Preparing Teachers in English Language Arts: Mentor Teachers Speak

Lindsay J. Jeffers

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This narrative inquiry case study brings the voices of mentor teachers into the discourse of English language arts teacher preparation. In a series of interviews, mentor teachers discuss the challenges faced by student teachers, the pedagogical content knowledge needed to teach secondary ELA, and the relationship between secondary schools and universities.

The first theme explores the challenges that are faced by student teachers. Mentor teachers spoke about the difficulty of making the transition from student to secondary teacher and learning how to put theory into practice in their classrooms. They also considered the challenge of student teachers engaging diverse groups of students. The second theme addresses the pedagogical content knowledge needed to teach secondary ELA, focusing on the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing. Mentor teachers felt that student teachers needed more strategies for the teaching of literature. They also believed that student teachers were in need of further instruction in grammar and the mechanics of language, as they found that many student teachers were unable to teach grammatical structures to secondary students. The third theme focuses on classroom management. Mentor teachers all felt that classroom management skills were best learned through practice, and they took on the responsibility to teach classroom management through observation and active learning. The fourth theme, disposition, aligns with
current standards on teacher dispositions. The mentor teachers used the term “teachable spirit”
to describe the ideal student teacher as being an active learner and reflective practitioner who is
open to feedback and focused on growth and learning. Finally, the fifth theme that emerged was
the need for greater communication between the university and the secondary schools. Mentor
teachers invited university instructors into their classrooms and hoped that time spent in
secondary schools could initiate conversations about teacher preparation and collaboration
between institutions.

At the heart of this project is my desire to empower mentor teachers, whose voices are
often missing from scholarship about teacher preparation. This study can give English educators
and mentor teachers common ground, fostering connections between the colleges who prepare
new teachers and the schools in which they will teach.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my husband, Craig, who never says, “no,” or, “it can’t be done.” His confidence in me is unwavering. Craig has made many sacrifices in the past four years as I’ve pursued my doctoral degree, rocking babies while I wrote my dissertation, cleaning up the kitchen so I could start my late-night hours a little earlier, and caring for our children while I gave research presentations all over the country. He is an amazing partner. I could not have completed this dissertation or the accompanying degree without him.

I also could not have completed this work without family and friends. It takes a village to raise a family, and they are my village. My mom spent countless hours in our home so that I could attend meetings, teach classes, and write. My mother-in-law also spent long days with our little ones to help out. Many others have helped along the way. A heartfelt thanks to Bobbi Steenbergen, Marie Jeffers, Jaime Steenbergen, Julie VanderMeulen, and Jennifer Jeffers for taking good care of our children on many occasions.

Thank you to the English department at Western Michigan University for its steadfast support. That especially includes Dr. Jonathan Bush, who has helped me through three degrees in the past fifteen years. His guidance has been paramount to the completion of this project and the doctoral degree. I especially appreciate his sense of humor, his enthusiasm for our field, and his honest feedback every step of the way. Dr. Allen Webb has also provided years of support as a professor, mentor, advisor, and colleague. I’m grateful for the many ways he has mentored me throughout my undergraduate and graduate work. I’ve had the more-recent pleasure of working closely with Dr. Karen Vocke. I’m thankful for her caring and encouragement as well.
Acknowledgements—continued

Thank you to Dr. Nic Witschi, English department chair, and Dr. Scott Slawinski, Director of Graduate Studies, for their leadership, encouragement, and very good advice. I am proud to be a graduate of this program.

I am also thankful for the support of WMU alumni and colleagues. Leah Zuidema provided significant insight on early versions of this work and was an important part of my dissertation committee. Amanda Stearns-Pfiffer and Kristin Koski Sovis offered examples that helped me shape HSIRB documents and the prospectus. Gretchen Rumohr-Voskuil was an appreciated mentor as I pushed to complete this project. Steffany Comfort Maher has been an invaluable friend throughout the past four years. I hope we remain cohort companions and NCTE roommates for many years in the future.

Thank you to the teachers at ‘Oakwood South High School:’ Ann, Carolyn, Helen, and Janet, who volunteered their time and shared their experiences. The project is, ultimately, for them. I chose this project because I wanted their voices to be heard in the field of English Education. I hope this study honors them in all of the ways that they deserve to be honored. Teachers are my people, and these four are among my favorites.

I also want to acknowledge the two beautiful babies brought into this world while I was finishing coursework, studying for exams, completing research, and writing, writing, writing. Thank you, Hattie and Michael, because the hard work of parenting was the best reprieve from the hard work of graduate school. I will remember my doctoral experience fondly because it
Acknowledgements—continued

afforded me mornings to dance in pajamas and afternoons to play at the park and rock sleepy children. And perhaps it was because of the daytime hours spent caring for my babies that I was dedicated and driven enough to spend nighttime hours focused on graduate school.

Undoubtedly, the entire four-year experience was better because Hattie and Michael took my vision of an organized and well-planned life and tore it apart with the gusto of babies and toddlers, then re-assembled that life into something more precious than I could have ever imagined. I am proud of many accomplishments, but I am most proud to be their mother.

Lindsay J. Jeffers
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I was surprised when I first went into the field. I thought [secondary] teachers would be teaching writing the way I was learning it.” -Erika Kramer, preservice teacher


The substantial gap from university methods courses to secondary classrooms is problematic for preservice teachers (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Corcoran, 1981; Dickson & Smagorinsky, 2006; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005; Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004). This is true for even well-prepared preservice teachers like Erika Kramer (Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013). Her experience is similar to what many preservice teachers face: a substantial “nonalignment” from university preparation to secondary classrooms (Corcoran, 1981; Dickson & Smagorinsky, 2006; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; McDonald et al., 2014; Smagorinsky, Gibson, Bickmore, Moore, & Cook, 2004). This nonalignment, likely a result of the historical lack of communication between secondary schools and institutions of higher education (Marshall & Smith, 1997), can be distressing to preservice and new teachers. As preservice and new teachers develop their new identities as teaching professionals, many are simultaneously trying to negotiate theory, practice, and values from university coursework into their new secondary classroom environments.
The transition from student to teacher, often taking place for the first time through mentorships coordinated by a university, is notoriously challenging. Though Erika Kramer was surprised by the disparity between her writing pedagogy courses and how she was asked to teach in an eighth-grade classroom, her experience is likely not so surprising for those of us who are intensely familiar with both settings. The gap that often exists between the university and secondary schools is no secret (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; Marshall & Smith, 1997).

Perhaps another reason for the disparity between university coursework and the pedagogy of secondary teachers is the absence of voices from the secondary sphere in research and scholarship. University coursework may provide a strong background in English pedagogical content knowledge, but the mentorship attained from field experiences also contributes significantly to the pedagogical content knowledge acquired by our preservice teachers (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Goerling, 2013; Grossman, 1990; McCann, 2013). This mentorship and the experiences gained from practice in the field are essential for new teacher preparation. Field experiences are intended to help our preservice teachers make the difficult transition from student of pedagogy to practicing teacher.

While mentor teachers\(^1\) are sometimes included in studies about student teaching mentorships (Britzman, 1991; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Goerling, 2013; Sudzina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican, 1997; Zeek, Foote, & Walker, 2001), their opinions are rarely solicited in studies.

\(^1\) Though 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).
that attempt to address the gap between the two institutions and the challenge of negotiating this
gap. This absence of secondary mentor teacher voices is troubling. We cannot help our student
teachers and new teachers make the difficult transition from university student to secondary
school teacher without involving the secondary teachers who mentor them through this
transition.

Finders, Crank, and Kramer’s article is one of few recent publications in English
Education to address field experiences and mentor teachers. The stated purpose of the article
was to share Kramer’s complex experience as a preservice teacher negotiating her field
experience at a local middle school while working with university methods instructors Finders
and Crank. The article also aimed to address the, “vast gap between university preparation and
the realities of the high school or middle school curricula” (11). The authors wrote,

Erika’s surprise with the expectations for her success in the field is disturbing. For new teachers, understanding what is expected of them in the context in which they work is essential for their success and for the success of their students. Yet we in higher education may tend to ignore or degrade the contexts which our preservice teachers enter as they begin their field experiences...We, most often, design our coursework around theoretical and pedagogical research-based writing pedagogy, ignoring the realities of the contexts into which they [preservice teachers] enter (6).

Finders, Crank, and Kramer recognized that knowledge of the context of field experiences was
“essential” for success of both preservice teachers and their students. But they also believed that
the secondary classroom contexts of field experiences have been often ignored or even degraded.
When that is true, the tendency by higher education to ignore secondary classroom contexts of
preservice and future teachers must contribute to the nonalignment described by these
researchers.
To address this gap, Finders, Crank, and Kramer encouraged university methods instructors to spend time discussing with their students the disconnects that may be evident between theory and practice, making the gap between “research-based teaching and the actuality of the English classroom” a central issue to address in university methods coursework and helping preservice teachers to “practice negotiating the gap in a safe environment” (9). Unfortunately, there was no suggestion in this article to reach out to secondary mentor teachers, to work through the gap between university coursework and the “actuality of the English classroom” together. No effort was made to include mentor teachers in the research, even though the research addressed student teachers’ work in secondary classrooms. The voices of the mentor teachers who provided field experiences for preservice teachers were excluded as the university instructors attempted to address the disconnect on their own.

In fact, it’s quite difficult to find research on field experiences in English Language Arts where mentor teacher voices are included and valued. Like Finders, Crank, and Kramer’s recent publication, most of the research focused on preservice teachers in field experiences has been written about mentor teachers rather than with mentor teachers. Research on field experiences and teacher preparation in English Education has generally been authored by instructors of higher education, sometimes in partnership with preservice teachers, but not as often in cooperation with the mentor teachers who provided field experiences. Although the voices of secondary ELA mentor teachers are often missing, their voices are valuable, and they do provide important context that is significant to the future teaching placements of our preservice teachers.

This project aims to address the university-secondary gap described by Finders, Crank, and Kramer as a, “vast gap between university preparation and the realities of the high school or
middle school curricula” (11). My research attempts to bridge the gap between university methods and secondary pedagogical practice by including the voices of the secondary mentor teachers who work with preservice teachers. I focus on the student-teaching experience as an important transition between university studies of pedagogy and pedagogical practice in secondary schools, knowing that this transition is difficult and this struggle often continues into the first years of teaching. By discussing this issue with secondary mentor teachers, I hope to bring respect and awareness to an often-missing perspective of teacher preparation.

New Teachers Bridging the Gap

I came to this dissertation topic out of an intense desire to help new teachers. Teaching is incredibly demanding and is often solitary work. Despite spending almost every minute of the day surrounded by students, teachers largely plan, teach, and assess alone, and English teachers in particular spend hours of their own time dedicated to the profession, reading and responding to student writing. Working with children, the stakes are incredibly high and the pay is not. But teachers also surround themselves with what really matters every day. They have the power to influence the trajectory of a student’s life. Their value is beyond description.

Induction into this profession is particularly difficult, and even well-prepared new teachers struggle, attempting to catch enough glimmers of the beauty to remain in the profession while desperately trying to keep up with the work load. (Berchini, 2016; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). One aspect of the difficulty facing new teachers is the large chasm that exists between secondary schools and universities (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; Marshall & Smith, 1997; McDonald et al., 2014). And while university
scholars consistently contribute to research and scholarship on topics related to the preparation and success of new teachers, the mentor teachers who actually work alongside our new teachers, often mentoring them through their first year, rarely do. In fact, the voices of highly qualified, excellent teachers with years of experience teaching secondary English are largely absent from any conversations about teacher training and induction. Mentor teachers have wisdom and experience to offer. Why are those voices missing from research in English Education?

Two Elements of Teacher Training

Traditional teacher training programs consist of two major components: university coursework and field experience. While pedagogical content knowledge is derived from multiple sources, perhaps the most influential are coursework and fieldwork (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). Ideally, the methods courses introduce students to important research on teaching and learning in the field of English, preparing them to think critically about pedagogy and classroom practice. Then, field experiences allow preservice teachers to put this learning into practice under the direction of a mentor. Instead, there is a general disconnect between the two components of teacher training programs, and our future teachers are suffering the consequences. And while extensive scholarship is available from the postsecondary instructors who provide the university coursework component of teacher preparation, the voices of the mentor teachers who provide field experience are hard to find. In fact, mentor teachers’ voices are essentially missing from conversations in the field of English Education despite the unarguable importance of field experiences in teacher preparation.
The field of English Education consistently and rightfully defends the importance of pedagogical coursework in the training of an English teacher. Pamela Grossman’s research, published in *The Making of a Teacher: Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Education* (1990), was an important contribution to the field, comparing new teachers with and without pedagogical training to demonstrate the significance of pedagogical content knowledge. Grossman found that study participants with a background in educational methodology in the teaching of English were more successful as teachers than those without pedagogical training because they focused on connecting content to students. This work provided a rationale for content-specific methods courses.

Methods courses specific to subject areas strive to break the conservative pattern of teaching how one was taught by focusing on the development of pedagogical content knowledge in new teachers. These courses consider theories and practices and engage teachers to think in terms of student learning goals (Grossman, 1990; Smagorinsky, 1995). Due to research in pedagogical content knowledge, teacher preparation programs consider content-specific methods courses to be an essential component of an education degree (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). In 1995, Smagorinsky and Whiting published *How English Teachers Get Taught*, a closer look at a collection of methods classes for future English teachers at various universities. Current contributions to the field continue to provide scholarship about what teacher training looks like at the university and how to better prepare university students for a future career in education (Hochstetler, 2007; Tulley, 2013).

Field experiences, including student-teaching, allow preservice teachers to put their semesters of preparation into practice under the direction and supervision of a currently-
employed mentor teacher. In order to provide preservice teachers with student teaching opportunities, universities depend on current teachers willing to share their classrooms and their expertise with preservice teachers. These mentor teachers are very significant to the development of successful beginning teachers. A 2002 article by Koerner, O’Connell Rust, and Baumgartner began, “Most teachers claim that the most important elements in their professional education were the school experiences found in student teaching.” Thomas McCann (2013) wrote, “My recent work in teacher preparation has convinced me that so much of the development of the new teacher will depend on the quality of the mentoring and modeling from the cooperating teacher during the candidate’s clinical [student-teaching] experience.” Christian Goerling (2013) echoed this sentiment, acknowledging that the “quality of teachers” graduating from the university “relies profoundly on excellent MTs [mentor teachers from student-teaching experiences] and the ongoing productive relationship between all parties involved.” He concluded, “perhaps there is no bigger influence on the future teachers than their mentors…”

According to McCann and Goerling, 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. It’s clear that these experiences are important to our preservice teachers as well. In fact, Whitney, Olan, and Frederickson’s 2013 study found that students had a tendency to value real classroom experience over theory and methodology learned in coursework, “priz[ing] experience over other forms of learning about teaching” (186).
Addressing the Gap

Despite the importance of the student-teaching experience for our preservice teachers, the connections between university coursework and student teaching experience may be minimal. Finders, Crank, and Kramer lamented the “nonalignment” between coursework and student-teaching contexts. The student teacher participant, Erika Kramer, was “surprised” when she entered her student teaching experience, because she found that the methods she had learned in her writing pedagogy course did not align with what she was asked to teach in her student-teaching placement. Finders, Crank, and Kramer noted a significant gap between methods classes and “the actuality of the English classroom” (11).

Although the student-teaching experience should facilitate communication between the university and the secondary schools, communication between the two institutions is often lacking. According to Marshall and Smith (1997), this gap has existed between colleges and secondary schools since, at least, 1890. The Conference on English Education Summit of 2005 also noted this “common gulf,” and advised that universities form relationships with secondary-school mentors, helping mentor teachers to “feel empowered to be involved...” rather than “disconnected” (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006). While studies acknowledge that student-teaching under the leadership of a mentor teacher is an essential component of preservice teacher education, the student-teaching experience taking place in the secondary schools is too often disconnected from the teacher preparation courses taken at the university. Despite the significance of student-teaching experiences, the mentor teachers who work with university students as mentors have virtually no voice in English Education scholarship.
This presents a major problem in teacher preparation. Essentially, the Best Practice methodology we wholeheartedly embrace in our methods classes is not always transferring into real teaching scenarios, and methods classes often are not involved collaboratively with the teachers who provide field experiences. If we really want to create a more coherent approach that combines theory with practice for preservice teachers, we must include mentor teachers in our conversations about teacher preparation.

The absence of mentor teacher voices in teacher preparation is also harmful for new teachers, whose retention is a concern across district and state lines (Bickmore, 2013; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). 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.” Thirty years later, teachers continue to struggle through their first years of teaching (Athanases, 2013; Bentley, 2013; Berchini, 2016; Hamilton, 2003; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Though university-directed studies have weighed in on this issue by studying mentoring relationships and examining ELA methodology classes, the voices of the mentor teachers who work with preservice and new ELA teachers are missing from the conversation.

We need the voices of mentor teachers in the field because they can provide essential insight into the reality of teaching at this moment. While many English Education faculty have years of classroom teaching experiences, they likely have left the secondary classroom in order to pursue careers in higher education and may maintain only loose connections with the local secondary schools. We need to hear from the teachers who teach side-by-side with our new and
preservice teachers. Bentley (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 turn them into real teachers in real schools.

In higher education, it’s easy to overlook what really happens in secondary classrooms. As we’ve seen, there is little inclusion of mentor teachers in English Language Arts research. Studies that do address mentoring and field experiences often do not actually involve mentor teachers. Perhaps worse, they do not seek to include mentors as significant voices in teacher preparation. Without the important voices of mentor teachers, the gap between university teacher preparation programs and secondary classrooms may continue to widen.

These 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?

**Exploring the Gap: Student, Teacher, Researcher**

By all definitions and indications, I was a very well-prepared new teacher. I graduated Summa Cum Laude, easily passing state-required content area examinations and earning certification in English and Spanish, grades 6-12. As an undergraduate, I had spent three years tutoring students in grades 4-6 through a grant program at an urban school. I also translated documents for the after-school program and sometimes substitute taught in that same urban district. After a study-abroad semester in Spain, I spent my final undergraduate year tutoring ESL students, all Spanish-speaking, from a neighboring suburban district. I took my courses on Tuesdays and Thursdays and spent Mondays and Wednesdays at a middle and high school,
tutoring students and substitute teaching. I also participated in parent-teacher conferences as a translator and regularly consulted with classroom teachers about the work of the ESL students. I felt confident that I was gaining important experiences in education, spending 10-20 hours every week working with students.

My student-teaching experience placed me in a smaller suburban district operating on a block schedule of 85-minutes classes. I taught first block American Literature for eleventh grade students, third block tenth grade English, and fourth block tenth grade English. My mentor teacher was a large man with a presence in the building. While I taught, he sketched football plays and worked on union matters. As soon as the bell rang, he was on his way to football practice. He was tall and commanded respect from the students, but when the school switched from regular 60-minute classes to block 85-minute classes, his pedagogy didn’t change. He used the last twenty-five minutes of every class for homework and chatting with the students. Due to some union matters, he was frustrated with school leadership. The classroom had thirty desks and a broken bookcase. The walls were bare. While my mentor teacher provided a lot of support with classroom management, especially in the fourth block class where I struggled, he provided very little pedagogical support. At the end of the semester, he asked for some of my tests and projects to re-use in the future and wrote me a great recommendation letter.

While I constantly wished for more feedback from my mentor, I couldn’t have asked for more freedom. The classes were mine to plan, teach, and grade. I was even allowed to choose a short novel from the English department book storage shelves when my American Literature students begged for something other than the anthology. We read *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*, by Stephen Crane, and talked about immigration and the cycle of poverty. I was thrilled that my
students had expressed their desire to read a novel and excited to be teaching something outside of the usual curriculum. The students in my American Literature class, which had been mine to teach since the first days of school, were disappointed when I completed my semester of student teaching. As our last day approached, students asked if I could stay, and one sweet student even asked the principal if there were any openings. I still remember the names of many of the students in the class.

Just a few weeks later, after my December graduation, I was contacted by the World Language methods instructor at the university. There was an opening at Oakwood Public Schools for a second semester Spanish teacher. The district has three high schools, and the job involved teaching two classes of Spanish II at one high school, then driving to another high school to teach three more afternoon Spanish II classes. Despite the driving and lack of a “home base,” it was a great assignment for a new teacher. All five classes used the same textbook and curriculum, so I had one class to teach five times a day. Since I only had one class to prep, I was able to devote all of my time and energy to that one prep. Teaching the class multiple times each day, with a break between each school to reflect and revise, allowed me to make changes when plans didn’t work well. It was harder to develop rapport with colleagues at two large high schools, and I often missed meetings driving from one school to another. But it was a great start.

In the spring, a full-time position opened up. It was a dream job for a double-major: three classes of Spanish levels II and III, and two classes of English Language Arts. And I had the whole summer to prepare. I was thrilled!
The First Year: A Survival Story

I spent most of August decorating my new classroom and attending the new teacher orientation. After the first few weeks in my own classroom with my own students, I realized I was in way over my head. I was overwhelmed by the meetings and professional development requirements and new information. I was lost on acronyms and the meaning of differentiated instruction, and I had no idea what to do with the athletic eligibility lists that kept popping up in my email. I had three preps, so I would divide up my weekends, spending all of Friday evening prepping plans for Spanish II, then spending all of Saturday on Spanish III. I hoped to find a few hours on Saturday nights to relax and catch up with friends, then I would spend all day Sunday working on plans for twelfth grade English. I could hardly bear to lose a day of planning and grading to make weekend plans. If I visited my family, I had to limit my time with them. Often, I had to read the material, learn the material, plan activities for in-class time, create homework, quizzes, tests, projects, etc. and grade student work on weeknights and weekends. I was constantly exhausted, running on enthusiasm and willpower, but unsure how I would make it to Thanksgiving break.

