Voices:
Student Teachers Link Teacher Education to Perceptions of Prepardness for Literacy Teaching

By Joyce M. Bainbridge & Leonora Macy

> Literature and the learning of language are such social events. That's why I like literature circles because they provide opportunities for students to do so much work together, such as writing stories where they brainstorm together. This whole theory is that they learn together and they can help each other. The ideas don't always have to come from the teacher. It's better when they come from the other students. (Lee C., student teacher)

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The changing world of literacy teaching creates considerable controversy over how student teachers should be prepared to meet the needs and challenges of literacy education. Former taken-for-granted notions about literacy and literacy education are no longer stable, and changing populations and a proliferation of new literacy technologies are challenging teachers to account for unprecedented rapid changes in language itself (Luke, 1995; New London Group, 1996). In the past two decades, broader and more complex approaches to literacy teaching have been developed which have the potential to result in increased student engagement, greater depth of literacy learning,

improved literacy abilities in real-life settings, and continued literacy participation and learning in later life. Social constructivist tenets undergird many of these approaches to literacy teaching, but the shift they necessitate in teacher education are not occurring without debate. Lee's voice provides an insight into how a student teacher begins to grapple with the ideas contained in a theory where the social context of language learning is highly relevant.

In this article, we explore the ways in which a selection of student teachers from two universities in Canada expressed their feelings of preparedness to teach literacy in elementary classrooms. The student teachers had experienced various approaches to literacy teaching as they progressed through their teacher education program. These student teachers had been in either cohort-based programs or a course-based program. We present the student teachers' voices, taken from interview transcripts, and juxtapose them with current theory and research on teacher education.

Purpose of the Article

Britzman (2003) writes, "Voice is linked to trying to represent something of the self but in doing so, bumping up against the language, or the prevailing discourses in education and the larger social [milieu]" (p. 17). We trace the uniqueness of the individual voices of these student teachers in an effort to understand how they were coming to find their authentic "teacher voice." Frequently, they encountered contradictory realities as they began to move their thinking from that of student teacher to beginning teacher. The voices of the student teachers in this study raised many issues about approaches to teacher education, especially in relation to creating the most appropriate environment for them to explore and reflect upon both their present understandings about literacy education and the new ideas presented to them in their program. One important issue they raised is how cohort-based programs provide a different underpinning for teaching in the 21st century than do course-based programs. In the next section, we focus our discussion on two sets of approaches to teacher education as well as discuss the concept of cohort-based programs.

Approaches to Teacher Education

Richardson (1997) suggests there are two sets of approaches to teacher education: transmission approaches and critical, reflective, constructivist approaches. The transmission approaches provide student teachers with the opportunity to be engaged in intensive direct teaching of what is commonly referred to as basic literacy skills (NCEE, 1983; Pinnell & Fountas, 1998). Those who advocate the transmission approaches emphasize providing students with a clear target and then inducing students to work continually to achieve it (Tucker & Codding, 1998). From the transmission approaches perspective, the main focus of teacher education is the transmission of subject content (Barr, Watts, & Yokoto, 2000; NCEE, 1983). Rolheiser (1999) writes that transmission-oriented educators

> believe that others can be the experts who guide learners in structured, direct learning experiences in order to develop specific skills and knowledge. This view of teaching operated from the belief that there was a fixed curriculum that needed to be transmitted to the students. (p. 129)

Rolheiser goes on to say that, in contrast, constructivist educators generally believe that

> through a range of experiences, interaction and talk, learners will construct their own meaning. A part of this orientation was the belief and trust that learners will move through a stage of discomfort to a stage of deeper understanding. (p. 129)

Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) suggest that the central principles of critical, reflective, and constructivist approaches to literacy teaching are captured in the Standards for the English Language Arts developed by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The central principles are: an open critical approach to literacy; teaching for understanding and real-life application; skill development in context rather than in isolation; student engagement, ownership and choice; student talk and collaboration; interdisciplinary linkages; and "learning for all" through meeting the needs of students with diverse interests, abilities, and background (pp. 29-30).

Few educators today advocate a transmission approach to teaching. Over the years, constructivist approaches have taken on a greater social emphasis, as educators have become aware of the importance of the social factors involved in both the construction and appropriation of knowledge. Social constructivism entails meaningful, critical, and holistic approaches to learning and teaching. We also understand that teacher education programs do not provide a "final product," and as Loughran and Russell (1997) suggest, "preservice education is only a starting point in learning about teaching, not an end unto itself" (p.164).

