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Mentor Teachers Speak: Valuing Teacher Voices in English Education

Lindsay Jeffers
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The transition from student to teacher is notoriously challenging. Despite the successful completion of a best-practice based university teaching preparation program, many teachers flounder through their first teaching experiences. Ellen Corcoran named this “transition shock” in 1981, finding “preservice education fails to survive the shock of transition from university to public school.” Over thirty years later, studies show that teachers continue to struggle through their first years of teaching (Athanases, 2013; Bentley, Morway, & Short, 2013; Berchini, 2016; Hamilton, 2003; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). As preservice and new teachers begin to develop identities as teaching professionals, many are simultaneously trying to negotiate theory, practice, and values from university coursework into their new secondary classroom environments, while also juggling curriculum expectations, state mandates, new colleagues, and classroom management. Because there is a well-documented problem with new teachers leaving the field within their first years of teaching (Bickmore, 2013; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005), this “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981) or “praxis shock” (Smagorinsky & Gibson et al., 2004) is a significant concern for teacher educators.

Student teaching with a mentor in the field is intended to help new teachers make the difficult transition from student of pedagogy to practicing teacher. University coursework aims to provide a strong background in English pedagogical content knowledge, and experiences gained from mentorship and practice in the field also contribute significantly to the pedagogical content knowledge acquired by preservice teachers (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Goering, 2013; Grossman, 1990; McCann, 2013).

In order to better prepare new teachers and bridge the divide between university coursework and secondary teaching, one largely untapped resource is

mentor teachers¹. Mentor teachers have an indelible impact on our preservice teachers, working alongside university students as they cross the bridge from student to teacher, and often providing the final phase of their university education. We need the voices of mentor teachers in the field because they can provide essential insight into the reality of teaching at this moment. Bentley, Morway, and Short (2013) described the importance of these mentors who have “on-the-job knowledge only an insider could provide” (35). These experienced teachers take our university-educated students and help them become practicing teachers in real schools. We need to hear from the teachers who teach side-by-side with our new and preservice teachers.

Unfortunately, the voices of mentors, highly-qualified, excellent teachers with years of experience teaching secondary English, are largely absent from conversations about teacher training and induction. Mentor teachers have wisdom and experience to offer. Their missing voices leave a significant hole in research about new teacher preparation. What can mentor teachers contribute to the conversation about teacher preparation in English Language Arts? And how can these voices improve the preparation of future ELA teachers?

Mentor Teachers in English Education

As a field, English Education focuses on the “preparation, support, and continuing education” of English teachers at all levels. In 2010, Leslie S. Rush and Lisa Scherff, editors of *English Education*, pointed out the “widened scope” of English Education as a field and hoped to “take an active role” in the Conference on English Education (CEE)² call to include as many perspectives as possible in the dialogue about teacher preparation. Significantly, Rush and Scherff wrote that the field “must include the voices of not only English educators and researchers but also graduate students in English education, experienced classroom teachers, mentor/cooperating teachers, prospective teachers, and novice teachers” (6). Noting that these voices were often absent, the editors advocated for the inclusion of classroom teachers, including mentor/cooperating teachers, in the conversation about teacher preparation.

¹Though mentor teacher is the term used in this study, cooperating teacher is also a common term for the secondary teachers who work directly with student teachers. For an interesting history on the origin of the term, and the reason for the shift from “cooperating teacher” to “mentor” in the mid 1980’s, see Anthony Clarke, Valerie Triggs, and Wendy Nielsen (2014).

² The Conference on English Education is a group of NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) members who prepare and support teachers of English. This group recently changed its name to English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE).

In addition to *English Education*, NCTE publishes *Research in the Teaching of English (RTE)*, their major research journal. In the past twenty-five years, *RTE* has published scholarship about the teaching of reading and writing to diverse populations; technology and digital literacies; composition theory and the teaching of writing, reading, and literacy; and the international teaching of English. But the voices of mentor teachers are hard to find.

Studies inside and outside the field of English Education will testify to the importance of mentor teachers in new teacher preparation. Mentor teachers who provide and supervise field experiences have a substantial impact on preservice teachers, especially as the student-teaching experience is generally the culminating work of a preservice teacher's education. Christian Goering (2013) discussed this reality in the teacher licensure program at the University of Arkansas. Goering estimated that preservice teachers in their program spend over 1,000 hours with mentor teachers. Therefore, placements with exemplary mentors are extremely important, as Goering concluded, "Perhaps there is no bigger influence on the future teachers than their mentors..." (13).

Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) found that preservice teachers themselves placed significant importance on their student-teaching experience, and mentors played a "crucial role" in this opportunity to practice teaching (102). This sentiment is repeated in research by Whitney, Olan, and Frederickson (2013) and Koerner, O'Connell Rust, and Baumgartner (2002), who wrote, "Most teachers claim that the most important elements in their professional education were the school experiences found in student teaching" (35). It's clear that collaboration between universities and secondary schools is an important aspect of teacher preparation programs, and it is to the benefit of future teachers when the institutions communicate effectively and all parties are valued.