I know, now, that I was not alone. In fact, this is a somewhat typical experience for a first-year teacher (Carey-Webb, 2001; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). The work load itself is tremendous and crushing, sometimes even for experienced teachers. In the midst of survival mode, when I felt that I could barely keep my head above the waves of work, my “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981) kicked in and I forgot to rely on what I had learned in methods classes. While I remember a few shining moments, I mostly remember constantly thinking that I needed to do better, but there was no time. I just wanted to have lesson plans that
kept students occupied and papers graded on time. Teaching was a matter of keeping my head above water.

In the spring of that first year, I enrolled in an Invitational Summer Institute hosted by our local National Writing Project site. Fortunately, the ISI brought me back to what I had learned in methods courses, reiterating Best Practice and reminding me that we are all writers learning together. I felt renewed and reconnected with what teaching could look like. After that summer, I enrolled in a graduate program in English Education. Going back to school transformed my teaching one unit at a time. I incorporated service learning, cultural studies, and writers’ notebooks in my classes, gaining a reputation for innovative and creative teaching practices while also receiving highly effective evaluations from my administration.

**Integrating Theory and Practice**

Despite this success, I still struggled to reconcile theory-based ideals with the reality of the school district in which I taught. When it was time for the English department to embark on curriculum revision, I jumped into the process, pushing for new material like *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2004) and *An Ordinary Man* (Rusesabagina, 2006), a memoir of the Rwandan genocide. I learned how to teach grammar in the context of student writing in my graduate courses, but I continued to struggle with the English department. I had to give a common final exam, and half of the exam was identifying punctuation errors, clauses, and compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences.

In my third year of teaching, I remember sitting down with the principal, a former English teacher at the school. I said that I was frustrated because I knew the best way to teach
writing, and I was aware of what would be most effective for my students, but it was impossible to carry out in the context of my job. The classes were too big, I was teaching six classes each day, and there was so much curriculum to cover. I really wanted to help my sophomores become better writers, but I could hardly find time to read what they wrote, much less respond in an effective way. He did not have a magical solution. While I greatly admired the professors I worked with in my graduate program, many of them were quite far removed from the reality of my classroom. And while I applied a lot of what I learned in those graduate classes to my teaching in both English and Spanish, I continued to feel a disconnect between the university world of theory and the real world of teaching.

**Teacher and Mentor**

After completing an MA in English Education, I responded to a request for mentors for pre-interns from Southwest State University\(^2\), a large research university and leader in teacher preparation located near our school. The pre-interns were required to spend ten hours a week in my classroom, observing and assisting. I enjoyed conversations about teaching and learning with the pre-interns, and they often volunteered to help grade quizzes or run copies. I provided an end-of-semester evaluation based on timeliness, professional dress and demeanor, and responsibility. I did not evaluate anything pedagogical, and the pre-interns were not required to teach lessons, though a few volunteered to work with groups of students.

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\(^2\) Pseudonyms have been used for Oakwood Schools and Southwest State University.
One of my pre-interns, Dave, requested a placement in my class for his internship\(^3\) the following semester, and I agreed to be the mentor for his student-teaching placement. The semester went well, despite Dave’s decision midway through the spring to apply to graduate school rather than pursue a career in secondary education, and mentoring was a positive experience for me. However, I was really shocked at the lack of communication from the university. I received a couple of form letters about the internship placement and a copy of the midterm and final evaluation forms. There were two meetings for all mentor teachers. We were given examples of student-teacher observation forms and a few mimeographed (they were really that old!) handouts about effective teaching strategies. The university coordinator stopped by sometimes to ask how things were going, and Dave was observed on two or three occasions. Dave was majoring in Spanish and applying to graduate school for Spanish, so he was teaching my Spanish I and Spanish III courses while I continued to teach my English 12 and creative writing classes. The university coordinator who observed his teaching didn’t speak any Spanish at all. I had no other contact with the university.

As I continued to mentor student teachers in subsequent years, I began to think more deeply about the student-teaching process and the lack of connection between Oakwood schools and Southwest State University. There were generally over a dozen interns placed in Oakwood South High School in any given semester, yet no one at the university really knew what Oakwood teachers were doing in their classrooms, and teachers at Oakwood didn’t have any idea how Southwest State’s students had been prepared. My undergraduate and graduate experience

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\(^3\) At Southwest State, the semester-long student teaching placement is called an internship, and student teachers are called interns. Because student-teacher is a more common term, I use that term as well.
at Southwest State gave me more insight than most teachers regarding their methods courses and program requirements, but even my experience was somewhat dated. No one asked for our opinions about the program or about the preparedness of the student teachers who were placed in our classrooms. Passing the internship was the last requirement for graduation and a degree in education from Southwest State University, but it was very disconnected from the rest of the teacher preparation program despite a long history of student teacher placements in Oakwood.

**Teacher Researcher**

After ten years at Oakwood South High School, I applied for a leave of absence to begin a doctorate in English Education. I had earned a teaching assistantship at Southwest State, and I was very excited about teaching the undergraduate methods classes. I wanted to prepare student teachers to enter real secondary classrooms with real students in real teaching scenarios. I thought about the theory and writers who had most influenced my teaching. And I also thought about trying to build bridges between the university and the secondary schools. My colleagues were excited about the opportunity as well. They hoped that my teaching of some of the methods classes would lead to student-teachers who were better prepared for teaching in real English classrooms. They, too, hoped for more connection between secondary classrooms and higher education.

These past fourteen years, from first-year teacher to methods instructor, lead me back to my goals for this project. I hope to help new teachers navigate the transition from university student to secondary teacher by discussing the gap that has long existed between secondary
classrooms and higher education. I believe that this gap, or disconnect, leads to important implications about how we can better prepare future teachers.

In order to address this gap, and help new teachers transition into secondary classrooms, the field of English Education needs to reach out to secondary teachers. My research brings forth the voices of mentor teachers in secondary English Language Arts. Through a series of interviews with secondary mentor teachers, I explored perceptions of student-teachers, of teacher preparation, and of the secondary school-university connection. Through the interview responses, I discovered ways that we might better prepare preservice teachers for their field experiences. I anticipated that soliciting the experiences of mentor teachers could help everyone involved in teacher preparation to think more critically about the secondary environments our new teachers cross into and how we can help them successfully make the transition into secondary classrooms.

I also wanted to gain the mentor teachers’ perspective on the disconnect existing between university preparation and secondary classrooms. Mentor teachers are rarely consulted regarding teacher preparation despite their expertise in secondary teacher mentoring, and I suspected they would have some good ideas about ways to bridge the existing gap and bring about a better partnership between secondary education and higher education. Put simply, I wanted to bring the experiences and expertise of these mentor teachers into the ongoing conversation about teacher preparation. The field experience mentorship is an essential component of teacher preparation, and the voices of mentor teachers are essential to the field. This dissertation brings forth their voices.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship in the Field of English Education

In most programs, teacher preparation consists of three components. Students in a traditional teacher preparation program take a variety of general courses in teaching, including courses in human development, learning environments, special education, instructional design, and the history of public education. In addition to the general courses mentioned, future teachers also take methods courses in their content areas. In Secondary English Language Arts, methods courses generally focus on the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature. These courses prepare teachers with pedagogical content knowledge specific to the teaching of English at the secondary level. While the body of research in the general area of teaching and learning is vast and significant, my research focused on the teaching of English Language Arts at the secondary level. For this reason, my research draws more heavily on studies that are specific to the teaching of English, research comprising the field of English Education.

In 2010, Leslie S. Rush and Lisa Scherff, new editors of English Education, the primary journal of our field, pointed out the “widened scope” of English Education as a field and hoped to “take an active role” in the CEE’s 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). As a field, English Education focuses on the “preparation, support, and continuing education” of English teachers at all levels. English educators and researchers in higher education provide an important body of scholarship on the preparation of English teachers. However, Rush and Scherff recognized that other voices are also significant to the preparation of teachers, and therefore significant to the field of English Education and to the journal. The editors advocated for the inclusion of classroom teachers, including mentor/cooperating teachers, in the conversation about teacher preparation. They believed that classroom teachers should contribute to a journal that focuses on the preparation of English teachers. They also noticed that these voices were often absent. While *English Education* publishes many studies on student teachers and student teaching, the voices of mentor teachers continue to be hard to find. Why aren’t classroom teachers involved in research and writing about the preparation of future teachers?

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. In this journal, also focused on the teaching of English, the voices of mentor teachers are hard to find.

This demonstrates that, while there is substantial research about teacher preparation in English Education, and many studies do include field experiences, the mentors who provide this field experience are largely absent in research. While some studies did solicit the voices of mentor teachers regarding their work as mentors and as teachers of secondary English (Britzman,
very few included the perspective of mentor teachers on the topic of teacher preparation. The importance of the mentor teachers is evident in research, but the wisdom of these teachers is often overlooked. No one seems to be asking mentor teachers how we can better prepare future secondary English teachers.

In chapter one, I introduced the concepts of a disconnect or gap between secondary and postsecondary institutions, and the “transition shock” that results when preservice teachers transition from university coursework to fieldwork in secondary classrooms (Corcoran, 1981). In this chapter, I will discuss these concepts as they relate to the scholarship that informs them. Three areas of scholarship informed and influenced my study. The first area is scholarship on the preparation of secondary English teachers. The second area is scholarship that explores the transition from university coursework to fieldwork in secondary classrooms, and specifically addresses the gap, or disconnect, between the university and secondary schools. A third area of scholarship discusses the role of mentor teachers in teacher preparation. My research draws significantly on all three of these areas, exploring the perspective of secondary mentor teachers in a qualitative study about teacher preparation and the relationship between universities and secondary schools.

The three areas of scholarship in Figure 2.1 are all important to English Education as a field because they address the concerns of educators who prepare future teachers of secondary English Language Arts. Scholarship about teacher preparation includes research about pedagogical content knowledge and methods courses, professional identity construction for preservice teachers, and fieldwork. All are significant aspects of learning to teach secondary
English. The second area of scholarship explores the well-documented disconnect or gap between university coursework and secondary fieldwork. This is an area of concern in our field because we want to find out how students transfer knowledge gained in coursework to experiences with real students. Finally, the third area of scholarship identifies the role of the mentor teacher in helping students to make this transition from coursework to fieldwork. My study provides new knowledge about the experiences of mentor teachers and also brings their perspectives forward regarding preservice teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, their ability to put theory into practice with real students, and the necessity of establishing relationships between university methods instructors and secondary teachers.
The Preparation of Secondary English Teachers

Pamela Grossman’s book, *The Making of a Teacher* (1990), provided our field with an important rationale for methodology courses specific to the teaching of English Language Arts at the secondary level. Through class observations and interviews, Grossman studied six new teachers in a multiple case study. All of the teachers were successful graduates with an English degree from a prestigious university. Three teachers had completed a traditional teacher
preparation program in English Education, which included classes in curriculum and instruction in English, along with a methods class in the teaching of writing (132). The other three had completed a degree in English without a focus on education.

Grossman’s research demonstrated a significant difference between the knowledge of a “subject matter expert” and an experienced teacher, whose subject matter expertise includes pedagogical understanding. Her study essentially tested the necessity of pedagogical content knowledge in English against the assumption that an intelligent individual knowledgeable in areas of English Language Arts would be inherently capable of teaching without the need for a background in pedagogy. Grossman found that new teachers with a background in pedagogical content knowledge were more effective in the classroom because they were able to connect English Language Arts content to their secondary students. This research provided an important rationale for the existence of content area methods courses in teacher preparation programs.

Grossman identified four aspects of pedagogical content knowledge related to the teaching of English. This body of pedagogical content knowledge is what helped the new teachers in Grossman’s study to connect their subject area knowledge in English to their students, helping them to teach them more effectively than those new teachers who did not have a background in pedagogy. The first component was “knowledge and beliefs about the purposes for teaching a subject at different grade levels” (8). A second component was students’ prior knowledge of a subject area. As they make decisions about how to approach a concept or lesson, teachers consider what students might already know about a topic, as well as what students might struggle to understand. A third component was curricular knowledge, which Grossman described as “knowledge of curriculum materials available for teaching particular subject matter”
(8). She noted that this includes “horizontal and vertical curricula,” or knowledge about curriculum that is typically addressed at one grade level (for example, novels and writings generally taught in ninth grade English) as well as the ways that curricula connects to past and future studies (for example, what students have already read and written in middle school classes and what they will be expected to read and write in subsequent high school ELA classes).

Finally, pedagogical content knowledge also included instructional strategies for teaching in a subject area. Grossman noted that “beginning teachers are still in the process of developing a repertoire of instructional strategies and representations” (9). In fact, beginning teachers are likely still acquiring knowledge in all of these four areas. Along with the pedagogical content knowledge specific to teaching English Language Arts, Grossman added that teachers also consider the context of their specific school setting, which includes knowledge about the students and the community.

While Grossman’s research demonstrated the importance of pedagogical content knowledge for future teachers, her work also revealed the complexities involved in the process of gaining this knowledge and applying it. The new English teachers who had benefitted from methods courses and teacher training were more likely to consider student learning outcomes, set realistic learning goals, choose appropriate literature, and connect to the lives of adolescent students. Grossman concluded that teachers need, “explicit knowledge about the purposes and strategies involved in teaching particular subject matter in secondary schools as well as knowledge about how students learn specific content” (143). As Grossman explained, understanding a Shakespeare play and knowing how to engage secondary students in that play are distinct abilities. The latter skill requires a set of instructional strategies, along with an
understanding of the purpose for teaching literature to adolescent students (143). Grossman believed that methods courses in content areas could “help teachers construct conceptions of what it means to teach a subject” (143).

Grossman’s work established the value of methods courses in English, helping these courses, and the teaching of pedagogical content knowledge in the area of English, to become an explicit focus of the field of English Education. Much research has followed Grossman’s work to explore the pedagogical content knowledge she described. Smagorinsky and Whiting (1995) looked at syllabi from methods courses across the United States to determine how pedagogical content knowledge was taught, providing syllabi and other documents to document the practices of methods courses in our field. Subsequent studies provide analyses of methods courses in California (Hochstetler, 2007) and Ohio (Tulley, 2013).

Grossman also believed that coursework in pedagogical content knowledge must be connected to secondary classrooms (144). While her study highlighted the importance of coursework in teacher education, Grossman also advocated the linking of field experiences to coursework (144). She stated that teacher education coursework and field experiences were not closely linked in typical teacher education programs, and continued, “we have much to learn from the wisdom of experienced practitioners regarding pedagogical content knowledge” (146).

Inspired by Grossman, I wanted my research to take a closer look at teacher preparation, which includes both coursework and fieldwork, and the way that these two aspects of teacher preparation are linked. I also wanted to learn from the “wisdom of experienced practitioners” (146). The focus of my research was teacher preparation in secondary English Language Arts, and the subjects of my research were experienced practitioners in the field. In reading
Grossman’s work, I was also inspired by the way Grossman allowed the teachers in her case study to have a voice. A significant portion of her data quoted directly from the teachers in her case studies, and readers are able to hear what real secondary English teachers believed and experienced in their classrooms.

Thomas McCann, Larry Johannessen, and Bernard Ricca’s *Supporting Beginning English Teachers* (2005) also significantly impacted my research. In the Foreword to the book, Jeffrey Wilhelm commended the authors for writing a book that addressed the preparation of English teachers, which he described as “the greatest and most neglected educational challenge of our time” (x). He also noted the importance of helping preservice teachers transition into the field, especially due the overwhelming nature of the job (x). The authors focused on beginning teachers with the intent of addressing the challenges that beginning teachers face and the retention problem that results from those challenges. McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca anticipated that portraying the concerns and challenges of new teachers could help universities and secondary schools to be better informed and perhaps to better prepare their new teachers. They also hoped that preservice teachers might see how other beginning teachers were coping with these challenges.

*Supporting Beginning English Teachers* discussed the most challenging aspects of being a new English teacher. Their participants described the “monumental workload,” working “twelve-thirteen-fourteen-hour days,” the “clerical challenges” of attendance and paperwork, and expectations that were “drastically different” than the real job of teaching six classes a day, five days a week. The authors interviewed secondary English student teachers and novice teachers (those with less than five years of experience) over a two-year period, looking for common
concerns and coping strategies among the teachers. While focusing on the experiences of these new secondary English teachers, they also looked for ways in which teacher education programs could better prepare new teachers to “anticipate and manage the stresses and frustrations of the job” (10).

The new teachers in their study described their challenges, but also made suggestions for other first-year teachers and for school administrators. Among those suggestions, new teachers discussed the importance of a “solid mentoring program,” explaining that supportive interactions with colleagues and administrators was important to the development of the new teachers (84). Additionally, the authors concluded that beginning teachers, university instructors, mentors, and supervisors should all be familiar with the “pattern of experience” that new teachers described in their first year of teaching: the exhilaration of the first weeks, the “end of the honeymoon” that occurred by late September, the “debilitating fatigue” of October and November, the “reenergized” feeling of the teachers after winter break, the hope of spring, as new teachers began to look forward to the end of the year, as well as the difficulty of ending the school year, and feeling “drained” by the marathon experience of teaching (56-78). The study found that many of the frustrations of new teachers stemmed from the “shock of unexpected experiences.” (85). Perhaps, if they had been aware of the common pattern of experience and the challenges described by the new teachers in the study, preservice teachers might avoid that shock. The final chapter is a summary of recommendations, essentially ways that those in the English Education community can support our new teachers. The authors’ first recommendation was for universities and secondary schools to work as partners to help preservice teachers “experience the realities of teaching” (158).
Primarily, McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca’s work was important to me because it spoke to the challenges of new teachers in secondary English Language Arts. I came to my study with a goal of helping preservice teachers make the transition from coursework to real teaching because I knew firsthand the challenges of a new teacher. I focused on student teaching as the bridge experience. I wanted to learn more about secondary English teacher preparation, and I felt that a closer look at the transition from coursework to fieldwork might reveal some insight into how I could better support teachers throughout their induction into the profession. *Supporting Beginning English Teachers* provided me with additional understanding and evidence to add to my own experiences.

This book was also significant to my research in its approach and methodology. The authors collected their data through interviews with student teachers and new teachers. They analyzed the interviews to find common concerns and issues based on the lived experiences of new teachers in the field. The authors also portrayed those experiences by using extended, direct quotes from the teachers themselves, giving these new teachers a voice. They genuinely cared about the experiences of the new teachers, respecting their feelings and frustrations. They also valued the new teachers’ advice and suggestions for improvement in teacher preparation programs. I was inspired by these researchers because of their appreciation for the work of teachers in the field and their belief that there is much to learn from them.

Some additional research and scholarship that informed my project in this area includes Erinn Bentley, Allison Morway, and Tammie Short’s (2013) “wish list” method for supporting new teachers. Echoing the new teachers in McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca’s (2005) study, Bentley recalled her own challenges as a new teacher, from practical (operating the copy
machine) to theoretical (increasing student participation through language games). Bentley created a wish list to help her focus on resolving these specific challenges. As a university-based English Educator, Bentley used the wish list framework to provide support for Morway and Short, intern teachers of Bentley’s teacher preparation program. Bentley found that creating the wish list helped her and the new teachers in her program articulate their specific needs and concerns.

Like McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) and Bentley, Morway, and Short (2013), Steven Z. Athanases (2013) also found that new teachers were easily overwhelmed by their work load and their struggles as new teachers. They tended to focus on themselves and their own performance as teachers, reflecting on classroom management and curriculum rather than on student learning. Athanases concluded that it took time for new teachers to develop a “student-learning focus” and recommended that mentors of new teachers help beginning teachers move toward a consideration of student learning through inquiry and directed conversations (40).

Steven Bickmore (2013) also addressed the personal and professional needs of novice teachers, citing the documented difficulties of new teachers who, “struggled with classroom management, the endless stacks of papers, the demands of preparation, and extracurricular assignments” (49). His solution called for collaborative co-mentoring between novice and veteran teachers.

Smagorinsky and Whiting’s (1995) research on English methods courses also impacted my research. Smagorinsky and Whiting found that the most effective methods courses engaged preservice teachers in active, situated learning, where students would have a chance to put pedagogical content knowledge into practice by creating and collaborating as if they were
already professionals in the field. These experiences also provide a transition from theory to practice, helping students to think of themselves as teachers, and are significant precursors to field experiences. Similarly, Bush and Zuidema (2010) encouraged preservice teachers to take on the identity of a professional in their writing. In methods courses, preservice teachers practiced writing lesson plans, sub plans, emails to parents, letters for parent and student audiences, and emails to colleagues. By writing from the stance of a secondary teacher, composing in these genres and considering student, parent, and colleague audiences, preservice teachers practiced making the transition from student to professional.

Meghan Barnes and Peter Smagorinsky (2016) also recently studied the “myriad of factors” that contributed to new teacher preparation in three university teacher education programs (339). They found that preservice teachers were certainly influenced by their coursework and their field experiences, but also were influenced by other factors, such as state mandates, federal policies, local culture, student dispositions, past experiences in education, their own backgrounds, and methods of instruction used in their college courses. This created a “pedagogical dissonance” in which neither university coursework nor fieldwork provided a completely unitary method of effective teaching. Of course, there is no one effective method of teaching, and preservice teachers are shaped by beliefs about effective teaching from a variety of sources. Barnes and Smagorinsky noted that recommendations for teacher education programs often “assume a singular vision” for improvement of teacher preparation programs at the university level (352). Instead, it’s evident that a variety of factors contribute to the preparation of new teachers. They recommended that teacher preparation programs recognize the absence of one correct way to develop teaching skills and guide preservice teachers to reflect on how
various factors impact and influence them as teachers (353). Each of these studies contributed information about the complex task of preparing future teachers, from methods courses for preservice teachers to the professional development that occurs throughout student teaching and the first years of a new teacher’s career.

