

# Best in Show: Teaching Old Dogs to Use New Rubrics

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## Abstract

*This paper discusses an instructional approach designed to help preservice teachers understand how assessments can be influenced by personal biases. In order to achieve this objective, we developed an analogy-based activity called "The Dog Show Analogy." After participating in the activity, we have observed that the participating preservice teachers are more aware of how their personal biases can impact the way they assess students. We explain the activity in detail in order to stimulate further discussions and reflections among teacher educators. In addition, we discuss how the development of the activity and the analysis of the data changed our perspectives on student assessment and stimulated future research.*

## Introduction

There is a tense silence in the arena as the fans at the 2006 Westminster Dog Show impatiently wait to see which champion canine will win the coveted title of Best in Show. After closely examining each canine individually, the judge slowly walks in front of the line of canines for one last inspection before he makes his decision. Finally, as the audience holds its breath in anticipation, the judge stops pacing and confidently points to the Bull Terrier, Rocky Top's Sundance. The crowd erupts as the handler and new champion respond with excited gestures in the ring.

For the winners, runners-up, and the audience, the reasons for the judge's decision will remain a mystery because no explanation is required. Everyone must trust that the judge was fair and objective, and that he used the guidelines for breed standards established by the American Kennel Club (AKC). However, without an explanation, it is impossible to know how other factors such as the canine's grooming, behavior, handler, and past victories and pedigree influenced the judge's decision.

Most Americans would chafe at the thought of being assessed in a manner similar to what happens at a dog show. If they received a poor evaluation from their employer, they would want to know why they were marked down and how they could improve. It is part of the American way of thinking that evaluations in the public sector should be open and fair. This concept is so important to Americans that state and federal legislatures have passed disclosure laws to protect people from surreptitious and unfair judgments. In light of our strong American ideals of openness and fairness, it is surprising that these principles do not apply to one large group of U.S. citizens: our children and their schooling.

In their role as students, children are subject to a variety of decisions that are dictated from school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers. The most significant influences are from the teachers who act as the primary evaluators of their performances. On a daily basis, assignments are assessed, returned to students, and marked with a numerical value or letter grade. From the students' point of view, the feedback they receive on their performance is extremely limited (Bardine, 1999). They may not know why points were deducted or how they can improve on future assignments. It is also unclear how external factors like a teacher's beliefs and perceptions influence the scores. One solution to this problem is to use rubrics because they are objective assessment tools that clearly communicate expectations, provide feedback, and check the gut feelings and preconceptions of the assessor (Gronlund, 2006). Essentially, rubrics clarify the process and make it more consistent.

In order to make our students more aware of potential sources of bias, and to demonstrate the efficacy of rubrics, we created The Dog Show Analogy. The central premise of the activity is the disconcerting parallels between the treatment of students in schools and canines at a dog show. Our

students are often shocked by how similar the two entities are, and they frequently comment that the activity changed their ideas about how to assess students. Over the past 4 years, we have presented the Dog Show Analogy to secondary preservice teachers and in-service teachers within early childhood, elementary, middle level, and secondary Master of Education, M.Ed., programs. The design and implementation of the instructional activity, and the perceived impact of the activity on our students, are discussed in the following sections.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *The Nature of Assessment Bias in Education Settings*

Through teacher preparation programs and in-service workshops, teachers learn how to construct objective assessments. However, the ability to write quality assessment items does not guarantee that students will be fairly assessed. Teachers, just like everyone else, have their own subconscious biases that drastically influence their perceptions and behaviors (Wegner, 2002; Wilson, 2002).

Research in cognitive and social psychology reveals that education assessments are biased in several ways. First, humans have a “bias blind spot” when it comes to comparing their accomplishments to the accomplishments of others. Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) found that college students tend to rate themselves as less biased than their classmates and other citizens. The students could readily identify the self-serving motives of others as biased but classified their motives as more objective and fair. We assert that it is logical to infer that preservice and in-service teachers are susceptible to a similar bias where they can identify the flaws in their colleagues’ assessments but view their own as fair and objective.

Second, when individuals assess the performances of others, they consider factors such as ability and effort (Weiner, 1994). For example, Struthers, Weiner, and Allred (1998) found that college students adjust their judgments of others based on the circumstances. The students were asked to read a vignette in which a fictional employee failed to meet a deadline. If the students read that the employee was a hard worker or lacked the ability to complete the task, their judgments were relatively lenient. However, if the students read that the employee was lazy or capable of completing the task, their judgments were harsher. In an analogous study, Sabini and Monterosso (2003) found that college students believe that instructors should consider effort and ability when assessing students’ performances. Research specifically targeting college-level education majors reveals that they too believe effort should factor into a student’s grades (Griswold, 1993). Teacher educators and in-service teachers also consider effort and ability when assessing students (Charles, 2007; Weinstein, 2003). We contend that it is not surprising or wrong for teachers to consider external factors such as effort when they assess students’ work. However, a major problem with assessing effort and ability is that the scores are based on teachers’ perceptions of students. Therefore, it is possible that a teacher’s assessments can be skewed by personal biases. In their seminal study, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) discovered that if teachers believe their students are academically talented, they tend to interact positively with the students and teach a relatively challenging curriculum. Alternatively, when teachers believe their students are less capable, there are fewer positive interactions, and the teachers cover less content. Rosenthal and Jacobson also found that teachers are not aware of how their perceptions can influence their interactions with students.

#### *Conceptual Development of the Dog Show Activity*

The Dog Show Analogy is based on our experiences as teachers, college-level teacher educators, and, for one of us (Helms), over 25 years of experience breeding, training, and showing dogs for obedience and confirmation. Combined, we have over 24 years of experience teaching in public middle schools and high schools. It was during our discussions about how we assessed our former middle school and high school students that we realized we were overconfident in our ability to be objective assessors. After reviewing the psychology literature and reflecting on the nature of student assessment, it was evident that in our roles as high school teachers and teacher educators we are also susceptible to personal biases that can influence the way we assess students.

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At the college level, we have over 20 combined years of experience and have taught nearly 400 preservice and in-service teachers within a Secondary Masters in the Art of Teaching (M.A.T.) program and in diverse Masters in Education (M.Ed.) programs. In addition, one of us served as the lead instructor for the state of South Carolina's alternative certification program and has taught over 3,000 teachers.

Based on our experiences, we concluded that many of our preservice teachers are also overconfident in their ability to objectively assess students. In addition, field observations of our preservice teachers convinced us that their assessment of students' work was susceptible to personal biases.

After nearly 2 years of conversations about assessment biases and the need for improving student assessments, we started brainstorming about an approach or activity that would heighten our preservice and in-service teachers' awareness of potential biases and motivate them to use rubrics and other assessment tools. As stated above, one of us (Helms) has trained, bred, and shown Old English Sheep Dogs for over 25 years. Helms's dogs have won three Best of Breed awards at regional shows, and, at one point, Helms owned and trained the second-ranked Old English Sheep Dog Obedience Champion in the United States. It was these experiences that guided the development of the Dog Show Analogy.

### *Instructional Format*

We selected an analogy-based activity for three reasons. First, research in cognition and linguistics indicates that humans think, integrate, and learn new information through the creation of analogies and metaphors (Lakoff, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Therefore an analogy-based approach is compatible with the way people think and learn. Second, research on using analogies for instruction reveals that analogies can help students understand and internalize relatively complex scientific phenomena (Duit, Roth, Komorek, & Wilbers, 2001). We contend that a similar analogy-based approach can help individuals better conceptualize the assessment process. Finally, psychological research reveals that when individuals can reflect on their beliefs and develop "attitude accessibility," they can change their behaviors and attitudes (Hodges & Wilson, 1993; Wilson, 2002). By comparing and contrasting the target phenomenon with the analog, our students can become more aware of their perceptions and can start modifying their views and behaviors.

Our analogy approach is also based on the principles of cognitive therapy, which is used to address emotionally based thought disorders (Beck; 1976; Haidt, 2006). In cognitive therapy, the patient (1) learns to capture his or her thoughts, (2) records those thoughts, (3) identifies potential distortions, and (4) identifies more accurate and productive ways of responding to problematic situations (Haidt, 2006). During the Dog Show Analogy, the preservice and in-service teachers identify and record their preconceptions about students. Next, they reflect on the putative similarities between the assessment of students and canines and identify their own biases or distortions. Finally, the preservice and in-service teachers learn about rubrics and other assessment tools that can mitigate assessment biases.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample Population*

Over the past 4 years, we have presented the Dog Show Analogy to over 120 preservice teachers in a Secondary Masters in the Arts of Teaching program, M.A.T. The program uses a cohort model in which preservice teachers in art, English, mathematics, music, science, and social studies are admitted to the program in early summer. The preservice teachers take courses in the summer and fall semesters, intern in the winter semester, and, after taking additional content courses during the following summer semesters, the preservice teachers complete the degree. Preservice teachers in all of the disciplines take general education courses such as Foundations of Education and Assessment and Action Research, and they attend discipline-specific content and methods courses. We introduced the Dog Show Analogy in the Assessment and Action Research course during the fall semester.

In addition, we have presented the Dog Show Analogy to approximately 60 in-service early childhood, elementary, middle level, and secondary teachers in different Masters in Education, M.Ed., programs.

### *Procedures*

Presenting the Dog Show Analogy is relatively simple, and we have found that it works well with groups of 30 or more students and relatively small groups consisting of 10 students or less. Prior to presenting the Dog Show Analogy, the students complete an in-class assignment requiring them to fill out a blank table and list what they believe are the characteristics of “good” students. We keep the students’ responses and return them during the Dog Show Analogy.

On the day of the Dog Show Analogy, we show the students a video clip of a Best in Show judging at a major dog show. Before the judge makes his or her decision, we stop the video and ask the students to choose a winner and provide reasons for their choices. The students then share their responses with the whole class. Finally, the winner of the dog show is announced, and the class members share their views on the judge’s decision. The students are then asked to infer what type of criteria the judge used to make his or her decision.

Next, we divide the students into small groups to discuss their views on the judging of a dog show. Each group is provided a blank table for listing the characteristics of championship dogs, and the students record their ideas. Afterward, we return the tables listing the characteristics of “good” students. The students then compare the attributes of good students to their lists for the qualities of champion canines.

Finally, we present some analogies between dog shows and give the students an assignment requiring them to write a reflective essay on the parallels between the judging of dog shows and the evaluation of students’ work. On the reflections, the students are prompted to (1) discuss any insights they gained from the analogy, (2) explain how well the analogy parallels the assessment of students in schools, and (3) suggest steps or methods to help teachers avoid dog-show-like assessments. The students bring their reflections to the next class meeting and share their views with their groups and the entire class.

### **Results**

When the students compare their lists of attributes of good students and winning canines, we have observed that they are frequently surprised and concerned by the parallels between their descriptions of quality students and winning canines. For example, the students use terms and phrases such as *pays attention*, *well behaved*, *respectful*, *follows directions*, *goal-oriented*, and *disciplined* to describe both groups. Table 1 includes the most frequent responses made by at least 50% of the participating subjects about the attributes of winning canines and good students.

A consistent difference between the two lists is that our students identify physical attractiveness as a key attribute of winning canines but not students. This difference is significant because preservice and in-service teachers frequently do not consider how a student’s appearance can positively or negatively impact how they are assessed. However, educational research reveals that teachers tend to view more attractive students as being more academically talented, and they tend to award these students higher grades (Ritts, Patterson, & Tubbs, 1992). Researchers have also found that the “expense” and “style” of students’ clothes and their “grooming habits” can influence teachers’ expectations (Cotton, 2001). Because a student’s appearance is rarely considered a significant influence on his or her grades, we emphasize it during class discussions.