The "Two-Worlds Pitfall"

At its 2005 Summit, a group of the CEE met to discuss the preparation of teachers of English and the connection between methods courses and secondary teaching, acknowledging that teacher education, "extends beyond the confines of the university and into the local community" and that the CEE must prepare preservice teachers to teach in secondary schools (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006). The authors described the ideological differences between the two institutions:

We needn't belabor the point that the ideals typically encouraged in teacher education courses—authenticity, engagement, justice, equity, inquiry, and so on—are often thwarted in the field by mandated testing, factoid-oriented

curricula, skills-based instruction, cynical faculty, and other factors that comprise the context of field-based preservice experiences. And yet we soldier on, making the effort to inculcate ideals, even if far too much evidence from research on teacher education reveals that the values of the schools ultimately trump those of the university for most preservice teachers (Grossman, Thompson, & Valencia, 2001) (315-16)

They recognized that the educational context of university coursework, and the ideals that methods instructors are able to promote in higher education, outside of the constraints of testing and controlled curricula, is very distinct from the context of most secondary schools. Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) also examined the “two-worlds pitfall,” described by Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann in 1985, finding that it effectively positions secondary schools and universities in opposition to each other, putting preservice teachers in the midst of a “competition” for teaching practices that either adhere to progressive university culture or more conservative secondary school culture (339).

While we know that preservice teachers are influenced by a variety of factors, both coursework and fieldwork contribute heavily to their preparation. When these two factors appear to be in opposition, preservice teachers may struggle to make sense of opposing visions for the teaching of secondary English. Contradictory ideals of “correct” teaching can result in a sense of surprise or shock when preservice teachers transition from university campus to secondary classroom.

The recently published *Secondary English Teacher Education in the United States*, is a comprehensive look at current practices in English teacher preparation (Pasternak et al., 2018). Twelve years after the CEE’s 2005 Summit, the authors note the, “disjuncture between the practices teacher candidates are taught in the teacher education programs, and what they find in the K-12 classroom” (46). They continue, “this is further complicated by the position in which [preservice teachers] find themselves, concurrently being teacher and student” (49). In the secondary classroom, preservice teachers are learning to conduct themselves as professionals in the field. In their first days as new teachers, they must develop a teacher identity and learn how to work with a new boss and new colleagues in a new environment. Corcoran (1981) wrote,

No matter how extensive the beginner’s preservice education, beginning teachers are faced by and accountable for or to – sometimes it is not clear which – unknown students, teaching colleagues, administrators, university supervisors, and parents. In the midst of so many strangers, it is

difficult to know to whom to turn or where to begin. In addition, the school and community environments have norms and rituals that most probably are new and strange. The large number of factual and procedural unknowns can send the beginning teacher into a state of shock...

Corcoran's case study revealed that student teachers may spend six to eight weeks in this state of shock, simply trying to adjust to their new surroundings and new expectations. During this transition, they struggle to transfer knowledge and skills gained from the university to the secondary classroom. Most come to the profession with little teaching experience and without their own materials for use in daily lesson plans and assessments. They must then learn multiple skills at the same time: how to plan lessons to meet learning goals, create effective materials for students, and manage a classroom of adolescent students from bell to bell. While university students may "know" about the time commitments and schedule of a teacher, most experience it for the first time during their student teaching, leading to the "transition shock" described by Ellen Corcoran (1981) and recognized over and over again in more recent studies of new teachers (Carey-Webb, 2001; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Rozema & Ellis, 2014).

Despite the "common gulf" between universities and secondary schools, the CEE Summit hoped to strengthen relationships with secondary school partners. As declared in their summit statement:

Given this common gulf between universities and schools, we believe that special efforts are necessary in order to form productive relationships with school-based educators who both become involved in teacher education and ultimately may become our graduates' colleagues. We have considered a variety of ways in which to establish relationships that improve articulation between universities and schools and increase the possibility that the transition between the two will be, if not seamless, at least less of a shock (316).

The Conference on English Education is aware of the disconnect that exists between university methods coursework and the reality of teaching in a secondary English classroom. They recognized in 2005 that this disconnect was difficult for preservice teachers, causing a shock as they transition into their field experiences. Yet, in 2018, Pasternak et al. report, "tension over connecting the theory learned in the methods courses to the field experience appeared repeatedly" in responses to their questions about teacher preparation (55). University-based methods instructors reported that the philosophy of the secondary school and mentor

teachers did not always align with the philosophy of the teacher education program, and this caused conflict for the preservice teachers (59). They concluded, “the context of the field experience can often be at odds with the teacher education program, both in philosophy and in practice (59).

One way to address the gap between university methods courses and secondary classrooms is to establish better partnerships, opening communication between professionals in both institutions. The CEE hoped to “form productive relationships” with secondary teachers (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006). Pasternak et al. (2018) reported that university-based instructors who worked in partnership with a school or with a mentor teacher felt more positively about their students’ field experiences (57). Interaction between the teacher education program and the field experience “creates a conversation” between the university and the mentor teachers and administration in the field (57).

Mentor teachers can contribute in valuable ways to conversations about the preparation of secondary English teachers. They may also experience the gap between university coursework and secondary classrooms, and they may have ideas and opinions about how to better prepare future English teachers. Working collaboratively with mentor teachers at secondary schools is essential to the work of teacher preparation. Collaborative work can give teacher educators and mentor teachers common ground, fostering connections between the colleges who prepare new teachers and the schools in which they will teach. Because mentors are so significant to the training and preparation of future teachers, their perspectives are certainly worthy of more consideration in research.

