

Student teacher perceptions regarding career readiness and the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program

Percepções dos estudantes sobre a prontidão para a carreira e a eficácia de um programa de formação de professores

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Abstract

This study investigated student teachers perceptions regarding career readiness and the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program at Lynn University. In 2011, research conducted by McCulloch, Burris, and Ulmer emphasized that there are more than 1,400 colleges and universities in the United States preparing students to enter the teaching profession. However, Teacher preparation programs in the United States continue to graduate many individuals who do not go into a teaching career long-term. This study was designed to provide insight into whether or not student teacher perceptions might be used as a different perspective in terms of teacher preparation program evaluation. The investigation was conducted through the collection of data from a demographic survey and the administration of semi-structured interviews with the research participants. The data were organized through the categories of analysis proposed by the researcher: Category A: Effective classroom management skills; Category B: Programs and Endorsements; Category C: Instructor's recommendations; Category D: Program requirements and features; Category E: Tests preparation – State's legal requirements and further combinations among them. The results of the study demonstrated that students recommend the inclusion of "hands on activities" as an alternative devoted to enhance the teacher preparation program. The findings of this study may be useful to contribute to the development of teacher preparation programs, to educational research literature, and also in terms of planning and implementing effective professional development for teachers.

Keywords: Teacher preparation. Career readiness. Newly graduated teachers. Program evaluation.

Resumo

Este estudo investigou as percepções de estudantes sobre o conceito de prontidão para a carreira (career readiness) e a eficácia de um programa de formação de professores na Lynn University. Em 2011, uma pesquisa realizada por McCulloch, Burris, e Ulmer enfatizou que existem mais de 1.400 faculdades e universidades nos Estados Unidos, as quais preparam os alunos para a profissão docente. No entanto, os programas de formação de professores nos Estados Unidos continuam a formar muitas pessoas que não permanecem na carreira docente em longo prazo. Este estudo foi desenvolvido com o objetivo de atestar se as percepções de estudantes podem ser utilizadas como uma perspectiva diferente em termos de avaliação de programas de formação de professores. A investigação foi conduzida através da coleta de dados de uma pesquisa demográfica e a administração de entrevistas semi-estruturadas com os participantes da pesquisa. Os dados foram organizados através

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das seguintes categorias de análise proposta pelo pesquisador: Categoria A: habilidades eficazes de gestão de sala de aula; Categoria B: Programas e endossos; Categoria C: recomendações do instrutor; Categoria D: requisitos do Programa e recursos; Categoria E: Preparação para testes - requisitos legais do Estado e de outros tipos de combinações entre eles. Os resultados do estudo demonstraram que os estudantes recomendam a inclusão de “atividades de mão na massa” como uma alternativa dedicada a melhorar aquele programa de formação de professores. Os resultados deste estudo podem ser úteis para contribuir para o desenvolvimento de programas de formação de professores, para a literatura de pesquisa educacional, e também em termos de planejamento e implementação de desenvolvimento profissional eficaz para os professores.

Palavras-chave: Formação de professores. Prontidão para a carreira. Percepção de professores recém-formados. Avaliação de programas.

Introduction

In 2011, research conducted by McCulloch, Burris, and Ulmer emphasized that there are more than 1,400 colleges and universities (not including online programs) in the United States preparing students to enter the teaching profession. Teacher preparation programs in the United States continue to graduate many individuals who do not go into a teaching career long-term. Approximately 30 percent to 50 percent of new teachers end up leaving their jobs within five years (LEVINE, 2006). There are many students who do not feel they are prepared by teacher preparation programs to follow this career path (NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, 2010). Despite the substantial amount of research that has been conducted in the field of teacher preparation, minimal research was found to investigate student teacher perceptions towards career readiness as an aspect of program evaluation (DARLING-HAMMOND; LIEBERMAN, 2012; HARRIS; SASS, 2007; WALSH; JACOBS, 2007). This study was designed to provide insight into whether or not student teacher perceptions might be used as a different perspective on teacher preparation program evaluation. The findings of this phenomenological study will be useful to contribute to the development of teacher preparation programs, to educational research literature, and also in terms of planning and implementing effective professional development for teachers.

