teaching" (p. 781). Only when students were explicitly prompted to articulate their pedagogy and curriculum as related to diversity did they make those connections. Like Milner (2005), we argue that more time and effort be spent to infuse content area investigations as part of teacher education programs focused within diverse, urban school contexts. And like Mensah (2009), we believe that teacher education courses must utilize "strategies that 'force' preservice teachers to change taken-for-granted notions" about their particular content areas (p. 1058).

Thoughtful problem framing and conscious reflection are essential components of teacher preparation, using a critically reflective stance. We caution, however, not to assume exposure to pedagogical practices and curriculum examinations are generic in focus, and that there are prescribed ways of teaching teachers regardless of the content areas in which they teach.

We would be remiss in our conclusions to assume that critically reflective thinking and practice are either enhanced or inhibited by traditional conventions of curriculum and pedagogy across content areas. While the histories of some content areas may provide more obvious opportunities for exposure to issues of critically reflective thinking through examinations of equity and social justice, this stance may not be valued as necessary or fully understood in other areas. That is, all teacher educators must assume ownership in their receptivity to and awareness of issues of social justice and critically reflective practices. Placing the responsibility of CRT on one group, such as generalists, only assigns some teacher educators the responsibility, while absolving others. Without concerted efforts among all teacher educators to examine beliefs and practices, our commitments to issues of social justice are superficial at best (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009). As our data imply, there are clear "cultures" within academic disciplines that define the roles of learners, teachers, and curriculum.

Programs must actively link school-based experiences and curriculum studies specifically devoted to examinations of equity, social justice, and multicultural awareness (Carrington & Selva, 2008; Castro, 2010). Without concerted efforts to unearth and make public the manifestations of these goals within daily practice, teacher education becomes uneven and, in some cases, stagnant in approaches that are generic and all-encompassing. The stories of two preservice teachers illustrate where inroads are possible and where additional work is needed.

We are hopeful that our findings challenge teacher educators to move their students' thinking beyond what Tanya described as seemingly inert "old, dead, White guy" curricula where sociopolitical factors are viewed as detached and irrelevant. Without conversations in teacher education that cross through barriers that often exist when content areas are entrenched, the impact of teacher licensure coursework remains in silos of isolation. Perhaps the more challenging task is to invite opportunities that extend discussions with content area specialists in ways that allow for new perspectives, taking on how the cultures of content areas impact CRT.

Our data present a rich qualitative view of the participants' thinking as it developed and changed, both within the context of their teacher licensure program and into their first year teaching. Our findings offer a more complete picture of the views of teacher candidates as they grapple with the reality of their classroom contexts while simultaneously developing their teacher identities, mature in their content knowledge, and learn (or not) to incorporate critical reflection as both a habit of mind and an artful and necessary teaching practice.

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# A Case Study of College Level Second Language Teachers' Perceptions and Implementations of Communicative Language Teaching

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## Abstract

*Previous research studies have indicated that some educators do not advocate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) because of their misunderstanding of the methodology. This article explores the relationship between college-level second language (L2) educators' perceptions and their implementations of CLT. The results of this study show that the majority of the participating teachers admitted that they did not understand what exactly CLT meant, but agreed that a communicative approach could facilitate students' learning. These teachers would like to insert a variety of methods in their practices regardless of the rules provided by the program coordinators. The findings also indicate that some teachers advocate for CLT because they believe it is the best way to achieve communicative competence. This study suggests the importance of partnerships between program coordinators and instructors. It also aims to yield insight regarding the design of future language teacher education.*

## Introduction

Second language (L2) educators have paid a great deal of attention to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the last two decades. CLT is a term that refers to various approaches and methods for teaching a second language (L2) communicatively. The main purpose of CLT is to develop learners' communication skills and ability. Despite the importance of communication in teaching, Richards (2006) points out that a great deal of language teachers who believe they use CLT do not have a consistent definition of what it means. When asked what makes their classes communicative, some teachers state it is because they focus on developing students' speaking ability (Wu, 2008). Wu also indicates that some teachers do not advocate for CLT because of their misunderstanding of what it is. These teachers think that CLT will hinder students' development of the language process because it focuses on meaning only. The focus of this research study is to address a void in the literature by understanding language teachers' perceptions of CLT and investigating whether and how language teachers implement CLT in their teaching practices.

## Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT is an approach to teaching because it is "a unified but broadly based theoretical position about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching" (Brown, 2007, p. 241). The methodology was developed in different stages, and the ideas of CLT have been expanded since the mid-1970s.

Descriptions of CLT emphasize elements of communication, including negotiation of meaning, expression, and interpretation as the defining characteristic of CLT (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1982; Johnson & Johnson, 1988; Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1991; Richard-Amato, 1996; Savignon, 1997). Lee and VanPatten (2003) explain that speaking is not the only skill that CLT focuses on. It also involves reading, writing, grammar, and culture. Brown (2007) adds that students in a CLT classroom need to use the target language in meaningful contexts. The purpose of CLT is to improve the learners' knowledge of the L2, as well as how to use it appropriately in a given social context (Li & Song, 2007). CLT is different from traditional teaching methods in that learners acquire a L2 through interaction with others rather than rote memorization and grammar rule learning. Despite the principles and the characteristics of CLT provided in the literature, some scholars criticize the definitions of CLT as very broad. CLT raises concerns because there is a great deal of confusion and controversy, and a lack of research on applying CLT in a language classroom (Canale, 1983). For example, Nattinger (1984) notes that there are some general descriptions of CLT, but its definitions are vague and contain many variations. Many L2 teachers feel frustrated due to the ambiguous explanations (Savignon, 1990), and many language teachers who claim to use CLT do not have a consistent definition. Unfortunately, there is still not enough guidance for teachers to use CLT in L2 classrooms (Burke, 2007).

### **The Role of Teachers in Communicative Language Teaching**

The role of teachers in CLT is different from that of the traditional language classroom in which the focus is on grammar and translation. CLT creates a learner-centered classroom environment of social learning where teachers provide opportunities for students, rather than taking an authoritative role and having power over their learning (Richards, 2006). CLT teachers have three major roles. The first role is to serve as facilitators to guide students' learning and communication and to provide more opportunities for students to interact by creating meaningful activities (Larsen-Freeman, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The second role of CLT teachers is to become participants with students within an activity instead of trying to control the activities (Littlewood, 2004; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The third role is to serve as a coach to guide students' learning.

Littlewood (2004) reminds CLT teachers that although they do not dominate students' activities, they do not totally stay out of students' communication. Rather, teachers in CLT classrooms provide guidance, observe students' strengths and weaknesses, and participate in the interaction with students. With teachers' guidance, students in CLT classrooms learn the target language by means of interaction and eventually develop their own language skills. Therefore, CLT "allows students to personalize learning by applying what they have learned to their own lives" (Richard, 2006, p. 23). Despite the attention given to CLT in the literature, language teachers have not received enough training on applying such methodology from their teaching programs (Savignon, 2002) because the term lacks precise definitions (Brown, 2007).

### **Teachers' Perception of Communicative Language Teaching**

The understanding and interpretation of CLT varies among teachers and scholars (Saengboon, 2006; Thompson, 1996; VanPatten, 1998). For example, Thompson (1996) states that CLT means focusing on speaking only and not on paying attention to grammar. Likewise, VanPatten (1998) found in his study about the perspectives among educators concerning the term "communicative" that CLT means speaking to most teachers, whereas researchers believe that CLT means teaching for both speaking and

writing. Other concerns about CLT include teachers and students' perceptions of this language teaching methodology and its effectiveness on second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., Rao, 2002). It is important to examine teachers' perceptions on CLT, because these perceptions of teaching are translated into classroom practices (Johnson, 1984).

Mangubhai, Dashwood, Berthold, Flores, and Dale (1998) compared teachers' understandings and perceptions of CLT. The subjects in this study were 37 elementary school language teachers in Australia. The results of the study showed that more than half of the participants viewed group work as potentially promoting more interaction among students. At the same time, they viewed such strategies as not effective in a real classroom environment. As for the role of error correction and grammar, more than half of the teachers believed that error correction was necessary in language teaching and that the majority of the participants viewed teaching of grammar as important. A majority of the participants believed that the role of teachers was to pass the knowledge to the students, and some thought that it was impossible for students to reach autonomy. Mangubhai et al. concluded that language teachers' perceptions and understanding were not in accordance with the research on CLT.