At the heart of this study is a desire to bring the voices of mentor teachers into the large body of research that comprises the field of English Education. Specifically, the study elicits mentor teacher perspectives on the pedagogical content knowledge needed for preservice teachers entering their classrooms. What do preservice teachers need to know and be able to do? What do mentor teachers believe are essential skills for preservice teachers entering the profession? This study also focused on mentor teachers’ ideas about how to establish better relationships between university preparation programs and secondary schools, which the CEE Summit believed would, “increase the possibility that the transition between the two will be, if not seamless, at least less of a shock” (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006).

Methods

I designed my research as an instrumental, collective case study, focusing on experiences, opinions, and beliefs freely given by participants through interviews and written documents. An instrumental case study looks to

representative cases to portray common experiences (Creswell, 2013). My research examined mentor teachers' experiences through interviews with four teachers. A collective case study like this provides insight from multiple perspectives, but is not meant to provide transferable generalizations about all preservice teachers, all teacher preparation programs, or all mentors. Instead, the goal is to portray the experiences of these teachers, knowing that other mentors may share these experiences, and prompting a dialogue that will include the perspectives of mentor teachers in later research about teacher preparation.

Participants

My research examined mentor teachers' experiences through a series of interviews with four teachers. The teachers volunteered to participate in response to an email inquiry to the English department at a local high school. In order to keep the research current, I chose to interview and observe only secondary ELA teachers who had worked with a preservice teacher during at least one semester of the previous three years. Two of my participants had just completed a mentorship when we started the interviews in January of 2016. The other two participants had mentored many preservice teachers during their long teaching careers, and both had mentored a preservice teacher during the previous three years.

Though participants were chosen because they volunteered to participate in this study, there were some requirements for participation. After gaining permission from the Administrative Board for the school district, as well as from the principal at the high school, I sent an email about the study to all teachers listed under the heading of English or Language Arts. I specified that I was seeking teachers who had mentored a preservice teacher in the previous three years. By default, my research could only include tenured teachers, because the university requires mentors to have earned tenure in order to mentor a preservice teacher. In Michigan, tenure is a four-year process involving administrator observations and evaluations. Though the English department included twelve teachers of mixed gender and ages, four female teachers volunteered for this study. The male teachers were ineligible because they had not mentored a preservice teacher.

Data Collection

Each of the four participants was interviewed individually in her own classroom. I sent questions a few days in advance, and some teachers provided notes to go along with the interview. Each interview was recorded, and I also took extensive notes throughout the interviews. The combination of notes and recordings allowed me to provide an accurate portrayal of teachers' experiences and opinions using their exact words.

The first interviews took place in January of 2016, and the conversation topics ranged from teachers' stories about their own inductions into teaching to mentoring successes and struggles. Over and over again, I heard the mentor teachers say that they were willing to work with preservice teachers on any aspect of their teaching if the preservice teachers were open to feedback and willing to invest their own time and effort.

In the second set of interviews, my questions focused on the needs of preservice teachers, including the pedagogical content knowledge and skills needed to teach English Language Arts. The questions were designed to gain the insight of mentor teachers regarding teacher preparation and the needs of the preservice teachers who arrive in their classrooms. I also asked questions about the mentor teachers' experiences working with the university and how we might improve communication and collaboration.

Data Analysis

My data analysis brought me back to my original purpose and analytic frame. The research goal was to elicit the voices of mentor teachers in order to provide their perspective on teacher preparation. I believed their voices could contribute to the larger goal of addressing the gap between secondary education and higher education that results in "transition shock" for new teachers (Corcoran, 1981).

I used a constant comparative method of analysis to search for themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Marshall and Rossman describe this as constantly searching through the data, evaluating the developing themes, and comparing themes and explanations (220). After the interviews, I began to analyze data and consider themes by making note of recurring topics in our conversations. I returned to the recordings and my notes several times, constantly comparing the teachers' actual words to the themes I had begun to lift out of the data. I determined categories and themes based on repeated phrases and issues brought up by mentor teachers during their interviews.

As an example, every teacher spoke about the importance of a preservice teacher's willingness to accept feedback. This resulted in a theme that I named, "A Teachable Spirit," based on a phrase used by two mentor teachers to describe the need for a preservice teacher to be open to advice and eager to learn. Some preliminary themes were content-based: the teaching of writing; the teaching of literature; and the teaching of grammar, and specific points made by teachers were clustered around those themes. Other initial themes related to classroom management, disposition (of the preservice teacher), the difficult transition from student to teacher, and school-university relations. I returned to the data often. My

research focused on soliciting mentor teachers' opinions about new teacher preparation and secondary school-university relationships. During the interviews, I asked questions that related to my research focus, and I prioritized those conversational strands during data analysis.

Profiles: School and Mentor Teachers

Oakwood High School³ is a large, suburban school district in a mostly middle-class area. About 20% of their 8,500 K-12 students were eligible for free lunch benefits from the state of Michigan in 2015 (Michigan Department of Education, 2015), and 88% of students were white ("Michigan School District Demographic Profiles", 2016). Oakwood is an IB World School and takes pride in offering an academically rigorous curriculum. Graduating students are required by the State of Michigan to earn credit for four years of English classes, and classes at Oakwood high schools are offered by grade level: English 9, English 10, English 11, and English 12. Additional electives include journalism, forensics, and creative writing. About 20% of students enroll in honors sections of English courses, and a few team-taught "prep" English classes are reserved for students who struggle in a regular English class. These classes are team-taught with special education teachers and para-professionals to help make accommodations for students with learning disabilities or emotional impairments.