Review of literature

The enrollment and active participation of students in a teacher preparation program relies on several factors. One such factor is the perception of the student regarding their own preparation program (ADELMAN, 2006; ASTIN, 1993; BAUM; MA, 2007; WILSON, 2012). Consequently, student perception is vital to achieve the necessary mindset to develop those competences, and to achieve the sense of career readiness, which will define how the students will conduct themselves in and at the end of a teacher preparation program (ADELMAN, 2010; WILSON; FLODEN; FERRINI-MUNDY, 2001). In turn, the use of students' perceptions in terms of improving development, and teacher preparation programs' evaluation is often focused on teacher/instructor effectiveness, and online programs effectiveness (HUSS; EASTEP, 2013; JURCZYK, BENSON; SAVERY, 2004; ONWUEGBUZIE; WITCHER; COLLINS; FILER; WIEDMAIER; MOORE, 2007).

Although the aforementioned studies have addressed student perceptions toward career readiness in higher education settings through different approaches, none of them were tailored to approach student perceptions towards career readiness at the end of a teacher preparation program. That confirms the gap which this study aims to overcome - build awareness regarding the use of student perceptions in educational research, specifically in teacher preparation programs. Furthermore, considering the importance of perception regarding the subject's life, the use of this element in research constitutes an excellent alternative to comprehend how students understand, and to evaluate a teacher preparation program.

In considering research related to teacher preparation programs, and career readiness, theories related to student perceptions constitutes a viable measure to address a research proposal. It was evident from the research and literature review that student perceptions plays a pivotal role regarding academic performance outcomes, behaviors, and the way the subject perceives his preparation at a teacher preparation program and the sense of career readiness, which are very important elements in terms of development of the future professional.

The approach of career readiness demonstrates the relevance of this concept in a teacher preparation program context (CONLEY, 2010). Furthermore, the concepts of student perceptions (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002; OKPALA; ELLIS, 2005) provide theoretical framework to contribute to the understanding of the topic. However, it can be noted also that the literature is lacking in studies investigating student perceptions towards career readiness in teacher preparation programs. Once these factors are identified, recommendations can be made to improve teacher preparation programs through the analysis of student perceptions.

Methodology

The qualitative research design of this phenomenological study was chosen in order to gain a better understanding regarding perceptions that student teachers have regarding career readiness and the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program (Bachelors degree: Elementary Education – Grades K6) at Lynn University. This program is designed to prepare students to teach in grades kindergarten through 6th grade. The major areas in this program include, but are not limited to topics in child development, literacy and classroom management. Therefore, this study used demographic survey and semi-structured interviews, which were administered in order to accomplish these determinations.

This phenomenological study was conducted at a teacher preparation program at Lynn University, a small private university located in South Florida. The targeted population in this phenomenological study was students, males and females (age range between 18-35 years) enrolled in the last year of the teacher preparation program. The researcher worked with 8 students in this study (there was only eight students at that cohort at the end of the aforementioned program). Moreover, the researcher sent a formal invitation to all students at the end of the specific program at the beginning of the study. The students received a copy of the IRB Approval, handout and consent forms, which were outlined the specific purposes and expectations of the study. The researcher asked them to read and sign the consent form and they received a copy of the form for their records. Also, they were encouraged to keep all conversations confidential.

The students who agreed to participate in the study filled out the demographic survey and participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The choice of students at the end of a teacher preparation program is due to the fact that, at the end of the program, these students already have a better perspective towards the program than students at the beginning of this program.

The criteria to be included in the study were: be enrolled in the 4th year of the selected teacher preparation program at Lynn University and agree and sign the terms of the research. The criteria to be excluded of this study were: express disagreement with the terms of the research and refuse to participate. The research participants in this investigation were chosen by using criterion sampling (FRAENKEL; WALLEN; HYUN, 2012). Criterion driven selections involve meeting predetermined criteria prior to being considered for the study (CRESWELL, 2009). The research questions were developed to capture the perceptions of individuals involved in the study, regardless of age, color, sex or religion. Additionally, the procedures used in this phenomenological study follow those suggested by Patton (2002).