In another study, Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, and Son (2005) compared six elementary school L2 teachers on their conception of CLT. Based on Joyce and Weil's (1992) framework that assists teachers in familiarizing themselves with a teaching approach and on the features of CLT shown in the literature, the authors prepared a list of attributes to evaluate teachers' conceptions of CLT by using semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. All participants were videotaped in their class using CLT for a recall during the interviews. The participants' responses regarding their CLT conceptions in the interviews and on the questionnaire indicated mixed results. The responses in the interviews were different from the descriptions in the literature, whereas those on the questionnaire were similar to the literature.

Mangubhai et al. argued that the differences in the participants' responses could possibly be because the teachers had a hard time expressing their thoughts in the interviews. Also, they argued that the teachers' responses on the questionnaire were similar to those of the literature because the teachers' abstract concepts of CLT belonged to its respective reading and training, while the differences were from their actual classroom experience. Mangubhai et al. stated that when implementing CLT, the teachers integrated other general teaching variables from their teaching experiences. However, the participants objected to the view that focusing on meaning alone can promote grammatical competence.

### **Research on Teachers' Classroom Practices with Communicative Language Teaching**

Research has shown that CLT classroom practice is rare. A body of research (Burns, 1990; Guthrie, 1984; Kamaravadivelu, 1993; Long and Sato, 1983; Mitchell, 1998; Nunan, 1987; Walz, 1989) provided evidence that teachers seemed to advocate for CLT, but they did not implement communicative approaches in their teaching. Researchers (e.g., Huang, 2007; Nunan, 1987) have also pointed out that teachers integrate traditional methods in their communicative activities. Nunan (1987) observed five CLT lessons. The teachers in these classes used interaction activities as those suggested in the literature. However, in Nunan's analysis of the data, he found that such activities used by the teachers included many traditional teaching patterns, such as drills, and the teachers were not genuinely interested in the students' answers.

Besides looking purely at how teachers implemented communicative teaching in their classrooms, some studies (e.g., Karavas-Doukas, 1996; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; Sato, 2002) have investigated both

teachers' attitudes toward CLT and how they carried out communicative approaches and methods. In Sato and Kleinsasser's (1999) study, they investigated L2 teachers' perceptions of CLT, how they developed their beliefs, as well as how they conducted their lessons. The subjects were 10 public school teachers teaching Japanese as a L2.

The data indicated that the 10 participants thought that CLT is a very broad concept. The researchers also reported that the participants in their study claimed that they use CLT in their teaching. However, the observation data did not provide such evidence. In addition, the data from the survey indicated that the teachers used both CLT and traditional teaching. Sato and Kleinsasser reported that there was a difference between these teachers' perceptions of CLT and their practice. Although the teachers believed that CLT focuses on communication as well as on speaking and listening in the L2, and that it involves little grammar but many activities, these teachers did not practice these beliefs. The teachers claimed that they did not have time to prepare activities and could not forego grammar instruction.

In addition, Sato (2002) investigated Japanese high school English teachers' understanding of CLT and how they taught their lessons communicatively. The results indicated that a significant amount of instruction by these teachers was on grammar teaching and translation. The data also showed that these teachers refused to implement CLT in their teaching because they lacked support for their own learning of teaching communicatively. Thus, Sato suggested that CLT teachers need not only support from administrators, but they also need continued education about how to implement CLT. The above studies provide evidence that there are differences between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices concerning CLT.

### **The Present Study**

The following two understandings of the research on CLT led to the present study. Many teachers develop an idea of what CLT is from their teacher training programs or research studies, but their implementation of communicative teaching is different from their understanding. Some language teachers are not sure how they can apply CLT in their classroom practices because its definition is rather broad compared to other traditional teaching techniques, such as the Audiolingual and Grammar Translation methods. As such, the focus of this research study is to address a void in the literature by understanding college level L2 teachers' perceptions of CLT and investigating whether and how they implement CLT in their teaching practices. I chose the qualitative paradigm because it provides us a way to investigate a phenomenon with details about an individual's experience and knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are college level second language teachers' perceptions of communicative language teaching?
2. Do these language teachers implement communicative language teaching in their classroom practices, and if so, how?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The participants involved in this study were six instructors (three males and three females) who were teaching beginning or intermediate levels of Spanish at a university in the Southern United States.