There are twelve English teachers at Oakwood South, and many have served as mentors for preservice teachers from the nearby university. While each of the participants at Oakwood South High School differed in background, teaching philosophy, and mentoring, it was clear that each of these teachers was also deeply committed to the profession. This included a commitment to their high school students as well as a commitment to future teachers through mentoring.

At the time of our interviews, Julie was teaching three classes of Honors English 9 and three classes of regular English 9. She had recently transferred from Oakwood South Middle School. She described that she approaches English, both reading and writing, as a process, and believes that any student can learn how to write well. Julie said that she focused on the skill of reading more than the evaluation of literature. This was her first year acting as a mentor for a preservice teacher.

Nikki was teaching English and reading skills classes for students below grade level, so she spent part of her day working collaboratively with special education professionals. Nikki had been teaching for eleven years at Oakwood

³ Pseudonyms have been used for names of the school and teacher participants.

South when I interviewed her, and she had taught ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades at the honors, regular, and prep levels. Nikki was currently working on her master's degree in reading, and she felt she was a better teacher while she was also taking classes. She said that she had been inspired by ideas from Nancie Atwell and Kelly Gallagher. Nikki spoke positively about co-mentoring, or the practice of sharing a preservice teacher with another mentor. In this arrangement, Nikki mentored a preservice teacher for a half day, and then the preservice teacher would work with another mentor. This year was the first time Nikki had mentored a preservice teacher on her own, without co-mentoring, and she preferred sharing the mentoring work, especially because she worried that students in some of her classes really needed a strong teacher with experience.

Annette is a former librarian who had worked with preservice teachers since 1998. She described herself as being “an old-fashioned NCATE educated teacher,” and a “KSD person,” explaining that teaching takes knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Annette taught English 9 and English 11 when I interviewed her, but she had also taught other grade levels throughout the years. She said that her job as a mentor was to inspire preservice teachers. Annette had been National Board Certified twice, and said, “the National Board instills in you that it is your duty to the profession to help others in the profession.” Annette named her strengths as organization and commitment, and she said mentoring is a long-term commitment for her.

Renee likely had the most experience with preservice teachers. In 2016, she was teaching eleventh and twelfth-grade English at Oakwood South, along with adult education classes in a neighboring rural district. In the past, Renee had served as a mentor coach, and she was also the district leader for the ELA team. Renee said it was important to her to engage her students, but she was also frustrated by the lack of commitment to understanding the structure of language and “simple, basic English.” Renee placed great importance on disposition, stating, “if a [preservice teacher] has what I call a “teachable spirit,” they can accomplish anything.”

Insights gained from Mentor Teachers

All of the teachers, Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee, spoke extensively about preservice teachers as writers, including the writing skills that were needed to teach high-school students. They also discussed the need for preservice teachers to have more experience delivering lessons with clear goals and higher-level thinking. This was especially true in the teaching of literature, where they noticed that preservice teachers struggled with close reading and thinking beyond recall. The mentor teachers spoke more in depth about the professional attributes needed

for preservice teachers, including the “teachable spirit” disposition coined by Renee. Mentors discussed both content knowledge and pedagogical skills, recognizing the challenges faced by preservice teachers and also expressing their hopes for them to be passionate about teaching and kind to students. Finally, the mentors expressed a desire to be more involved in teacher preparation, commenting that they would like to see professors in their classrooms and would welcome collaboration with the university. The teachers all clearly saw themselves as lifelong learners who could benefit from more collaboration with higher education.

In this article, I’ve chosen to include the mentor teachers’ insights in three areas that closely relate to my original purpose. I began my study because of my interest in helping preservice teachers navigate the transition from university to secondary school. I focus on mentor teachers’ perspectives in three areas:

- The challenges faced by preservice teachers
- Pedagogical content knowledge and the teaching of writing
- The secondary school-university relationship

These three themes begin to answer my research questions, “What do preservice teachers need to know and be able to do?” and “What do mentor teachers believe are essential skills for preservice teachers entering the profession?” Also, “How can we establish better relationships between university preparation programs and secondary schools?” in order to help preservice teachers navigate both worlds?

Challenges Faced by Preservice Teachers: “The Life of a Teacher”

One goal of the research was to better understand the “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981) or “praxis shock” (Smagorinsky & Gibson et al., 2004) experienced by preservice and new teachers. Each of the mentor teachers recognized the challenges facing preservice teachers. Preservice teachers must learn how to find time for lesson planning, grading, observing, reflecting, and collaborating with their mentors while also teaching the classes to which they are assigned.

According to Annette, we need to figure out what is a “reasonable workload,” and part of the problem is that teachers are already doing too much. They are teaching too many classes and the class sizes are too large. Preservice teachers are placed in secondary schools to learn how to teach, and doing more has not necessarily improved their teaching. Annette felt that it was more important for her preservice teachers to learn how to teach well, even just one or two classes, than to take on a secondary teacher’s entire teaching load.