**Table 1**

*Most Frequent (50% of all responses) Terms Used to Describe Winning Canines and Good Students*

<b>Characteristics of Winning Show Dogs</b>	<b>Characteristics of Good Students</b>
attentive, pays attention	attentive, pays attention
follows directions, obeys commands, disciplined	follows directions, cooperative, pays attention, disciplined
respectful	respectful, polite, courteous
well behaved, performs well	well behaved, considerate
good demeanor, good personality	friendly personality, good disposition, well organized
goal-oriented, driven	goal-oriented, organized, driven
beautiful hair, beautiful face, good looking, good proportion, nice body movement, nice teeth, well groomed	NONE

Analysis of the reflections reveals that students find the analogy useful because it reveals latent sources of bias. One common theme is the realization that seemingly innocuous factors like a student's dress and behavior can influence his or her grades. Below are some examples of comments we have collected from our students.

After watching this video and learning the Dog Show Analogy, I have changed my thinking.... I now believe it's possible for teachers to prefer certain characteristics including appearances.... They may also have better relationships with students who are like themselves. This seems very biased, but it's true.

I never really thought that such things as the way the child dressed, how well they carried themselves, and how well they were groomed had any influence on their grades. This experiment really changed my thoughts about how teachers look at their students. I don't feel that it's fair, but it happens all the time.

I had never realized that a student's outward appearance could in some way affect the student's grade. Because this seems like such a blatantly ridiculous factor in the grading process, I was at first shocked at this possibility. However, the more we talked about this in class, and after seeing the Dog Show Analogy, it began to make sense.

A second theme is students' heightened awareness of their personal biases. Most of our students write they are concerned that they will unfairly judge students based on superficial factors such as their shabby clothing and poor grooming habits. One student even noted the reverse situation can be problematic. In her reflection, she wrote that after attending the Dog Show presentation she realized she treated the "popular" and "attractive" female students in a summer camp program more harshly because of clashes she had with such girls when she was in high school. Comments like these are important because they are indicative of a growing awareness of personal biases. Psychological research reveals that this kind of self-recognition is essential in order for individuals to change their attitudes and behaviors (Wilson, 2002). Below are examples of students' statements.

When I was teaching at the Outdoor School, one week I got a cabin full of all the popular, attractive girls in the school. I actually was harder on them than any other cabin before because I saw them as the kind of people who picked on me when I was in school. The Dog Show Analogy helped me

realize that I shouldn't be this way with my future students because they really don't know any better. I was doing this subconsciously, and now I am aware.

I would have never thought that this would even be close to working. Yet, when we filled out the papers, I found that a lot of the same qualities I found in a "good" student were the same as those I found in a champion dog. This is a sad fact that I did that, and now I will have to rethink my thought process.

When we first started the Best in Show assignment in class, we were unaware of exactly what we were doing; this allowed me to watch the dog show objectively, or at least I thought I was watching it objectively. After we watched the dog show and discussed the analogy between students in school and dogs competing in a dog show, I realized that I had been judging those dogs due to my personal opinion and preferences, just as students would be judged by their teachers.

We also find that our students have relatively few suggestions concerning how teachers can minimize the impact of bias when assessing students (Table 2). A common statement is that teachers can become more aware of their biases through journaling and reflection. Another common solution is that schools should require students to wear uniforms, which would limit discrimination based on a student's appearance. Because we present the Dog Show Analogy at a relatively early point in the teacher education program, most students do not have well-formed ideas about teaching and assessment. This is advantageous because the students are relatively open to new ideas, and it is easier to make the case for using rubrics to assess students.

**Table 2**  
*Students' Suggestions for Making Student Assessment More Objective*

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**Suggested Methods/Approaches for Limiting Teacher Bias (50% or higher response frequency)**

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*Familiarity with Students and Parents*—Teacher researches the background and experiences of parents in order to create more positive relationships.

*School Uniforms*—Require all students to wear a standard school uniform, which will reduce assessment bias based on a student's appearance.

*Student Anonymity*—Students use codes or write their names on the back of assignments in order to prevent teacher bias.

*Student Surveys*—Students provide anonymous feedback on the teacher's performance. The teacher uses this information to promote equity in the classroom.

*Teacher Journals*—A teacher records his or her positive and negative interactions with students and uses this information to create a fairer and more objective classroom environment.

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In the next section, we present events at a dog show that we interpret to be analogous to the way students are assessed. The examples are identical to the analogies we share with our students and represent only a few of the possible parallels between dog shows and student assessments. Our students have identified other parallels, which has led to productive discussions and has influenced the way the Dog Show Analogy is presented.

**Parallels Between Dog Shows and Student Assessments**

*Grooming and Obedience*

An adept groomer can accentuate a canine's strengths and hide weaknesses, which can make the difference between winning and losing. Top groomers know how to highlight appropriate qualities

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through crimping, curling, teasing, and conditioning. In fact, groomers are so important to winning that they become part of the canine's extended family and often travel with the canine. In addition to grooming, judges consider the canine's behavior in the ring. A championship canine must remain alert and in control while being scrutinized by the judge. A canine that is not under control will not impress the judge and may be dismissed from the show ring.

Much like judges of dog shows, teachers also can make judgments about students based on their appearance and behaviors (Good & Brophy, 2003; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). A meta-analysis of the research on attractiveness and success reveals that teachers tend to view more attractive students as being more intelligent and academically talented; as a result, attractive students may receive higher grades (Ritts, Patterson, & Tubbs, 1992).

Additionally, those students who challenge a school's or teacher's dress code by wearing unacceptable clothing or by having exposed tattoos or body piercings can be viewed by teachers as being weaker academically and as having behavioral issues (Good & Brophy, 2003; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). In comparison, those students who are aligned with the dress codes may be seen as better students. The idea that a student's dress is directly connected to his or her academic performance is underscored by the popularity of the school uniform movement. Research on school uniforms reveals that, in general, teachers support the use of school uniforms because they believe that a student's clothing impacts his or her academic performance and demeanor (Wade & Stafford, 2003).

Finally, research reveals that race can factor into how teachers perceive their students (Banks et al., 2005; Persell, 2007). For example, education research reveals that teachers can maintain more negative attitudes toward African American students' academic abilities and behaviors relative to Caucasian students (Ainsworth-Darnell, James, & Downey, 1998; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Murray, Waas, & Murray, 2008; Yair, 2000). Other studies on race indicate that children of color are more frequently and severely punished for misbehaviors than their white classmates (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Fine, 1991).

### *Familiar Faces*

In the judging for Best in Show, not all canine breeds are equal in the eyes of the judges. In the 100-year history of the Westminster Dog Show, 44 of the Best in Show winners have come from the Terrier Group. In a distant second and third place are the Sporting Dog Group and the Working Dog Group which have 17 and 15 wins, respectively. The disparity between the numbers of winners in the Terrier Group and the other canine groups is too great to occur by chance alone. Based on these results, it can be inferred that not all canine breeds are equally appreciated by the judges.

This phenomenon can be explained by examining the backgrounds and experiences of the judges. Those breeds that are most popular will have more owners, breeders, and, proportionately, more individuals who are eligible to become judges. Every judge has his or her favorite breed that he or she is most familiar with, and it is reasonable to infer that the judge's affinity for some breeds influences his or her decision.

Familiarity and shared experiences can also influence the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship (Good, 1987; Meyer, Bevan-Brown, Harry, & Sapon-Shevin, 2006; Newberry & Davis, 2008; Parker, 1995). If a teacher and student come from similar backgrounds, they tend to more readily understand and empathize with each other. In contrast, when the teacher and student have different backgrounds, they are more likely to clash. Differences such as ethnicity, race, and gender can subconsciously influence how a teacher interacts with a student (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). For example, Downey and Pribesh (2004) discovered that a teacher's race can influence his or her perceptions of students. They found that African American teachers tend to rate African American students as being less disruptive than their non-African American colleagues.

### *Guides in the Arena*

A top handler is like a litmus test for the quality of the canine he or she leads into the ring. Canines entering the ring with an unknown handler, or a handler with a meager reputation, will be considered suspect by the judge. A judge's past experiences inform him or her that championship canines usually come into the ring with championship quality handlers.

Students who come from a higher socioeconomic status (SES) and, generally, more-educated families tend to be viewed by teachers as being better students, and teachers tend to interact with them in a positive manner (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008; Childs & McKay, 2001; Johnson & Stevens, 2006; Warren, 2002). In addition, higher SES parents are generally more actively engaged in their children's schooling (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Pong, Hao, & Gardner, 2005).

Constructive and frequent interactions between teachers, students, and parents can increase the teacher's empathy toward the students and can create a warmer teacher-student relationship. In contrast, students from lower SES families tend to have less-educated parents, they may be viewed less positively by teachers and school administrators, and their parents are less likely to be involved in their schools (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Warren, 2002). As a result, there may be minimal mitigating factors when the teacher assesses these students. Their grades are based solely on the teachers' perceptions of the students' academic work and behavior in the classroom.

### *History's Winners, Losers, and the Value of Pedigree*

Every breed group maintains a yearbook that ranks the top canines in terms of show victories. Those canines at the top of the rankings are perceived by the experts as being more outstanding than their lower-ranking competitors. Dog show judges are very familiar with the rankings, and they use this information to determine if a canine is deserving of winning Best in Show.

Likewise, before the first day of school, a teacher may have formed preconceptions about students and will treat students differently based on these preconceptions (Brophy & Good, 1970; Good & Brophy, 2003). If the information about a student's academics or behavior is "good," then the teacher may perceive the student as being academically strong and may respond to the student in a positive manner. In comparison, students who have a "bad" record may be perceived by the teacher as less motivated and weaker academically. Brophy and Good found that teachers may have lower expectations and have more negative interactions with these students.

The pedigree indicates that a canine is the offspring of champions and is reared by top breeders and kennels. Its quality is inextricably linked to its pedigree, which is reflected in its show name. The show name is not an endearing name like "Fluffy" or "Snowball" but, rather, an advertisement of the canine's pedigree. For example, the 2006 Westminster Dog Show Champion's name, Rocky Top's Sundance Kid, is an indicator of its mother, owners, and breeders. Before the canine enters the ring, the name precedes it, and the judge may know its pedigree and history. This information may influence the judge's decision about which canine will win Best in Show.

Teachers can also form preconceptions based on a student's family background (Brophy & Good, 1970; Good & Brophy, 2003; Persell, 2007). If a student has siblings who have performed well in the past, the teacher may have higher expectations for that student. Conversely, if a student comes from a family that has a weak academic history, the teacher might have lower expectations for that student.

### *Additional Parallels and Differences*

First, dog shows are high-stakes competitions that lead to financial gains and increased social status for the owners, trainers, handlers, and groomers. The owners' reputations increase if their canines win Best in Show, and they gain financially through breeding. Handlers' and groomers' reputations are also enhanced, which results in more business and more prestigious clients.

In school, the stakes are even higher for students. If they are successful and obtain a high school diploma, they can get higher paying jobs and earn significantly more money. High school and college graduates also obtain a higher social status because their better-paying jobs allow them to purchase homes in more affluent neighborhoods and their children can attend better-performing schools.