These participant teachers were also pursuing their Master's or doctoral degrees in Applied Linguistics or Spanish. They were taking or had taken a L2 methods course at the time of the study. The methods course provided an introduction to L2 pedagogy with an emphasis on communicative methods. The Spanish department required all instructors in their classrooms to employ a CLT approach and to exclude explicit grammar explanation. Among the participants, four were native speakers of Spanish and two were non-native speakers. Their teaching experience ranged from one semester to five years. Throughout the study, the participants were called Anita, Cesar, Gala, Juan, Rio, and Tere (all pseudonyms).

### Data Collection

**Observations.** To minimize research bias, the data were triangulated by conducting non-participant observations, interviews, and collecting a variety of documents and records. Six classroom observations were conducted for each participant (starting in the middle of Fall semester, 2009 and continuing in the Spring semester, 2010) to capture in detail how the instructors carried out CLT, how they taught the language in their CLT classrooms, how students responded to their teaching, if the instructors employed other teaching techniques, and if so, how the teachers used these techniques. An important aspect of observation is that it gives the researcher in-depth information about what is happening in the environment, and provides a way to capture behaviors and emotions of the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Non-participant observations were chosen over participant observations because the program coordinator required the researcher to "act as a fly on the wall" during observations. The researcher also took field notes with thick descriptions during these observations. Rossman and Rallis (2003) note that thick descriptions offer details and rich data. The field notes included what was happening in the class, the teachers' behaviors, the students' responses, as well as questions and thoughts that came up during the observations.

**Interviews.** To obtain information about the participants' experiences and the meaning they make out of these experiences, the three-step interview process suggested by Seidman (1998) was adopted. The questions the researcher asked in the first interview with the participants were about their experience as language learners and teachers, whereas in the second interview, the researcher concentrated on asking the participants what they thought about CLT. In the third interview, the questions were related to the observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because they would provide the researcher with the most appropriate data. As Corbin and Morse (2003) describe, the researcher is in control of the interview because he or she designs the structure and order of the interview through asking structural questions, whereas the informants have control over how much information they want to reveal when answering the questions. The researcher added questions on top of the predetermined questions for more information and clarification, because questions and concerns from the observations arose (Berg, 2004).

**Document and record.** The researcher also relied on documents and records in this study. Merriam (1998) emphasizes that the purpose of gathering documents and records is to examine the phenomenon and participants in detail. The textbook used in the participants' classes was *¿Sabías que...?* written by VanPatten, Lee, Ballman, and Farley (2008). The authors of the book emphasized communication. The book also focuses on the five Cs of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: communication, cultures, connections to the students' knowledge in other fields, comparisons of grammar and vocabulary of other Spanish dialects, and language used in the community. For the purpose of this

study, syllabi, copies of the textbook, and handouts from each participant were collected. The syllabi listed class goals and objectives that reflected the values of the instructors or the department about second L2 teaching. This source of information was analyzed and compared with the participants' actual teaching from the observations and responses from the interviews. The textbook the participants used and the information on the syllabi provided a significant amount of data about whether the class leaned toward traditional teaching or a communicative approach.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, both ongoing analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and recursive analysis method (Merriam, 1998) were employed. The researcher analyzed the data through repeatedly reading the data. In addition, throughout the analysis process, the researcher referred to the data from the observations and documents collected to better know what to ask in the interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest several strategies to establish categories and themes. To look for evidence for categories and themes, the coding method was used (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). To code the data, the open coding strategy recommended by Rossman and Rallis (2003) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) was utilized to establish final concrete categories and emerge themes with appropriate codes from the data.

### **Results**

Two major themes were found: perceptions of CLT and activities used in CLT. Sub-themes for each major theme were also determined. Table 1 provides the definitions of each sub-theme. In hopes of providing convincing and in-depth understanding of the findings, I presented the major findings in a narrative format, supported by information from the interview transcripts and field notes from the observations.