Julie also said that the schedule of a teacher was “shocking” for her recent preservice teacher, who was very surprised at the amount of work Julie brought home on a regular basis. Julie described,

Getting up early in the morning and getting here was a challenge. She [the preservice teacher] was pretty good about being here on time, but she complained about it all the time...the hours that teachers keep. That was really hard. I think it was difficult for her to wrap her mind around the demands of the job, and I think it really scared her...I think it was hard for her to figure out how to manage her time. She had a baby at home, so she was trying to figure out how to get things done within the day: planning, observing, grading, and then still be able to go home and have a life. All teachers struggle with that. That idea was foreign to her. I think it was shocking to her how we just take things home. It's the life of a teacher, especially an English teacher.

Julie's preservice teacher was a non-traditional student with a family. She struggled to figure out how to juggle the demands of teaching while taking care of a family. Julie, who is also raising her family while teaching full time, understood the very real challenge of balancing time, noting that “it's the life of a teacher, especially an English teacher.”

These student-teaching challenges identified by mentor teachers are also evident in research about beginning teachers. In interviews conducted by McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005), new teachers reported struggles with time management, stating, “the workload was the most stressful part of the job” (23). Annette felt that time management became a real problem when preservice teachers also had jobs. Her last four preservice teachers had all held additional jobs beyond student teaching, something that the university discourages but does not prohibit. Annette described that her most recent preservice teachers worked at night or on weekends and arrived at school exhausted. Since most teachers must use hours before and after school to lesson plan, collaborate, and grade, preservice teachers with jobs face an extra time-management challenge. Annette said,

At the end of the day, the biggest problem for my last four interns was the fact that they had jobs. They felt that they couldn't live without their jobs, they were working all weekend, they came in looking like they were hit by a train on Monday morning. When they were here, their brains were half asleep. I wish we could pay them to be interns. I truly do.

While Annette conceded that there is little current opportunity to address this problem, she made an important point about the time commitment that is necessary. As a longtime English teacher, Annette understood the time involved in teaching outside of the actual instructional hours. Teaching a class involves planning daily lessons to align with learning goals; reflecting; revising plans and assignments based on student learning; and evaluating student work. Time must be made for these aspects of teaching before students arrive and after they leave. Preservice teachers need even more time for this work because it is new. Those who are committed to other jobs have no time for collaboration before and after school, planning and grading at night or on weekends, and reflecting and revising their practices. Teachers also must find time to respond to emails, assist students who need extra help, attend after-school meetings, collaborate with colleagues, and respond to student work. If time management is a challenge for the most experienced English teachers, it's a serious struggle for a preservice teacher, who is learning many of the tasks of a teacher for the first time.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge: “To teaching writing, you need to be a writer.”

Although the mentors spoke about many aspects of pedagogical content knowledge in English Language Arts, including the teaching of literature, planning toward a goal, and concerns about knowledge of structure and usage, the pedagogical content knowledge related to the teaching of writing is likely of the most interest to readers of this journal.

Mentor teachers did not feel that preservice teachers were well-prepared in the teaching of writing. In this academically rigorous school district, college preparatory writing skills are essential, and ELA teachers dedicate much time and energy to this purpose. Unfortunately, the teaching of writing is where the mentors felt that preservice teachers were very weak in their preparation.

When Renee talked about content knowledge needed to teach secondary ELA, she was most concerned about the teaching of writing. She explained,

Being an English major should be a path of expertise. I feel like writing, being able to write well and speak well, are important things. It's not just about literature. It's about the whole package. I think too many people go into English thinking, “I love this book” or “I love to do this with literature,” and it's much less that now and much more about writing. Let's write and show students how to write for college. It's more about writing now than it has been for many years.

Renee discussed the shift that has taken place with the advent of the Common Core; secondary ELA classes are now making more time for the development of writing and speaking skills and less time for the study of fiction, poetry, and short stories. Renee thought of writing in terms of correctness, and she felt strongly that high-school students needed to learn to write well.

This focus on writing and away from the study of literature is problematic for preservice teachers, who may not have spent much time learning how to teach writing. Many English degrees require a wide knowledge of literature, and students must take courses that cover various literary genres and eras. Traditionally, writing is integrated into university literature classes in the form of seminar papers. Writing instruction is not necessarily the focus of college coursework for English majors. It is also typical of college literature classes to assign writing, collect seminar papers a few weeks later, and return writing with comments and a grade. While preservice teachers may spend hours observing their professors teach literature, they are not learning how to teach writing from their literature courses. In this area, the “apprenticeship of observation” described by Lortie⁴ (1975) may be failing our preservice teachers.

Renee explained, “A lot of student teachers don’t have clear ideas of how to improve writing.” She narrated a conversation with her colleagues at lunch yesterday, discussing preservice teachers and the teaching of writing. She said,

They [the preservice teachers] come in with these crazy, creative ideas. But honestly, that’s not what our students need in college. They [high-school students] need to learn how to write critically, to be able to analyze. That’s a big piece now. I think that we sometimes don’t do enough of that.

Renee also worried that English majors in college were writing narratives for their classes, but that was not what they were going to be teaching in secondary ELA classes. She believed that the rigor of other written work, for other content areas, was greater.

English teachers in college, in English classes, they write narratives and narratives. That’s really not what they’re going to be teaching, and it’s

⁴ Dan Lortie (1975) used the term “apprenticeship of observation” to refer to the time (hundreds of hours!) spent by preservice teachers in classrooms before their formal teacher preparation begins. Of course, the hours they remember as primary and secondary students lack a teacher’s perspective of attention to learning goals and course trajectory, but the experiences nonetheless influence preservice teachers.

really not what the kids have to write in college. Only if you're in an English class. The rigor of other papers is greater, for a psych class, for a history class, for a science class. They're all more rigorous. We were talking about that at lunch, too. Get out of this narrative plan. I guess it's good to write some, but that should not be the major writing. They should be analyzing.