The collection of data in this study was thorough. The demographic survey used in this study was sent to the eight participants through email. They were invited to respond to a few questions in that demographic survey, related to the following features: Sex, country of origin, formal degrees earned, current program, why did you choose this program. All students answered those questions and returned to the researcher through email account.

The interview questions of the semi-structured interview instrument were organized in such a way to capture the information required to successfully address the research questions. The interview questions 3, 5 and 7 pertain to research question 1: What are student teacher perceptions regarding their own readiness to enter the teacher profession at the end of a teacher preparation program at Lynn University? On the other hand, the interview questions 1,2 4 and 6 were related to the second research question: What are student teacher perceptions regarding the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program at Lynn University? Lastly, the interview questions 8 and 9 were related to the third research question: What is the comparison between student teacher perceptions regarding career readiness and effectiveness of a teacher preparation program at Lynn University? Moreover, the interview questions are:

1. How would you describe an effective teacher preparation program?
2. What are your perceptions towards the effectiveness of the teacher preparation program that you have participated in at this university?
3. Tell me about something that you learned from your participation at this teacher preparation program. Do you think it will make a difference in your future teaching career? Explain your response.
4. What advantages and disadvantages have you experienced from your participation in the teacher preparation program at this university?
5. Of all the skills or strategies used in the program, which three do you think are the most important in order to prepare students for the teaching career?
6. What are some aspects of the teacher preparation program you felt were surprising to you at the end of this program?
7. How beneficial was the practicum experience in preparing you for the classroom?

8. What do you think could be incorporated into the program to enhance the teacher preparation program at this university?
9. Do you feel yourself prepared to meet the State requirements and legal examinations, in order to achieve the professional standards of teaching profession? If yes, explain your point of view.

The data of this study were organized into categories and themes that captured the general consistencies that student teachers expressed throughout the study, and then they were analyzed and described through triangulation of data (FRAENKEL; WALLEN; HYUN, 2012; PATTON, 2002).

Data – results

Table 1: participants of the study

Participants of the study		Age
<i>Research Participant 1:</i>	R.P. 1 is an American male with B.A (Bachelor of Arts) in Anthropology. He is currently enrolled in the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University. He owned a small business in Maryland 6 years ago, where he used to host children’s birthday parties, a sort of technological adventure filled with the latest technology. After working with children and their parents for 4 years, he was interested with the aspect of building solid relationships with both the parents and children. When Participant 1 had to sell his business due to financial issues, he decided to look for guidance. Participant 1 enjoyed spending time working in an educational career, which made him feel that was a calling after his business was closed.	35
<i>Research Participant 2:</i>	R.P. 2 is a female from the Bahamas, with no former professional experience in teaching. Participant 2 declared herself as somebody that always wanted to teach. She affirmed that Lynn University has the most appealing Education program in the area (Broward/Dade/Palm Beach County) and that motivated her enroll in the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University.	22
<i>Research Participant 3:</i>	R.P. 3 is an American female, with no former professional experience in teaching. She defines herself as a person who is extremely passionate about helping children learn and grow as a person. Participant 3 also considers being a teacher a personal dream and she states always wanted to follow the teaching career.	24
<i>Research Participant 4:</i>	R.P. 4 is an American female who has earned an associate’s degree in Science prior to enrolling the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University. Participant 4 chose this program due to several reasons, such as: it is offered in a small setting; this institution offers all of the degrees in which she was interested, from bachelor’s through doctorate degree, which may allow her to avoid transferring to a different institution in the future.	24
<i>Research Participant 5:</i>	R.P. 5 is an American female, with no former professional experience in teaching. Participant 5 declares she has a passion for education. She attributes her participation at the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University to the fact that Lynn University did not offer a Social Work program, so she decided to try the teaching program. Nevertheless, she fell in love with the preparation program.	22