As seen in Figure 2.2, *The Making of a Teacher* (Grossman, 1990) and *Supporting Beginning English Teachers* (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005) are both significant contributions to scholarship about teacher preparation. Grossman’s work demonstrated the significance of coursework in English pedagogy, as evidenced by new teachers’ ability to apply their pedagogical content knowledge to secondary students. McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca also studied new teachers, asking teachers in the field to discuss the challenges they faced and proposing ways for English Educators to better prepare preservice teachers for those challenges. Other studies spoke to the challenges of new teachers and the role of methods courses, university-based mentoring, and veteran-teacher mentoring to help preservice teachers become professional educators. In my research, I also wanted to learn from teachers in the field. I knew that mentor teachers would have important insight into ways that we could better prepare and support the teachers who entered their classrooms to student teach.
From this scholarship on teacher preparation, we can also conclude that the transition from university courses to teaching in secondary schools is difficult to navigate. The existence of a disconnect (Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013), gap (Marshall & Smith, 1997; McDonald et al., 2014), or gulf (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006) is evident in research. Because I wanted to explore the relationship between coursework and fieldwork and the impact on teacher preparation, studies that attempted to address this disconnect, gap, or even gulf, were also significant to my work.

Figure 2.2 Scholarship on the Preparation of Secondary English Teachers
From University Coursework to Secondary Classrooms: The Disconnect

At its 2005 Summit, a group of the Commission on English Education (CEE) met to discuss the preparation of teachers of English and the connection between methods courses and secondary teaching scenarios, 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. Further, research shows that preservice teachers, who are establishing a career in education within secondary school contexts, will generally adhere to the values of secondary schools in order to conform to the school community. Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) also examined this “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 conservation secondary school culture (339). This is concerning as
there are a number of factors contributing to the preparation of new teachers, and research tends
to focus on university courses and field experiences as two competing components.

Despite the “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).

It is clear that the Commission 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 are also aware that this disconnect is difficult for preservice teachers, causing a
shock as they transition into their field experiences. Finally, the Commission also recognized
that the solution was to “form productive relationships” with secondary teachers.

The need for relationships among school teachers and university educators was also
behind the formation of a special interest group (SIG) to connect the Conference on College
Composition and Communication (CCCC) and National Council of Teachers of English
(NCTE). The Composition-English Education Connections group was formed by Janet Alsup
and Jonathan Bush in 2001 as a way to bridge the fields of composition studies and English
education, making connections about the teaching of writing teachers in both fields. Alsup and
Bush, “knew firsthand of the unfortunate stereotyping and tension that often existed between
those teaching writing at the secondary and postsecondary levels” (670). The SIG was formed to
increase collaboration among the two groups and improve communication between secondary
and postsecondary writing teachers (678). Perhaps most importantly, the SIG provides time and space for conversations across institutions. Within these spaces, stereotypes and tensions among secondary educators and postsecondary educators can break down as experiences are shared. This group, as well as the Commission on English Education (CEE) at NCTE, increases collaboration and addresses the shared needs of both secondary and postsecondary educators.

In recent years, it’s evident that the field of English Education has taken notice of the need for more collaboration among secondary and postsecondary institutions. The “gulf” alluded to by the Commission in 2006, and also discussed in chapter one of this study, has existed since at least 1890, when President Charles Eliot of Harvard spoke of a “wide gap” between schools and colleges (Marshall & Smith, 1997). 125 years ago, Eliot also recommended that a “clearer and more stable relationship between the public schools and the colleges had to be forged if the interests of both were to be served” (Marshall & Smith, 1997). Despite these efforts, we can still find ample evidence of the wide gap between the two institutions.

We can also still find evidence of the “shock” this causes for preservice teachers (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006). Ellen Corcoran (1981) discussed one instance of “transition shock” as part of a study on the shift from university student to beginning teacher. In the case of one beginning teacher, Corcoran found that the result of this “transition shock” was to “render the beginner unable to transfer previously mastered concepts and skills from university to public school classroom” (20). The student teacher seemed almost paralyzed by indecision, unable to make use of her extensive university training, until she had come to terms with her new role as a secondary teacher. If transition shock regularly causes new teachers to forget their training, the university has an even greater motivation for reaching out to secondary school
teachers. One reason is to help new teachers experience less of a shock during the transition from student to teacher, but an equally significant reason is to assure that new teachers can apply the pedagogical content knowledge gained in university education coursework to secondary English pedagogy in the classroom.

Peter Smagorinsky and Natalie Gibson et al. (2004) also described this shock, “praxis shock,” as experienced by Gibson during her student teaching and as a first-year teacher. Gibson found that the ideals of a student-centered approach to teaching middle-school English (a philosophy that was promoted in Gibson’s university coursework) were not concurrent with the practices of her mentor teacher or the high-stakes test focus of her first job. Gibson struggled to maintain a student-centered approach to teaching English throughout her first experiences teaching middle-school English before ultimately deciding to leave her job. 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 or praxis shock is a significant concern for teacher educators. Fortunately, Gibson ultimately returned to teaching, finding a placement in a rural school that aligned more closely with her student-centered approach. If “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981) or “praxis shock” (Smagorinsky & Gibson et al., 2004) is negatively affecting new teachers’ ability to teach and sometimes causing them to abandon the profession altogether, it is a problem worthy of research.

To that end, another study that inspired my research was Finders, Crank, and Kramer’s (2013) study about the disconnect between methods coursework and field experience. In this study, Erika Kramer described the challenge she faced as a preservice teacher negotiating the different expectations of her methods course and her secondary field experience. In her writing
methods course, Kramer had learned about pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing, specifically teaching grammar within the context of writing. In her field experience, she was asked to teach sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex) with handouts and a worksheet for secondary students, who would then be required to write an eleven-sentence paragraph, including one sentence of each type, as an assessment. Kramer’s methods coursework contradicted this focus on prescriptive grammar and the rigid assessment guidelines.

Margaret Finders and Virginia Crank, Kramer’s university methods instructors, admitted that the content of their methods courses included, “theoretical and pedagogical research-based writing pedagogy,” but “ignor[ed] the realities of the context into which [preservice teachers] enter” (6). They wrote that this was a common issue faced by preservice teachers: a nonalignment between the content of methods courses and the expectations of field experiences. They worried that preservice teachers were forced to step to one side or the other of a “vast chasm” (11), meaning that they would have to abandon the theories of methods courses in order to toe the line with their cooperating teachers, or risk the relationship with their cooperating teachers and their reputations in the secondary schools by refusing to follow directions. The researchers concluded that methods courses must prepare preservice teachers for the “nonalignment” that may occur between university preparation coursework and field experiences in secondary classrooms by helping them to think through the implications of the conflict and negotiate those scenarios as practice in methods courses.

Like Grossman (1990), Finders, Crank, and Kramer discovered a, “vast gap between [preservice teachers’] university preparation and the realities of the high school or middle school curricula” (11). This study was important to my research because it looked more closely at two
areas of teacher preparation, methods courses and field experience, and the ways in which those
two components are linked. The study provided an example of what causes this gap between
coursework and fieldwork in English Education and how it affected the preservice teacher
involved. It was also important because of what was missing.

The gap between university methods coursework and field experiences involves three
groups of people: methods instructors, preservice teachers, and secondary teachers, specifically
cooperating (or mentor) teachers who enable field experiences for preservice teachers. However,
this study only included the perspectives of the preservice teacher and her methods instructors.
The voice of Kramer’s cooperating teacher was absent, and it is evident that the secondary
teacher was never consulted about the disconnect between university preparation and secondary
classrooms. Like Finders, Crank, and Kramer, my research also addressed the connection (and
areas of disconnection) between methods courses and field experiences, as both contribute to the
preparation of new secondary English teachers. However, I felt that the perspective of
“experienced practitioners” at the secondary level was essential (Grossman, 1990).

In 2014, Peabody Journal of Education published an issue dedicated to research about
clinical (field) experiences in teacher preparation. Sharon Porter Robinson, president of the
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, explained, “teacher preparation is
most beneficial when it is directly linked to practice.” She argued that high quality programs for
teacher preparation are embedded in secondary schools through, “closely linked partnerships
between the preparation program and the school” (564). The issue included an article by Morva
McDonald et al. (2014) in which educators from the University of Washington discussed their
move to place an English methods course inside a local secondary school, strengthening
collaboration among methods instructors, preservice teachers, and secondary mentor teachers. In this model, mentor teachers were clearly valued as contributors to new teacher preparation, working in conjunction with university-based methods instructors. The authors developed this partnership because they felt compelled to address “fragmentation” between university coursework and student teaching, and the authors, “need[ed] to bridge the gap…between theory and practice, and among university courses and field work” (500-1).

In the same issue, Linda Darling-Hammond named strengthening field experiences, “the holy grail of teacher preparation.” Darling-Hammond (2014) wrote that one of the cornerstones of powerful teacher education was, “tight coherence and integration among courses and between coursework and clinical work in schools…” (549). She concluded, “Strengthening clinical practice in teacher preparation is clearly one of the most important strategies for improving the competence of new teachers” (557). Darling-Hammond’s history of scholarship in this area (Darling-Hammond, 2006) is evidence of the importance of integrating and including mentor teachers in the work of preparing teachers.

Additional scholarship in this area that influenced my project includes Joseph Milner’s (2010) quantitative research measuring beliefs between post-secondary teacher educators and secondary English teachers, between “towers and trenches” (171). Milner noted that other studies have attributed the gap from university to classroom to “turf protection,” politics, and “misleading movies,” while many see it as a “natural tension between innovative university theory and the regularized daily practice of the schools” (171). Milner gave a ten-question survey to university educators and secondary educators and determined that their values in teacher preparation were actually quite similar.
Susan Spangler (2013) also explained the need to create a “dialogic rather than antagonist relationship” between the “world of the university and the world of the secondary school” in her study about the transition from student to teacher (88). Spangler advocated that teacher preparation programs help students make the transition from university student to secondary teacher through professional communities meeting during student teaching. While Spangler felt that the disconnect from college classes into secondary classrooms “seems inevitable,” the seminar kept student teachers connected to university faculty as a means of helping them through the transition.

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. Most studies agree that the best way to address the gap between university methods courses and secondary classrooms is to establish better partnerships, opening communication between professionals in both institutions.

As seen in Figure 2.3, research in English Education and research in more general journals of education and teacher training both confirm the existence of a disconnect between universities and secondary schools. This disconnect indicates that coursework and fieldwork are often not integrated into a cohesive program, and preservice teachers may be unable to transfer the pedagogical content knowledge gained in coursework to secondary classrooms. Mentor teachers can help new teachers translate their coursework to real classrooms and real students,
bridging the gap between universities and schools, especially if universities reach out to the mentors to establish partnerships in teacher preparation.

Figure 2.3 Scholarship About the Disconnect

Mentor teachers provide field experiences to prepare and evaluate future teachers, experiences which are clearly valuable for preservice teachers and for the university programs who train them. Yet mentor teachers are rarely included in discussions about the preparation of preservice teachers. Secondary mentor teachers, or cooperating teachers, are historically not a part of discussions about the preparation work that leads to student teaching in English Language Arts, and they need to be included. If the field of English Education truly values collaboration
between coursework and fieldwork, and between universities and secondary schools, secondary mentor teachers need to have a voice.

**Portrayals of Mentor Teachers in Teacher Education**

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 their student teachers, especially as the student-teaching experience is generally the culminating work of a preservice teacher’s education. Christian Goerling (2013) discussed this reality in the teacher licensure program at the University of Arkansas, which “relies heavily on clinical experience,” writing, “the quality of teachers produced at the University of Arkansas relies profoundly on excellent MTs [Mentor Teachers] and the ongoing productive relationship between all parties involved.” In his estimation, the relationship between the university, preservice teachers, and secondary mentors is essential. Goerling estimated that preservice teachers in their program spend over 1,000 hours with mentor teachers. Therefore, placements with exemplary mentors are extremely important, as Goerling concluded, “Perhaps there is no bigger influence on the future teachers than their mentors…” (13).

Unfortunately, Goerling noticed a decline in the number of mentor teachers available for student teachers in their teacher preparation program. In interviews with two mentors, he found that mentor teachers were overwhelmed with Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and new curriculum. One teacher explained, “We are already juggling 400 oranges at once, 50 minutes at
a time.” Taking on a student teacher, along with new curriculum, added “hours and hours” to their workload. The mentor went on to describe,

Serving as an MT to a new teacher is exhausting, intense. All day long [my intern and I] process and reflect…My last intern wanted to know everything I knew; she wanted to pull 30 years of teaching experiences out of my brain. We were creating together; that was intense, exhausting, and so exciting. This act takes time, and teachers can’t create more time (14).

Another mentor explained, “Acting in the role of MT to future teachers, like all aspects of education, isn’t a simple concept with an easy, show-me-a-score-on-a-test answer. It is a long-term commitment, almost like being a parent” (14). Both mentors felt “honored and fortunate” to serve as a mentor, but it is also evident from Goerling’s work that these teachers found mentoring to be a difficult task, ultimately consuming much time and attention. Anthony Clarke, Valerie Triggs, and Wendy Nielsen (2014) also found that cooperating teachers were reluctant to work with a student teacher if they believed their teaching assignment to be too demanding (186). Because cooperating teachers felt primarily committed to their own students, some teachers were reluctant, concerned that working with a student teacher would negatively affect the secondary students in their classes.

Goerling stated, “There may be no more important role in the future of education than the one mentors currently play” (15). For that reason, his article shared a list of reasons to serve as a mentor teacher. Looking ahead at the future of the profession, Goerling declared, “For those qualified parties out there who may feel like another commitment isn’t possible, the profession needs you, perhaps now more than ever” (15) Goerling’s article appreciated the value of mentors for student teachers, as well as the challenges of mentoring, and he concluded by recognizing the importance of mentors for future English teachers, requesting that readers of
English Journal consider his plea for more teachers to commit their time and energies to the very significant work of mentoring.

In agreement with the importance of quality mentor teachers, Thomas McCann (2013) wrote, “My recent work in teacher preparation has convinced me that so much of the development of the new teacher will depend on the quality of the mentoring and modeling from the cooperating teacher during the candidate’s clinical experience” (21). McCann explained that preservice teachers “gain much” from their university coursework, but theory can be “pushed aside when influential partners in schools contradict those practices” (21). McCann concluded, “From a university perspective, the best situation is one in which the work of the cooperating teacher complements the efforts in the university classroom” (21). This ideal would require universities to form closer partnerships with mentor teachers, such as those described by Darling-Hammond (2014) and McDonald et al. (2014).

Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) found that student 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 by Koerner, O’Connell Rust, and Baumgartner (2002), “Most teachers claim that the most important elements in their professional education were the school experiences found in student teaching” (35).

Whitney, Olan, and Frederickson (2013) also found that student teachers valued their real classroom practice. When faced with a problem, the preservice teachers in their courses looked to their colleagues, who were in the field as student teachers working with mentors in secondary classrooms, rather than to their coursework. Preservice teachers valued the practicality of experiences in real classrooms. Pamela Grossman (1990) also found that teachers tended to
value field experience over coursework when reflecting on the acquisition of pedagogical content knowledge. She noted the difficulty of searching for the roots of pedagogical content knowledge, citing studies by Lanier and Little (1986) and Lortie (1975) that demonstrated teachers’ tendency to attribute most of their knowledge about teaching to student teaching (151).

While this valuing of classroom experiences has its pitfalls (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985) and is no replacement for the coursework that can cultivate inquiry and help preservice teachers focus on learning goals and the link between theory and practice, it’s clear that experiences in the classrooms of mentor teachers are an integral part of learning to teach.

Mentor teachers likely impact every new teacher trained in education, yet their voices are often missing from scholarly research on teacher preparation. Though a variety of work is published about mentoring, there is little work to solicit the experiences of mentor teachers through their own words (Koerner, O’Connell Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002). Scholarly work also focuses on student teaching, often from the perspective of a university supervisor or methods instructor. This work sometimes includes the voices of student teachers, presented through observations and interviews between student teachers and university supervisors (Bentley, 2013; Bieler, 2010; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Corcoran, 1981). Mentor teachers, while an essential part of the student teacher’s experiences, are rarely included.

In some studies, mentor teachers are presented in a binary view, essentially as either positive or negative influences for student teachers. Mary Sudzina, Carmen Giebelhaus, and Maria Coolican (2012) titled an article about the role of mentors in student teacher success or failure as, “Mentor or Tormentor.” In their study, student teachers and mentor teachers at two different sites responded orally or in writing to questions about the qualities of a mentor, the
responsibilities of a mentee, and a successful student-teaching experience. They found that some mentor teachers saw mentoring student teachers as “a hierarchical enterprise” where student teachers would follow their lead in the classroom, while others saw mentoring as a shared teaching experience between a mentor and student teacher (25). The researchers went on to also discuss three cases of failed mentorships, perhaps resulting from a lack of clear definition about the purpose of mentoring, but also resulting from “personality and pedagogical conflicts” (29). In most cases, the researchers felt that both the student teacher and the cooperating teacher had contributed to an unsuccessful mentorship.

Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican acknowledged that mentor teachers were often chosen based on teacher availability, location, and grade level rather than for being models of best practices or matches with preservice teachers (29). Citing multiple studies on the topic, they stated that mentor teachers had a great influence on their student teachers, yet also cited studies (Grimmitt & Ratzlaff, 1986; Lewis, 1990) showing that mentor teachers were “generally unprepared for the task of supervision” (30). Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican recommended inclusion of a university supervisor as well as supervision training for mentor teachers. They explained,

Traditionally, few cooperating teachers receive any training or support beyond written materials and/or a single orientation session. This lack of training for cooperating teachers results in prospective teachers working with supervisors who are not familiar with the teacher education program knowledge base or goals, and are unable to link the theory presented in campus-based courses with practices followed in the classroom (30).

Because the researchers believed that the mentor teachers were unfamiliar with the goals of the university program, and were therefore unable to help student teachers link coursework to the classroom, they argued for three phases of training for mentor teachers. This training would
establish goals and expectations, roles and responsibilities, and a process of supervision. They believed that well-informed participants would produce “effective mentoring relationships regardless of personality styles” (33).

Despite Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican’s deficit portrayal of mentor teachers as being unfamiliar with the goals of teacher education and unable to link theory to practice, they acknowledged that the participants in their study ranked the quality of their mentoring relationship as an important factor in student teacher success. The authors believed that, “student teachers need a guide, a teacher, a mentor to help them as they struggle to navigate the often-frightening distance between their college preparation and the beginnings of their teaching career” (33). Finally, they recognized that it was necessary for teacher educators to “take seriously the particular and unique role of cooperating teachers as they contribute to student teachers’ successes or failures” (33). This study, then, acknowledged the importance of a mentor teacher as necessary for the success of a student teacher, but also shared concerns about what the researchers perceived to be a lack of knowledge and training on the part of the mentor teachers. They felt that mentor teachers were so significant to their student teachers that it was necessary to ensure more effective mentoring through suggested training sessions. It’s evident that the researchers did not feel confidence in the pedagogical content knowledge of secondary mentor teachers.

In an extensive review of literature about cooperating teacher participation in teacher preparation, Anthony Clarke, Valerie Triggs, and Wendy Nielsen (2014), also noted “a strong sense that cooperating teachers lack specific preparation to enable high quality and developmentally appropriate support for student teachers…” (191). Their review of scholarship
found that studies often presented mentor teachers as “underprepared” for the task of mentoring student teachers (191). Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013) shared similar concerns about mentors who were chosen based on convenience and willingness rather than mentoring abilities or skill in teaching. They, too, worried that secondary mentor teachers were unfamiliar with the goals of teacher preparation coursework. Because student teachers place so much value on real classroom experience, they expressed concern that preservice teachers would be led astray by secondary mentors.

Another study by Robert V. Bullough Jr. and Roni Jo Draper (2004) described a “failed triad” in the content area of mathematics. In the context of their study, the student teacher, Allyson, was completing a yearlong internship in a secondary school with an assigned mentor teacher, Mrs. K. The mentor teacher had been chosen by the principal of the school because she was an outstanding math teacher. The university supervisor, Dr. Z., was a specialist in mathematics education who visited Allyson’s classroom weekly.

Bullough and Draper explained the “shifting” alliances and the power struggle that ensued between the university supervisor and the mentor teacher, which, of course, negatively impacted Allyson’s experience as a preservice teacher. Bullough and Draper believed that all of the participants, Allyson, Mrs. K., and Dr. Z., wanted the secondary students to learn math and have a positive experience with Allyson as their teacher. They all wanted Allyson to succeed in her yearlong internship and find employment as a math teacher. Dr. Z. and Mrs. K. both saw themselves as experts in the teaching of mathematics, but did not agree on teaching methodology, eventually arguing about how Allyson should approach her lessons. Allyson was caught in the middle, and both Dr. Z. and Mrs. K. felt undermined by each other.
Dr. Z. had never watched Mrs. K teach, but had heard that she was “a little more traditional in her approach to teaching” (412). He later commented that the secondary math teachers were “very set in their ways” (416). Bullough and Draper pointed out that Dr. Z. had positioned the mentor teacher as deficit because she relied on traditional methods of teaching instead of embracing the more contemporary approach he taught in his methods courses. Bullough and Draper concluded, “the distance between Dr. Z. and Mrs. K., between the university and the schools, and between theory and practice widened” as a result of the conflict between Dr. Z. and Mrs. K. (416).