Eifler and Potthof (1998), Fullan (2001), and Goodlad (1994) suggest that preservice teacher preparation programs that are implemented in cohort cycles tend to form natural learning communities because the student teachers share a large number of classes together. Cohorts tend to form their own peer support groups, become actively engaged in cooperative learning, and thereby tend to increase student teacher knowledge about teaching and learning (Koeppen, Huey, & Connor, 2000). Tinto (1997) posits that students involved in positive relationships within their learning communities tend to spend more time studying together and learning from each other. Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris, and Watson (1998) argue that the lack of community and cohorts in teacher preparation may contribute to the persisting pattern of teacher autonomy in schools.

In our study, the majority of students experienced their teacher education program as part of a cohort, with only one (large) group experiencing a course-based program where students selected when to take the required and optional literacy courses. We saw a clear difference between the majority of students in the

cohort-based programs and those in the course-based program. We discuss these differences later in the article.

The Research Context and Selection of Participants

The research project was conducted at two Canadian universities that offered a wide range of basic teacher education programs leading to provincial teacher certification. These included a four-year bachelor of education (BEd) program, a two-year after-degree BEd program, a one-year after-degree BEd program, a one-year and a two-year master of arts (MA), and a one-year master of teaching (MT) program. Some of these programs were offered on the main university campus, while others were offered at locations distant from the university (in some cases in rural locations).

In total, approximately 1200 students were registered in the elementary route of the teacher education programs at the two universities. One university's programs were entirely cohort based, while the other had a combination of cohort groups and course-based programming. The student teachers' experiences across these programs varied considerably in regard to instructors, course content, and specialization (e.g., music, special education, primary/early childhood education). However, all students were required to take at least one 36-hour course on language and literacy teaching.

The students were invited to participate in the study through a brief oral presentation in their classes and a letter of information and invitation from the researchers. Permission of individual instructors was obtained in order to access the classes. Of the 1200 students, 721 volunteered to complete a written survey instrument related to their coursework in literacy teaching. This survey provided mainly demographic data, which are not included in this paper. The students were also invited to participate in a follow-up interview held immediately after their nine-week practicum experience, when they had completed their teacher education program. The researchers planned to interview approximately 50 participants.

Research Methods

Forty-seven of the student teachers across both universities, who had already completed surveys for the study, volunteered to be interviewed at the end of their teacher education program. Interviews were about one hour in duration. An interview protocol was used and students were encouraged to respond to open ended questions. At the end of the interview they were invited to raise any issues or concerns they had not voiced during the interview. Research assistants conducted some of the interviews while instructors and researchers completed the remaining interviews. Thirty-nine participants were women and eight were men. Many were "mature students" (the average age of students graduating from the programs was about 29), with a wide range of education and work experiences. Some student teachers

had children of their own. It was the view of the interviewers that the maturity and life experience of the students affected their responses in the interviews. The more mature students, and those with a range of life and work experiences, appeared to be generally more reflective, more thoughtful, and more committed to entering the teaching profession than the less mature students.

The interview questions were arranged into categories. Sample questions are provided below:

> • *Background Information*—What was your minor? Where did you do your practicum? Where did you do your previous university study? When did you graduate?
>
> • *General Impressions* (about their program)—When you applied, what did you think the program would be like? Why did you choose the University of _____? What has surprised you about the program?
>
> • *General Questions* (about their teacher education program)—Which parts of the program have been the most helpful? How was the workload?
>
> • *Language Arts Course*—Tell me about some of the classes/activities in your language arts courses. What has been helpful? What do you think were your instructor's goals for the program? Have they been helpful to you as a student teacher? What parts of the language arts course were especially helpful? What do you feel should have been included in the language arts course? What impact has the course had on you and your teaching? Please describe your philosophy of teaching literacy/ approach to literacy?
>
> • *Practicum*—Tell me about the language arts programs you saw in your practicum classes. To what extent were you able to teach language arts while on practicum? What surprised you about teaching language arts?
>
> • *Development as a Teacher*—How have you changed since last September (as a result of being in the program)? Why? What have been some important experiences / learnings? In what ways has your understanding of being a language arts teacher changed since last September? How has the program influenced your development as a teacher?