<i>Research Participant 6:</i>	R.P. 6 is an American female who has earned a bachelor's degree in Science prior to enrolling in the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University. Participant 6 attributes her enrollment in this program to her interest in educating and her commitment to ensure to them a safe place to learn (school).	27
<i>Research Participant 7:</i>	R.P. 7 is an American female, with no former professional experience in teaching. Participant 7 earned a high school diploma prior to enrolling in the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University. Participant 7 affirmed that she always wanted to be a teacher. In addition, she emphasized the small class sizes at Lynn University as one of the most important factors in her decision to enroll in the teacher preparation program at Lynn University.	23
<i>Research Participant 8:</i>	R.P. 8 is an American female, with no former professional experience in teaching. Participant 8 decided to enroll in the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University due to her ideals. She claims that education is a privilege that should not be exclusive for those who can afford it. Participant 8 wants to devote herself to deliver education to those who truly need it for a promising future.	25

Data collected through the demographic investigation in this study demonstrate students are mostly born in the United States. Among them, only one is an international student. However, all these students belong to different cultural contexts: they are a very heterogeneous group. In addition, data also shows that 7 of 8 students enrolled in the last year at the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University are woman. The data reaffirms what several studies have shown: women's presence in teacher preparation programs, mainly at early childhood and elementary education specialization is greater than men (DARLING-HAMMOND; LIEBERMAN, 2012; LEVINE, 2006; TATZ, 2013).

Table 2: Results for Research Question 1

Category A: Effective classroom management skills
RP1: I learned how to deal with situations which may happen, which unfit or have the background to handle with the proper intervention. This will make a huge difference in my career as every day is a totally new experience and you never know what each new day will bring when dealing with six and seven year olds. RP 8: I learned how to apply effective classroom management skills, especially for first grade students. I feel if I never participated in this course, I feel I would have a negative impact (since I might show constant sarcasm).
Category B: Programs and Endorsements
RP 2: In the college of education the professors focus heavenly in assessments and ESE/ESOL strategies because the school district has a widely diverse population of students that vary in language (Creole, Spanish, Portuguese and French) and a multitude of cultures and socio-economic status. I feel the college prepared me to interact and teach all students. RP 7: Through Lynn, I got CRISS certified which is a program that encourages student owned activities. This will help me not only be a better teacher because I have more strategies to use, but it also puts me ahead of others candidates.
Category C: Instructor recommendations
RP6: When we all come together we can't stop learning from each other. Our professors had done a great job using materials books etc that we can use later on, so we can continue learning.

Category D: Program requirements and features
RP 1: Practicum it was extremely important, you cannot just be throw into the classroom, and practicum allows you to grow as a teacher and teach as well as learn from your cooperating teacher. This was an essential aspect of the whole experience.
RP 8: I observe the teachers who are passionate and burned out. I see, we both experienced the school, same grades, different teachers and, we have the opportunity to see teachers with... passion and teacher who has lost the passion, or without a goal. They look at you, you can see how they are happy when they see you, that smile, I had a good experience at supervision.

Table 3: Results for Research Question 2

<i>Category A: Effective classroom management skills</i>
RP 8: They have prepared us by outlining effective instructional practices which are currently incorporated in today's classroom.
<i>Category C: Instructor recommendations</i>
RP 6: They can teach us all they like but until we actually get in the classroom, it is up to us to use all they taught and imply what we learned. I think that they have done a great job preparing us and touching all the areas that we may or may not need to use.
<i>Category D: Program requirements and features</i>
RP 8: An effective teacher preparation program must reveal the authentic reality of working and managing in a school/classroom. At Lynn University, the education major provides to students the chance enter elementary schools in their first year. From freshman year to sophomore year, the student participates in field observations. Within this time, students are able to witness how a state certified teacher creates the numerous activities for his/her students. Afterwards, in junior and senior year, students enter practicum and student teaching. These two years introduce the genuine life of a teacher to me, to the point, I had questioned if this career is rightfully for me.
<i>Category E: Test preparation – State requirements</i>
RP 2: The only disadvantage that I have truly experienced was the testing/certification. I find that some students have trouble testing where as others excel. I would have preferred more time to prepare for all tests.
RP 8: If I do not pass the FTCE (Florida Teacher Certification Exam) I will not obtain a B.S in Elementary Education. Imagine four years of U\$ 15.000 dollars per semester tuition amounted to one test.