**Table 1**

*Definitions of Themes and Sub-themes*

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<b>Findings of Major Themes and Sub-themes and Their Definitions</b>
<b>1) Perceptions of CLT</b>
• <b>Conceptions of CLT</b> <i>Teachers' understanding of what CLT is and what it means to them</i>
• <b>Feelings toward CLT</b> <i>Teachers' attitudes and feelings about using CLT</i>
<b>2) Activities Used in CLT</b>
• <b>Types of Activities</b> <i>The kinds of activities that teachers use in their CLT classrooms</i>
• <b>Criteria of selecting activities</b> <i>Teachers' criteria of choosing activities for their CLT classrooms</i>

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### Perceptions of CLT

**Conceptions of CLT.** The participating teachers have divergent conceptions of what CLT means. Most of them believe that oral ability is the major goal of CLT, whereas a few teachers understand that communication refers to the focus of the four skills. Several teachers admit that they are not completely certain about what CLT is because of inexperience of the methodology. The teachers' belief that CLT focuses on speaking only can be shown from the examples below.

Anita: I would describe [CLT] as a teaching approach with focus on oral communication more than anything else. That's why we have so much emphasis on speaking in group activities that force them to produce and speak.

Tere: I would say that [CLT] is like to carry out...like as a teacher, as an instructor to carry out, to design activities in order to possibly take [students] to start developing their oral skills.

Other teachers perceive that CLT includes not only speaking, but also writing and grammar. For example, Gala described her understanding of CLT as:

Gala: I guess the objective of teaching is for students to do something with the language: communicate, speak, write, read. I don't think communicative language teaching means that there is no focus on grammar. Reading and writing can also be communicative. And I think sometimes, under the word 'communicative', people think about speaking. But it's not...communicative doesn't mean just speaking ability. It can involve...it should involve, in my opinion, the four skills.

A few teachers admit that they are not certain about what CLT is, and they describe the methodology based on their reading as well as what they can and cannot do in the classroom. Their reasons include lacking training and experience in the area. The expressions below describe the teachers' uncertainty of what CLT means.

Juan: I am not sure. I think it's supposed to be... I didn't study all this stuff. A lot of communicative skills, communicative activities, basically make students talk a lot. You know, we don't focus on grammar when we teach.

Cesar: I am not an expert in this... the expression is communicative method, and the scientific name, the communicative language teaching method would be structured input.

**Feelings toward CLT.** The teachers have various attitudes and feelings toward CLT. Each participating teacher agrees that there are merits about this methodology. While two teachers are in strong favor of CLT and they believe that it is the best way to learn a L2, other teachers disagree with such a belief. The following descriptions show why the teachers think CLT is the best way to learn a L2.

Rio: It's the best so far.... Emotionally communicative approach means a lot of fulfillment to me as a teacher. Because having taught under the grammar approach before, I know how frustrating it can be to the students and to the teacher because you can get straight-A students knowing all the grammar rules, but in the end they are unable to speak the language. And that is very frustrating to them. Then again, you have base low retention rates whenever you use a grammar-based approach—they may be able to regurgitate everything on the texts so to speak. Then two weeks later they forget it. And that's just sad. But now using this approach, they actually are able to communicate, and they are really excited about that.

Anita: I think it's very useful. Because when students graduate, if we focus on their communicative abilities, we can actually teach them something useful, and they can communicate instead of just memorizing a bunch of grammar things ... and they won't be able to speak with other people. So I think it's really good.

Although the teachers think CLT has its merits, they agree that students need a variety of methods to learn a L2 effectively. The excerpts below portray this belief.

Cesar: There are 20, 21 students and you can't expect using one theory or just one way of teaching and think all of them, 20 or 21 students, will either appreciate it or totally benefit 100% from the techniques you are using. So I prefer to use many different techniques.

The teachers also mentioned how they feel about CLT from an instructor's point of view. Three of them believe that it is an effective way for student to learn, but it is rather difficult for teachers to create a CLT lesson. For example,

Anita: I like [CLT] and I don't. I like it because I think it's good for the students, but it makes it a little harder for the teachers to create lessons that are actually communicative.