The in-depth interviews with the student teachers were transcribed and analyzed by applying open codes and then determining themes into which the responses could be grouped (Sowell, 2001). We used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. We made a deliberate decision, in this paper, not to address the student teachers' comments regarding their practicum experiences unless it was directly related to the literacy courses, because our purpose was to explore the course experiences and the teaching they had encountered in those courses.

The themes of response selected for discussion in this article are: *student teachers' perceptions of their literacy education courses; student teachers' understandings of literacy learning and teaching; and student teachers' transition to the role of beginning teacher.*

In the following section of the article, we present each of these categories and

reflect on the voices of the student teachers by interpreting their comments according to current teacher education literature.

Student Teachers' Perceptions of their Literacy Education Courses

Vygotsky (1978) posited that human beings learn primarily through social interactions and that language leads learning. When individuals interact collaboratively, they begin to develop shared meanings. Wells (2001) writes, "Knowledge is constructed and reconstructed between participants in specific situations, using the cultural resources at their disposal, as they work toward the collaborative achievement of goals that emerge in the course of their activity" (p. 180). In classroom situations, teachers provide strategies that facilitate interaction, which in turn leads to shared meaning making in a social community.

Modeling

Modeling is one powerful strategy that teachers use to scaffold learning. According to Beck and Kosnik (2006),

> modeling is always important in teaching: show rather than tell, or 'show *and* tell …, are common phrases among teachers. It is especially important for a social constructivist approach because modeling is itself a manifestation of holism and integration: it links how we live with what we say. (p. 45)

The student teachers in our study often recognized that their instructors' modeling was behind the success they experienced in their literacy courses.

> Sally: *She read us stories … we talked about them … and it was wonderful … it was great modeling for how to be an LA teacher.*

> Tammi: *He would read us poems, he would read us books, he would give us word puzzles ... And that's how I remember language arts, not theory. I'm glad he didn't teach us theory because really I think I just learned the theory naturally because we were doing activities.*

The student teachers experienced a wide range of reader response activities such as using drama as a tool for learning, and activating literature circles. Instructors modeled critical literacy activities by using questions intended to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions and points of view, and by raising issues of power, identity, and social justice. The instructors also modeled practices to help student teachers understand how to integrate language and literacy across the curriculum.

> Brian: *Drama components, very helpful incorporating that and across curriculum as well in the social studies ... integrated units. Things that we did I really remember as opposed to just sitting and listening.*

Theresa: *I liked the part on literature circles ... What else? Novel study and critical literacy; getting appropriate questions to get students to think more critically.*

Many drama theorists support and promote drama as a tool for learning across the curriculum (Booth, 2005; Neelands, 1992, 2002). Wagner (1998) suggests that instructors who provide their students with experiences in drama are modeling a social constructivist approach. In the social environment of both drama and literature circles (where students respond in a small groups to the literature they have read), the student teachers were learning how to use drama as a tool for learning as well as how to facilitate children's responses to literature in their future classrooms. At the same time, they were learning the deeper theory of social constructivism. As the instructors scaffolded student teachers' understandings, the student teachers were working within their zone of proximal development.

What it Means to "Teach Literacy"

We understand that student teachers enter their teacher education programs with a range of perceptions about what it means to teach literacy and about what their literacy education courses should do for them. At times, the literacy courses felt too theoretical for some of the student teachers. Many of them came to the teacher education programs with preconceived notions of what it means to be a teacher, notions derived from their many years of observing teachers when they were students in school themselves. Some of them appeared to enter the programs only to discover that the real mysteries of teaching had been hidden to them while they were students. They had not had to grapple with things such as the intensive planning required for even one day of teaching. Some of these individuals experienced frustration with a constructivist orientation to teaching and wanted to see a more transmission-oriented approach in their literacy courses, including more direct teaching (just tell me what to do), packets of resources that could be used directly in a classroom, lesson plans and units, and a clear step-by-step approach to teaching the various literacy skills laid out in the program of studies.

Jane: *You give it (the knowledge) to us and then help us find a way to utilize it in a classroom.*

Sometimes their naïve beliefs lingered, and this was evident when they continued to perceive knowledge about teaching as consisting of "tricks of the trade," or believing that current classroom practice should lead teacher education. There was an often-mentioned notion that university instructors should take their lead from individual teachers' classroom practice.