Bullough and Draper’s study also portrayed the complexities of acting as a mentor for a preservice teacher who may have been trained in conflicting methodologies and beliefs about teaching and learning. The study was also significant because it included the voice of the mentor teacher, giving Mrs. K. a voice in her role as a significant contributor to Allyson’s development as a teacher. Finally, this study is important because it may reveal some reasons why mentor teachers are not commonly included in research about teacher preparation. The university supervisor in this study assumed a “deficit view” of teachers as being set in traditional ways. Bullough and Draper concluded, “lack of effective communication between mentors and university supervisors is a widely-recognized problem,” citing a study by Beck and Kosnik (2002) which detailed “two largely separate worlds” and “a gulf between the views of…teachers and university faculty” (7) (418). Most research into teacher preparation is conducted at the university level, written by university faculty. If the university faculty believe that secondary teachers operate in a separate, secondary world, they may not consult them in conversations

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about teacher preparation. Worse, that secondary world may be viewed as deficit and of less value.

Like Bullough and Draper, Deborah Bieler’s (2010) study also evidenced a deficit view of mentor teachers from a university supervisor’s perspective. In her study, Bieler acted as the university supervisor for a preservice English teacher, Joss, during his student teaching. Through conversations with Joss, Bieler concluded that Joss’ mentor had inhibited the agency of the preservice teacher as well as her secondary students. Bieler’s study provides more evidence of the complexities of the student-teaching experience, in which a student teacher must teach in cooperation with a secondary ELA teacher while also submitting to the evaluations of both the mentor teacher and the university-based supervisor.

As a result of her study, Bieler recommended that teacher preparation programs consider more carefully their choice of mentors for student teachers. Specifically, she felt that mentors must treat student teachers as “contributing colleagues” instead of “students in need of evaluation” (421). This treatment of student teachers would foster agency in the student teachers, in contrast to the oppressive nature of Joss’ student teaching mentorship, and help them transition from student teaching to first-year-teaching (421). Bieler called upon teacher educators to ensure that student teachers have “a supportive, agentive experience,” noting that student teaching can “profoundly shape their pedagogical development, view of the profession, and agency as educators” (422). Bieler concluded that mentor teachers have a great impact on student teachers and, consequently, a great impact on new teachers in the field. It is because of the importance of mentor teachers that she implored teacher educators to choose mentors carefully in order to ensure a positive experience.
Fairbanks, Freedman, and Kahn (2000) also surmised that professional literature does not always present mentor teachers as supportive; instead mentors are sometimes portrayed to demonstrate the ways they “impede student teachers’ professional growth” (102) or even undermine the content of the university methods courses (Bieler, 2010; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; Sudzina, Giebelhaus, & Coolican, 1997). If studies by Linda Darling-Hammond (2006, 2014) and Morva McDonald et al. (2013) are evidence of the powerful teacher preparation that occurs when secondary schools and universities work together, Bieler (2010), Bullough and Draper (2004), Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013), and Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican (1997) are evidence of the dysfunction that occurred when the two institutions did not communicate and collaborate. The victims who suffered most in these cases were the preservice teachers.

Despite the evident significance of fieldwork and mentor teachers, very few studies solicit the perspectives of mentor teachers on teacher preparation. Catherine Zeek, Martha Foote, and Carole Walker (2001) also concluded, “too often, we hear only the voices of others…far removed from the realities of the classroom…” (384). Their work in a professional development school is based on a partnership among a preservice teacher, mentor teacher, and university liaison. This model, “values both the practical and the theoretical as essential elements of teaching success and offers opportunities for all voices to be a part of the preservice teachers’ growth (377). The authors, all university liaisons, wanted to find out about the benefits of mentoring for mentors themselves, and hoped to also recognize their voices as professionals. Using narrative inquiry research, they asked the mentors to tell their stories. Their goal was to
find ways for teacher educators at the university to hear the voices of secondary mentor teachers (383).

This study is a direct contrast to the stance taken in studies by Bieler (2010), Bullough and Draper (2004), Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013), and Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican (1997). In those studies, university supervisors acknowledged the value of mentor teachers and field experiences, but rejected the teachers’ methodologies. In contrast to Zeek, Foote, and Walker’s goal to bring forward the experiences of mentor teachers so that university educators would hear their voices, studies by Bieler (2010), Bullough and Draper (2004), Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013), and Sudzina, Giebelhaus, and Coolican (1997) presented mentor teachers as having very little to offer to the theory-based work of the university. They felt that mentors needed to be trained in university goals and philosophy in order to be effective.

The task of teaching alongside an experienced mentor teacher is complex for both student teachers and mentor teachers. 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. Alsup, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher (2011) knew that nothing could “completely reproduce real-time, one-on-one conversation and debate” among teachers at secondary and postsecondary institutions (677). Teacher preparation involves student teachers, university-based educators, and secondary mentor teachers. Reaching out to include mentor teachers at secondary schools demonstrates their value.

My research reaches between the two worlds of teacher education and secondary classrooms and also brings together research specific to English Education and more general
studies in the field of education. Some additional scholarship in this area includes Fred Hamel and Heather Jaasko-Fisher’s (2011) work with a mentor teacher advisory council. Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher described mentoring as a “hidden labor,” finding that the daily work of mentoring preservice teachers is “a largely invisible drama” (442). They were concerned about the lack of opportunities for the participants to step back and reflect upon their experiences. The mentor teacher advisory council provided an opportunity to bring university educators and mentor teachers together. According to Anthony Clarke, Valerie Triggs, and Wendy Nielsen (2014), a lack of knowledge about the work of mentor teachers is noticeable in scholarly literature despite a large body of research about mentor teachers. Common conceptions view mentor teachers in varying degrees of participation in the education of preservice teachers, from a simple placeholder (someone who acts as an absent landlord of the classroom) to a teacher educator (acting as a coach for the preservice teacher). Clarke, Triggs, and Nielsen found that mentors participate in a variety of ways in student teacher fieldwork, and their significant analysis of publications that detail the involvement of cooperating teachers resulted in eleven categories of participation.

Another study by Sheila Valencia, Susan Martin, Nancy Place, and Pamela Grossman (2009) addressed the “complex interactions” between student teachers, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. Their study addressed the clash that sometimes occurs between the goals of the university and realities of secondary classrooms. The researchers found that there were multiple “lost opportunities” for student teachers learning to teach language arts because the time for guidance and feedback was so limited. The researchers also noted the difficulty of competing goals and the complexity of interactions between student teachers, mentors, and university
supervisors. In this study, university supervisors wanted to provide positive support and promote partnerships with the school, so they sometimes did not address concerns about student teachers and mentors. Similarly, student teachers wanted a positive experience and to establish a good rapport with their mentors. They avoided conflict with mentor teachers because they saw themselves as guests in their classrooms. Positive surface-level interactions took the place of deep discussions about student learning and methods of teaching, resulting in “lost opportunities” for preservice teachers to learn pedagogy. Other studies confirm that substantive reflection on practice is rare, and most feedback from mentor teachers focuses on technical aspects of teaching: what and how to teach rather than why (Chaliés, Ria, Bertone, Trohel, & Durand, 2004; Clark, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Richardson-Koehler, 1988).

Deborah Britzman’s Practice Makes Practice (1991) also inspired my study. Britzman’s work addressed each of the categories of research that also contributed to my study: the preparation of teachers, the disconnect between university-based methods and secondary classroom teaching, and the portrayal of mentors in literature. In Practice Makes Practice, Britzman also advocated research into “the lived experiences of teachers” (1). In order for this research to take place, Britzman insisted that researchers commit to including teachers, listening to their voices and making sure they are physically present during the research. Britzman’s work was an example of research where all voices involved in teacher preparation were valued.

Britzman opened her work with the research question, “What does learning to teach do and mean to student teachers and those involved in the practice of teaching?” (2). Britzman’s study focused on the experience of student teaching, which she described as the act of, “putting into practice the knowledge obtained from college courses.” She was interested specifically in
what the experience of student teaching meant for both student teachers and those who are also involved, deemed, “significant others.” Britzman’s significant others included mentor teachers, administrators, university supervisors, and methods instructors. The idea that student teaching was simply a mode of putting coursework into practice with secondary students was a simplified description. Student teachers were also transforming their classroom knowledge, “shifting from a student’s perspective to that of a teacher” (47).

For Britzman, who took care to include the voices of mentor teachers in her study, teacher education was problematic because it pushed student teachers to conform to the status quo. She wrote, “education course work that does not immediately address” know how” or how to “make do” with the way things are and sustain the walls we have come to expect appears impractical, idealistic, and too theoretical” (49). Like Whitney, Olan, and Frederickson (2013), she surmised that methods courses were seen as idealistic and, sometimes, in opposition to the authentic world of secondary classrooms. Britzman expressed concern that, “real school life, then, is taken for granted as the measure of a teacher education program, and, as such, the student teacher semester is implicitly valued as the training ground, the authentic moment, that mystically fills the void left by so-called theoretical course work” (49). These descriptions set fieldwork and mentor teachers in opposition to coursework, rather than presenting coursework and fieldwork as two cooperating components of teacher training.

Like Grossman (1990) and McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005), Britzman was interested in how student teachers would make this transition from coursework to teaching and how they would face the challenges of becoming a teacher. She also addressed the public image of education, the cultural myths that contribute to view of student teaching as “learning by
“experience” and the problematic view of teacher training as a path in which one gains knowledge at the university, applies it to students, and becomes a teacher through that experience. For Britzman, the separation of content area knowledge from pedagogical practice prevented the student teacher from combining the two (37). She found this traditional path of teacher training to be less than ideal for future teachers.

Britzman also expressed concern about teacher education programs that focused on a “smooth transition” between coursework and field experiences. Like so many others (Corcoran, 1981; Dickson & Smagorinsky et al., 2006; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; Grossman, 1990; Marshall & Smith, 1997), Britzman discussed a “dramatic shift” from university coursework to teaching in real classrooms (47). She recognized that preservice teachers wanted to learn “practical things,” but believed that they also needed to think beyond sustaining the status quo (48-9). By focusing on an easy transition from coursework to classroom, programs operated under the assumption that their role was to maintain the current school structure, transitioning new teachers as seamlessly as possible into secondary classrooms. In reality, student teaching forced student teachers to constantly revise their views of teaching and learning, reworking what was learned in classes and reinventing themselves as educators.

Britzman catalogued many hours interviewing and observing two student teachers, Jamie Owl, a prospective English teacher, and Jack August, a future social studies teacher. Her work exemplified the complexities of student teaching, especially the often-conflicting ideologies and actions of the student teachers themselves. Though Britzman noted that she, as an ethnographic researcher, was inherently included in the discourse of the teachers, she took care to represent the voices of participants, while also “car[ing] for their integrity, humanity, and struggles” (12).
Britzman’s research took a narrative inquiry stance to portray teachers through their own voices. In light of her student-teachers’ experiences, Britzman discussed the teacher persona, exposing various cultural myths that persist about teachers. Britzman also solicited interviews from persons she named, “significant others” in the work of student teachers. These “significant others” included mentor teachers, administrators, and university supervisors. While giving voice to each of the professionals involved with the student teachers, Britzman also granted,

There has never been a common agreement as to how one becomes a teacher…In reality, those who surround student teachers in school contexts bring to their advisory role contradictory feelings about the experience of their own teacher education: what they take to be a betrayal of theory; the refusal of university-based professionals to value their work and judgments; and the failure of teacher educators to recognize their own constraints and sense of the real…

Like Bullough and Draper (2004), Britzman found contrasting views about teacher preparation from mentor teachers and university supervisors. Mentor teachers felt they could provide practical experience and guide new teachers in ways that university instructors could not, since university instructors were removed from the classroom (175). University instructors found mentor teachers to be too practical, refusing to consider theory, and even felt the need to “undo” what student teachers learned from mentor teachers (175). Both of the mentor teachers in Britzman’s study were “highly suspicious” of university teacher education (186). One mentor felt “abandoned by the university,” which he saw as separating itself from the reality of public schools. Another mentor viewed teacher education as unnecessary, explaining that “it failed to help students understand the relationship between pedagogy and content” (186). Though she included both mentors in her study, Britzman stated that the views of these mentor teachers were never shared and that the university program never approached the teachers to ask for their views (186).
Like Britzman, my study involves discussions of student teaching, the preparation of student teachers, and the gap between university preparation and secondary classrooms. However, a primary goal is to bring forth the perspective of mentor teachers. I have been a student teacher, a mentor teacher, and a teacher educator myself. My study was conducted as a result of those experiences, and because of my relationship with mentor teachers and my presence in their world, both as colleague and as a researcher.

Figure 2.4 illustrates how mentors play a significant role in the preparation of a preservice teacher. Even in studies presenting a deficit view of secondary mentor teachers, the researchers acknowledged that mentor teachers and field experiences were central to the development of beginning teachers. Because mentors are so significant to the training and preparation of future teachers, they are certainly worthy of more consideration in research. Mentor teachers can contribute in valuable ways to conversations about the preparation of secondary English teachers. They, too, see the gap between university coursework and secondary classrooms, and they, too, have ideas and opinions about how to better prepare future English teachers.
Figure 2.4 Mentor Teachers in Scholarship

The following chapter discusses my relationship with mentor teachers as well as my methodology. Like Zeek, Foote, and Walker (2001), I chose narrative inquiry for my research because I wanted university-based professionals in education to hear the voices of secondary mentor teachers. I hoped the mentor teachers would share themselves, their stories, their ideas, and their opinions about the ways in which preservice teachers are prepared to enter secondary classrooms.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Theoretical Framework and Guiding Questions

My research was an instrumental, collective case study that was also based on the tenets of narrative inquiry. As an instrumental, collective case study, I sought to gain a general understanding of the ELA mentor teacher experience through an in-depth study of a few cases. My case study was also guided by the principles of narrative inquiry, focusing on the stories of the participants and portraying their experiences through their own words. Because my goal was to improve teacher preparation and communication between universities and secondary education programs, this case study was also an example of action research, as defined by Marshall and Rossman’s *Designing Qualitative Research* (2011), a handbook that significantly influenced my methods.

My research was guided by the intent to learn about the present-day experience of mentoring a preservice teacher. What does it mean to be a mentor for student teachers in high school English Language Arts? This overarching question allowed me to ask the mentor teachers to narrate their stories, expand on their experiences, and elucidate their values as mentors of student-teachers. I also wanted to find out what mentor teachers focused on when they worked with student-teachers. The following questions guided my interviews:

- What do mentor teachers believe are essential skills and dispositions for preservice teachers entering the profession?
• What do mentor teachers believe is necessary content knowledge in the teaching of English Language Arts?
• What must student teachers know and be able to do when they enter secondary classrooms?
• What is the goal of the student-teaching field experience, according to mentor teachers?

These guiding research questions shaped the questions I asked during interviews with the mentor teachers, prompted the notes I took during the interviews, and helped me sift through hours of recorded data in order to draw out conclusions.

I was also looking for information that would help me understand how we might work to bridge the gap between secondary education and higher education. During note-taking and data analysis, I focused on information that would help me understand how we could better prepare our preservice teachers, as well as how we might improve communication between the two institutions. I asked the teachers what they would like to discuss with the university methods teachers who prepare student teachers, if provided the opportunity. Given that the goal of both university methods instructors in ELA and secondary mentor teachers in ELA is to guide preservice teachers into the profession, communication among these individuals seems essential, yet it is lacking in many models of teacher education. I hoped to get some perspective, from the mentor teachers, on what could be done to develop a more cooperative model between institutions.

My focus on a few individuals in the specific context of one local high school brings me to case study methodology. Because my research also involved a dimension of collaboration and
the re-telling of lived experiences, I was guided by principles of narrative inquiry. In *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (2013), John W. Creswell defines some common features of narrative inquiry research:

- Narrative researchers collect stories from individuals about their experiences, and the stories emerge through interactions and dialogues between the researcher and the participant.
- Narrative inquiry often sheds light on the identities of the individual participants and how they see themselves.
- Narrative stories take place within a specific context, either a place or a situation. The context is an important aspect of the story, and it must be taken into consideration by the researcher.
- Narrative research may be analyzed in a variety of ways; a thematic analysis is quite common (71-72).

Narrative inquiry seeks to make heard voices that are often ignored by asking case study participants to speak freely about what they have experienced. The participants in my case study were asked open-ended questions based on their work as mentors of preservice teachers. The research was a collaborative effort, built on my relationship with the participants, which certainly contributed to the exchange of ideas and opinions that took place during our interviews.

**Defining an Instrumental, Collective Case Study**

Creswell (2013) defined case study as a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems
His definition also defined detailed, in-depth data collection as an important aspect of case study. The qualitative data I collected focused on experiences, opinions, and beliefs which were freely given by each of the participants through interviews and written documents. Case study methodology also aims to report a case description and case themes (97). Each teacher, or case, is described in detail, and themes were obtained by analyzing data as it related to guiding research questions. Themes were also chosen based on what the participants chose to discuss when asked general questions about student-teacher preparation, content knowledge, and skills.

In articulating these defining features of case studies, Creswell also differentiated between an intrinsic case study and an instrumental case study (98). In an intrinsic case study, cases are chosen and studied for their uniqueness. Researchers may use an intrinsic case study methodology to portray an in-depth study of an exceptional situation. In contrast, my instrumental case study focused on representative cases to portray common experiences. An instrumental case study, like the study I’ve concluded, looks at cases that are typical rather than deviant or extreme.

In this instrumental case study, I sought to gain a general understanding of the experience of mentoring a student-teacher. My instrumental case study analyzed themes or issues across cases, looking for similarities and differences related to the common experience of mentoring in secondary English Language Arts. While Creswell noted that qualitative researchers are “reluctant to generalize from one case to another because the contexts of cases differ,” instrumental cases are chosen with the intention of providing a characteristic depiction of an experience (99). In order to provide any generalization, an instrumental case study must then
select representative cases. The instrumental case study methodology fit my intention to identify common themes and ideas related to the mentor teachers’ experiences working with preservice teachers.

My research examined mentor teachers’ experiences through a series of interviews with four teachers, which makes this a multiple or collective case study (Creswell, 2013). Multiple cases are chosen for research methodology when a researcher hopes to illustrate different perspectives on an issue or different experiences with a problem or concern (99). When multiple cases are studied, a maximum of four or five cases is typical for qualitative research (101). A collective case study focuses on just one issue with multiple cases selected to illustrate the issue. Accordingly, my research involved interviews with four teachers, and each teacher was considered a case in this collective case study, focused on the issue of mentoring student-teachers. Each case focused on one secondary ELA mentor teacher, though that teacher may have had multiple experiences over years of teaching and working with preservice teachers.

The instrumental, collective case study methodology allowed me to provide insight by looking at the experiences of a few representative teachers. Of course, a few typical cases cannot apply to all preservice teachers, university preparation programs, or mentor teachers. The intention was not to make sweeping generalizations about the experiences of all secondary ELA mentor teachers working with preservice teachers. This instrumental, collective case study provides insight into teacher preparation from the perspective of mentor teachers, but it does not aim to provide transferable generalizations about all preservice teachers, all teacher preparation programs, or all mentor teachers. The goal, instead, was to portray the experiences of these mentor teachers, knowing that other teachers may share these experiences, and prompting a
dialogue that will include the perspectives of mentor teachers in later research about teacher preparation.

Creswell (2013) noted that case studies typically portray cases that are current and in progress (98). However, I wanted to speak with mentors about the composite of their experiences as mentor teachers rather than focusing on just one mentorship that may have been in progress. I felt that mentors who were currently mentoring a student teacher might be inclined to consider their current mentorship as the focus of my research. Instead, I hoped to gain an understanding of each teacher’s overall experience as a mentor teacher, knowing most had worked with various preservice teachers during their careers.

While I did not seek out mentor teachers presently involved in a student-teaching mentorship, I did want to work with current mentors. In order to keep research up-to-date, 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. While some of the participants spoke about mentoring experiences in their earlier years of teaching, I wanted to learn about their most current mentoring experiences. For that reason, I focused on the mentoring that had occurred with recent student-teachers in the field, operating under the present requirements for teacher preparation in English Language Arts. This allowed me to consider contemporary practices of teacher preparation and how those practices affect student-teaching and mentoring.

Because all of my participants were recent mentor teachers, two had just completed a mentorship when we started interviews in January of 2016. The other two participants had mentored many preservice teachers during their long teaching careers, and both of these participants had mentored a preservice teacher within the previous three years. One goal of my
research was to give mentor teachers a voice in a field where they have much expertise: the training and induction of new teachers. This desire moved me in the direction of narrative inquiry.

**Narrative Inquiry**

While my research topic came out of my desire to help new teachers make the difficult transition into the teaching profession, I chose to work with mentor teachers because I recognized that mentor teachers and field experiences were often relegated to existing outside of higher education coursework. Despite the significance of field experiences for the preparation of new teachers, the mentor teachers who provide those experiences are rarely included in scholarship about student teaching and new teacher preparation. Narrative inquiry seeks to draw out the lived experiences of individuals by allowing them to share their stories, and it brings out voices that may not otherwise be heard.

Narrative inquiry “assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories,” so the researcher “explores and records” stories told by participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Narrative inquiry requires collaboration and trust between the researcher and the participants and “demands intense and active listening” (153). In order for the participants and their stories to be accurately portrayed, the participants must be given “full voice” (153).