The teachers show mixed feelings for CLT. While all of them believe that CLT is an effective way to learn and teach an L2, some of these teachers prefer using a variety of methods in addition to CLT. A few teachers admit that CLT is beneficial in students' L2 learning process, but it requires a great deal of preparation for teachers. The participants' understanding of CLT varies. The main difference is about whether CLT focuses on only speaking or other aspects of the language. The teachers' inexperience in implementing CLT appears to play into feelings of uncertainty in the methodology. They also have various attitudes and feelings toward CLT. All of the participants believe that CLT has its strong points, but some of them are opposed to the notion that CLT independently is the best way to teach an L2.

### **Activities Used in CLT**

All of the teachers used structured input activities in their classes because the required textbook is written based on the structured input model. The teachers were obligated to cover a certain amount of activities in each chapter. They had the freedom to decide how they wanted to arrange the order of the



activities and modify them accordingly. After they covered the required activities, the teachers had a choice to provide supplementary activities. According to the observations, the activities teachers used were different. While all of the participants followed closely to the activities in the textbook, most of them incorporated their own activities and modified the ones from the textbook. The sub-themes that were evident from this theme are types of activities and criteria of selecting activities.

**Types of activities.** In addition to conducting structured input activities from the textbook, all of the participants incorporated various types of activities in their CLT classrooms to facilitate students' learning. The types of activities include lectures on grammar, grammar-based activities, and communicative activities, such as conversations and picture descriptions. Several teachers modified the activities from the textbook to fit the students' situations.

Two teachers focused more on grammar and brought in grammar-based activities. The following examples are from my observations in Cesar's classes. In my first observation in Cesar's class, he introduced the imperfect and preterit tenses in the form of lectures. He also used technical terms, such as *direct objects*, *indirect objects*, and *reflexive verbs*. When Cesar explained how direct objects and indirect objects are used in Spanish, he first wrote the explanation and formulas of these two forms on two different cards and passed them around to the class. In my third observation in Cesar's class, he gave a small lecture on possessive adjectives. He explained the differences between 'mi' (a possessive adjective) and 'me' (an indirect object or a reflexive), and other possessive adjectives. In addition to lectures on grammar and doing activities from the textbook, Cesar also had his students form small groups and write short stories with a focus on particular grammar features, such as imperfect and preterit tenses.

The type of activity that Juan used during my observations in his class is an example of a grammar-based activity. He provided a brief grammar explanation on the conditional form to the students and asked them to come up with sentences based on the form. In the fourth observation in Juan's class, he directed the students' attention to the conditions and use of verbs in Spanish by asking them to read the grammar description in the textbook. The book contains a grammar chart, explanation, and examples of how the conditional form is used. After that, Juan showed the students a formula for using the conditional form with verbs and irregular verbs. He then asked the class to do the structured input activity related to the conditional form in the textbook. When the students were finished, he asked them to form small groups and go to the corners of the blackboard where there were pictures of people: one person on each corner. The people included Tiger Woods, George Bush, and President Obama. In the fifth observation, Juan conducted a similar type of grammar-based activity after explaining about the use of subjunctive and conditional forms. He explained to the students how irregular verbs for subjunctive forms should be conjugated and asked them to do the structured input activity in the textbook.

A few teachers used authentic pictures and sample sentences to introduce new target forms and vocabulary before asking students to do the activities in the textbook. The following example from an observation in Rio's class displays this type of activity. Before having the students do a structured input activity on frequency words, Rio presented a number of pictures of famous people and sample sentences associated with the pictures. He also left the names of the famous people out and asked the students to fill in. For example, '\_\_\_\_\_ se acuesta tarde todas las noches' and '\_\_\_\_\_ goes to bed late every night.' After this introductory activity, Rio had his students do a series of activities from the book related to frequency words.

Instead of following closely to the structured input activities in the textbook, all of the participants mentioned that they would modify the activities from the book when needed. The following example is from an observation in Tere's class. It shows how she modified a structured input activity from the textbook. When reviewing the impersonal and passive forms of 'se', the textbook had three sub-activities about laws within one activity. After Tere asked her students to complete the first two sub-activities, she modified the last activity by having the students tell each other what rules they had at home, instead of having them create a prohibition that they would want to see converted into law, as indicated in the book.