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Second, dog shows are entertaining and exciting events for the canine participants because of all the unique events, sounds, smells, and sites. Based on his years and experiences showing dogs, Helms can attest that his Old English Sheepdogs become very excited about an upcoming dog show. During the event, the dogs enthusiastically participate in the judging events, and they enjoy interacting with the humans and other canines attending the show.

In contrast, an increasing number of students may not find school engaging because there are not enough interesting classes or activities. Unfortunately, the siege of standardized testing does not improve students' interest levels, and budget cutbacks eliminate more interesting electives such as music, art, and auto body, which are enticing to some students (ABC News, 2003; Ickes-Dunbar, 2005; Landry, 2006; Tulenko, 1997).

Third, there are drastic differences between the way show canines and some students are prepared for competing in a dog show or attending school. Owners of show canines feed them the most nutritious meals, pay for the best health care, and provide a safe personal space in which to play and rest. When a canine arrives at a dog show, it is well fed and ready to go because it has received the best possible preparation.

However, an increasing number of students come to school unprepared to meet the academic challenges they will face in the classroom. They can arrive at school hungry, sleep-deprived, and lacking adequate school supplies. Some students may be left at home unsupervised for hours, or, in the most severe cases, they do not have a place to call home. Students who are not prepared for school, due to a variety of factors, tend to study infrequently, fail to complete homework assignments, and receive lower grades and even fail courses. As a result, these "at-risk" students rapidly fall behind in school and are more likely to drop out (Vaughn, Bos, & Schumm, 2006).

### **Learning From the Dog Show Analogy**

#### *Rubrics*

After our students share their reflections on the Dog Show Analogy, we start making the case for rubrics as effective assessment tools. We emphasize the fact that rubrics provide valid and reliable assessments and can help increase student motivation (Arter & McTighe, 2001). Rubrics make assessments more reliable because they standardize the grading process. Every assignment is assessed using the same criteria, and the impact of bias is minimized if the rubric guidelines are earnestly followed.

Rubrics improve the validity of assessments by keeping the assessor's perceptions and biases in check. We tell our preservice and in-service teachers that rubrics can address the issue of bias in two ways. First, the reality is that all assessments are "biased" because the content ultimately reflects the designers' values. Items on assessments are also "guided" or "biased" by state and national standards or the views of content experts and educators. This bias is evident in the design of teacher-made assessments. For example, we are certain that the rubric included in this paper does not represent a consensus among science teachers (Figure 1). It is expected that the format and the assessment of a laboratory report would be modified in light of the students' developmental levels, the subject being taught (e.g., biology, chemistry), and the background and preferences of individual science teachers. In effect, rubrics positively impact student achievement because they explicitly communicate the specific expectations of different teachers.

Category	<u>1</u> Unacceptable	<u>2</u> Developing	<u>3</u> Proficient	<u>4</u> Excellent
<b>PRE-LAB</b>				
Title	The title is an inaccurate description of the experiment, and/or the dependent or independent variables are not present.	The title is a partially accurate description of the experiment, and/or the dependent and independent variables are present but some are incorrect.	The title is an accurate description of the experiment, and the dependent and independent variables are present and correct.	All of the previous categories have been met, and the title is engaging to the reader and does not contain grammatical errors.
Materials	The materials list is mostly incomplete, and/or the list is inaccurate.	The materials list is nearly complete, and/or it is generally accurate in terms of the quantity of consumables and the sizes and types of equipment used in the experiment.	The materials list is complete, and it is accurate in terms of the quantity of consumables and the sizes and types of equipment used.	All of the previous categories have been met, and the materials section is legible, neat, and contains minimal grammatical errors.
Safety Protocols	Most of the biological/chemical safety issues are not identified, and/or most of the procedures, such as disposal and clean-up, are not addressed or they are inaccurate.	The majority of the biological/chemical safety issues are identified, and the majority of the procedures, such as disposal and clean-up, are addressed and accurate.	All of the biological/chemical safety issues are identified, and all of the procedures, such as disposal and clean-up, are present and accurate.	All of the previous categories have been met, the protocols are neatly organized in tables or lists, and there are minimal grammatical errors.
<b>PRE-LAB/DURING LAB</b>				
Procedures and Notes	Research procedures are missing, or they are incomplete and/or inaccurate.	All of the research procedures are present, accurate, and ordered in the correct sequence.	All of the research procedures are present, accurate, ordered in the correct sequence, and annotated with experimental observations.	All of the previous categories have been met, and the procedures and notes are legible and easy for a reviewer to follow.
Results/Data	The quantitative and qualitative data are present, but the data are incomplete or inaccurate, and/or the data are difficult to review because the data are not reported in tables and/or charts.	The quantitative or qualitative data are present, accurate, and reported in tables and/or charts.	The quantitative or qualitative data are present, accurate, reported in tables and/or charts, and the independent, dependent, and control variables are correctly identified in the tables/charts.	All of the previous categories have been met, and the tables and charts are set up correctly and are neat and legible.

Category	1 Unacceptable	2 Developing	3 Proficient	4 Excellent
<b>POST-LAB</b>				
Data Analysis and Conclusions*	The conclusions are not supported by a rationale that is based on the experimental data.	The majority of the conclusions are supported by a rationale that is based on the experimental data.	All of the conclusions are supported by a rationale that is based on the experimental data, and ideas for future experiments that can support or refute the current experimental results are discussed.	All of the previous categories have been met, and the conclusion section flows, is focused, and contains minimal grammatical errors.

**Figure 1.** Example of a rubric for a science laboratory report

Second, we point out that the assessment of students' work is a solitary endeavor. When a teacher is grading, there may be no other teachers, principals, parents, or students present. Since human biases and preconceptions can be subconscious and habitual, they must be explicitly monitored (Haidt, 2001; Pinker, 2002). For the lone teacher assessing students' work, rubrics may be the only check on his or her personal biases. For example, open-ended items like essay questions are designed to test students' knowledge of specific concepts. Research reveals that stronger writers have an advantage because they can write phrases and themes that read well and match the teacher's views (Gronlund, 2006; McMillan, 2007). The result is that these students may receive higher marks. In contrast, weaker students tend to be less skilled writers, and their succinct phrases and simple sentences may give the teacher the impression that the students do not understand the target concepts (Gronlund, 2006; McMillan, 2007). As a result, students who are less skilled writers may be penalized and receive lower grades even if they understand the construct.

We tell preservice and in-service teachers that when they start using rubrics they may be surprised by the performances of their "strong" and "weak" students. The reason is that rubrics force us as teachers to assess assignments using explicitly stated standards or guidelines. Rubrics also help teachers identify specific skills and understandings, which results in a more precise assessment of the student's strengths and weaknesses (Gronlund, 2006; McMillan, 2007). For example, teachers can create rubrics that include specific assessment categories such as content knowledge and writing ability.

Finally, we communicate to preservice and in-service students how rubrics make assessments and their results easier for students to understand. In our experiences as high school teachers, we have had students who believed their grades were determined by how much we liked them or because of good or bad luck. If we had used rubrics more often in our classes, those students would have known exactly how their grades were determined. Rubrics open up the assessment process and allow students to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Conversely, if mistakes are made by the teacher, the rubric provides a clear starting point for efficient and transparent dialogue between the teacher and student. The result is a win-win scenario for teachers and students: Teachers win because the rubrics help them create fair assessments that reinforce their instruction; students win because they receive clear criteria for completing an assignment and because they know how it will be assessed.

However, we also concede that rubrics cannot eradicate all sources of biases in teaching or schooling. The rules and regulations for school systems and individual schools can create favored or advantaged students. For example, some students may be identified as "gifted" or "advanced," and other students can be identified as "at-risk." Unfortunately, this labeling process can be susceptible to personal biases.

## Conclusions

For teachers, it can be difficult to reflect on the nature of the assessment process because it has become just another part of the instructional routine. In fact, assessments are so ingrained in the minds of some educators that they are frequently used out of habit. For example, in our experiences as high school teachers, we knew colleagues who gave tests once a week, usually on Friday, based solely on the fact that it was part of their classroom routine.

In order to start breaking down this perfunctory cycle of assessing students, we devised the Dog Show Analogy. Our experience is that it heightens preservice teachers' awareness of their personal biases. However, it must be emphasized that the Dog Show Analogy is not a stand-alone activity; it is part of a larger theme. It is unrealistic to expect that a single activity focusing on the development and use of rubrics can change the perspectives and behaviors of future teachers. In order to initiate meaningful changes, the core concepts of the Dog Show Analogy are integrated in other assignments and courses in our teacher education program.

An investigation of the efficacy of a programmatic Dog Show approach is ongoing. To date, we have found that even though our preservice teachers are more aware of the need to utilize objective assessment instruments, they may not use them in practice. A major barrier to introducing rubrics into the classroom is the perceptions of classroom teachers. We have observed that when interns are placed with cooperating teachers who regularly uses rubrics, the interns tend to use them as well. In contrast, when the cooperating teachers do not use rubrics, and in some cases actively deter their use, the interns do not use rubrics.

Based our experiences, we believe the interactions between interns and cooperating teachers have a long-term impact. Interns tend to view their cooperating teachers as experienced experts who know through practical experience what works and what does not work. In some cases, a cooperating teacher's views are in direct conflict with those of the university supervisor. Often, the cooperating teacher will couch his or her views using what we identify as the "wink-and-grin response." When an intern explains how he or she was trained to assess students, the cooperating teacher will respond with a sardonic wink or grin and suggest a more practical solution.

However, we also acknowledge that teacher educators can be just as guilty when it comes to unfairly assessing students. In our experiences as teacher educators, we have colleagues who assess students using a gut analysis. These individuals refuse to use rubrics and instead deduct, or give what they feel are fair and reasonable scores on assignments. They defend their approach as being based on professional knowledge, and they criticize rubrics as being too restrictive in terms of the points they assign students.

We assert that teacher educators can also benefit by reflecting on the parallels between dog shows and student assessments. In fact, through the development of the Dog Show Analogy, we identified several areas where we needed to improve; as a result, we changed our assessment methods. For example, we now use rubrics to assess nearly all assignments. We also require our students to assess their class assignments using rubrics provided by the instructor. Finally, we require preservice and in-service students to develop, test, and reflect on rubrics they use during their practicum and internship experiences.

The Dog Show Analogy has also stimulated us as educational researchers. Presently, we are investigating the putative relationship between preservice teachers' moral beliefs and their acceptance or rejection of specific pedagogical practices. A preliminary analysis reveals that our preservice teachers' subconscious moral beliefs do influence their views on what constitutes "best practices" in the areas of instruction, classroom management, and assessment. For example, the data indicate that our preservice teachers may reject or accept certain practices, such as mixed-ability cooperative learning groups, based on gut feelings rather than rational and critical thinking. These results suggest a need for future research projects focusing on instructional methods that will help preservice teachers become more aware of their beliefs, values, and biases.

In closing, we believe that with reflection and practice all educators can create and implement thoughtful assessments that are aligned with the ideals of openness and fairness. As with any new

instructional approach or philosophy, it must be presented and reinforced over an extended period of time. A thorough analysis of biases within schooling as a whole can also improve the presentation and retention of the concepts presented through the Dog Show Analogy. With patience and perseverance, it is possible to teach new and experienced teachers to develop and use assessment rubrics and, consequently, to create a more objective and equitable learning environment. We believe it is possible to teach young and old dogs new tricks.