Narrative inquiry was an important aspect of my research because I was genuinely interested in hearing the stories of my participants. In fact, I felt it was the only way to truly understand and portray their experiences as mentor teachers. The stories of my participants shed light on their identities as mentor teachers and their opinions regarding teacher preparation. We
form opinions and make judgments based on lived experiences, and I wanted to capture the teachers’ opinions and judgments along with the experiences that produced them. As humans, we also connect through story, and I felt narrative was a powerful way to give a voice to the teachers, whose voices are so often left out of research. Because I wanted to accurately portray the teachers and their stories, I aspired to capture their experiences in their own words.

The narrative inquiry tradition of qualitative research emphasizes the personal, lived experiences of participants and encourages them to tell their stories. According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), narrative inquiry “requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher” and gives “full voice” to the narrator (153). These are important principles of a narrative-inquiry based study. Giving “full voice” to the mentor teachers guided my research questions, methodology, data analysis, and writing. I asked open-ended questions that would encourage teachers to tell their stories and relay their experiences. I recorded everything, and I later played the recordings as I analyzed the data and wrote the narratives. I focused on hearing the voices of the teachers as I wrote. I wanted to portray the flow of our conversation, using the exact words of the teachers and revealing their passions.

Narrative inquiry necessitates a foundation of trust between researcher and participant. Marshall and Rossman wrote that narrative inquiry, “should involve a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences” (153). I asked my participants to share their experiences working with preservice teachers and also to provide me with ideas to improve new teacher preparation. Because a history of collaboration would benefit this study, I chose to work with a school district, and a group of teachers, that I am very
familiar with. I have known many of the teachers in the school as professionals for over a
decade, and I know that most have many years of experience teaching in public schools. I
requested participants for this research at Oakwood South High School, knowing that my
relationship with the teachers there would be an asset to research built on narrative inquiry. My
connection to the school and its teachers formed a foundation of trust, providing me with the
potential for in-depth conversations about the teachers’ experiences. My previous experience
working in the English department afforded me the potential for participants to speak with
honesty and candor during the interviews.

Participant and Site Selection

Oakwood South High School was chosen as a site because of my experience working
with students, teachers, and administrators at the school. The choice was made due to my
previous affiliation with the school, which brought with it the opportunity for a more honest and
thorough representation of the mentor teachers involved in research. My research was taken
seriously, and I was given access to the building and the teachers because I had previously built a
positive relationship with the district. Oakwood was also a convenience sample; though I do not
live in the district, the commute was short and it was not difficult for me to arrange time spent at
the school.

Though participants were chosen because they volunteered to participate in this study,
there were some requirements for participation. My research focused on mentoring and teacher
preparation in English Language Arts, so I only contacted potential participants who were
currently teaching ELA classes at Oakwood South. I sent my email requests to any teacher listed
under the heading English or Language Arts on the staff contact list. Although I contacted all of
the teachers in the English department to request participants, I also specified in the content of
my email that I was seeking teachers who had mentored a student teacher in the previous three
years. By default, my research also included only tenured teachers. The university requires that
mentor teachers must have earned tenure in order to work with a student teacher. In our state,
tenure is a four-year process involving administrator observations and evaluations. Due to this
requirement, my research only included teachers who had been tenured and therefore were also
able to serve as mentor teachers.

My research asked mentor teachers, whose voices are historically absent from research
about teacher preparation, to tell me about their experiences as English teachers and as mentors
requires a relationship. My relationship with Oakwood South High School and with my former
colleagues in the English department was an important aspect of narrative inquiry research,
affording me the opportunity for in-depth conversations with the participants. The teachers were
open and genuine with their stories and their comments. They felt comfortable speaking to me,
laughing and freely admitting frustrations and difficulties. Of course, this relationship also put
me in a unique position as a researcher. For the sake of transparency, I have provided more detail
about my history with Oakwood South in the following section.

My Background at Southwest State and Oakwood Public Schools

I graduated from the teacher education program at Southwest State University in the city
of Bradley in December of 2003, after a fall semester student-teaching placement at a suburban
high school located in Bradley county, just outside the city. Shortly after the winter holiday break, one of my professors contacted me about a job opportunity for a one-semester position at Oakwood. A Spanish teacher needed to take an early retirement and would be leaving at the end of the first semester, in just three weeks. The position would require me to teach two morning Spanish classes at Oakwood North and three afternoon Spanish classes at Oakwood South. I interviewed the following week and was thrilled to be offered the position, despite the caveat that it was just for one semester. Consequently, I spent the next eighteen weeks teaching five classes of Spanish level II, an ideal placement for a new teacher since I had just one course preparation.

At the end of the semester, both Oakwood North and Oakwood South High Schools had positions open for the following fall. I applied to both and chose a full-time position teaching both English and Spanish at Oakwood South High School. I continued to teach both English and Spanish at Oakwood South for the following ten years, participating in curriculum revision committees in both English and Spanish departments and building relationships with teachers at both Oakwood South and Oakwood North. During my ten years at Oakwood South, I taught English 9, 10, and 12, as well as creative writing, and I advised and published the student literary magazine. I also taught Spanish at every level, eventually earning my certification to teach International Baccalaureate (IB) Spanish\(^4\). I became involved with service learning in both English and Spanish and earned a reputation for creative approaches to teaching. I was also involved in Challenge Day and “Be the Change,” a social change school improvement group.

\(^4\) IB, or International Baccalaureate, classes are advanced classes taken by students who may earn college credit. Instructors must complete a training course in order to earn certification through the International Baccalaureate Organization.
I was first asked to serve as a mentor teacher in 2008, after I had earned tenure and completed my master’s degree in English Education. I served as a mentor for student teachers from Southwest State, the same university from which I had graduated, from 2008 until 2013. Teaching IB classes sometimes precluded me from serving as a full-time mentor. Because the IB Programme requires an IB-certified teacher, and student teachers are therefore unable to teach IB classes, many student-teachers work with two mentors in Oakwood South, so I sometimes shared mentoring responsibilities with colleagues. As I continued to teach a combination of Spanish and English classes, I was an ideal placement for any student teacher with that combination of major and minor.

When I decided to return to the university to pursue a Ph.D. in English Education in 2013, it was difficult to come to terms with leaving Oakwood. While I had admittedly become disillusioned by the data-driven culture of the schools and the need for teachers to prove their worth through test scores, I also knew that Oakwood South was a great place to teach. I admired and respected the majority of my colleagues in both the English and Spanish departments, and I still enjoyed teaching high school students. On the other hand, I had become very interested in working with student teachers and I wanted more time for writing and research in the area of education. I also wanted to have more of an opportunity to affect change in education, and I believed that pursuing a Ph.D. in English Education would give me a greater opportunity to influence secondary English education as an advocate for cultural studies, service learning, and best practice in writing. I struggled with the feeling that I was leaving the trenches of the hard work of educating adolescents in order to take the high road at the university, but I was also excited by the idea of working with preservice teachers, teaching the methods courses that
prepare university students for a career in education. When Southwest State offered me a graduate assistantship, I could not turn it down. While my colleagues in English and Spanish were disappointed by my departure, many of them expressed the same hopes I harbored. They hoped I could help, from the university, to better prepare the student teachers who arrived at Oakwood schools every semester. They desired change in education, and they hoped that someone who had real experience teaching in public schools might have a voice and the insight to know what to advocate for. They felt, as I did, that their voices as public school teachers were often disregarded, even in an academically supportive community like Oakwood. Teachers were, and still are, frustrated by attacks on the profession.

**Site Approval**

My position as a former teacher for Oakwood Public Schools undeniably brought some advantages as I pursued my research goals. My first step, before applying to the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at Southwest State, was to contact the new Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Oakwood Public Schools to request the permission of the Administrative Board. The Administration had undergone some significant changes since I left Oakwood South in 2013, so I needed to explain my purpose and my connection to the teachers. When I contacted the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, it was important to him that I specify the amount of time involved for prospective teacher participants. He was also interested in how this research might benefit Oakwood Schools. I spoke to him about the relationship between Southwest State and Oakwood, as well as the possibility that a stronger connection could be forged. We also talked about the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own
practices and make their voices heard. After the next Administrative Board meeting, I was contacted with the news that my research had been approved by Oakwood Public Schools.

Once I had been granted the permission of the Administrative Board, my next step was to gain the consent of the principal at Oakwood South High School in order to contact teachers regarding my research. The principal at Oakwood South was happy to permit me to contact English teachers directly through their school email accounts, and I recognize that this advantage was due to my background as a former teacher at the school. Once I had also gained approval by the HSIRB at Southwest State, I sent an email to all of the teachers in the English department who met my qualifications as mentor teachers. I did not send an email request for participants to any of the new, non-tenured teachers, knowing that they were unable to serve as mentors until gaining tenure, which generally occurs after four years of positive evaluations. I sent the email explaining my research goals and requesting participants in the beginning of December of 2015, near the time that current student-teachers would be finishing their semester-long internships with mentor teachers, and a few weeks before the upcoming holiday break.

Participants

Two potential participants responded almost immediately to the email I sent in December of 2015. Because I hoped for a minimum of three participants for my study, I sent another email request in January of 2016. The second request highlighted the intent of the study and the commitment for participants. Two additional teachers responded to my second request. My knowledge of the English teachers, the classes they taught, their experience working with student teachers, and their reputations as strong teachers was certainly an advantage for this study.
While every teacher is distinct in philosophy and practice, I can attest that each of the participants is highly respected by colleagues and students. As a former teacher at Oakwood South High School, I can also attest that each of my former colleagues is extremely dedicated to her students and to the teaching of English.

Because I had already earned the trust and respect of these teachers, I was able to proceed with my research relatively quickly. After four potential participants had responded to my first or second inquiry emails, I spoke to each potential participant about HSIRB protocol, sending copies of HSIRB consent documents and answering questions about time and procedures. I allowed some time for the participants to make the final decision about participation. Once I had received consent from each teacher, I then communicated with each teacher directly through email to schedule our first interviews.

**Data Collection Methods**

My insider knowledge of Oakwood South High School allowed me to recruit excellent English teachers for my study, and it also provided me the ability to move freely through the building as I met with teachers for interviews. I was granted access to the building on various occasions with a simple sign-in on the office guest log. Teachers were happy to welcome me back into their classrooms for interviews, and small talk was easy. Despite some pangs of nostalgia, I was pleased to be back in the building, and I felt comfortable asking questions and requesting information from my former colleagues.
Initial Interviews

Our first interviews took place during the final week of the first semester, at the end of January, 2016. I emailed each of the participants with my interview questions a few days in advance (See Appendix A for interview protocol). While some of the participants thought deeply about the questions before I arrived (as evidenced by one teacher’s pages of notes), other participants disclosed that they had not had much time to think through the questions and preferred to answer spontaneously as I asked the questions.

Interview topics ranged from teachers’ stories about their own induction into teaching to mentoring successes and struggles. Accordingly, our conversations flowed in and out of content knowledge, grammar concerns, lesson plan ideas, and student behavior. Often teachers would describe a distinct situation or memorable scenario with a student teacher in response to a question. At other times, the mentors would speak in more general terms about their experiences as mentors.

I began the first interview by asking each participant to discuss her own student teaching experience. I felt that an understanding of each teacher’s own experience in being mentored would be important to convey, especially as we know that mentor teachers have an important effect on new teachers. I also considered that the way each teacher was mentored could reveal significant parallels to how each teacher now acts as a mentor for her own student teachers. Finally, I wanted to bring these experienced teachers back to their first year of teaching. I wanted to hear about their struggles and how they had started out. I wondered if the challenges they faced as student teachers would be similar to the challenges they perceive their student teachers to face today.
I then asked each teacher to describe her teaching philosophy, probing to ask what the teachers believed deeply about the teaching of English and the teaching of writing. I felt that this description would help readers understand each teacher’s goals and values as they approach English education.

Moving the conversation to mentoring, I asked teachers to tell me about themselves as mentor teachers. I asked how they became mentor teachers, finding that most had been recruited by university coordinators and mentor coaches from Southwest State. I asked how they learned to become mentors for student-teachers, and I asked about their strengths as mentors. One of the teachers pointed out that I did not ask about her weaknesses as a mentor, and she thought it was important to reflect on her weaknesses as a mentor as well. I did also ask the teachers about areas in which they wished they had been better prepared as a mentor teacher because I perceived that question to be a kinder way to ask about weaknesses or shortcomings. I asked each teacher to share her goals for student-teachers, and I asked about success stories from each teacher’s work with student-teachers. While some of the newer mentors were unsure about their student teachers’ current career prospects, mentors who had worked with many student teachers over years of teaching were able to share various stories of student teachers who continue to teach English in schools throughout the state and the country.

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 how teachers responded to questions, often using their exact words. I was also able to convey my conversation with each teacher, including some of the issues in teaching and learning that we discussed. As an aspect of narrative inquiry, and a goal of presenting the authentic voices of
mentor teachers in the field, it was very important to me to portray a truthful depiction of each
teacher and each interview.

As I concluded the first set of interviews and began to write notes about themes and ideas, I immediately perceived that all of the mentor teachers described their own mentoring experiences in a positive light. Each described a good relationship with her mentor or mentors, and while the teachers did not specifically discuss content in English, they did talk about their relationships with mentors and the ways in which their own mentors had influenced their teaching. In fact, all of the teachers had kept in touch with their mentors for some years after the mentorship had formally ended.

This focus on relationships was also evident when the mentor teachers spoke of their current work with student teachers. They brought up the importance of having a “teachable spirit,” described as a mentality that is open to feedback and suggestions and responds appropriately. The mentors wanted student teachers to be willing to put in the time and effort to learn their profession. Over and over again, I heard the mentor teachers say that they were willing to work with student teachers on any aspect of their teaching if the student teachers were open to feedback and willing to invest their own time and effort.

Second Interviews

I contacted teachers again in February to schedule a second set of interviews, and we were able to schedule interviews during the first week of March, about five weeks after the initial interviews. In this second set of interviews, my questions focused on the needs of student teachers. I wanted 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. Again, I sent the questions to each of the participants five days in advance of the interviews. Some teachers had prepared answers and others had not.

To begin the conversation, I asked the teachers to talk about the challenges faced by student-teachers. I hoped that this question might put them in the perspective of a new teacher, considering honestly the difficulties preservice teachers face during their induction into the profession, before addressing some of their shortcomings.

In my following questions, I asked the mentor teachers what content knowledge is needed by student teachers, as well as what skills and dispositions are needed for student teachers. I asked the mentor teachers what they would expect student teachers to have gained from university teacher preparation coursework prior to student teaching, and I followed by asking mentors to discuss how they work with student teachers who may be lacking in skills, dispositions, or content knowledge.

Finally, I asked teachers to discuss their experiences working with Southwest State University. If, hypothetically, they were to meet with the English Education department methods instructors at Southwest, what would they want to talk about? What is the university doing well? Where is the university falling short? What should be done to improve? Now that I had portrayed the mentor teachers as significant contributors to conversations about teacher preparation, I also wanted to give these secondary teachers an opportunity to make their voices heard.
As in the previous interview, each of these interviews was recorded, and I took extensive notes during the interview process in order to portray my conversation with each teacher as accurately as possible. 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. This constant comparative method of analysis led to the themes I describe in chapter five.

**Data Analysis**

My data analysis brought me back to my original purpose and analytic frame. I wanted to elicit the voices of mentor teachers in order to provide their perspective on teacher preparation. I hoped 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).

My non-linear process of mining data to search for themes is accurately portrayed by Marshall and Rossman’s (2011) explanation of a constant comparative method of data analysis. I was constantly evaluating developing themes and understandings, constantly returning to the data, and constantly considering and reconsidering interpretations of data (220). I determined categories and themes based on repeated phrases and issues brought up by mentor teachers during their interviews. For example, every teacher spoke about the importance of a student 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 student teacher
to be open to advice from the mentors. In fact, a student teacher’s response to critique or suggestions was a theme that repeatedly occurred throughout both sets of interviews.

Preliminary themes also noted the various challenges of student teachers and the needs of student teachers in areas such as pedagogical content knowledge and classroom management. I returned often to the data to analyze whether a participant’s experience fit better into one theme or another, reconstructing themes as I returned to my notes and listened to recordings.

This constant comparative method of data analysis is also characteristic of research that develops grounded theory. Creswell (2013) described a theory as an explanation or understanding developed by a researcher (85). This understanding is gained through a “drawing together” of themes and ideas (85). Creswell listed several defining features of grounded theory:

- **Memoing:** The researcher takes notes and formulates ideas throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data.
- **Data collection:** This primarily occurs through interviews in grounded theory.
- **Constant comparison:** Data gleaned from interviews with the participants is constantly compared to ideas about emerging themes.
- **Open categories:** Data analysis develops open categories or “core phenomenon,” which may then split off into additional categories around this phenomenon, eventually forming a theory where categories intersect.
- **Presentation of theory:** The theory may be presented as a diagram, through propositions, or through discussion.

These features of grounded theory are evident in my research. For this study, the data consisted of recorded interviews and extensive notes taken throughout data collection. My
analytic frame led me to ask mentor teachers about content knowledge needed by preservice teachers in ELA, as well as skills and dispositions necessary for teaching. I used the constant comparative method to compare data to emerging themes, eventually developing categories and theories. As I analyzed data, I mined conversations with each teacher for themes of teacher preparation. My methodology included extensive memoing or note-taking, and I was able to return frequently to my notes to look for themes, often revisiting the recordings as well. I noted issues that were brought up by multiple teachers, and I also noted points made by teachers that specifically related to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of a new teacher. These categories and theories are presented through discussion in subsequent chapters.

Creswell also noted that a more constructivist approach to grounded theory draws attention to the role of the researcher, who makes decisions about themes throughout the process, bringing the researcher’s personal values, experiences, and priorities into the equation (88). Certainly, my role in analyzing the data cannot be ignored. While the researcher must “set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions” so that the theory can emerge, the researcher must also recognize that outcomes of the study are contextual and may not be generalizable (88). During our interviews, I asked questions that related to my analytical frame, and I prioritized conversational strands that related to issues of teacher preparation. As I listened to data and recorded notes, I also prioritized themes and ideas that occurred in multiple interviews, making the decision that those themes and ideas were more significant because they were repeated by multiple participants. Typical of grounded theory, my findings reflect the values of the participants as well as the researcher.
As an example, my analysis of data led me to create a category named “a teachable spirit,” which I later connected to other categories under the theme of disposition. As I compared this theme with other categories and themes, I reached the hypothesis that a student teacher’s attitude towards mentoring was perhaps more important than content knowledge. This was an unexpected finding that emerged directly from comments during interviews and indirectly through stories the mentor teachers told me about their experiences working with student-teachers. I recognize, however, that this finding may not be generalizable to all mentor teachers, and it’s possible that mentors in other scenarios may not place as much value on student teachers’ responses to feedback. Because all of the teachers I interviewed are female, and I am also female, I have considered that this concern with relationships and communication between student teachers and mentor teachers may be influenced by gender. This finding is contextual, and my gender and previous relationship with the participants may also have contributed to this emerging theme.

Grounded theory allows the researcher to develop theory based on extensive interaction with data. In my study, the data detailed the individual experiences of mentor teachers in English Language Arts, bringing forth their identities, priorities, opinions, and stories. In the following chapter, I identify each of the participants and aim to give a voice to each mentor teacher. As Creswell notes in his description of narrative inquiry, this method sheds light on the identities of the individual participants and how they see themselves (71). Therefore, chapter four includes information to illuminate each teacher’s self-identification, both as a teacher of high school English and as a mentor of student teachers. This data includes information about
teachers’ beliefs about the teaching of English, beliefs about the goals of student-teaching, and beliefs about mentoring.

Conclusion

Chapter four provides a more in-depth description of the school and the surrounding areas, giving the reader a clearer picture of context for this particular high school. This chapter also looks closely at the English department and the classes offered in a school known for its academic rigor. An understanding of the school’s priorities and curriculum is important to understanding the teachers interviewed for this research, and context is an important aspect of narrative research.

Chapter four will also provide a detailed description of each of the four mentor teachers who participated in this study. I’ve detailed each teacher’s background, including each teacher’s own experience as a student teacher. In order to give readers a better understanding of the principles guiding each teacher, I asked the teachers to talk about their teaching philosophies, the things they value and believe deeply about teaching. Each teacher shared her beliefs about students and learning, as well as beliefs about the teaching of English more specifically. Teachers discussed the challenges of their work and the changes they would like to make, but each teacher also expressed her passion for students and for teaching. This passion for students and for teaching extends to mentoring preservice teachers, and most of the teachers told stories from their work with student-teachers. I include their stories in chapter four, knowing that sharing stories helps us to know each other. I hope readers will feel that they know these high school English teachers. I want their voices to be heard.
CHAPTER 4

PROFILES: DEPICTIONS OF OAKWOOD AND TEACHER PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter, I provide background information about Oakwood, a mid-sized, continually-growing, suburban-sprawl city located in Southwest Michigan. This chapter will characterize Oakwood Public Schools and, more specifically, Oakwood South High School, where the study takes place. An understanding of the city and school climate can help the reader better understand teaching philosophies and the mentoring environment. This chapter also details the backgrounds of Julie, Nikki, Renee, and Annette, four English teacher participants at Oakwood South High School.

Oakwood and Bradley\(^5\): Two Cities with a Blurry Border

This study took place in the city of Oakwood, located just a few miles south of the larger and more urban city of Bradley. Bradley county extends around the eponymous city of Bradley, the smaller city of Oakwood, and a number of outlying smaller towns and villages. In fact, it can be difficult to draw a geographic line between the cities of Bradley and Oakwood. Demographically, the two cities are distinct. Bradley is a more racially and economically diverse city of 105,000, encompassing a large research university, a sprawl of upper and middle class neighborhoods, and an inner-city area of lower income and higher crime. Bradley’s school district is quite large and somewhat diverse, even including a Spanish-immersion school.