Wendy: *I thought there would be more hands-on; more tricks of the trade*.

Theresa: *I would say [both the students and instructors should] go out to the classrooms and see how different teachers are teaching, and then bring back some of those teaching strategies.*

At the end of their program, we expected the student teachers to have a relatively broad understanding of the many kinds of knowledge a teacher requires in order to successfully move students from one set of understandings to another. We found, however, that some of the student teachers had maintained an extremely narrow view.

Loughran and Russell (1997) describe their experiences of consciously "meeting student teachers on their own terms" when they write:

> We share a view that our practices as teacher educators must acknowledge, develop and challenge the various perspectives that preservice teachers bring to the task of learning to teach. We also believe that experience precedes full understanding, so that part of meeting new teachers on their own terms involves showing them how experience extends their understanding and enables them to use it to guide future teaching. (p. 164)

Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) evoke the metaphor of the orchestra conductor when they write that, from the point of view of the audience, the conductor appears to have the easiest job on stage. A novice audience would be unaware of the many skills required to lead an orchestra successfully. Interestingly, one of the student teachers, Melanie, commented:

> *I don't think that I knew what I was doing last year. I was just like a band-leader up there with a whole bunch of different instruments in front of me, not knowing what I'm doing. Where this year, I felt more confident … I felt like a teacher. Last year … I felt like a student. And this year, I felt like a teacher.*

Melanie had reflected on what she was coming to know. She began to view herself as a teacher only when she could transform her intentions into deliberate actions. Research evidences that student teachers need personal reflection time and opportunities to explore alternative views when they are engaged in their teacher education programs. Beck and Kosnik (2006) suggest that

> A key implication of the constructivist paradigm for teacher education is that student teachers should have time and encouragement to reflect on what they are learning. Because of the short duration of preservice programs there is a tendency to think we must "give them the theory" while we have the chance, leaving them to work out the implications as they teach. This is an unfortunate approach, however, not only because it models transmission pedagogy but because it gives the students inadequate opportunity to assess and adapt theory. (p.10)

While many of the student teachers spoke favorably about their literacy courses, nearly all agreed that they needed an extended period of time in language arts course work in order for them to become more comfortable with literacy instruction. Some student teachers in the course-based program felt that the one required literacy course they took was rushed and that too much material was presented.

> Candice: *Some days there was, like, seventeen concepts that we just talked about in one day, but I don't feel like I fully understood as much as I could have.*

> Greg: *I could see it being a full year course. It really feels like you're crunching a lot of stuff … and I think that we could only be better teachers if we could get more instruction.*

Students felt there was little or no time allowed for reflecting upon the new concepts addressed. They implied that instructors were sometimes transmitting large amounts of information without connecting it to practice.

Understanding Resources

Student teachers commented upon the ways in which they were provided with instructional resources as part of their literacy courses. Many of the student teachers distinguished between textbooks and other resources. They generally did not perceive their textbooks as resources for teaching. At least two different textbooks were used in the programs: *On Solid Ground: Strategies for Teaching Reading K-3* (Taberski, 2000) and *Constructing Meaning: Balancing Elementary Language Arts* (Bainbridge & Malicky, 2004). However, the student teachers reminded us that their instructors must mediate the texts so that the information contained therein is accessible to them. It cannot be assumed that because student teachers have "learned" portions of a text, they can transform that information into practice.

> Rachel: *We were just asked to read the textbook, we didn't actually ever learn how to use it effectively ... You've got all these terms and half of them you haven't touched on. You've got no idea how to use it. You've got a fantastic compilation of information with no way to use it. It's like trying to get on the Internet without your password.*

Some student teachers said that few resources were provided to them—these students interpreted "resources" as "gifts"—bundles of materials given to them in a package or folder for direct use in the classroom. They did not recognize human resources or sources for finding more material and ideas as teaching resources.

> Wendy: *They've provided us with a lot of places we can get resources ... But maybe not like actual tangible resources.*

However, by the end of the program most student teachers felt they had gathered a good collection of language arts resources that would be helpful to them as they began teaching.