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# Defining *Teacher Educator* Through the Eyes of Classroom Teachers

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to analyze a sample of classroom teachers' definitions of the term teacher educator and determine whether they considered themselves to be teacher educators. The extent that classroom teachers' definitions of a teacher educator were influenced by involvement in a university–public school partnership was also examined. Results indicated that a large majority of the study's participants considered themselves to be teacher educators, but there were variations in how they defined this role. Analysis of the participants' definitions of the term teacher educator revealed two general categories: teacher of teachers and general educator. Results also indicated that a school's consistent involvement in a partnership led to a higher percentage of teachers giving definitions that could be categorized under the teacher of teachers theme. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are presented, along with suggestions for future study.*

In today's educational environment of accountability and emphasis on educational outcomes, the success of teacher education programs that prepare schoolteachers is measured by the achievement of the students in the classrooms of teacher education graduates (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Levine, 2006). Feiman-Nemser (2001) said, "If we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of [students], we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to [preservice] teachers" (pp. 1013–1014). In the end, it is expected that student learning and achievement are maximized by teachers who are better prepared and are provided enhanced professional development (Ridley, Hurwitz, Hackett, & Miller, 2005).

In order to provide "more powerful learning opportunities" that lead to better-prepared teachers and improved student learning, many university teacher education programs and public schools have entered into educational partnerships. One of the primary purposes of these partnerships is to broaden the preparation of preservice teachers by providing quality field experiences (Bullough Jr., 2005; Ridley et al., 2005; Sands & Goodwin, 2005; Teitel, 2003), thus preparing teachers who are more qualified to move from university training to public school teaching positions. An important outcome of the field experience, made possible through the partnership, is that preservice teachers are placed in classroom settings to observe, practice, and develop teaching skills. Central to the effectiveness of the field experience being a powerful learning opportunity is the understanding of how classroom teachers enact the role of teacher educators (Young, Bullough Jr., Draper, Smith, & Erickson, 2005).

This focus on the classroom teacher as a teacher educator is not new (Bullough Jr., 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Korthagen, 2004; Koster, Brekelmans, Korthagen, & Wubbels, 2005; McNay & Graham, 2007; Robinson & McMillan, 2006; Sands & Goodwin, 2005; Smith, 2005; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2006; Young et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2005). While there are many complexities related to how classroom teachers enact the role of teacher educator, the purpose of this study is to emphasize how classroom teachers define the term *teacher educator* and indicate whether they consider themselves to be teacher educators. The study sample includes teachers from schools with varying levels of involvement in a university–public school partnership. Thus, the extent that classroom teachers' definitions of a teacher educator were influenced by partnership involvement was also examined.

## *Field Experience in Teacher Education*

In the past several years, the prominence of field experience in teacher education has increased

(Bullough Jr., 2005; Korthagen, 2004), perhaps due to expectations and standards of accrediting agencies that emphasize quality field experience as an essential component of teacher preparation programs. The multiple, interconnected purposes for this requirement include developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for high-quality teaching through guided observation and practice; developing an overall sense of what it means to be a teacher; and connecting theory and practice. Darling-Hammond and Hammerness (2005) point out that guided observations and engagement in practice can help preservice teachers develop a “sense of the big picture” or “schema” of teaching as well as making the connection between the theory and practice of teaching. They further state:

Many programs now emphasize the importance of providing clinical experience early and throughout a teacher education program—so that prospective teachers develop an image of what teaching involves and requires. This allows them to begin to understand some of the challenges and thinking involved so that they can make sense of how the ideas and theories they encounter in their coursework fit in the process of developing practice. Some teacher educators contend that providing novices with these early practicum experiences actually provides a conceptual structure for them to organize and better understand the theories that are addressed in their academic work. (p. 398)

As noted in Levine’s (2006) analysis of teacher education, exemplary teacher education programs include a “field experience component that is sustained, begins early, and provides immediate application” (p. 6). Thus, as quality teacher education programs are developed and defined, field experience continues to be a critical component that can lead to powerful learning opportunities resulting in better-prepared teachers and enhanced student learning. Inherent, however, to the success of the field experience reaching its intended purposes is the role of the classroom teacher.

#### *The Role of Classroom Teachers as Teacher Educators*

Increasing attention is found in teacher education literature regarding the role of the classroom teacher in preparing preservice teachers (Bullough Jr., 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Korthagen, 2004; Koster et al., 2005; McNay & Graham, 2007; Robinson & McMillan, 2006; Sands & Goodwin, 2005; Smith, 2005; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2006; Young et al., 2005; Zeichner, 2005). The mentoring role of the classroom teacher is critical to the success of preservice teachers in field experiences. However, the addition of this mentoring role and the university’s expectations that classroom teachers fulfill responsibilities of teacher educators increase the workload and add complexity to their current role as teachers of children (Bullough Jr., 2005). These additional responsibilities include providing critical and evaluative feedback to preservice teachers, helping preservice teachers acculturate into the broader profession, and being willing to invest themselves in a professional relationship with preservice teachers in their charge (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998, 2001; Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Young et al., 2005).

However, research demonstrates that classroom teachers vary in the way they enact the role of teacher educators. Some classroom teachers merely provide a setting for preservice teachers to practice what they have learned in their coursework, providing encouragement and assistance when needed (Bullough Jr., 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998). Other classroom teachers enter into a mentoring relationship with the preservice teacher, providing critical feedback and engaging in reflective dialogue about the field experience and the broader teaching profession (Feiman-Nemser, 1998; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2006; Young et al., 2005).

Thus, as teacher preparation partnerships rely heavily on classroom teachers functioning as teacher educators, it is important to consider what influences the manner in which classroom teachers enact this role and the role the partnership has in preparing classroom teachers to function in this role so that field experiences lead to well-prepared teachers. University programs should not assume that simply

declaring teachers to be teacher educators or placing preservice teachers in their classrooms will lead them to function effectively in this role (Bullough Jr., 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998). It is possible that the manner or degree classroom teachers function as teacher educators might be determined by the way they define this role or even acknowledge their role as teacher educators. In other words, how a teacher defines this role may influence whether the field experience will be a quality learning experience that leads to better-prepared teachers and enhanced academic outcomes. Thus, the purpose of this study is to analyze teachers' definitions of the term *teacher educator* and perceptions of themselves as part of this category. The impact of a strong public school–university partnership on their definitions will also be examined.

## The Study

### *Participants*

Participants for this study included 79 educators from four schools. As a whole, the teachers had varying degrees of teaching experience (0–5 years, 30%; 6–10 years, 25%; 11–15 years, 18%; over 16 years, 27%), averaging nearly 11 years of experience. The majority of the participants ( $n = 54$ ; 69%) had prior experience mentoring a preservice teacher. All participants had a Bachelor's degree in education with 4 also having a Master's degree. A description of each of the four participating schools along with participant demographics for each school follows.

### *Setting: The University–Public School Partnership*

A university–public school partnership with over a 20-year history was the setting for this study. Located in the Rocky Mountain area of the western part of the United States, this partnership emphasizes meaningful collaboration between the university teacher education program and five partnering public school districts, with the common goal of “simultaneous renewal” of both public schools and teacher education practices (Goodlad, 1994, p. 123). Within each of the five school districts, various schools are identified as partnership schools that are used to place preservice teachers. In addition to being used for placements, partnership schools also participated in the partnership through professional development and contributing to the improvement of the teacher education program. For this study, four schools from three of the five partnership districts were selected to participate in the study with one of the schools not functioning as a partnership school. Selection was based on the schools' history and degree of involvement with the university teacher education program through the partnership. At the time of the study, clinical faculty from the university teacher education program were supervising student teachers at these schools, except at the no-partnership school. Pseudonyms are used to identify the schools, which are all located in suburban communities and are within a 25-mile radius of the university. School demographic data were provided by state demographic reports from the year data were collected for this study.

### *Participating Schools*

Mountain Heights Elementary had a student population of approximately 645 students and 25 classroom teachers. Twenty-three educators participated in the study averaging 13.7 years of teaching experience, 86% ( $n = 19$ ) having experience with student teachers, and all having a Bachelor's degree. This school was chosen for the study because it was one of the initial partnership schools and had a more than 20-year history of continuous involvement with the partnership. Principals at Mountain Heights consistently supported their teachers in participating in the partnership, including providing ongoing placements for preservice teachers and contributing to the evolution of the teacher education program.

Lake View Elementary had a student population of approximately 1017 students with 37 classroom teachers. Twenty-five educators participated in the study averaging 13.2 years of teaching experience, 76% ( $n = 19$ ) having experience with student teachers, and all having a Bachelor's degree with 2 teachers also having a Master's degree. Lake View was also one of the initial partnership schools, but

unlike Mountain Heights, it has not been consistently involved in partnership activity. In years immediately preceding the study, Lake View was primarily a site for preservice teachers majoring in early childhood education; thus, only classroom teachers in kindergarten through third grade were actively involved in the partnership.

Valley Elementary had just been opened with a student population of nearly 700 students and 28 classroom teachers. Twenty-two educators participated in the study averaging 7.7 years of teaching experience, 59% (n = 19) having experience with student teachers, all having a Bachelor's degree with 2 also having a Master's degree. The principal learned about the partnership through in-service training and requested that his school be a site for preservice teachers. When selecting and training his new teaching staff, he was purposeful in preparing them to work with preservice teachers.

Finally, River Front Elementary was randomly selected from the schools in the partnership districts that were not functioning as a partnership school and did not have any history or current involvement with the university–public school partnership represented in this study, nor any other formal university–school partnership. River Front was located in the same partnership district as Valley Elementary. River Front had a student population of approximately 620 students and 33 classroom teachers. Only 9 educators participated in the study averaging 9.3 years of teaching experience, only 3 having experience with student teachers, and all having a Bachelor's degree.

#### *Instrumentation*

Data were collected by asking participants to address two questions: (1) "Are you a teacher educator?" and (2) "Define the term *teacher educator*." Participants also provided demographic information regarding position, number of years of teaching, academic degree, and involvement with student teachers. Surveys with the questions and demographic information were distributed to teachers at each of the participating schools. The overall return rate for the four schools was 64%.

#### *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed based on the participants' responses to the two questions listed above. First, the researchers tallied participants' responses to the question of whether they viewed themselves to be teacher educators. Data from the second question (define the term *teacher educator*) were analyzed for common or shared themes. Then definitions were grouped according to the emergent themes. After all of the responses had been categorized, a school-by-school comparison was done to determine whether participation in the partnership had any influence on participants' definitions of the term *teacher educator*.

### **Findings**

Data provided information about whether participating classroom teachers considered themselves teacher educators, how they defined *teacher educator*, and how partnership participation of the school impacted a teacher's definition of the term *teacher educator*.

#### *Classroom Teachers as Teacher Educators*

Of the 79 participants, 75 (95%) indicated that they considered themselves teacher educators (see Table 1). Of these 75 who related the term *teacher educator* to themselves, 20 (27%) reported that they had not worked with preservice teachers. Only 4 of the 79 participants (5%) did not consider themselves to be teacher educators. Based on the demographic information provided by these participants, 3 of these 4 had not worked with student teachers and were in their first 3 years of teaching; they stated that their inexperience as teachers was the reason they did not view themselves as teacher educators. They indicated that as new teachers they were not ready to educate others about teaching, but they anticipated becoming teacher educators as they gained more experience and were given the opportunity to have preservice teachers assigned to their classrooms. One stated, "I might be [a teacher educator] if I had cohort/student teachers in my class." This seems to indicate that these 3

teachers may feel that they are teacher educators only when they are actually working with preservice teachers. In contrast, the 4th teacher, who did not identify herself as a teacher educator, was a veteran teacher of 22 years. She stated, "I have served as a mentor teacher many times; however, I don't perceive myself as a teacher educator." This distinction between *mentor* and *teacher educator* was not made by any of the other participants.