\(^5\) Oakwood and Bradley are both pseudonyms.
According to 2009 demographics, the population identified itself as 75% white, 18% African American, 5% Hispanic or Latino, and 2% Asian (“Michigan School District Demographic Profiles,” 2016). Bradley is easily defined as an urban district.

While not all of Oakwood’s students are economically privileged, Oakwood is identified as a more suburban, middle-class district. It is less racially diverse than Bradley. Its 2009 demographics estimated the population at 88% white, 5% African American, 3% Hispanic or Latino, and 4% Asian (“Michigan School District Demographic Profiles,” 2016). As one point of comparison, for the 2014-2015 academic year, 63% of Bradley’s 12,000 K-12 students were eligible for free lunch benefits (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). In contrast, about 20% of Oakwood’s 8,500 K-12 students were eligible for those benefits (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). Though Bradley offers a lot of impressive opportunities for students, and even provides an unprecedented college tuition reimbursement program for students who attend K-12 Bradley Public Schools, both of Bradley’s high schools struggle with the school’s past reputation for gangs and violence. Oakwood has historically been the school district where parents relocate if they don’t want their children to attend Bradley’s urban schools.

Oakwood’s first high school, established in 1922, was located about ten miles south of the Bradley city center. The school opened as an agricultural school, historically middle class and white, catering to families moving to the land outside of the city of Bradley. Today, the roads and highways connecting Bradley and Oakwood are some of the busiest thoroughfares in the state, and the development of restaurants, a shopping mall, and other retail have slowly merged the two cities together. The almost indistinguishable border between the two cities is
noted on a small sign in the midst of chain restaurants and retail establishments just north of Oakwood North High School and just southwest of Bradley’s Eastland High School.

**Oakwood Public Schools: An “Academic State Champion”**

Oakwood takes great pride in its academically rigorous schools. The school district includes eight elementary schools, three middle schools, two large high schools, and a smaller alternative education community high school, serving a total of over 8,500 students in a city of 50,000. Oakwood’s two large high schools both meet the state’s definition of a “class A high school,” serving a population of 1300-1500 students in grades 9-12. The graduation rate is high, and the curriculum focuses on college preparation. The district is consistently ranked as one of the top in Michigan. Oakwood also identifies and markets itself as an IB World School. This commitment to the International Baccalaureate Programme sets the school apart from other districts in the region.

**Oakwood Points of Pride**

**An IB World School.** The International Baccalaureate (IB) Programme, founded in 1968 and headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has a presence in countries around the globe ("International education - International Baccalaureate®"). IB describes itself as distinct from other curricula for, “encourag[ing] students to think critically and challenge what they are told,” and through consideration of both local and international environments ("How the IB is different - International Baccalaureate®"). The curricula is also “independent of governments and national systems and therefore able to incorporate best practice from a range of international
frameworks and curricula” (“How the IB is different - International Baccalaureate®,” n.d.)

Teachers must be trained, renewing their IB certification every five years, and schools must be authorized in order to offer any aspects of the IB Programme. Any school authorized to offer IB programmes is given the title “IB World School.”

There are 35 only public and private high schools offering the IB Diploma Programme in the state; two of those schools are Oakwood South High School and Oakwood North High School. The IB Diploma can be achieved in addition to the Michigan diploma given to students meeting the state graduation requirements. The IB Diploma Programme is academically quite rigorous, requiring students to complete examinations in six areas of advanced study during their last two years of high school. The international focus of the program is reflected in the courses offered and the requirement of both an oral and written examination in a second language. In order to earn the IB Diploma, students must pass a series of IB examinations in May, and they must also undertake a yearlong research project, the Extended Essay, alongside a faculty mentor. The Extended Essay is submitted to IB examiners in the spring of a student’s senior year. A final requirement of the IB Diploma is hours of service to the school and community. In Oakwood, students who have earned the IB Diploma wear a large gold IB medal to the school’s graduation ceremony. The medal is coveted by students as a badge of honor for completing the rigorous IB requirements, although official examination scores are not released until six weeks after the graduation ceremony.

While less than 10 percent of graduating students choose to complete all of the requirements of an IB Diploma, Oakwood Public Schools estimates that half of juniors and seniors in Oakwood’s high schools enroll in IB classes. Any junior or senior student may elect to
take one or more IB courses in order to earn a course certificate. Students who earn a passing score on the IB examination for that course may earn college credit for completion of these advanced courses.

**Extracurricular Opportunities.** Both of Oakwood’s high schools boast award-winning forensics programs, often competing against each other for first and second place in state competitions. Oakwood’s appreciation for the arts is also evidenced by the community’s commitment to music and drama. Both high schools offer orchestra and choral programs, as well as robust marching bands. The high schools host impressive musicals in the spring, and community support for theatre is evidenced by sold-out shows on weekends.

Opportunities for athletics are plentiful in both Oakwood North and Oakwood South. Along with the usual school sports, Oakwood also offers team hockey, bowling, water polo, and lacrosse. As you might image, the schools are each other’s biggest rival. Oakwood North vs. Oakwood South games are heavily attended, standing-room only.

Each high school hosts a great variety of clubs and service opportunities for the large student population. Oakwood South High School offers Gardening club, Chess club, Gamers club, and a Gay-Straight Alliance, among others. Oakwood North offers Anime club, Health Science club, Latin club, Historian’s Guild, and Snow Riders club. Most of these clubs are student-led under teacher advisors, and students are encouraged to be involved.

**The English 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. Honors classes are quite popular, chosen by about
20% of English students. Reading and writing expectations are high in honors classes, and students are given summer reading assignments in order to prepare for honors and IB classes. Students taking honors courses in ninth and tenth grade can choose to enroll in International Baccalaureate English. IB English is a two-year class, taking place in eleventh and twelfth grade, with an examination in May of the second year. Students who earn a passing score on the IB English exam may earn college credit for English. Ninth and tenth grade honors students who choose not to enroll in IB English are placed in regular classes for eleventh and twelfth grade. While teachers recommend courses during scheduling periods each spring, students (and parents) ultimately choose placement in an honors class or a regular class.

Regular classes are offered for any student who does not wish to take an honors class. Reading and writing expectations are much lower, and the ability level varies greatly. From my experience, the disadvantage of this system is that the students who really love reading and writing and who provide classroom leadership generally choose to take honors English. The regular English classes are populated with students of high, average, and low ability, but many are generally unenthusiastic about English.

Finally, a few team-taught or “prep” English classes are reserved for students who struggle in regular English classes. These classes are team-taught with special education teachers and para-professionals who can help make accommodations for the many students with learning disabilities (LD) and emotional impairments (EI). In one of Julie’s ninth grade classes, she told me that 20 of her 32 students had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Those with IEPs range from LD (learning disabled) to EI (emotionally impaired) to ASD (autism spectrum disorder) to (HI) hearing impaired to OHI (otherwise health impaired). In another team-taught
class, she had 13 students with IEPs. Julie taught both of these classes along with a special education teacher. While there are obvious challenges to teaching a class with many at-risk and special-needs students, another teacher, Nikki, also mentions some advantages. She works with her co-teachers to teach small groups and facilitate teacher-led literature circles. They also are able to meet with students to revise their writing during class. It’s easier to meet with every student when there are two teachers in the room. While the curriculum is the same as a regular English class, the prep classes move at a slower pace and assign very little homework.

The English Department at Oakwood South High School

There are twelve English teachers at Oakwood South High School. While three of the teachers are relatively new, and therefore ineligible to serve as mentors for student teachers, the majority of the department has had experience mentoring student teachers. The city of Bradley is the home of a large research university, Southwest State University, with a prominent teacher-education program. There is a long history of teacher candidates serving in various capacities in Oakwood schools, and the majority of the intern⁶ teachers placed at Oakwood South are completing teacher education degrees at the neighboring university. There are also a couple of smaller, private colleges in the area, and one of my participants, Annette, mentioned working with student teachers from other teacher preparation programs.

⁶ While many programs refer to university students placed with a mentor as a student teacher, Southwest State refers to university students as interns. I use both terms interchangeably, especially since many of the teachers also use both terms.
Because Oakwood historically has served as a placement location for student teachers from the neighboring university, there are also two liaisons who work with mentor teachers and student teachers across all content areas at Oakwood South High School. These liaisons were sometimes mentioned by Julie, Nikki, Renee, and Annette. One of these liaisons, Amy, is a full-time teacher in the social studies department at Oakwood South. Her position is mentor coach. As mentor coach, Amy works with teachers to find placements for the student teacher applications that are sent to her by the university. It is often Amy who approaches teachers in the spring and again in the fall to make a request for a student-teaching placement, and mentor teachers are encouraged to go to her with questions or concerns.

Southwest State provides a university coordinator, Lori, who also serves as a liaison to the school. Lori leads an after-school meeting for all of the student teachers at Oakwood South once a week, and student teachers work directly with Lori as their guide through the Office of Field Placements in the College of Education at the university. Lori has served as the university coordinator for Oakwood South for seven years, and mentor teachers report that she has been happy to meet with mentor teachers and provide suggestions when there are questions or concerns.

The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to each of the four mentor teacher participants who offered their time and experiences for this study. I introduce each of the teachers, including information about each teacher’s own student-teaching experience, as well as a portrayal of each teacher’s self-described philosophy of teaching English. I also include narrative about each teacher’s experiences as a mentor for student teachers.
Mentor Teachers at Oakwood South High School

Julie: Ninth-Grade Specialist

When I first met Julie in 2004, she had recently made the decision to stay home with her young children. Because I was the newest teacher in the department, she generously offered me her collection of posters to spruce up my classroom walls, and I was delighted to accept them. Ten years later, Julie had returned to teaching and had recently left Oakwood South Middle School to accept an open English position at Oakwood South High School. At the end of that year, after I accepted a PhD assistantship at Southwest State University, I returned Julie’s posters to her. During our first interview, I noticed some of our “shared” posters on her walls, including a poster of Anne Frank with the quote, “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

At the time of our interviews, during the 2015-2016 academic year, Julie was teaching three classes of Honors English 9 and three classes of regular English 9. During the first interview, Julie described her teaching as, “deliberate,” and “process-oriented.” We talked for a few minutes about how ninth graders are so distinct from upper-classmen, and Julie mentioned that she often has older students in her class because they have to retake English 9. Their demeanor is different, and Julie specifically said that older students have the ability to hold their bodies very differently than ninth graders. Her ninth-grade students need to move around. Julie’s experience working with middle-school students has prepared her to understand the energy and trajectory of her ninth-grade students. I noted that her demeanor and her attention to structure and consistency would probably be comforting to students. Considering Julie’s student
load, she likely was teaching almost half of the ninth-grade students enrolled at Oakwood South. She is also an advisor for the Gardening Club.

**Teacher Preparation and Student Teaching.** Julie completed her teacher preparation coursework at a private college in Southwest Michigan, finishing with a semester of student teaching at one of Oakwood’s middle schools. Because she had recently relocated to Bradley, she had requested the placement herself. Julie knew that she wanted to work with middle-school students, so she contacted the principal at Oakwood East Middle School, who found two English teachers willing to mentor her part-time. Julie spent her mornings with John and her afternoons with Meg. During our interview, Julie described this as, “an ideal experience” because her mentors were very different. She described John as a retired military man who was stoic, but he also knew how to have fun with the kids and had a great rapport with them. He was tough on them academically and had very high expectations. Julie says he did not nurture the kids, but he did nurture her.

The other half of the day she spent with Meg, a teacher she described as, “not a strong academic teacher,” but who was all about nurturing kids. Meg played music and the kids wrote about the music and their feelings and they loved her. Laughing, Julie told me that John would say, “kick ‘em in the ass,” and Meg would say, “hug ‘em.” Julie said she learned a lot from each of them, and she, “thought the world of both of them.” Julie was hired at the Oakwood East Middle School the following year as a seventh and eighth-grade English teacher, and she said that she carried aspects of both mentors into her own classroom.

Julie explained that she was never lead-teaching with both teachers at the same time during her student teaching. The semester was structured so that Julie would act as lead teacher
in John’s classroom for a few weeks, and then she would be lead teacher with Meg’s students later in the semester. She never had the experience of teaching on her own for a full day. Meg talked to Julie many times, which Julie describes as “mothering her,” because Julie was a very hard worker who was very intense, and Meg warned her that she wouldn’t be able to keep up that pace in a regular job. Meg cautioned her that she would burn out, and Julie said that Meg was right. She did burn out.

After completing her internship at the middle school and then teaching middle school English for five years, Julie took time off because she was “worn out” and she wanted to spend time at home raising her young children. After an eight-year hiatus from teaching, Julie returned to teach at Oakwood South Middle School. She later moved to Oakwood South High School, where she has taught all levels of ninth grade English for the past four years.

**Teaching Philosophy.** Julie described that she approaches English, both the reading aspect and the writing aspect, as a process. She believes that people can be taught the process and can be successful. Any student can learn how to write well. When I asked about reading as a process, she elaborated, “When kids read, they make meaning based on what is on the page and what they know in life. Students are taking their experience and knowledge and mixing it with what is on the page.” She teaches them that, “there are tricks to understanding, cue words, phrases, things that should clue them in to understanding.” Julie also reminded me that her philosophy is based on teaching middle school and freshmen students. Consequently, she focuses on the skill of reading rather than the evaluation of literature. Julie mentioned *The Grapes of Wrath*, which she is reading with her ninth-grade honors students at the time of our first interview. As an example, she said that she had to help them find the clues in the text that
Jim Casey was being compared to Jesus. It wouldn’t occur to the students, but once they began to look, they could find references. Julie said she is very deliberate with her students. She believes that, deep down, kids want to be successful, “even the ones who do everything possible to not be successful.” She stated that she has never found any magic key to making sure that those kids are successful, but she believes everyone deserves her time and efforts.

*Mentoring.* This year was Julie’s first year acting as a mentor for a student teacher, though she had been asked in previous years to consider it. When she was approached again last year by Amy, the mentor coach at Oakwood South, Julie said she was cautious and wanted to meet the student teacher first to make sure she had a good feeling about working with him or her. Julie met with the prospective student teacher, Amber, during spring break of the previous year and it went well. Julie was particularly impressed with Amber’s writing from the application documents. After the meeting, she felt comfortable and agreed to work with Amber for the following fall semester.

Although I did not specifically ask, Julie gave me her reasons for having decided to mentor a student teacher. First, she mentioned that Amy is always looking for teachers willing to mentor a student teacher, and she wanted to help out and give it a try. Then she also mentioned that she considered that a good student teacher could help her out a little and ease the grading of papers, which she said is, “sad, but true, and it’s part of what you think about.” Finally, she said, “at this point in my career, I’ve had enough experience…that I felt I could mentor somebody and share what I know.”

When asked to reflect, Julie thought there were some things she did well, and there were also times she didn’t know what to do. When school started, Amber, who was 33 years old, told
Julie that some of the things she was asked to do as part of the program were silly. Because she was older than most of the other student teachers, Amber felt that she was more experienced than the other student teachers. Julie said that Amber really didn’t have any classroom experience, and Julie didn’t know how to respond to Amber’s complaints about the program. When Julie asked herself how she might have been a better mentor for Amber, she wondered if she should reflect on the student-teaching program in general, or Amber as an individual. She often wasn’t sure if she was dealing with a personality issue or a skill issue, and she was at odds with herself on how to respond to Amber. In retrospect, Julie said, “of course you know that personalities will come into play…we’re human,” but also said she really wasn’t prepared for some of the conversations she had to have with Amber. Amber felt that some of the university’s portfolio requirements were unnecessary, and she told Julie that the university attendance policy for student teachers was unreasonable. Julie explained that it was the university policy, which Julie had no power to change, but she added that it would, “put [Amber] in a sour mood, and it would trickle out into other things.”

Julie told me that about a third of the way into the internship, things “came to a head one day.” Amber wanted a place to lock her things, so Julie had given her the key for the coat closet. Julie kept her own things in a desk drawer so that Amber could have her own locked space. Amber forgot her key, and everything she had prepared for the day was locked in the coat closet, including all of the students’ tests and quizzes, which she had planned to go over during class. Amber was flustered and did not know what to do. It was 7:25 am, and classes would begin in ten minutes. Amber wanted to go home and get her key, but Julie felt she should stay and work out a solution. They created an alternate plan and worked through it.
At the end of that day, Julie decided that they needed to have a conversation about communication. Julie finally asked Amber what she wanted from her as a mentor. Julie felt that she had been giving Amber “honest feedback,” but Amber was not receptive to it, and Julie felt there was tension between them because of the way Amber reacted to her. So she asked Amber what she did want from her as a mentor. Amber teared up a bit and insisted that she did want Julie to give honest feedback. When Julie pointed out the ways that Amber had responded negatively to Julie’s feedback, Amber agreed that Julie was right, and also admitted that another employer had also told her that she was not receptive to feedback. Amber acknowledged that she would “have to bite her tongue” because it was hard for her to not be defensive. From that point on, Julie felt that things improved because they had an understanding that Amber did want her feedback. Julie wished she had a conversation about feedback and Amber’s needs earlier in the semester.

Julie was also surprised that Amber was lacking in grammar skills, especially because she was a good writer. Julie described Amber’s application essay as “so polished, thoughtfully-written, with lots of figurative language and imagery and details.” Julie assumed that Amber’s writing skills would transfer to her teaching, but Amber struggled to speak using proper grammar. Julie said she talked to Amber many times about subject-verb agreement and about pronunciation of words. Julie often stepped in when Amber “couldn’t do something.” Now, in retrospect, Julie wasn’t sure if she should have stepped in or if she should have just allowed Amber to flounder and perhaps learn from it. Julie recognized that sometimes people learn when they make mistakes, but she also said she didn’t want to confuse her students, so she was torn.
Julie also did not realize how difficult it would be for her to evaluate another teacher, to be both honest and fair. Julie said she spent hours on Amber’s evaluations because she wanted to compliment things Amber was doing well, but also be honest and fair and realistic about the areas in which Amber needed to improve. Some of the areas on the evaluation related to personality, and Julie said it was hard for her to write an evaluation of Amber.

Overall, Julie described the semester as, “a rough experience,” and said that she wasn’t sure she would do it again, although she added that Lori, the university coordinator, was fantastic, and they met a few times to discuss Julie’s concerns. Julie then added the caveat that she would consider sharing a student teacher with someone else, so that she could be a mentor for part of the day, but not in every class.

When I asked Julie about her strengths as a mentor, she responded that she is really good at modeling. Amber had the opportunity to watch Julie teach a lot, though Julie mentioned that Amber often spent that time on her computer working on things for class. Julie reiterated that she is very deliberate with the freshman students, breaking things down into small steps. Because Julie said she is, “incredibly visual,” she includes lots of slides when she teaches and all of her handouts are very visual. Julie said that she was constantly thinking about helping her students and helping Amber. Everything she created and planned for class was also planned with Amber’s learning in mind. Julie was very conscious that Amber was learning how to teach, and Julie wanted to be a good model for her. Julie also said she was honest in her feedback, but she admitted that she often, “held back and didn’t say anything,” because sometimes it was better to let things go. Julie said she was always consistent with Amber and reliable. If she said she
would do something, she always followed through. She wanted to model reliability and professionalism.

I asked Julie about her goals for Amber, asking what she wanted Amber to gain from her semester student teaching. Julie said she wanted Amber to understand the time involved in being an English teacher. She also wanted Amber to understand what it was like to teach more than one book at a time. Finally, she wanted Amber to learn techniques for the teaching of writing, which Julie feels is one of her own strengths as a teacher. By the end of Amber’s experience, she had taught two papers with the Honors students, following through on responding to those papers as well. When I asked if Amber was successful, Julie tells me a story in response. She described how Amber taught the students how to give context for a quote, then use a quote, and then follow through with an explanation. Though Julie noted that Amber spent time observing as Julie responded to student writing, and they talked about how to respond, Amber resorted to simply pointing out what students had done (checking off context, a quote, and an explanation) without really responding to what the students had written. Julie concluded that she wasn’t sure Amber really knew how to give useful feedback to students.

Amber completed her student teaching and graduated just six weeks prior to my initial interview with Julie. Julie’s very recent experience as a first-time mentor brought up some important questions about both the preparation of mentor teachers and the preparation of student teachers. While Julie is very confident in her work with freshman students, she was often uncertain about how to respond to Amber. She questioned whether her uncertainty was due to the new experience of working with a student teacher or Amber’s specific case as a nontraditional student who didn’t respond well to feedback. In the end, she concluded that she
would have preferred to share a student teacher, perhaps in the same way that she was shared by two mentor teachers in her own experience. Nikki, another mentor teacher participant, also spoke highly of experiences in which she shared a student teacher with another mentor in either the French or English department.

**Nikki: Committed to At-Risk Students and Learning All the Time**

When I knocked on the door of Nikki’s classroom for our interview after school, Nikki was seated in a grouping of student desks grading exams together with one of Oakwood’s special education teachers and one of the school’s deaf interpreters. The three women were working collaboratively, as they often do. Because Nikki teaches English and reading skills classes for students who are below grade level, she spends part of her day team-teaching with these specialized teachers. At the time of our interviews, Nikki was an English and French teacher at Oakwood South. In the eleven years she has been teaching at Oakwood South, she has taught ninth, tenth, and eleventh grade English classes at the honors, regular, and prep levels. Nikki began teaching ninth and eleventh grade English classes, then was later asked to teach tenth grade regular and prep classes. A few years ago, she took on a couple of French classes as well as the reading skills class for ninth grade students. In January of 2016, she was teaching prep tenth-grade English, reading skills, and two levels of French.