Student Teachers' Understandings of Literacy Learning and Teaching

In this section, we address how the student teachers grappled with concerns and notions about what it means to teach literacy. It was particularly interesting to see how the course-based student teachers viewed community and collaboration in contrast to the cohort-based student teachers. Some of the students' voices were

closer to that of teacher than others. In some cases, the student teachers were able to clearly identify what they had come to understand about literacy learning and teaching. In other cases, especially where there was one required literacy course, the student teachers had not yet developed the ability to clearly articulate their understandings about literacy learning and teaching.

Support and Collaboration

In the cohort communities in this study, the student teachers had the advantage of taking at least two language and literacy courses during their teacher education programs. The course-based students teachers were required to take only one basic language and literacy course. The cohort communities were further helped by having the continuing support of both the instructors and the peer group as they worked to transform their literacy learning into a coherent way of thinking about literacy teaching. It was not until after the analysis of the transcripts that we saw the clear difference that existed between the majority of student teachers in the cohort-based programs and those in the course-based program. Student teachers in the course-based program appeared, among other things, to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of different instructors and individual students in the various courses they completed. Pat, in a course-based program, made the following comment:

> *The number of people, it's quite big here, just the size of it surprised me because I was in my fourth year classes and there were faces I still didn't know.*

In the course-based program, while collaboration with classmates was valued, several student teachers found that scheduling time to work together in groups outside of class time was extremely difficult. The student teachers were usually taking five different courses at different times, and with different groups of individuals. In addition, many of them held jobs off campus. Relationships among their peers were more difficult to create and even more difficult to sustain than within the cohorts. Resistance to collaborative assignments is understandable under these conditions. These student teachers told us they could do better working individually. Although they recognized collaborative group activities as part of everyday life experiences, they did not value them in the course-based program.

> Jean: *Although many times working with others is really great, in such large groups it can be very, very difficult. We worked with a group of five or six and we were all taking five classes. We had to get together for group work to get this assignment done and it's very difficult. I'm working, so my hours are very few and far between. It's much easier for me to do my work assignments on my time, rather than trying to fit other peoples' schedules into mine. The cooperative aspect was great but it's not easy.*

On the other hand, some student teachers dismissed the value of collaborative work and likely had not been introduced to the idea of professional learning communities, which have become part of the educational scene in the 21st century.

> Lori: *For someone like myself with the three children, I didn't need that group component. I've had lots of group components just in life and being in school with my children. So I found it very tedious and a big time-waster for me because I was serious, I was here for a reason and I think I did not benefit from that at all. In fact, it held me back. Just let me soar on my own, I can get this done.*

In cohort programs, student teachers were far more willing to be part of a learning community and saw it as beneficial, and more relevantly, as part of the educational experience. Social constructivist ideas were therefore practiced more in the cohort programs as the student teachers supported each other under the guidance of their instructors. The student teachers felt that belonging to a cohort was like "coming home."

> Lydia: *We had the same professors face-to-face in a small classroom, so we got to do a lot of one-on-one talking with them. And since we were with the same group for the full program, we all became pretty good friends, helping each other out quite a bit.*

Many of the cohort student teachers saw the value of social constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978) and spoke about the social nature of language, scaffolding learning events, encouraging peer support, and the nature of small-group work. As in Lee's words, quoted at the beginning of this paper, "Literature and language arts and the learning of language is such a social event . . . The ideas don't always have to come from the teacher."

As we revisited the student teachers' voices, it became evident to us that in cohort-based programs a stronger sense of community existed. According to Peterson (1992): "When community exists, learning is strengthened—everyone is smarter, more ambitious, and productive" (p. 2). It could therefore be argued that well structured cohort-based programs have the potential to lead preservice teachers into embracing the importance of community and collaboration in teaching. Barth (1990) suggests that schools need both "congeniality" and "collegiality" among teachers. We therefore believe that well structured cohort-based programs are conducive to leading student teachers into enjoying each other's company and talking about their practice. Course-based programs have to be vigilant that they do not perpetuate "teaching as a highly individualistic affair" (Lortie, 1975) by neglecting to make a special effort to offset the concept when student teachers enter their professional program.