**Table 1**

*Participants' Response to the Question: "Are you a teacher educator?" and Whether They Have Worked with Preservice Teachers*

	Respondents who have worked with preservice teachers	Respondents who have NOT worked with preservice teachers	Total
Number of participants who replied, "Yes" when asked, "Are you a teacher educator?"	73% (n = 55)	27% (n = 20)	95% (n = 75)
Number of participants who replied, "No" when asked, "Are you a teacher educator?"	25% (n = 1)	75% (n = 3)	5% (n = 4)

#### *Teacher Educator Defined*

Analysis of the participants' definitions of the term *teacher educator* revealed two general categories: *teacher of teachers* and *general educators*. Since 13 responses had elements of both categories and were categorized as both the *teacher of teachers* and *general educators*, the total *n* reported (92) is greater than the number of participants (79). Table 2 includes a description of the categories, examples, and the percentage of total responses in each category.

**Table 2**

*Percentage of Responses Within Categories by School*

	Mountain Heights	Lake View	Valley	River Front	Total
Teacher of Teachers	75% (n = 21)	56% (n = 14)	61% (n = 17)	18% (n = 2)	59% (n = 54)
General Educator	25% (n = 7)	44% (n = 11)	39% (n = 11)	82% (n = 9)	41% (n = 38)

*Teacher of teachers.* This category was used for definitions that explicitly refer to working with preservice teachers or fellow teachers. As a whole, this category could be summarized as definitions that focus on purposefully sharing one's knowledge and skills relevant to teaching in an effort to improve the quality of teaching. Of the participants, 54 (59%) (see Table 2) defined the term *teacher educator* with this focus. Many definitions included the phrase "teacher of teachers," as well as words like *teaches*, *educates*, *instructs*, *helps*, *assists*, *guides*, and *leads* with the intent that preservice teachers or fellow teachers would *improve* and become *better* or *more effective* teachers. Nearly one fourth of these definitions referred to being a *mentor* or *trainer*.

Generally, participants' definitions explicitly referring to mentoring preservice teachers embodied the notion of a teacher educator as "one who teaches, trains, and mentors students desiring to be qualified." Others added that a teacher educator working with preservice teachers is "someone who

helps prospective teachers learn how to apply their college knowledge to the classroom and how to deal with real situations." Some indicate that to be a teacher educator requires education and experience: "A person of educated status who adequately prepares young teachers to be effective in all teaching areas." "A person with teaching experience who then shares [his] experiences with current perspective educators." "A teacher [who] shares her knowledge and experience along with the joys and tribulations of teaching/educating to help soon-to-be teachers." On the aspect of working with preservice teachers, respondents' definitions specified that teacher educators directly interact with preservice teachers with the intent to prepare, train, and/or mentor.

Not all definitions explicitly referred to working with preservice teachers. Some designated a teacher educator as one who purposefully shares his or her knowledge and skills with fellow teachers and other peers within an educational setting to improve teaching. This was made evident in definitions that referred to classroom teachers as being leaders in their schools through their example and explicit instruction about teaching. "A teacher educator is someone who gets the qualities of a teacher into [herself] and can lead others to increase those qualities in themselves. An example who leads [others], [does] not pour information...into others." "One who helps others learn and improve their skills and strategies as [teachers]." A few definitions referred to the time commitment and specific tasks of a teacher educator. "A teacher educator is one who devotes time to the improvement of teacher education to help improve and prepare the effectiveness of teachers. He/she may provide opportunities for growth." "A professional who aids in teaching individuals the methods and the practices associated with teaching. This may be done through demonstrations and critiques and observations/evaluations." Overall, these definitions referred to the responsibilities and actions of a teacher educator apart from the primary role of being a classroom teacher; thus, not all classroom teachers are teacher educators. Rather, being a teacher educator is an additional responsibility with a unique purpose and unique tasks.

*General educator.* The remaining 38 responses (41%) (see Table 2) defined a *teacher educator* as one who teaches others, emphasizing the act of teaching or educating. The definitions did not refer to mentoring or assisting in improving others' ability to teach. In the simplest sense, they stated that one who teaches or educates others is a teacher educator: "*Teacher*—one who teaches; *educator*—one whose profession is to educate others," "Someone who educates others." Some participants made specific reference to their primary teaching role: "It has to do with my role to teach concepts and educate students on how to use their knowledge in real life." Reference was also made to the tasks of a classroom teacher: "A teacher is a person who [displays] his/her knowledge of a subject and helps guide students' learning"; "someone who takes curriculum and presents it in the most interesting and applicable way." In contrast to answers categorized as *teacher of teachers*, no obvious reference was made to preservice teachers or to interacting with peers or fellow teachers. Nor was there a distinction made between the role of a teacher educator and that of a classroom teacher. The two roles were viewed as one in the same.

*Mixed.* Among the 79 respondents, 13 definitions could be grouped into both categories. Some referred to a teacher educator who had a dual role of teaching children *and* teaching teachers: "A teacher who has students and also mentors and teaches educators"; "One who teaches children but also teaches peers and potential educators." Others referred to both categories as *either* being an educator of children *or* working with other teachers: "Any person that teaches, or works with teachers or people in a learning environment"; "A professional who teaches children or a teacher who teaches teachers." In other words, teacher educators were viewed as having one role or the other, not a dual role of simultaneously teaching children and other teachers. One definition clearly made this distinction: "In what context do you mean? All those who participate in face-to-face teaching of students are teacher/educators. Or do you mean teacher educators in the sense of instructing preservice and current teachers? Or do you mean some combination of both (i.e., a classroom teacher that also teaches and guides peers)?" These mixed definitions make reference to the complex role of classroom teachers as teacher educators and point to the need to negotiate those roles.

### *Impact of Participation in a Collaborative Partnership*

In general, the nature of responses seemed to vary with the level of each school's involvement in the collaborative university–public school partnership (see Table 2). Responses from Mountain Heights, a school with a long history of consistent involvement in the partnership, primarily reflected a *teacher of teachers* concept of teacher educator (n = 21; 75%). Only 7 responses (25%) from the teachers at Mountain Heights reflected a *general educator* perception. The responses from the teachers at Lake View Elementary, a school with a history of sporadic involvement in the partnership, were less consistent than those from Mountain Heights: 56% (n = 14) of the teachers defined a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers*, and a smaller number defined a teacher educator using a more general definition (n = 11; 44%). Respondents from Valley Elementary, a new member of the collaborative partnership, showed a similar pattern, with the majority of teachers defining a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers* (n = 17; 61%) and fewer teachers giving a more general definition (n = 11; 39%). Accordingly, River Front Elementary, a school with no connection to the collaborative partnership, had more teachers give a general teaching definition (n = 9; 82%). In fact, only 2 of the responses (18%) from the teachers at River Front defined a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers*. Although the sample for River Front is small and can have a skewing effect on the results, a closer look at these 9 teachers shows that the 2 teachers who did define a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers* had experiences with multiple student teachers. The 9 teachers who gave a general education definition also indicated they had never had any involvement with student teachers, except one teacher who worked with only one preservice teacher in his/her 15-year career. All together, these trends suggest that involvement in a collaborative partnership, as well as the nature of the involvement, may have some influence on how teachers define the term *teacher educator*.

### **Discussion**

Current research shows that field experiences can provide powerful learning opportunities for preservice teachers that lead to better-prepared teachers (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Levine, 2006). Central to field experiences being quality experiences is the manner in which the classroom teacher functions as a teacher educator. However, research indicates that classroom teachers vary in the way they enact this role, which can subsequently influence the quality of field experiences (e.g., Feiman-Nemser, 1998, 2001; Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Young et al., 2005). It is possible that how classroom teachers define the role of a teacher educator may determine how they enact this role. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine whether a sample of classroom teachers considered themselves to be teacher educators, examine how this sample defined the term *teacher educator*, and infer how these definitions might have been influenced by participation in a collaborative university–public school partnership.

A large majority of the participants (95%) considered themselves to be teacher educators. Of the 4 who did not consider themselves to be teacher educators, 3 stated that they were in their first years of teaching and had not yet worked with preservice teachers. However, 21 other participants (of whom 16 were also in their first 3 years of teaching) indicated that they had not worked with preservice teachers, yet considered themselves teacher educators. From these initial findings, the researchers inferred that there were varying definitions of a teacher educator among the sample as well as varying perceptions of how that role is carried out. Additional analysis supported these emerging ideas.

An analysis of the definitions provided by the respondents suggested two categories of definitions. The category of *general educator* included definitions viewing a teacher educator as simply one who teaches or educates others, with no indication of mentoring or working with preservice or fellow teachers. This perception may be a reason such a high percentage of the sample considered themselves to be teacher educators, especially those who indicated that they had not worked with preservice teachers. The finding demonstrates that for some classroom teachers the role of a teacher educator is simply a description of their current role as an educator of children. Thus, these teachers might not

believe that being a teacher educator is a separate or distinct role or set of responsibilities apart from teaching children.

The second category of responses—*teacher of teachers*—is comprised of definitions of a teacher educator as one who is purposeful in sharing his or her knowledge and skills about teaching in a purposeful effort to improve the quality of teaching of others. In contrast to the definitions categorized under *general educator*, these definitions considered the role of a teacher educator to be different or separate from the primary role of teaching children. This was even more evident in the *mixed* category, as respondents referred to a teacher educator as being a dual role in which one simultaneously teaches children and mentors preservice teachers. For example, one respondent defined a teacher educator as “someone who is not only a teacher of students, but someone who teaches all around them *and* teaches them how to teach/lead others” (italics added). Although this may be a positive finding in regard to creating effective field experiences for preservice teachers, a dual role may be challenging for classroom teachers as they attempt to negotiate the increased complexity of their teaching. Assisting classroom teachers with this challenge may be a critical responsibility of the university teacher education program, a responsibility that will be addressed later in the discussion.

These findings regarding the varying definitions of a teacher educator and the perception of being a teaching educator have significant implications regarding the manner in which classroom teachers enact or carry out the role of teacher educator; this, in turn, can influence the nature of the field experience. In short, it is possible that classroom teachers who define the role of a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers* would enact this role differently than if they defined a teacher educator as a *general educator*; such differences would influence the type of field experience encountered by preservice teachers and whether the field experience leads to better-prepared teachers.

For example, teachers who do not see the designation *teacher educator* as a separate role may consider that their responsibility for preservice teachers assigned to their classroom is merely to provide a setting for trying out methods and strategies learned while involved in university coursework (Feiman-Nemser, 1998). Feiman-Nemser and Parker (1993) labeled this approach to working with preservice teachers as “local guides.” Classroom teachers enact the role of a teacher educator by providing emotional support and short-term assistance when needed and then becoming less involved in mentoring as the preservice teacher becomes more confident. Young et al. (2005) also labeled this pattern of mentoring as “responsive,” indicating that the mentor interacted with the preservice teacher when assistance was requested, as would a teacher aide or guide. In short, field experiences with classroom teachers who view the role of a teacher educator as that of a general educator, with the primary role of teaching children, may be less likely to generate powerful learning experiences.