**Criteria of selecting activities for CLT.** When expressing how they select activities for their CLT classrooms, the teachers had similar criteria. The activities these teachers chose reflected their perceptions of CLT. Their criteria are based on students' needs, knowledge in L2 learning theory, level of engagement, and usefulness of activities. The teachers include, omit, or modify activities according to the usefulness of the activities. Anita's belief of how she selects activities reflects the teachers' idea of incorporating activities based on students' needs. She takes into consideration what students need to perform at the end of the chapter. She said:

There is a task at the end of the chapter that they are supposed to be able to do. But the whole objective of a certain task is for them to be able to do certain tasks, so I take things out or leave things in... I think about what students are supposed to accomplish at the end of the chapter.... So I choose those activities that will help them with the skills to do that task.

Another principle of how the teachers create and choose appropriate activities for students is their knowledge in L2 learning theory, specifically about input and output. The excerpts below from Rio and Anita demonstrate this fact.

Rio: Most of the time I do make a point to follow from the less complicated to more complicated stuff, from input to output. I do try to follow those activities. Whenever I am in press time, I still make a point to go from input to output; from simple to more complex.

Anita: If we have two or three [tasks] working with input activities, and I don't have time, then I will choose two out of those three—or only one out of those three. But I try not to skip, to go straight from input to output. I would try to do some activities working with input.

When selecting activities, other participants focus on how well the activities can engage students' interests, learning, and participation. Juan and Gala's descriptions of how they decide which activities to include in their classrooms illustrate this criterion.

Juan: I look at [the activities] beforehand, and I see which ones me as a student would understand and get the most of it ... but also some that may not be as good but they will keep them engaged, like they will like it and that will be fun for them.

Gala: If [the activities] are repetitive, I'll try to omit them. For ones that are boring, I omit that. I try to get a mixture of activities that will get the students involved in the class in doing something rather than being passive. So, if there are a lot of passive activities where they're listening or checking off things, I'll make sure there's an activity where they actually have to do something with what they're saying.

The teachers' expectations for choosing activities for their CLT classrooms are similar. Their criteria take into consideration students' needs, knowledge in SLA theory, level of engagement, and usefulness of activities. All of the participants incorporated various types of activities in their CLT classrooms to facilitate students' learning. The types of activities include lectures on grammar, creating sentences based on contexts, and communicative activities. Two teachers focused more on grammar-related activities, and other teachers used authentic pictures and sample sentences to introduce new target forms and vocabulary. Several teachers modified the activities from the textbook to fit the students' situations.

### **Discussion**

The participants in this study raved about CLT and agreed that it is useful in helping students develop communicative competence. All of them believe that CLT contains teaching values that facilitate students' communication in the target language. However, how the participants perceive CLT varied. Some seem to have a more thorough understanding of what it is than other participants. Similarly, some teachers tend to have a stronger feeling about CLT.

### **Misconceptions and CLT Practice**

The findings revealed that some participants held misconceptions about CLT. Recall that the core idea of CLT is to allow students to participate in communication in order to achieve communicative competence through interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1983, 1997, 2002). CLT is not only designed to develop speaking skills, but also develop reading and writing. Additionally, grammar rules should not be eliminated in CLT. Instead of memorizing grammar rules, Savignon (1983, 1997, 2002) suggests that students should learn grammar with meaning to achieve communicative ability. However, half of the participants perceive CLT as emphasizing oral communication, and that grammar should not be the focus in a CLT classroom. A possible justification for such a misconception is derived by the word "communicative" from the name Communicative Language Teaching and the description of the term: the primary goal of CLT is to develop learners' communicative competence (Wu, 2008). Wu also points out that the reason teachers hold misunderstandings of CLT is due to various definitions and interpretations of the term since the 1970s. Others (e.g., Cai, 2009) have argued that misconceptions of CLT occur because teachers and scholars often characterize the methodology based on their own understanding. It is not surprising that the participants had different descriptions of CLT, which may have affected their perceptions of the methodology in language instruction.