Developing a Philosophy/Approach to Literacy Teaching

A number of the course-based student teachers had difficulty in articulating an overall approach to teaching literacy or in describing a philosophy of literacy teaching. It must be remembered that these student teachers had only taken one required course in literacy teaching, while the cohort student teachers had two or more required literacy courses. This may account for course-based students' vague

notions about the overall purposes for and approaches to teaching literacy. When asked if they remembered a particular theory or researcher/writer in the area of literacy education, student teachers commented: "There's so many names floating through my head," and, "I have a note of them at home." Students held vague notions about generally improving children's skills, developing a love of reading and writing, and of increasing children's enjoyment of reading. Overall, these student teachers thought of literacy activities in terms of them being "fun," with little concern for the literacy concepts and strategies taught through the activities.

> Dale: *With any subject you have to find ways so that they'll enjoy it, so you need to be able to read well, you need to be able to enjoy reading and that's tough sometimes because if it's difficult you don't usually enjoy it.*

There was a range of understandings of literacy among the student teachers. In one cohort program the instructor presented a broad definition of literacy. Here, one student teacher spoke of different types of responses to a song:

> Sylvia: *She taught us about using a song ... and putting up the lyrics on the overhead … and having them do a variety of activities. Let them listen to the song and make it a more modern song, and then they have to write an essay or write a response to the lyrics … and how it makes them feel.*

As we examined the above interview transcript, we noticed Brittons' (1970) three voices of writing (expressive, poetic and transactional) evident in Sylvia's description. Although she did not directly connect the activities to Britton's work or to the textbook, she clearly understood the implications of Britton's ideas. The song, and changing the song into a more modern one, represented the poetic voice. As they reflected on the feelings evoked by the song, the students moved into the expressive voice. As they researched information about the song they provided information in a new form, using the transactional voice.

Student teachers commented on the importance of literacy teaching and how so much hinged on their successful teaching of literacy. They were also aware of how much time is devoted to literacy teaching in the primary grades.

> Blair: *[The course] confirmed a lot of things that I suspected about literacy, about how important it is. The students who do well in reading often do well in other subjects.*

At the end of their program, many of the student teachers were still grappling with a number of issues in the teaching of language and literacy, primarily assessment and the accommodation of students with special needs.

Assessment

Assessing student progress proved to be a challenging prospect for many of the student teachers. A number of them saw language arts assessment as "subjective." These student teachers appeared to have a rudimentary understanding of summa-

tive assessment, but understandably they had not developed the professional judgment that allowed them to effectively evaluate student learning and achievement. The successful use of assessment tools is dependent upon a teacher's abilities to understand what constitutes, for example, an "acceptable" piece of writing or a child's strengths and weaknesses in reading.

> Melanie: *The very nature of language arts is so subjective. I did grading stories that the children had written, and . . . even though you have the rubric to go by, which is supposed to make you more objective, there's still that certain amount in there where you have to really be careful*.

Some student teachers commented on the attention paid to assessing the process of student learning but not on assessing the final product:

> Leah: *I think that there was a fair bit of emphasis on formative assessment. How to continuously see how a child's achieving ... There was a lot of emphasis on things like checklists and rubrics ... I don't remember a great deal on marking the final product or on exams. There wasn't a lot of talk about those kinds of things*.

Many of the student teachers commented that assessment would probably be a personal challenge for them and believed it was a stressful point for everyone. Some said they still needed to know how to assess early literacy learners in particular. One student teacher said her instructor had introduced exemplars and different qualities of writing, and recommended a little book on assessment that was helpful. Some participants commented that assessment was one of their weakest areas.

> Jane: *All the different kinds of assessment tools that might be used and what are the pros and cons of each and what do they tell you? How do you score them? How do you take the results and find out what grade level the child is functioning at and stuff like that. I found that I was a little ill equipped for assessment in the sense that I didn't even know really what was out there*.

As we interpreted the student teachers' voices in regard to their fears about assessment, we realized that they needed to understand that assessment *is* subjective. As O'Connor (2002) explains:

> Grades are as much a matter of values as they are of science—all along the assessment trail, the teacher has made value judgements about what type of assessment to use, what to include in each assessment, how the assessment is scored, the actual scoring of the assessment, and why the scores are to be combined in a particular way to arrive at a final grade. Most of these value judgements are professional ones; these are the professional decisions teachers are trained (and paid) to make. It should be acknowledged that grades are, for the most part, subjective, not objective, judgements. (p. 19)

O' Connor suggests that we must acknowledge and not apologize for the subjective nature of grading, but this means that we must work toward defensible and credible professional decisions throughout the assessment process. Our student teach-

ers are still learning that many of their assessment questions are complex because they are bound to specific purposes and contexts. We can provide students with a plethora of assessment strategies but they need to develop a clear understanding of the purpose of each assessment tool. They need to be able to distinguish clearly between formative and summative assessment and determine the appropriate use of these assessment tools. Many student teachers in this study did not differentiate between formative assessment as a means to give feedback to students on the progress of their learning, and summative assessment as primarily a means to provide information about the achievement status of the learner (O'Connor, 2002).