Nikki was also in pursuit of a master’s degree in reading. She originally started a master’s degree in learning disabilities, then decided to switch to a program that focused on reading skills. She wanted to find a program that would be applicable what she teaches, and she felt that the courses she was taking directly applied to her reading skills classes. She told me,
“to be a good teacher, I have to be learning all the time.” She felt that she was a better teacher while taking classes. We talked about the unfortunate lack of incentives for a graduate degree, especially now that the state allows new teachers to fulfill professional development hours through their own school districts. When Nikki and I began teaching, the state required 18 credit hours of graduate-level coursework for new teachers to earn their professional certification. That requirement no longer applies, and graduate programs for teachers are falling apart. While Nikki said she certainly understood the “pushback against it [the old re-certification requirement]” because “it’s exhausting those first few years,” she knew that coursework improved her teaching, and she added that taking classes again has moved her into some leadership roles at Oakwood South, specifically for a school-improvement group focused on building reading and writing skills. She was also more knowledgeable about conferences and other opportunities for professional development due to her work in graduate school. She was excited to be learning and to be able to apply her learning to her current instruction.

*Teacher Preparation and Student Teaching.* Nikki attended a private college in Southwest Michigan, and she describes her student teaching as “awesome.” She completed her student teaching in a middle school, which was her only experience working with middle-school students. The mentor teacher interviewed Nikki in advance because she had had a bad experience and was nervous about taking on another student teacher. Nikki said the mentor teacher was honest and up-front with her, and the interview went very well. They shared similar personalities and a mutual affinity for Starbucks, and they got along great. Nikki enjoyed working with her.
Nikki’s mentor intended for her to observe for a few weeks, but Nikki was bored after just a week of observing and asked for things to do to help out. Because she was ready and anxious to teach, Nikki taught for the majority of her semester and took on a full teaching load of five classes of seventh-grade English for six weeks. Nikki followed the curriculum, but was also given freedom of how to work with the texts. She felt that she was trusted to make decisions and lead the classes on her own. Nikki reiterated that it was a great experience for her, and she had a great relationship with her mentor teacher. She remained in contact with her mentor for a few years after the student teaching ended, and also was in contact with a few of the students through social media.

**Teaching Philosophy.** When I asked Nikki about her teaching philosophy and what she believed deeply about teaching, she first said, “every kid deserves their best chance in the classroom.” Nikki works with a tough population of at-risk students who read and write below grade level, and she feels deeply that despite some of her students’ struggles, they should be given every opportunity to succeed in her classroom. She also said, “Every day is a new day,” explaining that whatever happened on Monday does not affect how she works with a student the next day.

Nikki believed that literacy was key to a student’s learning, and literacy included both reading and writing. She explained that the two skills “hinge on each other…one can’t be separated from the other…so reading and writing should be taught in every content area.” She also believed in the value of kids “processing their thinking in writing.”

When I asked Nikki about how she teaches writing, she responded that students should be “writing every day, as much as possible.” She added that she values revision and the
process, though she also said that she doesn’t always do it well. She wanted to help students with the process of writing, but acknowledged that it was a struggle under the traditional high school schedule. Her classes have grown over the past eleven years, and trying to meet with each of her twenty-five or thirty students during a fifty-minute class period was very difficult, despite her belief that conferencing with her students individually was important. Technology has helped with this problem. Nikki’s students have used Google docs as a way to share writing so that she can give feedback in or out of class time. As I nodded my head in agreement regarding the challenges of teaching writing well to over 150 students a day, we continued to talk about the seemingly universal struggle of teaching writing. We (English teachers) know the very best, ideal way to teach writing to our students, but we must constantly compromise based on time and resources. This was a huge source of professional frustration to me. In fact, the only class in which I felt I could give enough time to developing students as writers was creative writing, an elective class with no required curriculum.

Nikki brought up the teaching of grammar, and explained that she felt grammar was really important as a new teacher, but her purpose for the teaching of grammar has changed. She was working on subject-verb agreement with students, but she explained that she no longer focused on grammar for identification purposes. She was currently teaching it as a way to add interest to writing and be clearly understood. Nikki explained that she was taught grammar independently of writing, and she also taught grammar outside of students’ writing in her student teaching. She mentioned that she was taking a graduate class on the teaching of writing, which resulted in her “shifting her focus” on how she was teaching writing. As Nikki continued to
describe the changes she wanted to make in reading and writing, it became very apparent that student choice has resulted in more success for Nikki’s students.

A couple of years ago, Nikki was inspired by Nancie Atwell\(^7\), a well-known middle-school teacher and teaching award recipient who has authored several books, to do a choice reading project alongside the regular curriculum. Every three weeks, the students wrote Nikki a letter about their reading. Nikki added that she modeled for students how to write the letters, and students analyzed books in their letters, talking about theme and characterization. Nikki told me, “their writing improved in leaps and bounds that year because they chose the books.” She added that it was, “an independent task,” though she coached them through the first couple of letters. She continued, “those kids learned to love to read that year and their writing improved dramatically.” She wanted to get back to that, after explaining that time and other issues got in the way. Nikki also brought up Kelly Gallagher\(^8\), a former high school English teacher who focused on building deeper reading and writing practices with students. She talked about the idea that students could write “seventeen different papers” from one topic if they were passionate about it. She clearly believed that student choice was an essential component of good writing, and she explained that students could work on writing in informative, persuasive, and narrative genres while still writing about their own interests.

Nikki mentioned that her class read *Bad Boy*, a memoir by Walter Dean Myers this year. *Bad Boy* depicts the author’s struggles with race and class as a boy in 1940s and 1950s Harlem.

\(^7\) Major works by Nancie Atwell include *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning; Side by Side; Lessons that Change Writers*; and *Systems to Transform Your Classroom and School*.

\(^8\) Kelly Gallagher is the author of *In the Best Interest of Students; Write Like This; Readicide; and Teaching Adolescent Writers*. 

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Nikki relayed that her black students really identified with Myers when he talked about being a black person in America, especially since her black students are in the minority group at Oakwood South. She hoped that more choice reading and writing in the upcoming semester would engage her current students.

**Mentoring.** Nikki has shared student teachers with various other teachers in the building on three occasions, but this year was the first time she worked one-on-one with a student teacher as his only mentor teacher. Nikki spoke highly of the shared mentorship experience, and said that if she had started as a mentor on her own, she would have failed at it. In her past experiences, she felt that she had a “coach” to talk with and discuss issues as she shared student teachers with her colleagues. In a sharing scenario, she would mentor a teacher for two or three classes a day, which helped her learn about mentoring through conversation and collaboration with other colleagues.

Nikki said that taking a student teacher this year was both a good and a bad decision, explaining that she, “had difficult classes to pass off.” She thought her classes would be good experiences for a student teacher, but it was difficult for her to hand over classes to a student teacher when many of her classes were designed to help the lowest-performing students. Nikki’s recent student teacher wasn’t a strong teacher, and she was fearful that her students would not make the progress that was needed. Nikki also admitted that she had good ideas about what they would be doing during the semester, but “didn’t have all her ducks in a row,” explaining, “in theory I had a good idea, in practice it didn’t always work out as well as I’d hoped.” Nikki added that she really values collaboration, so working with a student teacher without another teacher for collaboration was, “really taxing,” and she struggled as a mentor. Nikki reiterated
that it was important to have a plan in place, which units you planned to teach and how you planned to transition, but her remedial skills-based classes made that difficult. For Nikki, the students who arrived in the fall and their strengths and weaknesses determined her goals. Nikki added that maybe second semester would have been a better choice for mentoring because she would have known the students and what she could feasibly pass on to a student teacher.

Nikki and I discussed that the advantage for a student teacher arriving in the fall is the ability to see how classroom procedures and environments are established. When student teachers arrive in January, the classroom rhythm is established, and the teacher has already created an environment that determines what behaviors are acceptable. Nikki thought a student teacher would benefit from the experience of arriving in the fall to see a teacher establish rapport and classroom procedures with students. However, for a mentor, we discussed that it might be easier to take a student teacher in the spring, after teachers already know the students and have established their classes, making it easier for mentors to coach student teachers in their own classrooms with their own students. Nikki’s student teacher struggled in classroom management, though she added that this is a struggle for most of the student teachers she has worked with.

When asked about her strengths as a mentor, Nikki explained that she has been very open and honest with her student teachers, and she has given them a lot of feedback. Nikki often would write running notes during class as she observed her student teacher, and she typed these into a shared Google doc so that her student teacher could read them during the next class. The disadvantage is that she doesn’t really edit her notes, and she noticed that she was, “good at finding things that needed work,” but she had to really work to include positive feedback as well. She added that a teacher naturally looks for what needs correction, and she had to remember to
give affirmation. According to Nikki, her student teacher this year was accepting of her feedback, though she said every student teacher breaks down at some point because it’s stressful, and Nikki recalled breaking down during her student-teaching semester as well. Nikki added that being transparent was one of her strengths, but that could be good and bad. She explained that the student teachers knew exactly what she was thinking about their abilities, but sometimes that was hard on them. Nikki described that her student teacher this fall was overwhelmed and felt attacked until he realized that Nikki really wanted to help him improve. She noted that she, “has to work to put herself in check” when dealing with a sensitive person. Nikki also said that she’s “pretty good” at what she does and that she tries to model everything for her students. That modeling is beneficial for student teachers as well.

Nikki has had good discussions about teaching and planning with all of her student teachers, and one of her goals for student teachers was that they learn self-reflection. She has asked her student teachers to keep a journal and coached them on what it should look like (i.e. not complaining, but reflective about teaching practices). She felt that using the journal allowed student teachers to process their teaching before having dialogues with the mentors. Another goal was to help her student teachers use technology in the classroom. It strikes me as odd that Nikki would need to teach these millennial student teachers about technology, but she tells me that her student teacher this year was, “really apprehensive” about using technology, and Nikki pushed him to do online journaling and lesson planning in Google docs.

Nikki explained that first she models what she does, but then she wants student teachers to transition to thinking about how they will make decisions in their own classrooms. So,
midway through the semester, Nikki asked her student teacher to set goals for the rest of the semester, and they spent a lot of time discussing what he would do in his own classroom.

When I asked Nikki about successes, she told me that the first quarter of the year was a little rough, but after a low point, she had a great conversation with her student teacher this fall, and he established some goals for himself, which re-focused him in the second half of the internship. Nikki also added that she trusted him more and was able to pass some responsibilities to him after their conversation, and the second half was more successful. Although Nikki said he was not particularly strong in English, he processed feedback and improved more than other student teachers she has worked with. For her, this was an important success.

When Nikki brought up content area knowledge, she said none of the student teachers were really strong in that area, but she also contended that it was hard to come from the university to the high school and remember what the ability levels of students are. She said she was also “idealistic” about what she would be able to teach when she was a student teacher. Nikki noted that a couple of her student teachers were “very organized,” which made them more able to map out and plan for long-term goals. One of her student teachers always planned three weeks in advance, which allowed Nikki and the student teacher to discuss plans and goals on a weekly basis. Nikki concluded by saying all of the student teachers she has worked with have been very “coachable.” They all want to improve and be the best teacher they can be. Student management was always difficult, but every student teacher has listened to feedback and made improvements, which Nikki says is the best she can hope for.
Finally, Nikki said all of her student teachers have been “nice people,” who are personable. Nikki’s student teacher this fall was weak in some areas, but built strong relationships with students, which was a success for him in comparison with another student teacher who Nikki worked with last year. She was an introvert who struggled to connect with other people. Nikki mentions that students, “give some grace,” when they like the student teacher, so being personable and building relationships with students is an important aspect of being a successful teacher.

Nikki reiterated that “co-mentoring” has been a great success although she knows that the university discourages it. It’s easier on the mentor teachers and gives the student teachers the experience of two different classrooms. She mentioned that some universities do a year-long student-teaching experience, and there is a lot of value in spending time in two different classrooms. She was glad that the university still allowed co-mentoring and thought it should be encouraged. She added that sharing a student teacher also promoted collaboration among colleagues, which was important for Nikki. Of course, she conceded that a successful collaboration among mentor teachers depended on their personalities as well.

Nikki’s reluctance to “hand over” classes of at-risk students to a student teacher has become more of a concern among teachers whose evaluations are now directly tied to testing and student success. Perhaps one solution is to actively encourage co-mentoring or shared student teachers. As Nikki mentioned, the student teacher is given the advantage of working with two different teachers, and the mentor teacher can make important decisions about which classes a student teacher should teach. Julie spoke positively of the advantage of working with two
mentors, and Nikki felt that she was a better mentor when given a co-mentoring option. Like Julie, Annette also had a positive student-teaching experience with two mentor teachers.

Annette: Inspired and Inspiring

Annette, a former librarian who really wanted to teach high school English, has found her calling at Oakwood South. At the time of our interviews, Annette taught ninth-grade honors classes and IB English classes. She also assisted IB Diploma students with their Extended Essay and supervised the school gardening club. Until moving into the new building, Annette collected lunch scraps for the birds, feeding a black raven she called Walter from her second story classroom almost every day. She appreciates what is both useful and beautiful and has an impressive green thumb. Annette had revived my classroom aloe plant more than once. A copy of the Anishinaabe Prayer, a Native American prayer of love and respect for the Earth, was featured in the front of her classroom, along with a poster about the Battle of Little Big Horn. On the back wall was a world map entitled “Promoting World Peace and Friendship” and another poster called “The Great Garden Guide.” One thing that has always impressed me about Annette is her ability to attend to the minutia of managing incredibly organized classes while never losing focus on the big picture of education and her students’ lives.

When I contacted Annette about the interviews, she described herself as, “an old-fashioned NCATE educated teacher,” who is “a KSD person,” explaining that teaching takes Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions. She continued, “Whenever I have had an intern or a pre-intern struggle, they lacked one or more of these fundamental traits.” Annette believed that a teacher’s job was to inspire, and her job as a mentor was also to inspire her student teachers. Her
dedication to the profession and future teachers has been an inspiration to me since I have known her.

**Teacher Preparation and Student Teaching.** Annette spent a year attending her local community college before transferring to a small private college, earning her degree in English in 1983. She fondly described her student teaching semester, taking place in the fall of 1983, and she remained in contact with one of her two mentor teachers (the other was now deceased). Annette worked with two English teachers in a mid-sized, very diverse, urban high school. She was placed with two teachers for two eight-week mentoring experiences. One teacher taught advanced classes; the other taught at-risk students. Annette told me that the entire staff, including the principals and secretaries, welcomed her, supported her, and appreciated her work. Both mentors treated her with respect and confidence, offering to write her a letter of recommendation when she completed her semester with them. Annette specified that her mentors offered to write letters of recommendation without her having to ask, adding that she never felt like a burden. The two teachers worked collaboratively on Annette’s final evaluation, then took her out for a nice dinner to thank her for working with them.

While Annette described her internship as an incredibly positive experience, she also told me that she discovered, “big holes in her education” during her student teaching. She described herself as “solid in literature” with strong writing skills, but said, “I didn’t know how I knew what I knew.” She told me she had to go back and teach herself many of the things she knew intuitively about language and writing. Annette said the confidence her mentors had in her inspired her to figure it out, and she was self-aware enough to know what she needed to learn. They never belittled her for what she did not yet know.
When Annette graduated in December of 1983, teaching jobs were not readily available, so she decided to attend graduate school on the East Coast, earning an MA in library science. After completing graduate school, she started her first teaching job. Annette described this job as “landing in the honeypot.” She spent half the day as a librarian and taught English classes for the other half day. At a time when she was still learning how to teach, she only had half the classes to prepare and half the papers to grade. The district also had a brand new superintendent who hired a teacher coach to provide non-evaluative feedback. Annette invited the teacher coach to sit in on her classes any time she was not occupied with another teacher. She desired as much feedback as possible. The teacher coach scripted her classes and provided detailed feedback without any effect on Annette’s evaluations, which Annette called, “priceless help.” Though she described this as an ideal first job, Annette also told me that she had a group of at-risk kids, “that would have sunk any new teacher’s ship.” She had a student who self-mutilated and sucked her blood in class, another student who hid under desks and roared like a lion. She told me that the rest of the staff took turns sitting in her room while she was teaching that class. She specified that other teachers volunteered to bring their work and spend their planning time in her room because they knew the students behaved better with another adult presence. They supported her, knowing that veteran teachers could help a new teacher gain control of a very difficult class.

After two years in this position, which Annette called, “the golden years,” Annette was pink-slipped. She found a job as a middle-school librarian in Oakwood Public Schools. Her position as librarian was great when her children were young. Annette explained, “I worked really hard all day, and I brought nothing home…I didn’t have to grade a single thing.” But she wanted to teach. Annette said that she, “loved the principal, loved the [middle-school] building.
but wanted to teach.” She also felt that her teaching was more suited to high-school students. An opportunity opened up for a full-time English Language Arts teacher at the district’s high school in 1994, and Annette has continued to teach English classes at Oakwood South High School since then. In the past twenty-two years, she has mentored thirteen student teachers from various institutions. While many have come from the neighboring university, she has also mentored student teachers from smaller colleges in the area and out-of-state. Annette was also the district’s first Nationally Certified teacher. She told me that National Board Certification instills the values of mentoring, and that she felt part of her duty to the profession was to help others.

**Teaching Philosophy.** Before the interviews, I let teachers know I would ask about their teaching philosophy, and Annette had prepared notes for me. Annette described her teaching philosophy as, “You are important.” She continued by describing the ways she shows her students that they are important. She will always be prepared to teach her class to the best of her ability. She refuses to collect work that she does not have time to grade. She explained, “I don’t want you to stay up until 2:00 a.m. finishing a paper that will sit in my basket for two weeks. If I collect it, I grade it.” Annette wrote, “I will always be happy to see you,” and, “No matter how big a pain in the butt you are, I will remember that you are a precious child of God, and I will treat you that way. You, of course, will owe me an apology in the future.” While she said that completing work on time is a life skill, she added that ultimately the students are more important than the time. So she sometimes takes late work without penalty. She is positive about the future, especially her students’ futures. During the interview, she told me that she would never give less than her best to her students.
When I asked Annette about her philosophy specific to the teaching of English, she told me that language is important and students should know it well. She added that it would be embarrassing for students to meet someone whose first language is not English, yet who knows and understands English better than they do. Annette believed in the power of words for a thoughtful, reflective society, and believed that democracy depended on her success as an English teacher. Annette also told me that we put too much emphasis on what books students read. She said, “I don’t think it really matters at all what books you read. It matters that you read.” While she declared that she loves the classics, she admitted that she didn’t start reading by reading the classics. She felt that we needed to “find the books students love and enter through that door.”

Annette also has a degree in Psychology, and she brought up B.F. Skinner, “rewards are more effective than punishment,” in regards to the teaching of writing. She added, “the more immediate the reward, the more positive the outcome.” Annette has always returned a paper to a student the next day. When I balked in surprise, Annette explained that she generally has collected papers on Fridays and returned them on Mondays. She sometimes has given the class two due dates, and has collected half the papers on Tuesday, and the other half on Wednesday. She reiterated that she would not make papers due if she could not grade them because she believed in immediate feedback. She described herself as scoring “to the FCAs [Focused Correction Areas] very strictly,” but she also told me that she “always finds positive things to say about the writing.” She started to chuckle, and said her husband knows that if a paper says, “good title,” then she was searching for something positive to say. She does not try to write everything on every paper, so she also gives class feedback. She added, “I’m not an editor.
Editing takes hours. I don’t have that kind of time.” She talked about looking for common errors among student papers. As an example, she explained that she might tell her class, “If you see a minus five for capitalization, you may have forgotten about…” And she sometimes has allowed students to edit their work and resubmit. Annette explained,

I’m trying to teach them to be editors. Too many teachers are drag and brag-this is what I know, this is what you don’t know. See how smart I am, see how dumb you are. I try not to come across that way as I grade papers. I don’t want to drag and brag. I just want to say, ‘eight of you don’t know how to spell the word receive. If that is you, this is how you spell it. Write it down.’

Annette added, at the end, that she read once that the best color to grade in is green. So she doesn’t use red pens. She also made a point about student effort, explaining that some kids care so deeply about their writing. She spends more time giving feedback knowing that those students will utilize her time. Other students, who clearly spent much less time on their writing, may get less feedback. This means Annette, “doesn’t grade all papers equally,” but she specified that she reads “every single paper to the end.”

Mentoring. Annette’s first mentoring experience with a student teacher occurred in 1998 when her principal recommended her to the university coordinator. At the time, Annette was working on her first National Board Certification (she has been certified twice) and felt that it was important to help others in the profession. She told me, “the National Board instills in you that it is your duty to the profession to help others in the profession.” She has taken that very seriously. She also added that she always remembered that her mentors were so dedicated to her, and she wanted to give back.

Annette’s first intern was a non-traditional student, and the two are colleagues and friends today. Annette reflected that her first nine student teachers found jobs immediately after
graduating. In fact, some years ago, a principal at another district told Annette that any intern who worked well with Annette was someone he wanted to hire, and he hired the new teacher. In our interview, Annette expressed concerns about the way student teaching has changed. She worried that the mentality about interns today is different, that they are not always welcomed happily into a school and that they are used to lighten teachers’ heavy workloads. She feared that some were “dumped upon” and, in that scenario, it would not be surprising that they were not in love with teaching. She also expressed concerns that her last four or five interns have held jobs outside the classroom. One was a soccer coach and needed to leave as soon as school ended. This gave her no time to reflect and work collaboratively with Annette. Another student teacher held a full-time job, working from 3:30-11:30 each day, which did not allow her any time outside of the regular school day to work on planning or grading. Annette recognized that this is survival for student teachers, and said, “It would be a different story if we paid them [student teachers]. We should pay them.”