### **Affective Memories and CLT Practice**

Some participants strongly support the idea of employing CLT as a sole methodology in their classrooms, whereas other participants view it differently. The differences in perceptions can also be

explained through affective memories, which is a motivational component under a social cognitive expectancy-value model by Eccles (1983, 1987, 1993, 2005) and Wigfield (1994). Affective memories refer to humans' memories of former experiences related to a particular activity or task (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). If an individual had a negative experience about a certain activity, avoidance of the same type of activity will result. In the study, Rio, for example, had a negative L2 learning experience in the classroom because most of his learning involved studying and memorizing grammar rules. Rio's affective memories may explain his avoidance in explaining grammar to his students.

### **Perceptions and CLT Implementation**

Overall, most of the participants' perceptions of CLT are aligned to their classroom implementations. Despite the fact that the administrators required them to follow certain rules, such as no English use and no grammar explanation in their CLT classrooms, not all of the participant teachers adhered closely to the rules because of their beliefs in teaching. The activities conducted by most of the participants reflected their perceptions of CLT. The activities chosen by the participants also reflected what they believe a CLT classroom should contain. As Isler and Cakiroglu (2009) suggest, teachers play a critical role in making final decisions as to how they conduct their lessons regardless of what the curriculum proposes. Teacher beliefs play a large part in this decision-making process. Yero (2002) indicates that teacher beliefs are powerful because they not only shape teachers' perceptions, but also highly impact instructors' classroom practices as well as other pedagogical behaviors. Research in the field of L2 education has found evidence that instructors' teaching practices and relevant decision making are informed by their beliefs and knowledge regarding L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Borg, 2003; Burns, 1992; Farrell, 1999; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Golombek, 1998; Ng & Farrell, 2003; Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001; Yim, 1993).

### **Professional Development as a Catalyst for Shifting Perceptions**

One factor that may have affected the participants' perceptions of CLT was the methods course that they were required to take. These teachers mentioned that the major focus of the course was on CLT and structured input. They were also encouraged by the department to use structured input and teach communicatively. Taken together, the participants received feedback from the students, instruction from the professor of the methods course, and weekly meetings with the program coordinators about the effectiveness of their teaching. With practice, feedback on the performance, and further instruction on their teaching behaviors, these teachers modified their teaching beliefs and styles. Pajares (1993) explains that educators continuously reshape their beliefs when they absorb new information from the environment, and they adjust their teaching based on the new information, including new knowledge regarding the content area, student performance, and feedback. He states that 'The process of accommodating new information and beliefs is gradual, one of taking initial steps, accepting and rejecting certain ideas, modifying existing beliefs, and finally adopting new beliefs' (p. 46). L2 teachers alter their beliefs about teaching as they gain more knowledge about language pedagogy, have more experience in teaching, receive students' responses, and observe their learning behaviors. Over time, teachers adjust their teaching methods.

### Implications for Second Language Teacher Education

This study underscores previous research suggesting that it is important for L2 educators to understand instructors' beliefs in teaching and learning and what they discover from their instruction, which may have an impact on their teaching preferences. Bailey (1992), Hampton (1984), Jackson (1992), and Richards, Gallo, and Renandya (2001) offer evidence to suggest that teacher beliefs are the central component in teacher development as well as their instruction to students. Richards et al. (2001) state that it is essential to determine teacher beliefs to understand how teachers govern their instructional practices. A similar conclusion is identified in the study of Harste, Woodward, and Burk (1984). To understand teachers' beliefs in L2 teaching and learning, offering ongoing teacher training to teachers is necessary. A continuous professional development program can include workshops, periodic observations of other instructors, and seminars. Attending workshops and conducting observations allow teachers to explore and discover various ways of teaching. Through observing modeled activities, teachers can be more self-efficacious as a result of the observational learning experiences. Having seminars in which teachers reflect on their beliefs through discussions can help them and their trainers understand their pedagogical choices.

This study further emphasizes taking into account teachers' teaching experience and their interpretations of students' feedback and learning performance. Program coordinators and administrators can engage instructors in discussions about their pedagogical experiences, struggles, as well as what they observe from students' behaviors and performance. This allows them to further understand what the teachers are experiencing in their instructional process and offer support to the teachers. Besides providing training to teachers, encouraging them to try out innovations is important. Clark and Peterson (1986) point out that teachers who try out an innovation through which they witness progress in students learning will more likely modify their belief. Administrators should offer support and encouragement instead of limiting teachers' choice in teaching methodology.

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