Student Teachers' Transition to the Role of Teacher

From the transcripts, it became evident that the student teachers were gaining confidence in their understandings of what it means to be a teacher. As they described their transition from student teacher to beginning teacher, we saw that many of them had discovered a new voice. As one student said:

> Gladys: *[I've] changed a great deal … my family and friends have noticed it too, 'cause I was always a shy quiet person but in this last term they've noticed a big difference … nobody will call me shy nowadays.*

Making Transitions

As the student teachers made transitions from being university students to beginning teachers, they reflected on their experiences and spoke of the gains they made in knowledge and confidence. Many student teachers felt well prepared to be teachers, and credited their course work and their practicum in this regard.

> Rhonda: *I think that the courses and the practical experiences and even just the contacts I made with some professors have made me feel ready to go out and teach … last year coming in I didn't feel that there was any way … so a lot of learning happened in the last eight months!*

One student teacher recognized "that there's so many ways to be a language arts teacher," and went on to describe experiences with the language arts curriculum, the course work and practicum:

> Beth: *You realize how open-ended [the curriculum] is, and how much can be done with those objectives you need to meet. Having the curriculum course and then the practicum, you're really getting a feel for how one sort of expectation can be met in a variety of different ways, and they might all be equally good and they might all be necessary.*

There were many participants who mentioned feeling somewhat overwhelmed at the prospect of being a teacher in charge of their own classroom. Many felt scared because they understood the responsibility they would be undertaking. On the whole, however, they felt prepared, and felt they had sufficient resources and

knew the strategies they needed to successfully teach literacy. It was the unknown parts of the situation that made them anxious: whether or not they would have a job, where it would be, not knowing what grade level they would be teaching nor what their students would be like.

Critical Reflections

During our interviews, many student teachers reflected on their programs critically for the first time. Attitudes changed once the student teachers began to think about what they had done during their practicum and how these ideas connected to their literacy courses. Some students made connections and had insights during the interview that they had not previously experienced.

> Melanie: *I've kind of changed my idea talking about it haven't I? … First impression was that especially LA was useless, I was like, oh, what a waste of time. But maybe now that I've talked about it and thought about what I saw—I mean I still think there should have been more of a strategy base, but maybe it wasn't as bad as I initially thought ... I feel better that I've changed my mind.*

Most students did not speak to what their teaching-and-learning lives would be like beyond the completion of their degrees; there was little mention of continuing professional education, in-service training, or graduate programs. More focus was placed on job-hunting, and the notion that upon graduation the students would become "teachers"—without necessitation of further study. One notable exception was the comment, "I do plan on coming back to do a master's—everyone knows I will."

Findings of the Study

The intention of this article was to provide a snapshot of how a selection of student teachers expressed their feelings of preparedness to teach literacy in elementary classrooms. In this section of the article, we generalize the findings across the three categories in which we presented the data: student teachers' perceptions of their literacy education courses, student teachers' understandings of literacy learning and teaching, and student teachers' transitions to the role of beginning teacher.

The majority of the student teachers found the literacy courses relevant, practical, broad and thorough. Some instructors taught by example and used modeling frequently, providing many new literacy strategies for the student teachers. When they were given the opportunity to work in their zone of proximal development, the student teachers could work through preconceived notions and transform them into new and relevant understandings of literacy learning and teaching. Student teachers reported that when their instructors used transmission approaches, and expected them to learn large numbers of concepts in isolation without practical support, many of them experienced frustration.