Renee wondered if that was why student teachers had weak skills in writing. She felt strongly that narrative writing should not be a major focus because it was not a skill needed for college coursework, with the possible exception of English classes. In her opinion, teacher education was underserving preservice teachers by not adequately preparing them in the area of writing. The "crazy, creative ideas" weren't useful for the rigorous college preparatory writing she currently teaches in her eleventh-grade English classes. Her students need to be able to write critically and analyze, and Renee felt that preservice teachers did not know how to help her students improve their academic writing.

Annette suggested that preservice could bring some of their own lessons on writing into their student-teaching experiences. She said that she would be excited if a preservice teacher arrived with a lesson for teaching active voice that could be revised for her students. For Annette, preservice teachers' expertise in writing and grammar was directly tied to pedagogical content knowledge and the ability to teach writing. She felt that preservice teachers needed to be strong writers themselves so that they could teach writing skills to secondary students. In our interview, when I asked Annette what she would like to talk about with methods instructors, if given the opportunity, she returned to writing and grammar.

If I were to meet them [university methods instructors] to sit down with them, I would not talk philosophically. I would bring real things. Here's a sentence written in active voice and a sentence written in passive voice. Most [preservice teachers] can't tell the difference. They don't know. Here's parallel structure...I'd show them the skills, because I feel that that's the thing they [preservice teachers] are most lacking...

So for me a conversation with the professors would be about content knowledge. When I read their essays, even their essay to be a teacher, I'll say, "Did you realize this is a fragment? Do you understand that this is a compound-complex sentence?" And I will show them. My ninth graders have to do this.

When Annette taught sentence structures and usage to her ninth graders, she often found that her student teachers had to learn that content knowledge alongside her ninth-grade students. Pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of how to teach content, is contingent on knowing content, and preservice teachers who were not strong writers themselves were unable to help student writers. For Annette, this was a major concern.

Knowing how to teach writing was also a concern for Julie. Julie reiterated that intern teachers need a strong background in grammar, reading, writing, and speaking, and Julie stressed that “solid basic grammar skills” in both speaking and writing was something student teachers should be gaining in college coursework. When I asked about the content knowledge needs of student teachers, she replied,

Solid basic grammar skills and solid basic speaking skills. So when I say grammar I mean spoken and written. So when speaking, the teacher should be able to speak using proper grammar...And solid writing skills. And then I guess an understanding of methods. Those reach across a lot of different things.

Nikki also said preservice teachers need “very solid writing skills.” Nikki explained what that means,

I think they [student teachers] should have very solid writing skills, that they should be proficient writers. That means the whole scale of organizing ideas, being able to show depth of knowledge and understanding, synthesis and analysis skills within their writing, but also being able to structure it well. They should have good grammar skills.

And I know there’s more recently, well probably eternally, a debate about teaching grammar and I have my own thoughts on that. But I think you should have the skills that are part and parcel to what encompasses teaching, because otherwise you can’t help students revise and edit their own work, or be able to explain to them why what they’re doing is incorrect if you don’t really understand or know how to explain.

Nikki also felt that teachers need to be writers themselves so that they regularly practice the skills they teach. She said that it took her a long time to figure out that it was important for her to write as well, and now she is doing a lot more of her own writing. She stated, “to teach reading, you need to be a reader. To teach writing, you need to be a writer.” Nikki has begun to really take that to heart, writing what she assigns her students, and it has changed her teaching of writing.

When we discussed what preservice teachers should do in methods coursework, she said,

A lot of writing themselves, so that they're well practiced in that. A lot of what we've talked about in my master's classes and in conferences I've been to is 'teacher as writer.' It's really important. I never thought about that. I essentially stopped writing when I started teaching, which is not what you should do. So I'm doing a lot more writing now, but it took me a long time to figure that out.

So, being a reader, being a writer, essentially being a grammarian, being a specialist...all those things that you're going to be teaching. Having the knowledge and skills to be those people when you go into the classroom...that's just English, but math teachers should be mathematicians. History teachers should be historians. I don't know if we have as much practical experience that way. We write papers on topics, but in the university, I don't know that you're really encouraged to be a writer.

According to these mentor teachers, preservice teachers need more experience in the teaching of writing, and they may need to specifically focus on learning how to help secondary students build academic writing skills. Preservice teachers also need to identify as writers, doing their own writing alongside their students.

The Secondary School-University Relationship: Improving Teacher Preparation

One of the motivating factors of this study was to include mentor teacher voices in the conversation about teacher preparation. After my interviews with mentor teachers, it was evident that the nonalignment described by Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013) was also a problem for secondary teachers like Renee and Annette. Renee, who served as a mentor coach and mentored many preservice teachers, told me that the methods classes "don't really jibe with what we have to do in the [secondary] classroom." While she said that methods students come away with "great ideals," those ideals have not transitioned well into a high-school classroom. Renee described,

My biggest complaint with the methods classes has always been the fact that they don't really jibe with what we have to do in the classroom. They [preservice teachers] come away with all these great ideals about how to get students excited about learning, but they don't really translate well into the high school...I think what the university needs to do, though, I think

the people who are teaching [methods classes] need to come to the schools and see what's really going on.