In contrast, teachers who define a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers* may be more likely to provide field experiences that are more purposeful and more directly focused on teaching preservice teachers about teaching as opposed to simply providing a classroom for preservice teachers to practice teaching. These classroom teachers may be more likely to invest time in engaging in an in-depth mentor–student relationship and be “agents of change” (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993) where critical and evaluative feedback is central to the interaction between the preservice teacher and classroom teacher, including consideration and evaluation of alternative perspectives (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2005; Young et al., 2005). “Unless teacher educators engage prospective teachers in a critical examination of their entering beliefs in light of compelling alternatives and help them develop powerful images of good teaching and strong professional commitments” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1017), their training and development as teachers will be impeded by misconceptions and inappropriate ideas and practices.

#### *Classroom Teacher Educators and University–Public School Partnerships*

Results from this study suggest that teachers may be more likely to give a *teacher of teachers* definition if they are working in a school that participates in a collaborative partnership with a

university teacher preparation program. It is possible that a *teacher of teachers* definition may simply be a result of classroom teachers having multiple experiences in working with preservice teachers, and which such opportunities are greatly increased in a school that is collaborating with a university teacher education program. This leads to the possibility that involvement in a partnership seemed to raise the percentage of definitions that were categorized under the *teacher of teachers* simply as a function of increased experiences with student teachers. However, both the results from this study and those of other studies demonstrate that there is significant variability in how classroom teachers define and view the role of a teacher educator, even among those having multiple experiences with preservice teachers.

Thus, it is cautioned to assume that simply the act of working with preservice teachers can lead classroom teachers to effectively function as teacher educators. Adding the responsibility of working with preservice teachers to the other roles performed by classroom teachers complicates their primary role of teaching children. When classroom teachers are left alone to negotiate these roles, the role of a teacher educator may easily be subsumed by the primary role of teaching children (Bullough Jr., 2005), and thus classroom teachers may not function as teacher educators in ways expected by the university. Classroom teachers need guidance and training to be effective in this role, and such guidance and training can logically occur within the framework of a university–public school partnership.

This study did not examine how classroom teachers arrived at their definition of *teacher educator*. It is unclear whether definitions were influenced by training and formal interactions with the university teacher education program or whether definitions were based on the experience of having had preservice teachers in their class. Regardless, the results of this study raise questions regarding the relationship between the university teacher preparation programs and classroom teachers, as well as the preparation classroom teachers receive as they are asked to work with preservice teachers.

For example, although a high percentage of teachers at three partnership schools defined the role of a teacher educator as a *teacher of teachers*, many teachers from the partnership schools did not define or view their role in such a way. Is this the result of insufficient training by the university teacher preparation program, or is it the classroom teachers' struggle of negotiating the additional role/responsibility? Did the university teacher education program simply orient classroom teachers about hosting preservice teachers and teach them to complete assessment forms, or were classroom teachers trained on what it means to be a teacher educator and how to enact that role in order to lead to effective learning opportunities as addressed in the paper and extant literature? In addition, did the interaction between classroom teachers and university teacher education programs include a dialogue on how to negotiate the added responsibilities for teacher educators with their primary role as teachers of children? In short, as university teacher education programs enter into partnerships with public schools for the benefit of preservice teachers, university programs should not assume that simply placing a preservice teacher in an experienced teacher's classroom will lead that teacher to take on a teacher educator role that aligns with the university program (Bullough Jr., 2005).

Similarly, administrators of teacher education programs need be cautious in assuming that good teachers are good teacher educators (Bullough Jr., 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1998, 2001). Teachers who have demonstrated effective teaching skills and classroom management strategies may not necessarily have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to function as teacher educators. Even though a classroom teacher may be implementing "best practices" that would be beneficial for a preservice teacher to observe, he or she may know very little about mentoring a preservice teacher beyond allowing him or her to simply observe and practice teaching strategies. Those who manage teacher preparation programs need to work directly with their partnership schools and teachers to explicitly discuss roles and ensure that these roles are aligned with teacher education program expectations. The same notion of preparation required for preservice teachers should be extended to preparing teachers to become teacher educators.

It is also important to keep in mind that the university is not the only direct influence on classroom teachers effectively functioning as teacher educators. This was manifested from findings pertaining to

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Valley Elementary. As both a newly established school as well as being new to the partnership, a high percentage of teachers gave a *teacher of teachers* definition. It is possible that the school principal made an explicit effort to hire teachers who exhibited both a desire to work with preservice teachers and an effective perspective of that role. Thus, universities need to first consider the existing environment of a school as it pertains to the views of working with preservice teachers as the teacher education programs determines the nature of their training and collaboration with a school. A school that, as a whole, has a *teacher of teachers* perspective of working with preservice teachers may simply need university personnel to assist those teachers in further developing their role. Whereas a school that has not already taken on that perspective may need explicit and intentional training to help it develop an effective view of working with preservice teachers.

The findings of this study do not simply imply the need for an increase in university–public school partnerships but, more specifically, for stakeholders in teacher education to consider the nature of the school–university partnership and the interaction between the university program and the classroom teachers. Although the commitment to university–public school partnerships has increased (Bullough Jr., 2005), these two entities remain “two largely separate worlds [that] exist side by side” (Beck & Kosnik, 2002, as quoted by Bullough, 2005, p. 144). The development of a collaborative partnership goes beyond a school allowing a university to place preservice teachers in its classrooms, with the partnership being present only in name. The partnership must function at a cooperative level (Furlong et al., 1996), with both the school and the university engaged in identifying shared goals and purposes, common definitions, and consistent expectations and role identification. A shared commitment to invest in the preparation of preservice teachers along with the professional development of new and veteran teachers must exist.

Thus, to prepare classroom teachers to effectively work with preservice teachers, university personnel must invite these mentor teachers to participate in the dialogue of what teacher preparation programs should entail (Bullough Jr., 2005). Classroom teachers contribute a critical voice concerning the nature of field experiences, and universities should be invested in helping classroom teachers understand their role as teacher educators. With mutual respect predominant, classroom teachers would then value their collaboration with universities in enhancing their own teaching practices and their students’ academic achievement. To this end, the partnership would be functioning at a level that would be characterized as engaging in “simultaneous renewal” (Goodlad, 1994, p. 123).

### *Study Limitations*

The researchers acknowledge several limitations to this study. First, the sample is geographically limited and small. Although multiple schools were included in the study, they are located in the same geographic location. In addition, the sample size is small, especially for River Front Elementary with only 9. Thus, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Data were limited to survey results, and it is possible that interviews would have provided additional data. The survey focused on the term *teacher educator*, and it is possible that some of the respondents might have been familiar with the role of mentoring and training peers and/or preservice teachers but did not connect that role with the term used in the survey. It is also possible that only those teachers who were familiar with the term responded to the survey, and those who did not understand the term did not complete the survey. However, with the exception of River Front Elementary, over 50% of teachers from each school did complete the survey. Finally, the researchers acknowledge that defining “teacher educator” does not necessarily imply certain desirable or consistent actions. Thus, it is possible that those who gave a *teacher of teachers* definition may not have been effective in the role of a teacher educator, whereas those who gave a *general educator* definition may have been very effective teacher educators.

### *Future Directions*

Three recommendations are offered that would add productively to research in this area. First, research needs to be conducted to better identify the specific responsibilities of university teacher

preparation programs in mentoring and training classroom teacher educators. Although this study points to the need for this role to increase in university–public school partnerships, it is unclear what universities need to do in order to assist classroom teachers in negotiating this added role and responsibilities. Second, it would also be valuable to conduct a similar study of how university-based teacher educators define the term *teacher educator*, as well as evaluate their perceived role as teacher educator. Third, it is recommended that research needs to examine the congruity and incongruity between the teacher educator identity of university-based and field-based teacher educators.

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# Learning to Mentor: Evidence and Observation as Tools in Learning to Teach

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to examine how an experienced teacher learned to mentor as she attended ongoing professional development and worked with first- and second-year teachers across one school year as part of a university/district pilot induction partnership program. The mentoring component emphasized mentoring that was both responsive to beginning teacher needs while also challenging them to develop a framework for their thinking and asking them to consider new perspectives about what it means to teach effectively. Throughout the year, the mentor learned the value of gathering evidence from the beginning teacher's practice to guide her continued learning, and about observation as a tool for mentor and beginning teacher learning. The findings focus on both the conceptual and practical aspects of mentoring within an induction program, including differentiation, developing a repertoire of mentoring practices, and learning in and from the practice of mentoring.*

Researchers have called for studies of induction programs that focus on both practical and conceptual issues related to how induction is done and what induction could be (Britton, Paine, Pimm, & Raizen, 2003; Wood & Stanulis, 2009). Mentoring is a common element in many induction programs to help novices navigate the transition between university and school and to support the ongoing process of learning to teach. The conceptualizations of what mentors should know and be able to do, however, is not commonly agreed on by those in the field. Consequently, preparing mentors can differ based on the induction purposes and the context in which the mentors develop their practices.

Much of what beginning teachers learn during their first year depends on the opportunities in their school context to continue to learn (Grossman & Thompson, 2004; Worthy, 2005). It is critical to develop induction support targeted toward helping beginning teachers accelerate their development in order to have an impact on student learning early in their careers.

Furthermore, the quality of interactions between beginning teachers and their colleagues can play a critical role in the success of novice teachers (Johnson & Kardos, 2004). Without any preparation, though, an assigned mentor often becomes a "buddy," someone who is available for advice and explaining school procedures, but visits to the new teacher's classroom and conversations about teaching and learning are not expected (Gordon & Maxey, 2000). In such a case, mentoring might improve retention, but we would not expect it to improve effectiveness (Stanulis & Floden, 2009).

Our alternate approach to induction is to provide mentors with substantial and targeted preparation. This "educative" mentoring places emphasis on engaging beginning teachers in joint inquiry with a mentor to help novices understand the importance of learning from practice while providing tools useful for studying teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 1998).

Induction programs designed by school districts and with school districts in collaboration with a university have been described in earlier research (Beerer, 2002; Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; McGlamery, Fluckiger, & Edick, 2002; Stanulis, Burrill, & Ames, 2007). However, examples of ways in which university-based induction leaders and district mentors work together to develop a conceptualization of mentorship while engaged in the practice of mentoring are rare. The purpose of this study was to examine how an experienced teacher learned to mentor as she attended ongoing professional development and worked with first- and second-year teachers across one school year as

part of a university–district pilot induction partnership program. This action research served to inform the continuing development of the mentoring component of this induction program.

### *Induction Program Context*

This study involved a collaborative partnership between a midwestern urban school district and Michigan State University, a Teachers for a New Era institution (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2001), to create a comprehensive induction program to support beginning teachers. As the induction director, one of us (Stanulis) led the design and implementation of the professional development, as well as the research in the induction program. One of us (Ames), an experienced teacher and doctoral student, studied Debbie and the beginning teachers in the field across 2 years. During this time, Ames became a coach to Debbie, providing her feedback and support in the development of her practice.

This study was situated within the mentoring component of the program. University induction leaders and the district’s human resource managers recruited and interviewed current classroom teachers for mentor positions. Each mentor was released from teaching one day each week to work with 3 beginning teachers in the novices’ classrooms. Mentor-novice matches were based on teaching responsibilities related to content and/or level—secondary science, English, and math; special education; and elementary education. Mentors participated in mentor study groups for 6 hours each month along with 6 full days of professional development during the school year. Preparation of mentors focused on how to help novices enhance student achievement through development of effective instructional practices, including developing worthwhile content, strong classroom management and ways to motivate, and scaffolding student learning (Athanases & Achinstein, 2003; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Stanulis & Floden, 2008). Key readings included Stanulis (1994), Feiman-Nemser (2001a), Helman (2006), and Stein, Smith, Henningsen, and Silver (2000). The beginning teachers also attended a monthly beginning teacher study group led by their common mentor.