Table 4: Results for Research Question 3

<i>Category C: Instructor recommendations</i>
RP 7: Yes, I have had wonderful professors who have become my mentors and wonderful cooperating educators who have taught me an immense amount.
<i>Category D: Program requirements and features</i>
RP 6: More "in class" experience and less observation hours and more` actual teaching.
RP 7: I think that more hands on hours in the classroom would be beneficial.
<i>Category E: Test preparation – State requirements</i>
RP 5: Well, I passed all of the exams but that because I studied.
RP 6: Still working on it I can meet the standards and know legal issues but then is so much more I haven't learned but I will.

Table 5: Results from combination

<p><i>Category F: combination between Category A (Effective classroom management skills) and Category B (Programs and Endorsements)</i></p>
<p>RP 2: The most three important strategies that prepare students for student teaching is classroom management, assessment strategies- because data driven instruction is very important to teacher/student success, and ESE/ESOL Strategies, simply because everyone does not learn in the same way, at the same time.</p> <p>RP 3: Having a resume building class and classes to get you more prepared for the interview process and getting you ready to teach on your own.</p>
<p><i>Category G: Combination between Category A (Effective classroom management skills), Category B (Programs and Endorsements), Category C (Instructor recommendations) and Category D (Program requirements and features);</i></p>
<p>RP 7: I feel that our teacher preparation has been highly effective in terms of comparing it to other large universities. Being a small school we have been given many new opportunities to be involved in the district and community; and our teachers are highly qualified – they have many years of experience in the field so they serve not only as professors but mentors in the field of education which in turn makes us better teachers as we are better prepared. In terms of advantages, I have been given many opportunities to get involved in the community through our program such as getting AVID and CRISS trained and participating in programs such as ASK (adults supporting kids) and FCCI (Farm workers Children Tutoring). I also feel that being at a small university allows me to form a great bond with my professors and I feel like they truly care about me. I have yet to find any disadvantages in this program.</p>
<p><i>Category H: Combination between Category A (Effective classroom management skills), Category B (Programs and Endorsements) and Category D (Program requirements and features);</i></p>
<p>RP 1: An effective teacher preparation program needs to incorporate every aspect of teaching. The program needs to stress classroom management as one of the important point as behavior and elementary students “acting out” seem to be the main issues. They need to prepare you to all the experiences which you may find yourself in. Behavior, planning, effective instruction.</p> <p>RP 4: I would describe an effective teacher preparation program as a program that not only prepares you to go into the classroom, but also prepares you to get a job in your field of study. I also believe the program should put emphasis on more hand on assignments that are used in class instead of just written assignments.</p>
<p><i>Category I: Combination between Category A (Effective classroom management skills) and Category E (Test preparation – State requirements);</i></p>
<p>RP 1: Some important things I think I am prepared for are our classroom management skills. It was a great experience and I wished it lasts longer because I think it is so valuable. Also, something that we are really prepared to teach the new common core math. I went into this thinking math is my worst subject and I would do horrible and after a year of teaching in this course, I know things that the teachers don’t know...in how to interpret the standards and teach the math the way the child needs to learn this new math.</p>
<p><i>Category J: Combination between Category B (Programs and Endorsements) and Category D (Program requirements and features);</i></p>
<p>RP 3: In class teaching time ESOL Endorsements; having guidance along the way; knowing the details of a lesson plan.</p> <p>RP 4: ESOL Endorsement; Reading Endorsement; that we have to do 75 hours in upper elementary and 75 in lower during the practicum.</p>
<p><i>Category K: Combination between Category C (Instructor recommendations), Category D (Program requirements and features) and Category E (Test preparation – State requirements);</i></p>
<p>RP 1: I feel very prepared to meet state requirements, some better preparation for the state test would be nice but it is ultimately up to you to do the work and put in the time.</p> <p>RP 3: Yes and No. I feel there could be more guidance and help through the testing process with valid studying tests questions.</p>

Summary of Results

Phenomenological studies keep their focus on the interpretation of the world, which comes through the subject's perception and, in the same way that happens in society, the interpretation of actions, ideas and concepts occurs through different points of views, different perspectives (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2002). The participants of the study have their own personal attributes. They share several characteristics among them: they are young; they face education like one of the most challenging careers and they believe they choose the best option in terms of the teacher preparation program at Lynn University – they believe they will be able to make the difference at this career.