Renee's comments allude to the gap described by Marshall and Smith (1997) as existing since the nineteenth century between universities and secondary schools. This long-existing gap was also a concern of the Conference on English Education's (CEE) Summit in 2005. In response, the CEE recommended that universities form relationships with secondary mentors, empowering them rather than contributing to the enduring disconnect (Dickson and Smagorinsky et al.). Renee suggested that the methods instructors spend time in secondary classrooms to "see what's really going on."

Annette seemed to agree that university instructors needed to be present in the secondary schools, stating,

I wish that I could have them [university methods instructors] come to me, and I could say, "These are my students' writing folders. These are the skills these interns have to teach. This is what they have to be able to do." Some schools are good about getting their college professors into the real schools, and some aren't.

This was one of Annette's major criticisms of the university from which most of her preservice teachers earned their teaching certification: the university instructors did not spend time in the secondary schools. In contrast, Annette discussed her evaluation of Gustavus Adolphus College, a private liberal arts school in Minnesota, as part of her NCATE work. She was very impressed by their teacher preparation program and told me that they did "a phenomenal job." Annette stressed that there was "a relationship and dialogue." Methods instructors at Gustavus Adolphus supervised their preservice teachers throughout the student-teaching semester, spending significant hours in the secondary classrooms where their preservice teachers practiced teaching. They also invited mentor teachers to attend the methods classes. Annette described,

For all my years of NCATE...Oh my gosh, the schools where the professors were in the schools, where each professor supervised their intern rather than some external person, like part of your job load is that you have these five interns, you watch them teach, you see what's going on... It's a whole different dialogue. It's a whole different event. They learn so much that the interns have much better skills. And the professors have a stake in their success. I like that.

For Annette, it was important that the professors have “a stake” in the success of their preservice teachers, and she felt that the preservice teachers were better prepared when professors spent time in the secondary schools, observing the preservice teachers and working directly with the mentor teachers. This is the kind of relationship advocated by the CEE Summit of 2005 (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al.).

Based on our interviews, mentor teachers would welcome collaboration with university methods instructors. Annette and Renee, longtime teachers and mentors for many preservice teachers, felt strongly that the university instructors were uninformed about what was happening in secondary ELA classrooms. As a result, the preservice teachers were unprepared to teach in their classrooms.

Despite the many demands on a secondary teacher’s time, these mentor teachers all expressed a commitment to helping preservice teachers make the transition from student to teacher. They repeatedly volunteered their time and their high-school classrooms to help new teachers learn and practice, and the mentor teachers genuinely wanted preservice teachers to grow as professionals. Of course, methods instructors also share this goal. Unfortunately, despite shared goals, a “vast gap” continues to exist (Finders, Crank, and Kramer, 2013) between secondary classrooms and university coursework. In the meantime, young, inexperienced, preservice teachers are struggling to find their footing as they make the transition from coursework to secondary teacher. More opportunities for collaboration and communication between methods instructors and secondary mentor teachers is one way to address the gap still existing between the institutions.

Conclusions

A review of the literature revealed that mentor perspectives are scarce in research that focuses on teacher preparation, and communication between universities and secondary schools has long been lacking. Yet we know that mentors in secondary schools play a significant role in preparing new teachers. This study addresses the communication gap and seeks to provide some ideas about ways to ease the transition shock experienced by preservice teachers.

There is much scholarship available on the content of university-based methods classes, often including the perspectives of methods instructors (Grossman, 1990; Hochstetler, 2007; Pasternak et al, 2018; Smagorinsky & Whiting, 1995). This study brings forward the perspective of secondary mentor teachers. While both university methods instructors and secondary mentor teachers have the same goal, to prepare future English Language Arts teachers, their values and priorities may be distinct.

English methods courses focus on theory and research because preservice teachers must be able to think critically about methodology and best practice, connecting those practices to student learning goals. A focus on research and methods is essential to preclude our future teachers from simply reproducing the teaching practices of their own classroom experiences. We need teachers to think deeply about effective strategies for student learning and to be familiar with the research that influences pedagogy. The weakness of this perspective is that it does not always take into account secondary classroom contexts.

Mentor teachers focus on what works in their context. In this study, mentors were preparing teachers to teach six daily classes of thirty adolescent students. Their focus on disposition, “a teachable spirit,” makes sense. A preservice teacher in that scenario needs to be positive, flexible, able to admit mistakes and willing to accept feedback from mentors. A teachable spirit is important because secondary teachers need to be self-motivated and eager to try new things. Preservice teachers, especially, must be focused on growth and learning, as their entire student-teaching semester is designed to help them learn and grow as a professional. The mentor teachers felt that anything--content, grammar, classroom management-- could be learned (and, indeed, we all continually learn alongside our students!) as long as a preservice teacher had a teachable spirit. This perspective makes sense, especially when we consider that the mentor’s job is to inspire the preservice teacher, allow them opportunities to try new ideas in the teaching of English, and then help them learn from their classroom experiences. Considering the content of our interviews and the stories that were told by Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee, it’s evident that a teachable spirit is a high value for mentors. Although it was not what I had expected from the interviews, the focus on disposition and growth is an interesting consideration for ways to help preservice teachers transition into the profession.