**Table 1**  
*Focus of Mentor Study Groups: Vision of Effective Teaching<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Worthwhile Content**

- Engaging students in challenging content, where students learn to support ideas, make connections, and elaborate understandings
- Engaging students in rigorous tasks that provide for analysis and interpretation of text materials
- Planning deliberate instructional *balance* (direct instruction and group/individual application time), instructional *density* (strong authentic tasks with high expectations; time to discuss and process), and *scaffolding*
- Planning a structure for setting up and maintaining cognitively challenging learning tasks/experiences
- Providing opportunities for students to talk, collaborate, and explore content by engaging students in active reasoning to support claims
- Knowing the content beyond the current lesson
- Understanding that the quality of the time students spend engaged in their work depends on the quality of the tasks they are expected to accomplish

(table continues)

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<sup>1</sup> Table 1 is influenced by the work of Ames & Manning, 2002; Ball, 2000; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Stein, M. K., Smith, M. S., Henningsen, M. A., & Silver, E., 2000; and Tomlinson, 2003.

Table 1 (continued)

**Excellent Classroom Management that Engages Students**

- Creating thoughtfully planned routines during the day, including morning meetings, transitions, routines for group and independent work
- Creating environments that stimulate curiosity; students are absorbed in the work
- Planning for time that is well managed and pacing that is effective for the students' learning. Closure is included in lessons, and much time for interaction, questioning, and discussion is planned.
- Paying deliberate attention to the verbal and nonverbal classroom environment and to developing relationships with and among students
- Managing many different kinds of tasks and activities during the day (small group, whole group, one-to-one work with students, discussions, and seat and project work)

**Strong Motivation and Scaffolding of Student Learning**

- Developing an environment of high expectations where students move from dependence to independence in task completion
- Motivating students to spend the time needed to learn complex ideas and solve problems they find interesting
- Anticipating frustrations, segmenting tasks, providing hints and other mechanisms for students to move from guidance to independence
- Beginning lessons with a "launch" that invites students into a topic and arouses curiosity

*Conceptualizing Mentoring*

Our goal in developing the mentoring component of the induction program was to develop mentoring that was both responsive to beginning teacher needs while also challenging them to develop a framework for their thinking and asking them to consider new perspectives about what it means to teach effectively (Stanulis et al., 2007). Our goal was to support experienced teachers in constructing mentoring practices that were educative. Educative mentoring involves a shared vision of good teaching that guides the work of the mentor, an image of how beginning teachers learn to teach, a repertoire of mentoring strategies and skills, and adopting a stance of a learner (Feiman-Nemser, 1998).

*Learning to Mentor in and From the Practical Work of Mentoring*

Learning to mentor is not necessarily a natural extension for veteran educators who are accustomed to teaching children, not adults (Orland, 2001). Guiding the learning of colleagues involves strategies related to adult learning and interpersonal skills, situated within a variety of political, cultural, and historical contexts. Plus, to engage in mentoring aimed at improvement of teaching practice, mentors need to learn ways to work inside beginning teachers' classrooms to observe and provide subject-specific feedback, analyze student work, coplan engaging tasks, assist a novice in identifying areas for growth, probe to clarify ideas, model problem solving, help novices connect practice to student achievement, and explore questions rather than provide answers (Stanulis, 2006). These sorts of activities provide ways to use teaching practice as a site for inquiry in support of teacher learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999) where teachers can learn in and from their teaching practice in collaboration with others.

**Methods***Purpose of Study*

This study examined, together with a mentor, a research associate, and the induction program leader, ways in which a mentor learns in and from the practical work of mentoring as she works with

first- and second-year teachers across an entire school year as part of a university–district pilot induction partnership program. The questions we examined included:

1. How does an experienced teacher develop her conceptualization of mentoring within the frameworks advocated by this induction program?
2. How does the mentor enact those ideas in her mentoring to create opportunities for the beginning teachers to learn about their teaching practice?

### *Participants*

The mentor, Debbie (pseudonym), has taught elementary grades (2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and gifted) for 13 years in the district. Debbie had experience leading professional development for her colleagues and supervising preservice teachers in her classroom, but she had not received much training for these roles.

Nicole and Carl (pseudonyms) were two of Debbie’s assigned mentees. Nicole was beginning her second year of teaching. Due to fluctuating student numbers, she was displaced to a first-grade position in a Reading First school. Reading First is a grant program where the U. S. government distributes money to states, on a competitive basis, for reading assessments, materials, and professional development to help schools effectively teach reading to at-risk students. Carl was entering his first year of teaching. He was a second-grade teacher in a K–3 school that served a special population of students who had been recommended for retention.

### *Action Research*

This study was a collaborative project between the university induction leader, research associate, and the elementary education mentor in the university–school induction program. We engaged in action research as inquiry where all participants communicate and collaborate to examine issues in context (Greenwood & Levin, 2000). Such an approach involves an ongoing, dynamic, and complex process of “observation, reflection, and action” (Stringer, 1996, p. 17) in which researchers and participants discuss issues that arise from the data and propose possible actions. In our study, this meant engaging in ongoing, collaborative conversations involving the researchers and the mentor. These conversations served as a time for the mentor to debrief, problem solve, and plan for her mentoring while giving the researchers an inside look at the learning involved.

### *Data Collection*

Throughout the year, we collected data in different ways to gain multiple perspectives on how the mentor conceptualized and enacted her mentoring with the beginning teachers. First, we conducted observations in several settings. The researchers attended biweekly mentor study groups (6 hours each month); observed one mentoring cycle (preobservation conference, observation of lesson, postobservation conference) with each of the beginning teachers; and observed the beginning teachers’ classroom instruction three times during the year. For each observation, we took field notes, recorded dialogue, and obtained artifacts (e.g., handouts, lesson plans, mentor–beginning teacher observation logs). These observations provided common experiences involving the mentor’s learning and her work with the beginning teachers for the researchers and mentor to use in their work together.

We also gathered data through interviews with the mentor, which were audiotaped and transcribed. As the year progressed, these interviews turned into sharing and planning sessions that helped to shape the mentor’s practical work. Finally, the mentor recorded her reflections in a journal she shared with the researchers at our meetings. These reflections provided us access to the mentor’s thinking as she worked through her first year as a mentor.

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### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was an iterative process in that our study was influenced by the data collected and the findings that emerged from the mentor's work with the beginning teachers, which often led us to a shift in focus or direction (Merriam, 1998). On many occasions, the mentor had a chance to dialogue with us, examine her conversations with the beginning teachers, and uncover recurring themes about her learning through the construction of data analyses. Therefore, these opportunities to reflect influenced the development and enactment of the practical work of mentoring.

To examine how the mentor learned throughout the year, we reviewed the mentoring observation and interview data during the study and after, summarizing our developing interpretations with analytic memos. We then reread the multiple sources of data, first making notes and forming initial codes (Creswell, 1998). We labeled tentative themes and then reread the data to look for discrepancies between the data and our findings. We then returned to the data again to construct individual cases that illustrated the way the mentor's conceptualization of mentoring, her work with individual beginning teachers, and her participation in ongoing mentor professional development influenced her learning.

### **Findings**

This project has provided an insider's look into the complexities of learning to mentor that focuses on both the conceptual and practical aspects of mentoring within an induction program. In the sections that follow, we provide cases that illustrate the mentor's learning as she worked throughout the year with two beginning teachers.

#### *The Value of Evidence*

In October, Debbie began her work with Nicole, using part of her release day for meetings during lunch or planning time. Debbie had learned through the university-led study groups about the importance of building professional relationships with novices that would support her in mentoring that involved observation and feedback, coplanning, and analysis of student work. During this time, Debbie was thinking about how to focus her work with Nicole in a way that could move her practice forward. In this initial period of her mentoring, she was looking for cues from the beginning teacher and the mentor study groups to guide what she decided to work on with Nicole.

During the first weeks of school, Debbie noticed that Nicole's self-esteem was floundering due, in part, to pressures exerted upon her to follow a scripted program in the Reading First context. Nicole had administrators, literacy coaches, and colleagues sending different messages about what requirements to follow while also expecting this novice to produce immediate increases in student test scores. The way the Reading First curriculum was being implemented in a prescriptive manner was sidetracking the development of this teacher's reading instruction and stifling her developing identity as a teacher. Debbie knew that she needed to step in to help Nicole develop her own voice as a teacher.

Nicole expressed frustration as she learned about the guidelines structuring her literacy instruction:

I just found out today that... (I) have to do a 2-hour literacy block, and I was doing my writing during that time, and they told me today that writing does not count; it has to be reading only. So now I have to go and figure out how I'm going to fit that in, and, so, it's been challenging.

Nicole had different staff in her school—administrators, literacy coaches, and colleagues—telling her what requirements to follow and demanding increases in student test scores.

As Debbie wrote in her mentoring journal:

Part of my stance in mentoring Nicole is to counteract the messages she gets from the Reading First coach, whom she finds abrasive and caustic. Nicole has a fragile self-confidence, and her reflective talk is permeated with self-doubt, so I feel I need to bolster her self-view.

The professional development in mentoring provided by the university emphasized data collection and learning to distinguish between evidence and opinion. Debbie began to integrate this approach to mentoring by gathering evidence of strengths in Nicole's literacy practice in an effort to show Nicole how her teaching impacted student engagement and learning.

To help enact this plan, Debbie drew on the language suggestions provided by the mentoring professional development she regularly attended. Sentence and question stems for paraphrasing, clarifying, suggesting, mediating, and offering nonjudgmental responses provided Debbie with a framework to guide her language choices in the moment during feedback conversations with Nicole. These conversation starters included ways to help mentors restate, clarify, analyze, or make suggestions to beginning teachers in their conversations. For example, Debbie could restate by saying, "What I hear you saying is ..." or "As I listen, you seem to be saying...." Debbie could get more information from a novice by clarifying through questions such as, "Can you give me an example to help me understand?" or "What similar concepts have already been explored with this class?" Debbie could help the novice analyze possibilities by asking, "In what ways is this task well suited to your students? How do you know?" or "What are the important ideas/processes involved in this problem?" Debbie could make a suggestion to the novice by saying, "We could coplan together so I can help you with...," or "You might want to consider...."

At the same time, Debbie provided Nicole with language options for engaging in conversations with those trying to influence her instruction. For example, at a December preobservation conference, Nicole shared with Debbie that a colleague had given her a management book. This was an unsolicited resource that made Nicole doubt her teaching abilities:

Nicole: I don't know if they are thinking my management is bad.

Debbie: Ask her what she means.

Nicole: I feel like I'm not doing anything right.

Debbie: You are doing things well, and we need to build on your successes.

In this conversation, Debbie challenged Nicole to speak up for herself and attempted to strengthen Nicole's self-esteem by mentioning her teaching successes. Debbie wanted Nicole to construct an identity as teacher, one that allowed her to see herself as a professional with valuable knowledge and experience.