Teacher students tend to focus on “hands on” activities as the most effective teaching strategies. They believe that kind of experience is the best strategy in terms of preparation for real world situations, devoting a large amount of their attention to those activities. Consequently, they believe that effective classroom management skills, and programs and endorsements among others courses offered at that teacher preparation program mostly effective contribute to prepare the student for a teaching career. In addition, they also attribute the enhancement of the teacher preparation program to the increase of “hands on” activities as well as the organization of an extensive chronogram devoted to preparation for exams.

Results

The results of this study are presented in two different parts. Part one refers to an overview of the participants of the study. Part two focuses exclusively on the research questions guiding this phenomenological study, which were presented in three different sections: the first section provides a detailed description of the collected data related to the first research question of the study; the second section presents a detailed description of the data related to the second research question of the study; lastly, the third section presents a detailed description of data related to the third research question of the study. This detailed descriptive narrative is intended to report the perceptions of the participants as they relate to career readiness and the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program, in order to better comprehend the phenomenon under investigation.

The demographic survey (part one) indicated that student teachers in this specific class are quite young, which indicates that they will be active professional teachers at an early age upon completion of their teacher preparation program. According to Darling-Hammond & Bransford, (2005), the age of the teacher is one of the main characteristics of his/her performance and encompasses some issues possibly related to acceptance of new educational concepts, issues related to experience and to professional maturity, among others.

Data collected through the demographic investigation in this study demonstrate students are mostly born in the United States. Among them, only one is an international student. However, all these students belong to different cultural contexts: they are a very heterogeneous group. In addition, data also shows that 7 of 8 students enrolled in the last year at the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University are woman. The data reaffirms what several studies have shown: women's presence in teacher preparation programs,

mainly at early childhood and elementary education specialization is greater than men (DARLING-HAMMOND; LIEBERMAN, 2012; LEVINE, 2006; TATZ, 2013).

The students demonstrated they were satisfied with the experience they had at that teacher preparation program at Lynn University, although they would recommend increasing “hands on” activities during the program, in order to get in touch with real world problems. They also recommend more preparation for professional exams throughout the program, not only at the end of that program, when they must to split their attention with practicum and internships.

The themes which emerged through the investigation demonstrated that research participants indicated they believe that effective classroom management skills exerted a very important role in terms of their preparation for future careers in the same way as supplemental programs such as CRISS (Project CRISS - Creating Independence through Student-owned Strategies), AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) and ESOL/Reading program/endorsements. In addition, they believe that an effective teacher preparation program depends on combinations of effective classroom management skills, programs and endorsements, instructor recommendations, program requirements and features, and test preparation for State requirements.

Conclusions

Overview

The results of this study revealed that there are five aspects of teacher preparation which exert influence on student perceptions both regarding their own readiness to enter the teaching career and the effectiveness of teacher preparation program. These aspects include: effective classroom management skills, programs and endorsements, program requirements and features, and test preparation for State/professional exams.

The research participants consider that increase courses and content devoted to approach skills and techniques that teachers should use to promote organization in the classroom are both useful to prepare student teachers to enter the teaching career as to contribute to the enhancement of the effectiveness of the teacher preparation programs. Concerning programs and endorsements, the participants considered that specific courses and endorsements offered at the program might be useful in terms of offering extra tools, making students more appealing in the job market and the program more attractive to potential new students. In turn, instructor recommendations perform an important role in the whole process: it represents the human element, the different styles and models they had access throughout the program. The program requirements and features, such as the practicum activities, the small class sizes and tutoring represent the path designated by the institution to facilitate the teacher preparation program. Lastly, test preparation for State/professional exams play an important role in terms of teacher preparation, both in terms of career readiness of students, since those exams might help determine if the students hold the proper training and if the program has an appropriate course of study.

The research questions, which were used to provide the proper guidance to the investigation also, were useful to organize the results of the study: the data related

to the first research question demonstrated that the research participants felt themselves well prepared for the teaching career. In turn, the data related to the second research question demonstrated that research participants tend to consider the teacher preparation program at Lynn University an effective program, although they hold some suggestions in order to enhance those aspects they consider there are some gaps. Lastly, the data related to the third research question of the study demonstrate the research participants are able to identify the impact of a teacher preparation program on their careers.

Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice

Every participant interviewed at this study indicated their perceptions regarding what they think about their own readiness to enter the teaching profession and what would be an effective teacher preparation. The results of this study demonstrated that:

1. The research participants of this study perceive themselves as ready to enter the teaching profession from the teacher preparation program at Lynn University, although they feel they need more “hands on” experiences before they assume their duties as professionals;
2. The research participants consider the teacher preparation program at Lynn University effective, mainly due to its features;
3. The research participants consider that the program endorsements, the instructors’ recommendations, the program requirements and features were relevant in order to achieve their readiness to enter the teaching profession, although they suggest that the preparation for State/professional test should follow a different timeline in order to reinforce its effectiveness.

By considering themselves well prepared to teach, they consider the teacher preparation program at Lynn University as an effective program. However, they also had their own suggestions about how to improve the teacher preparation program, some thoughts and ideas regarding the skills that they considered to be of primary importance in order to better prepare student teachers to feel themselves ready to enter the teaching career. Those suggestions justify the existence of implications and recommendations of this study for further investigations at this area.

Although teacher preparation constitutes one of the most important areas in education, the constant discussion in this area might grant new alternatives in terms of enhancement of those programs. Policymakers, school districts, teacher preparation programs, instructors, schools, teachers, and students can all benefit from a better understanding of the data collected from research in this area. Results from this study raised some issues for consideration. Furthermore, these findings may have implications for the development of teacher preparation programs.

Based on the research literature for this study, perception exerts a pivotal role in terms of developing the student mindset (BISSESSAR, 2014). Consequently, the development efforts devoted to teacher preparation programs should pay attention to those perceptions in order to embrace the aspects investigated in the present study. In this sense, this study addressed some critical components for success in teacher preparation programs including: effective classroom management skills, programs and endorsements, instructor recommendations, program requirements

and features, and test preparation/State requirements.

With the literature indicating effective classroom management skills and test preparation/State requirements as some of the top reasons teachers leave the profession, it is an area of concern in terms of loss of student achievement (NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, 2010; PETERSON, 2000; TATZ, 2013). As Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) indicated, because it is a complex issue with many perspectives, teacher preparation programs must continue to look for ways to better prepare and support students in this area.

An important implication from this study is that teacher preparation programs may enhance their practices by increasing their offer of “hands on” experiences under the guidance of expert instructors (DARLING-HAMMOND; BRANSFORD, 2005). These “hands on” experiences should be more active in nature, and less observational. Since the practicum is a privileged moment of teaching and learning, it may allow student teachers to achieve a more effective integration into the school environment, where they will be able to find real situations related to the teaching-learning process, school organization practices, and to be familiarized with the public policies which govern education at school (DARLING-HAMMOND; CHUNG; FRELOW, 2002).

Teacher preparation programs should reinforce their focus on effective classroom management skills. Since the act of teaching is a dynamic process, which is attached to cultural contexts, the organization of educational activities should be performed through current strategies, content, curriculum and methods (Ralph, 2003). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs should establish a closer relationship between theory and practice, in order to prepare student teachers to present the skills and competencies required to contribute to society from the beginning of their professional practice. These effective classroom management skills courses need to be taught by instructors who invest in real world situations in this area. As Levine (2006) indicated, teacher preparation programs need to prepare student teachers to perform their practices through a wide variety of strategies for managing student behavior. By adopting these practices, teacher preparation programs will prepare their students to hold specific skills to perform their duties in a most accurate way. This reflects on students, which may feel themselves ready to teaching career more appropriately.

The research participants declared themselves satisfied with their instructors at Lynn University. Due to the institution features, such as small class size, low student-to-faculty ratio and tutoring programs, they can take full advantage of the contact with their instructors in that teacher preparation program. In addition, the research participants consider the programs and endorsements offered into the program (ESOL/Reading endorsements, AVID and CRISS programs, among others) extremely relevant in terms of their preparation for a teaching career and also they made the teacher preparation program more appealing. According to Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy (2001), the offering of supplemental programs and endorsements by teacher preparation programs might reinforce those programs proposal in terms of empowering their student teachers to perform their professional duties in the most accurate way.