While differences in perspective and priorities certainly contribute to the disconnect evident between coursework and fieldwork, the gap can be bridged through greater collaboration and communication. According to Milner (2010), the values of university educators and secondary teachers are actually quite similar. Theory and content knowledge are essential for future teachers, and disposition is also of great significance in education. Perspective is, of course, highly influenced by one’s experiences. Given more opportunities to collaborate and share experiences, perhaps inviting mentor teachers into university courses and also bringing methods instructors into secondary classrooms, this disconnect could become less pronounced, resulting in a smoother transition for our preservice and new teachers.

Ultimately, instructors at both institutions want to train and support great teachers of English language arts. By giving mentor teachers a valued voice in

teacher preparation, by asking them about their experiences and respecting the knowledge they bring to discourse about teacher preparation, we can improve communication across institutions and create more cohesive experiences for all teachers.

Implications for Teacher Preparatory Programs

This study has significant implications for postsecondary, or university-based, teacher preparation programs. Perhaps the best way to combat the “towers and trenches” (Milner, 2010) mindset, and the gap that can result, is for secondary and postsecondary English teachers to spend more time together.

According to this study, secondary teachers genuinely desired more collaboration with the university. The mentors wished that methods instructors would come to their classrooms and see what secondary students are learning. In her NCATE work, Annette was particularly impressed with university programs where mentor teachers were also involved in student-teacher supervision, mentoring their students through coursework and fieldwork. In contrast, Renee expressed frustration that no one at the university listened to secondary teachers. She mentioned a meeting she had attended at the university where mentors made many recommendations, but no changes were made. Despite her many years of mentoring preservice teachers and her years of serving as a coordinator, Renee did not feel that her opinion was valued at the university, and she felt completely disconnected from the English methods instructors, as there was no contact between content area methods instructors and secondary teachers in Oakwood Schools.

Annette was also excited about programs that invited mentor teachers to campus for professional development opportunities. High school teachers are incredibly busy, but they have a high stake in the preparation of the secondary English teachers who may be their future colleagues. The participants in my study hoped university methods instructors would visit their schools and spend time in their classrooms. They also expressed interest in university-sponsored professional development. If field experiences are essential to the preparation of new graduates, who gain much of their pedagogical content knowledge from their mentors, then the involvement of mentor teachers at the university level should be embraced. For the mentors in my study, this collaboration meant that university instructors would come to secondary schools, and mentor teachers would go to the university as well.

While it may not be possible for university secondary education programs to connect with every school district, offering more opportunities for collaborative work between institutions is a worthwhile pursuit. Alsup, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher (2011) discerned that secondary and postsecondary English teachers had much in common and could learn from collaborative work and conversations across

institutions. Pasternak et al. (2018) found that university methods instructors were more positive about field experiences for preservice teachers when partnerships were in place (57). The mentor teachers in this study desired more collaboration. Perhaps conversations and connections are the best way to address the historical disconnect, gap, or gulf between institutions.

Though many studies have attested to the difficulties experienced by new teachers, some even naming “transition shock” or “praxis shock,” this study provides ideas from mentors on ways to help preservice teachers. Based on the experiences of the mentors, encouraging preservice teachers to do less might help them. Annette insisted that “more is not better,” and felt that her preservice teachers thrived when they focused on only one class. She noted that she wanted them to experience success and feel good about their teaching, so she focused on just one class preparation. When preservice teachers were ready, she could add more.

While it would require an institutional change, perhaps it’s worthwhile to consider a way to pay our preservice teachers for their semester(s) as student teachers. At our university, the number of students enrolled in education programs has dwindled in the past decade. Pasternak et al. (2018) also noted “steep drops in enrollment in schools of education” nationwide (19). Could we encourage future teachers by providing financial support in their final semester of student teaching? Would that help ease their transition by easing the workload burden and allowing them to focus on learning the craft of teaching? Might preservice teachers find more time for planning, collaboration, and reflection if they were paid to do that work?

At the beginning of this study, I asked, “What can mentor teacher contribute to the conversation about teacher preparation in English Language Arts,” and “How can these voices improve the preparation of future ELA teachers?” One clear response from mentor teachers was to strengthen pedagogical content knowledge in the area of writing. If university-based instructors worked collaboratively with mentor teachers, perhaps preservice teachers in methods courses would create lesson plans for teaching structures in writing, which could help preservice teachers feel more confident when teaching writing to high-school students. This is one skill that mentor teachers were adamant about: preservice teachers need to know how to teach writing, and they need to understand structures of English in order to better work with student writing.

Implications for the Field of English Education

If the field wants to include the perspectives of mentor teachers in English Education scholarship, as Rush and Scherff (2010) requested as editors of *English Education*, the field needs to more often seek out “the wisdom of experienced

practitioners,” the secondary mentors who help educate preservice teachers through field experience (Grossman, 1990). Unarguably, more scholarship is needed in this area.

The voices of Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee, four experienced practitioners of secondary English, are included as important perspectives on how to better prepare preservice teachers and how to increase communication and collaboration between secondary schools and universities. Many universities are already collaborating effectively with secondary schools. However, the “towers and trenches” (Milner, 2010) mentality still exists. Instead of positioning the two institutions in opposition, English Education as a field can continue striving to include secondary voices in research about the education of future teachers.

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