Evidence of the impact of Debbie's work with Nicole surfaced in February when Nicole shared what happened when someone from the state Reading First office came in to show Nicole how to implement small-group instruction:

Nicole: We were talking about writing, and she said, "She can pull these groups [for small-group instruction] and all these people can pull groups." And I said, "Well, that's not realistic. When I'm in there all by myself I want to see what it looks like for me as myself." And she said, "Well, so what do you want to see?" I said, "Well, I want to see it, but I want to see it in a realistic setting."

Within this episode, Nicole demonstrated that she had begun to assume the stance Debbie had suggested throughout the year: When someone is doing something that you do not think is right, speak up and ask questions. After this meeting, Debbie wrote in her journal: "Perhaps she [Nicole] has turned a corner in confidence." For not only was Nicole asserting herself in conversations with Reading First administrators, Debbie also found that Nicole's postobservation reflections contained more positive self-talk.

As emphasized in the mentor professional development, part of Debbie's work as mentor involved helping Nicole articulate her own vision of good teaching that included the Reading First curriculum blended with Nicole's own beliefs about and prior knowledge and experiences with effective literacy instruction. Explicit in mentor preparation was the notion that teachers needed a vision of good

teaching that they are mentoring toward, and that the vision needed to be articulated and owned by the beginning teacher. In February, Debbie remarked how their conversations focused on Nicole's emerging strategies of literacy:

Things went well with Nicole's observation and postconference. She...was very excited about forming and implementing her groups. She was concerned about a child who lagged way behind in the small group.... We talked about what kids could do who were done and had reread the text more than once.

By the end of the year, Nicole made a critical shift in defining the development of her literacy instruction. She told Debbie that the following school year she would like to work on how to meet Reading First guidelines but also make the curriculum more her own. In this way, Debbie helped Nicole learn how to "finesse" or make sense of the connections and differences between one's own beliefs and the demands of the teaching context (Pardo, 2006).

More importantly, Debbie had gone beyond acting as a buddy, who might only give Nicole a pat on the back when times were tough. The in-the-classroom time, year-long relationship, and evidence collected allowed Debbie to support Nicole in defining her own vision of teaching. When colleagues threatened her professional identity, Debbie kept Nicole focused on how she was succeeding with her students. Without this targeted support based on collecting specific evidence situated in Nicole's own practice, Nicole may have continued to feel that her voice was not valued, to further doubt her teaching abilities, and to follow through with thoughts of leaving the profession as many new teachers do (Ingersoll, 2004). But through this process, Debbie learned that she, too, needed some mentoring as she took on the new role of mentor.

#### *Observation as a Tool for Mentor and Beginning Teacher Learning*

Debbie also spent time each week in Carl's classroom, talking with him and observing him during his first year of teaching. Carl's responses were different from Nicole's: He only asked questions when prompted and replied, "Yep, I already do that" to any ideas Debbie suggested. This concerned Debbie. In her journal, she wrote: "The lessons I observe with Carl are all about prescribing the learning, following an algorithm or fitting responses into a pattern." Debbie's vision of good teaching included students constructing meaning in addition to learning rules. She wanted to help Carl reconsider his assumptions about teaching and learning, but she wasn't ready to be direct. As she said during a December mentor study group, "I'm learning this way of talking. We tend to be superficial." So, at that time, Debbie felt she did not have the words she needed for her work with Carl.

Engaging in collegial conversations that involve goal setting, idea generation, open sharing, and active listening is not a norm in the teaching profession, in part due to the isolating nature of individual classrooms in most schools (Lortie, 1975). As Debbie wrote in her journal after a discussion of these issues in the mentor study group, "There is very little in our culture that models it. The language, the parameters, the interactions, they are all new and different." Coming out of the university, the novices are accustomed to the didactic dynamics of being instructed.

Debbie recognized that it was not easy to discuss personal, long-held beliefs. Her relationship with Carl was still quite new and she was hesitant to confront him about his instruction. As Debbie told us in an interview:

I haven't been that pointed with him. I feel like he might back off easy if I pushed him too hard, and that he would back off and say, "I'm good, back off, don't talk to me, leave me alone." So, I am very cautious with the words I say to him.

Therefore, in February, 6 months into their work together, Debbie purposefully made choices about how to continue to build trust with Carl, while at the same time finding ways to help him think about his instruction and his students' learning in new ways.

In the next few weeks, things began to change for Debbie. At the ongoing mentor study group meetings, the induction leaders and mentors read and discussed an article about an exemplary mentor (Feiman-Nemser, 2001b). In her own reading of the article and the ensuing discussion, Debbie connected to the description of the mentor being cautious at first about starting difficult conversations about practice. She realized that she had been timid about Carl's reaction to being pushed, and her mentoring could evolve into something stronger and more confident, just like the mentor in the article. She understood this as being given permission to be where she was in her mentoring and to grow, change, and try to be more accountable in promoting talk around improving practice.

In addition, Debbie was deeply frustrated by Carl's satisfaction with the status quo. She realized that the indirect and subtle mentoring she had been providing was not helping him to improve his teaching practice. She began to draw a parallel between her own beliefs about teaching and her mentoring. Since Carl did not appear to be learning anything from her mentoring, she knew she needed to rethink her approach in order to reach him, just as she did with students who are not learning. Debbie felt Carl had been deflecting her questions and suggestions, and she wanted to gain more skill in leading conversations with Carl that included direct feedback about ways in which his observed practice was not matching effective teaching practices.

To pursue this goal, Debbie drew another parallel, this time between herself and her beginning teachers. The observation and feedback she provided for the beginning teachers validated what they did in the classroom while challenging them to do more. Debbie said, "I need someone to watch what I do, to collect evidence, and see I'm doing okay." She wanted someone to coach her in developing mentoring skills. With this request, the induction leaders assigned themselves to the mentors as coaches who would observe and provide feedback on their mentoring.

This support made a difference for Debbie; she had someone to talk with about her developing ideas about her work as a mentor. Her coach provided support through evidence of mentoring strengths and discussions about possible strategies to use. This was particularly helpful for Debbie's work with Carl. She was able to gain confidence in her assessment abilities when her coach agreed with her perceptions of Carl's instructional difficulties. This helped her to move ahead with her plans of challenging him to think more about ways to change his instruction to focus on student understanding.

Debbie decided to point out to Carl what she saw in her observations. She told him, "You are teaching them the process, not the thinking. What part of your lesson involves teaching for conceptual understanding so they understand why they are doing those things?" At this point, Debbie felt that Carl did not have "a good answer for me," but she still perceived a breakthrough with him because she had confronted him and he had not backed away.

As the year progressed, it seemed that no matter how Debbie attempted to have more substantial conversations with Carl about the complexities of teaching, their talk stayed within cliché remarks about district concerns or anecdotal stories about the students. In many ways, Debbie felt defeated. So, she took a different tactic during their final classroom conversation in May. She told him, "I am not here as your mentor today. I just want to talk. Debbie to Carl. Friend to friend." First, she explained how she appreciated his strengths as a teacher: effective classroom management and the great relationships he developed with his students. Then Debbie told Carl that he needed to do more for his students. She said, "There is so much to know and do that you can't possibly know it all, but you don't let me help you." She had wanted to see him teach reading, but he said he didn't teach reading, that the students just practiced reading. She asked him how he knew what the students were practicing, what comprehension strategies they used if he did not meet with them individually or in guided reading groups.

At this point, Carl's students arrived at the classroom door, back from lunch, and as Debbie said goodbye, she left him with an action plan to complete as an end-of-the-year reflection and a beginning

to their second year of work together. When they met a week later for dinner, Debbie was astounded to find that Carl's action plan matched the one she had created for him. He was willing to admit he needed to learn more about how to teach reading. She could hardly believe it. Being extremely direct had been the strategy that finally worked in getting her message to him.

**Table 2**  
*Conceptualization of Debbie's Mentoring*

<b>Tools and Ideas Learned During MSU Mentor Preparation</b>	<b>Tools and Ideas Applied to Practice of Mentoring</b>
Learning to observe by looking for evidence	Observing for evidence and data collection
Learning to hold critical conversation using conversation sentence starters	Holding conversations with beginning teachers, asking probing questions, using data gathered during observations
Learning about mentoring as a practice to be studied and learned	Applying mentoring "stances" such as coplanner, cothinker, finding an opening, and pinpointing problems
Learning to confront difficult situations in order to move a beginning teacher's practice forward	Holding conversations with a beginning teacher who avoided conversations about literacy practice
Learning to help beginning teachers find their own unique voice and principled reasons for teaching decisions	Holding conversations about what is worthwhile and working in a young teacher's practice
	Designing Debbie's own vision of "differentiated" mentoring based on the beginning teacher's specific context of teaching and vision of teaching
Learning about research-based image of a vision of effective teaching	Talking with novices about their vision of good teaching and how to move toward realizing this vision in their practice
Learning about her own practice as mentor	Having a MSU coach observe Debbie as she mentored, collecting evidence and providing feedback about her practice

### **Discussion and Implications**

Together, as we studied the data, we realized ways in which Debbie was blending her ideas about teaching and learning with the ideas presented in her mentor professional development. Debbie took very seriously the questions and concerns that each beginning teacher had as the starting point for figuring out ways to approach her work. A hallmark of Debbie's work was differentiation, which meant she needed to bring a flexible repertoire of mentoring strategies to her work with each novice. With Nicole, Debbie wanted her to see her teaching strengths in order to build instructional practices consonant with both the Reading First mandates and her prior knowledge and experiences. With Carl, Debbie wanted him to recognize that learning to teach is an ongoing process while also nudging him toward a broader view of good teaching. Debbie also took her own learning as a mentor seriously. She wanted help in developing that repertoire of mentoring strategies and enacting those strategies in her work with the novices.

In both the mentoring of the beginning teachers and the mentor, observation and evidence were important elements in supporting the development of teaching practice and the work of mentoring. For

Debbie, this meant that she was able to bring together her prior beliefs, knowledge, and experiences; the ideas she learned through her mentor professional development; and the interactions she had with the beginning teachers to enact her work as mentor. In addition, the mentoring Debbie received allowed her to take on different roles as she and the coach pursued different ways to proceed with each beginning teacher. Talking about the beginning teachers' needs and how to help them gave Debbie a chance to do more than "rehearse" in her head. She had someone to dialogue with, someone who could voice support and alternative courses of action. These collaborative conversations also extended into the mentor study groups where professional readings and individual cases were discussed and mentoring strategies developed.

Since mentoring conversations (one-on-one or in a study group) can help facilitate mentor learning opportunities, we agree that mentors need their own time to "learn about, discuss, try out, and reflect upon how these conversations are put into practice" (Helman, 2006, p. 80). Mentoring as a learned, professional practice involves the study of ways in which teachers learn, tools for helping engage one another in continued learning to teach, and reflective analysis of what is being learned. This experience has implications for helping induction providers take seriously the learning needs of teachers who mentor as well as beginning teachers as learners.

As we begin analysis of data from this work, we see areas where we need to continue strengthening both as professional development providers and as researchers. This study focused on one mentor teacher's development across the school year. Through this study, we realize there is much we have to learn about the specific contexts in which beginning teachers are placed as they continue their learning about teaching. Future research needs to document beginning teacher learning within their context, as well as student learning, in order to inform educators about the effects of this intervention on teacher and student learning. Within our professional development, we need to make use of what we have learned from studying mentors such as Debbie, and we need to use this rich data to construct cases of mentor teacher learning. In this way, we can inform the development of more mentors. Such mentoring cases, like Debbie's experiences with Ca il, could become part of caæ-based instruction that allows mentors to examine difficult situations and experiment with possible strategies to try in their work with beginning teachers.

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