Although the research participants feel themselves ready and well prepared by the institution to enter the teaching career, they suggested that the preparation for

State/professional tests should follow a different timeline than the one proposed in the program. They would like to participate in a preparation for tests throughout the program instead of being committed to that test preparation only in the last semesters of the program. Tatz (2013) affirms that the best academic preparation for State/professional tests is good instruction. By adapting its instructional principles and practices to approach content, standards and frameworks of those tests throughout the whole program, the institution will be able to ensure that students of that teacher preparation program will master those tests until the end of that program.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This phenomenological study investigating student teachers perceptions regarding career readiness and the effectiveness of a teacher preparation program at Lynn University has its limitations. The results of this study cannot be directly applied to other teacher preparation programs throughout the country. The research findings are specifically relevant to the unique demographics from the Elementary Education Grades K-6 teacher preparation program at Lynn University. Thereby, additional phenomenological inquiries replicating the study in similar programs are strongly recommended. In addition, a broader context in which the data can be further supported would improve the trustworthiness of the findings of this study.

The present study does not intend to exhaust the discussion on this topic. Instead, this study aims to serve as a starting point for addressing the perceptions of students in teacher preparation programs. Furthermore, the dataset for this study was not longitudinal. In order to understand student teachers' performance and behavior over time through a greater perspective, it would be beneficial to also investigate teachers' perceptions after completion of their first and second years of teaching. This would allow for comparison of new teacher attitudes and perceptions up to a 5 year period of time. It is also recommended that future research in this area include a socioeconomic status indicator such as the percentage of students in the teacher preparation program receiving student loans or specific scholarships.

An additional limitation of this study was that the investigations did not include any amount of time devoted to observations during the student teachers' experiences at practicum. Further studies should include that important moment among their data collection strategies. Lastly, the demographic information survey used in this study delimited the student teachers' responses to those areas perceived by the researcher to be important. During the interviews and subsequent data analysis, other issues and questions emerged that could be addressed through further research. Additionally, studying the habits of the student teachers who are preparing themselves for professional exams may add insight about best practices of preparation for tests at teacher preparation programs.

Summary

Teacher preparation programs are structured in order to prepare students to perform their duties through higher standards after their graduation. Successful professionals in a teaching career use didactic knowledge, articulated with others teaching knowledge such as classroom management skills and professional

development to perform their duties at school. In addition, student teachers must be able to pass State/professional tests before they get their licenses. However, some programs have not reached all students. Considering that perceptions perform a pivotal role regarding the development of the students' mindset, these perceptions should be taken into account in order to enhance those teacher preparation programs.

The process of career choice and insertion in the labor market becomes harder day by day, creating doubts and anxiety, which means that career choice possibilities are not related only to personal characteristics, but mainly to the historical context and the sociocultural environment in which the young newly graduate is living. Since professional occupation is a social construction which refers to socioeconomic and cultural issues, changes in the labor market and its relationship with the professional training requirements, and the social representations of professions associated with status and salary are certainly factors that influence the attractiveness for choosing between different careers. Considering that a teaching career is related to career preparation and career choice, which is a process permeated by dilemmas, conflicts and contradictions, involving not only personal characteristics, but also the historical context and sociocultural elements, the way teacher preparation is executed demands thorough data collection. That perspective directed the execution of this study.

This phenomenological study revealed that students defined the teaching profession as challenging and rewarding, but also with limitations and difficulties. They understand that the teacher preparation program at Lynn University has prepared them appropriately: they highlighted the small class sizes, the ESOL and Reading endorsements, the instructors, and the mentoring program as some of the elements that help the program achieve success at this academic area. However, students have suggested that increasing the offering of effective classroom management skills, time extension at practicum and others "hands on" experiences as well as different timelines related to preparation for State/professional tests by the program would be highly beneficial. From the point that universities must assume the responsibility to improve, develop, and organize their teacher preparation programs in order to prepare students for the teaching profession, the findings of this study might be useful at least to start the discussion related to the use of student perceptions in terms of evaluation of teacher preparation effectiveness.

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