We encountered a distinct difference between the cohort-based student teachers and the course-based student teachers. Those in cohort programs voiced the

positive nature of collaboration and community as part of their educational experience and appeared to embrace social constructivism in their teaching philosophy. Many students in the course-based program questioned the need for collaboration, and they raised issues such as finding time to collaborate as well as feeling that they could do better working alone. The transmission-oriented student teachers experienced frustration with the use of social constructivist strategies provided by the instructors, who endeavored to create community through collaborative assignments. Many of the individuals in the course-based program, due to the nature of the program, appeared not to understand the implications of social constructivism for the classroom. Their voices suggested that they wanted to be taught "the basics" so that they were better prepared to teach.

At the end of their program, some student teachers, noticeably those in the course-based program, thought of literacy activities as being "fun," and displayed only minimal connections with literacy theory, concepts, or strategies. The role of faculties of education must be, in part, to examine the expectations and perceptions that student teachers bring with them into the professional program and to scaffold a deeper understanding of the breadth and depth of literacy teaching and learning. Faculties also need to emphasize that teacher education programs are only a starting point in the students' journey to becoming knowledgeable members of the teaching profession.

In the course-based program, some of the student teachers criticized their instructors for not teaching the kinds of literacy practices they had observed in their practicum classrooms. They wanted the instructors to replicate the classroom teaching they had observed during the practicum rather than introduce them to new and improved literacy pedagogy. The way in which these students saw the faculty of education was not that of creator and disseminator of new knowledge but rather that of a vehicle for reflecting the status quo in current practices in the field.

The process of reflection offered through the interviews provided some students with the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to think back over their university experiences and to consider the transitions they had made from student teachers to beginning teachers.

The assessment of literacy learning remained a cause for anxiety among the student teachers. They were struggling with knowing how to use the numerous assessment tools provided in textbooks and course instruction. The student teachers at both universities were deeply concerned about the issue of classroom literacy assessment, especially as many of the assessment instruments they are required to use are not consistent with social constructivist pedagogy.

Discussion

Cohort programs have the advantage of becoming social communities of learners, in which teacher educators can provide student teachers with opportunities to

experience the power of social constructivist learning and teaching. Cohort programs help students gain an understanding that teachers should not be autonomous beings but bring into a school environment the ability to be both congenial as well as collegial. The student teachers' voices in this study have helped us to understand that it is more difficult to create a cohesive learning community in large course-based programs, and therefore difficult to implement social constructivist pedagogy. In large, course-based programs, student teachers do not belong to a specific community of learners. They encounter different people in different courses at different times, and they are more likely to be taught by a range of autonomous instructors.

Cohort programs provide students with more opportunity to learn together and to scaffold each other's understandings as they develop a community of learners. Tom (1997) suggests that cohorts seem "to intensify and crystallize programmatic experiences," and goes on to state: "At their best, cohorts provide mutual support for prospective teachers and foster socialization into desirable professional norms and practices" (p. 153). Tom also points out, however, that within a cohort group, members can reinforce one another's doubts and challenge program goals. In our findings, we did not encounter this negative aspect of the cohort but feel it necessary to state that this is one point of weakness in cohort programs that needs to be considered.

In pre-service teacher education programs, it is important to acknowledge the relevant prior knowledge student teachers possess when they enter the program. Knowles, Cole, and Presswood (1994) suggest that this knowledge should be used as a starting point for reflection, discussion and inquiry. Lortie (1975) noted that new teachers frequently teach the way they were taught. When student teachers are encouraged to reflect on their previous life experiences and relate them to their evolving view on education, they are participating in a social constructivist approach. The approach suggests that new ideas should be related in part to old ideas. Student teachers are then more likely to perceive learning to teach as a gradual process rather than a sudden initiation.

Beck and Kosnik (2006) write that in "a constructivist model, a program's philosophy should be subject to constant reinterpretation and modification by students and faculty alike, rather than regarded as a fixed mandated position" (p. 31). Problems arise when student teachers are at cross-purposes with instructors in regard to their theoretical orientation. We believe that the underlying philosophy of a teacher education literacy program should be continually discussed, revised, and reinterpreted in order to address the rapidly changing needs of our diverse university and school populations. When faculty members discuss issues together, they learn from each other so that programs can be refined and inconsistencies reduced. When the voices of the student teachers are included in this discussion, we can begin to address ways of alleviating their fears and frustrations. In this research, the voices of our student teachers were powerful in informing us about what teacher education programs can do to provide them with a solid foundation for literacy teaching.

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