Annette also said that her last few interns have had fewer skills and less enthusiasm. One failed the English competency state test before student teaching; Annette was never told that this student teacher had failed the state exam. This became a crisis when Annette asked the student teacher to help grade Honors 9th grade English papers, and Annette realized that her Honors students had better writing skills than her student teacher. Annette was willing to work with the student teacher, but the student teacher had a full-time job and did not have time to work on her skills. Sadly, Annette said that the student teacher did not have time for mentoring.

Annette said student teachers have been weak in their writing skills, and she gave an example. In her Honors English class, ninth-grade students are responsible for identifying active
and passive voice, as well as simple, compound, complex, and compound/complex sentences. They are asked to highlight all the clauses: independent and subordinate, along with subordinators and conjunctions. She explained, “the student teachers don’t know what active and passive voice are. They don’t know their clauses, they don’t know their subordinators.” Annette said the interns have told her, “I really like to lead book discussions.” Annette laughed and said, “I do too! But I can’t eat lunch with the foreign language staff and have them say, ‘how come your students don’t know what an adjective is?!?’” And she added that this is “all over the ACT and the SAT.” She said the student teachers just need time to learn.

Annette specified that she doesn’t fault her interns if they don’t have some skills, but then she needs them to make the time commitment to learn those skills. She reflected that she also did not have all the skills she needed as a student teacher, but she committed to learning them. Annette said that student teachers now are overwhelmed. When Annette goes into lunch, she has heard the student teachers talking about “stress and anxiety, stress and anxiety, stress and anxiety.” Annette did not remember feeling stressed and anxious, even though she was working hard as a student teacher. Annette said part of this is that teachers today have too much. Student teachers were here to learn how to teach, and doing more has not necessarily resulted in better quality. Annette admitted that she has sometimes been accused of not giving her student teachers “the real experience” because she has only given them one class of papers to grade instead of all her ninth-grade classes.

I asked Annette about her goals for student teachers. She said, “I want you to teach well, and I want you to have the experience of what it feels like to teach well, to go ‘wow, that was great! The kids got it!’” She explained that if an intern could not handle teaching six classes
well, then the intern should just teach a couple and really learn how to teach. She wanted student
teachers to, “fall in love with the positive aspects of teaching.” She went on, “I want them to
remember something that’s written on a coffee mug in our house. ‘A hundred years from now, it
will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove,
but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.”

Annette said that the local university (from which most of the intern teachers graduate)
doesn’t understand reflection. She expressed frustration that student teachers met as a group
with the university coordinator once a week, and all of the mentor teachers received group
feedback about the concerns of the student teachers. For Annette, this was not particularly
helpful. She did not know who the feedback came from. The feedback (from the university
coordinator) for mentors was not helpful because it wasn’t specific. She wished she could get
real feedback. She explained, “the group elusive feedback is not genuine reflection” and it
doesn’t help anyone become a more effective teacher. Annette also required that her student
teachers request feedback from the students. She suggested that they include a question on
quizzes asking for feedback from students, and added that her student teachers get a lot of
positive comments from students. Unfortunately, she did not feel that reflection was stressed by
the university. And, with her past few student teachers holding outside jobs, there was no time
for reflection because they were so busy.

Annette named her strengths as organization and commitment. She said her interns have
emailed her, later, from Texas and Milwaukee asking for assignments. She has always felt that
mentoring was a career-long commitment. She sends them the assignments. Annette also felt
that her classroom management skills were learned because of good mentoring, and she believed
her interns could learn from seeing her model. But she concluded by telling me that the most important thing a teacher does is inspire people. She told me, “Somehow it’s all gotten down to knowledge…the mentors need to know that inspiration is their job.” She continued, “When an intern walks in my room and I introduce them to the class, I say ‘this is the most important teacher in the room. You are to treat them better than you treat me. If you do anything to discourage them from being a teacher, I’m on you.’” She added, “We need more teachers.”

Annette said that National Board certification was the best preparation to be a mentor, but she would still like to be prepared by the university each time she agrees to work with a student teacher. Usually she has attended a brief meeting where the coordinator said something like, “You know the routine, Annette.” And she does. But she continued, “I would like to hear every time the same thing. Thank you for taking an intern. We’re here to support you. We hope you will pass on a love of teaching.” She continued, “I’d love to hear what to do, like, please give them [student teachers] as much positive feedback as possible. Please let us know early if there is a problem.” Although she is busy, Annette would welcome more genuine reflection and interaction with the university.

In the end, Annette said, “mentoring is really important work to be doing.” She added that student teachers need to understand what is going on with the legislature and how that affects their job. “They’re not guaranteed a good job. They’ll have to fight for every single thing.” After we chat for a few minutes, Annette quoted one of her colleagues, Renee, and said that “a teachable spirit” is the trait she wants most in a student teacher. She continued, “I can work with anything after that.”
Renee: In Search of Good Grammar and “A Teachable Spirit”

As a former mentor coach, Annette’s colleague Renee may have the most experience working with student teachers. Indeed, when I talked to Renee, she used the term Annette quoted, “a teachable spirit” when asked about her work with student teachers. In an interesting twist, of which I was not aware before conducting interviews with my former colleagues, I found that Annette had been Renee’s mentor teacher at Oakwood South.

Since her student-teaching semester in 1997, Renee has been increasingly committed to Oakwood Public Schools. In 2016, Renee was teaching eleventh and twelfth-grade English classes at Oakwood South, along with adult education classes at a more rural district in Bradley county. In the past, Renee served as mentor coach for five years. She was also the district leader for the ELA team, serving on the Curriculum and Instruction Council and reporting to the Curriculum Director. Renee’s eleventh-grade students were involved in SAT test prep in January, with tests taking place just six weeks from the time of our interview. Renee welcomed me into her classroom with a hug and offered me a cup of tea.

Teacher Preparation and Student Teaching. When I asked about Renee’s student teaching experience, not yet knowing that Annette was her mentor teacher, Renee said it resulted in “a lifelong friend” in her mentor, and explained that she and Annette have been colleagues in the Oakwood South English Department for almost twenty years. Renee was a non-traditional student teacher who had already taught at a private school out-of-state for seven years before moving to Bradley. When she moved to Southwest Michigan with her children, it took her two years to earn her state certification in English with a minor in history. Although Renee was older than Annette and already had experience teaching her own classes, she expressed that she
learned a lot from student teaching, and she believed Annette learned some strategies as well. After she completed her certification requirements, Renee was offered a job at Oakwood South. Renee and Annette continued to work closely together. Though they came from different backgrounds and have different teaching personalities, Annette and Renee have been close colleagues, and Annette has supported Renee through some difficult times in her life. They care deeply for one another.

**Teaching Philosophy:** Renee described her teaching philosophy as, “all students can learn, but sometimes they need help unlocking that door.” She noted that it has gotten harder to focus individually on students as class sizes have increased, but “I still look for opportunities.” She added, “when students are recalcitrant, I will take them into the hallway after class, or catch them on the way in, and say, ‘how can I help you? What can I do to make this a better experience for you because I know you’re not happy in class?’” Renee also believed that proximity to students was important. She referenced Jacob Kounin’s “withitness,” defining it in her own words as being there, being aware of everything that was happening in her classroom.

Renee places great importance on student engagement. She mentioned an upcoming Shakespeare unit and a YouTube video she found last year. It was a rap video of Shakespeare’s sonnets and she told me, “I’ve never seen them get excited about writing sonnets before, so it was really cool.” We delved into a side conversation about a new series I saw at Barnes and Noble called *OMG Shakespeare*. The titles were *YOLO Juliet* and *Macbeth #killing it*. While I

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9 “withitness” was coined by Jacob Kounin in his 1970 publication *Discipline and Group Management in Classrooms*. His work moved away from classroom discipline of misbehaviors, instead focusing on teachers using classroom management techniques to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. “Withitness” refers to awareness, paying attention to student reactions and behaviors, anticipating what students will say and do, and knowing how to act and respond accordingly.
chuckled about all the scholars who were probably bemoaning this denigration of Shakespeare, we talked about how the texts could be used with high school students, how students could evaluate the texting and emoticon versions of the plays themselves. Renee added that anything that gets students interested and helps them understand is worth looking at.

When I asked Renee about her philosophy specific to the teaching of English and the teaching of writing, she first brought up the whole language approach. While she believed whole language has “brought more interest to writing,” she also believed, “the structure of writing has suffered from it.” She was very concerned that “people don’t even hear what’s wrong” with their writing and speaking. She felt, “at this point, we can either throw it out …decide it doesn’t matter anymore, or structure and grammar need to be taught early on.” Renee felt, “even simple diagramming of sentences would help them [students] understand where the placement of a subject or a verb goes so that students would have a framework of semantics with which a teacher could discuss grammar.” She added, “We’re at a point now where students think that something like, ‘which is why he did what he did’ is a complete thought.” She admitted, “I know I’m old, but in my day, we knew that.” She concluded, “grammar needs to be taught systemically in a composition class again, and we worry more about literature and the love of literature that we have as English teachers, but for literacy, they need to be able to read and write.” She explained that a teacher cannot explain comma rules if students don’t understand the difference between a compound and complex sentence, because the rules are connected to usage within those types of sentences. She wondered why it is expected for students to learn correct pronoun usage in foreign language, and why it is not expected that students know them in their first language. The lack of commitment to understand the structure of language is a source of
frustration for her. Renee felt that an understanding of grammar and structure was essential for literacy. Later she told me, “Literacy is key for living in a democratic society and certainly a must for today’s world. We can’t make wise choices for leaders when we can’t tell the difference between truth and lies.”

Mentoring. In her nineteen years teaching at Oakwood South High School, Renee has mentored fourteen student teachers. Renee also completed a Master’s degree in Educational Leadership, and eventually became a mentor coach for the high school. For Renee, mentoring has been different for every student teacher. She believed it was important to establish a rapport with a student teacher, and mentioned that she liked to take them out for lunch to get to know them. She described mentoring as “a fluid situation depending on two people with different personalities.” She told me that she asks her student teachers about their teaching philosophies before she talks about her own teaching philosophy. She added, “the classroom is mine, but I like to give them freedom of some choices, and as long as it doesn’t interfere with the district and getting things accomplished in the curriculum, I’m pretty game for that.”

Renee wanted her student teachers to have a plan for the following week ready by Thursday so that they could sit down and talk about the plans in advance. She added that she stays in the classroom with her student teachers rather than, “throw them on their own.” When student teachers are ready to teach, they’ll take one class, and then another, and finally take on the full load of teaching towards the end. However, she added that she has never given a full load to anyone who she doesn’t feel is ready. Renee said, “if the intern has what I call a ‘teachable spirit,’ they can accomplish anything.” On the other hand, she describes some student teachers who have not had that disposition.
If they think they know it all when they come in, then we’re going to have some problems…I think that an intern who is willing to come in and right away say, ‘what can I do to help get started’ [stands] a much better chance of doing well and being successful than one who sits there and waits and waits and waits…and I’ve had both.

She explained that some people take a little longer “warming up” than others, which is really okay. She concluded, “You have to be alert and aware and watch and plan. You need to spend time planning together. It’s important to spend the time.”

When I asked Renee about her strengths, she said that she is approachable and her students know that she is fair. And she added that she is, “a decent teacher.” She is careful with her lesson plans and provides a good model for student teachers to follow, which is especially helpful for student teachers who may not be comfortable and confident right away.

Renee’s goal was to give her student teachers the best possible modeling and experience and practice in the classroom for as long as they could have it. She wanted them to walk away having experience dealing with parents, with the business aspect of school, and with administration. She wanted them to have spent time with students and know what student learning looks like. She wanted student teachers to know how to create their own assessments and give assignments with clear goals that students understand. She was concerned that often student teachers attempted to establish rapport with the students first and foremost, and sometimes they crossed the line into almost-friendships, which they had to “back out of” in order to be a teacher. She talked about the importance of keeping a professional line drawn and not caring too much whether kids liked them.

Renee believed most of her student teachers were success stories in different ways. She mentioned one student teacher who could “barely speak English.” She described him as having “very rough edges.” He had to work hard, and they worked together. Renee wanted him to be
able to speak to parents and students in a way that would establish him as credible, so they worked on speaking and writing skills. She said he got a teaching job out of state, and as of her last contact, he was still teaching. She mentioned a couple of student teachers haven’t gotten jobs yet, and one student decided ultimately that he wanted to make more money than what was possible in teaching. Renee said he was good in the classroom, and he would have been a good teacher. Renee reiterated that the biggest success stories are people who have a teachable spirit, who are willing to go the extra distance to stretch themselves and learn something new.

Renee raised the issue of grammar again, and she said many teachers aren’t willing to take a student teacher unless they [student teachers] were willing to learn it. She continued, “If you’re an English teacher, you should be wanting to learn new things in your discipline. We need to be open to learning more.” For Renee, student teachers need to know the parts of speech, they need to know the sentence structure, and they need to do basic diagramming for simple and compound and complex sentences. She added that they need to know participles, gerunds, infinitives, verbals…“it’s simple, basic English.” Renee added that it is also part of Common Core, and it’s expected for students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. When I asked what we can do for student teachers who do not have that knowledge base, she recommended a Warriners-style textbook\(^\text{10}\) with everything diagrammed and spelled out.

As we wrapped up our interview, Renee lamented that there is never enough time to evaluate student learning and apply that knowledge to how we approach the next unit or to reteach. She said that she feels constantly rushed to move on to the next thing in the curriculum.

\(^{10}\) Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition, a comprehensive handbook for students in grades 6-12, was first published in 1946 and has since sold over 30 million copies.
“It’s a major problem in education,” she explained, “we grade tests and quizzes, rush to get everything done at the end of the semester, and submit the grades. There needs to be more evaluation and time to reflect on it.” She said, “We’re always doing it [assessing students] as an autopsy, not to help.” She added that we’re losing a lot of kids from the public schools because “the way we do education needs to change.” Renee’s daughter, who Renee described as incredibly bright, has been homeschooling her young children and was debating homeschooling her adolescent son instead of sending him to a local high school next year. As Renee worked hard to prepare her eleventh-grade students for the SAT, the test that was required by the state this year instead of the ACT and Michigan Merit Exams of the past few years, it wasn’t hard to see why Renee believed that change was necessary. I think many educators would agree with her.

**Conclusion**

While each of the participants in this study differs in background, teaching philosophy, and mentoring, it is clear that each of these teachers is also deeply committed to their profession. This includes a commitment to their high school students as well as a commitment to future teachers through mentoring. While the narratives of these mentor teachers are not generalizable to all mentor teachers in all secondary schools, these teachers represent the values and experiences of the ELA mentor teacher community at Oakwood South.

In chapter five I will discuss key findings about teacher preparation from interviews with Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee. All of the teachers spoke extensively about student teachers as writers, including the writing skills that were needed to teach high-school students. They also
discussed the need for students to have more experience delivering lessons with clear goals and higher-level thinking. This was especially true in the teaching of literature, where student teachers struggled with close reading and thinking beyond recall. The mentor teachers spoke more in depth about the professional attributes needed for student teachers, including the “teachable spirit” disposition coined by Renee. Mentors discussed both content knowledge and pedagogical skills, recognizing the challenges faced by student teachers and also expressing their hopes for student teachers 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.
I know some teachers are like, “Well, this is what the experience is. Good luck. Start swimming.” I say, “Here are my files.” I literally let them [student teachers] download everything I have in my files. Read it, think it through, but here’s a start. I start them off teaching one class, and one class only… I mean one preparation, like Honors English 9. And you know what, this is the truth, if they never make it past being able to handle more than one, I never give them more than one. This idea that they have to have two weeks of teaching a full load…I can’t have things going to hell here! That’s not going to build their confidence. I let them work on what they need…I just don’t give them more than they can handle. -Annette, mentor teacher

Annette’s explanation of how she mentors a student teacher reveals the complexities behind mentor teachers’ work. This is work that deserves examination in the field of English Education because it is an essential aspect of teacher preparation. Mentor teachers at Oakwood commit fifteen weeks (about one third of an academic year) to helping a new teacher learn classroom management, pedagogical content knowledge, strategies for teaching and assessing, and a host of other new skills. However, mentor teachers must also prioritize the learning of their secondary students. They are still responsible to meet course objectives and follow state and district curriculum. This places mentor teachers in a compromising position, especially if a student teacher is struggling. Mentor teachers must support their novice student teachers, accepting their inevitable mistakes and struggles along the way, while also ensuring that secondary students are not losing out on valuable knowledge and skills.

Annette stated that she could not allow a student teacher to take over for two weeks (a minimum time period recommended by the university to provide student teachers with a full teaching experience) if the student teacher was not capable. Other mentor teachers also shared
concerns about allowing student teachers to lead instruction in their classes. Nikki was very protective of her Prep English and Reading Skills classes. These classes are for students who are already struggling to develop grade-level skills in English Language Arts. They need an experienced teacher to help them develop the reading and writing skills they are lacking. Nikki explained, “I have to know that a person is strong in their content area to allow them [to teach] in my low-level classes.” Julie also mentioned the challenge of working with a student teacher while still ensuring that her students were learning. She wanted her ninth-grade students to leave her class with a firm foundation of reading and writing skills, and she sometimes had to re-teach concepts that were not clearly presented by her student teacher. Annette summed up these concerns for mentor teachers,

> When I take an intern, life slows down, and the kids simply don’t learn as much. Parents don’t want their kid to have a schedule with three interns. Some of that is the demanding Oakwood parents who requested a specific teacher.

Annette acknowledged that the parents of this very rigorous school district are demanding, and while that may not be the case in other schools, she reiterated the compromise a mentor teacher makes when volunteering to mentor a student teacher. Mentoring is extra work that teachers take on to give back to the profession. Mentors share their knowledge and skills in the hopes of making a positive contribution in the life of a future English teacher. There is little to gain apart from the intangible rewards that likely led these mentors to education in the first place.

My research focused on mentor teachers because I believe they contribute an important perspective on teacher training. University methods instructors teach pedagogical content

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11 Mentor teachers are not compensated for their work with student teachers; however, Southwest State does provide a $100 classroom supplies reimbursement at the end of the semester as a small thanks for a mentor teacher’s commitment.
knowledge and the needs of the profession at large, but many have been out of the secondary classroom for years. Mentor teachers know what a student teacher needs in order to be successful in a current secondary English Language Arts classroom.

Secondary ELA mentor teachers contribute a contextual understanding of secondary schools. This contextual knowledge includes the current experience of teaching secondary ELA, working with real high school students and the most current curricular requirements of states and districts. This knowledge is essential for new teachers making the transition from university coursework to teaching in a secondary school. The voices of the mentor teachers may help us better prepare students for their transitional field experiences.

In this chapter, I’ve focused on specific aspects of teaching and teacher preparation based on my interviews with mentor teachers. While my analytical framework, and thus my interview questions\textsuperscript{12}, focused on helping student teachers make the professional transition into a teacher identity, the categories below are based on what the teachers discussed in response to my questions. The issues I present here are issues the teachers brought up throughout their interviews. I analyzed my data by grouping the issues teachers talked about into themes and categories. Figure 5.1 organizes the content of our interviews into five thematic categories resulting from my conversations with the mentor teachers. Under each category, I noted specific issues that mentor teachers discussed during our interviews, using their own words to ensure the presence of individual teachers’ voices. By using the mentor teachers’ responses to establish categories and topics of consideration, I hoped to make their experiences known and their perceptions clear.

\textsuperscript{12} See Appendix A for interview protocol
Perceptions of Challenges for Student Teachers

- “The life of a teacher”
- Theory to practicum
- “A tougher world”

Pedagogical Content Knowledge in ELA

- Teaching literature at a “higher level”
- “You need to be a writer”

Classroom Management

- Confidence and competence
- “Just practical experience”

The School-University Relationship

- “They don’t really jibe”
- Collaboration on “something practical”

Disposition

- “A Teachable Spirit” and other traits

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**Figure 5.1 Categories of Data Analysis**

**The Challenges Faced by Student Teachers**

The first thematic category addresses the challenges of being a student teacher. Each of the mentor teachers recognized the challenges facing new teachers. Although most student teachers have previously spent hours as students in a secondary classroom, the preservice teachers I work with tell me that the view is very different from the other side of the teacher’s desk. Student teachers are learning to conduct themselves as professionals in the field. In their first days as student 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 very 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.

This is a lot to accomplish in just fifteen weeks, especially if many student teachers spend the first six to eight weeks overcoming transition shock. During our interviews, Nikki discussed the duration of student teaching mentorships and wished more schools would implement a year-long student-teaching experience. By the end of the semester, many of her student teachers were finally beginning to gain confidence and competence in the classroom. She felt that a second student-teaching semester would be extremely beneficial. Nonetheless, most teacher preparation programs require just one 15-week semester of mentoring to help student teachers make the transition from university student to secondary teacher. Mentor teachers recognized that this semester experience is exciting and also challenging to student teachers who are both anxious to begin their professional lives and still unprepared for some aspects of the teaching profession. In the following pages, mentor teachers discussed the challenges faced by their student teachers.

Challenges: “The Life of a Teacher”

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). At Oakwood South, high school begins at 7:35 a.m., and teachers are expected to arrive before 7:15 a.m. The teachers teach six 50-minute classes a day and are also given one 50-minute planning period. While intern teachers are not likely to be teaching all six classes in their first weeks, they 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. After ten years in the classroom, I can attest that managing time demands is challenging for the most experienced ELA teachers. Of course, learning time management while also coping with a new schedule, an unfamiliar setting, and new colleagues is likely very stressful for student teachers.

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. Student teachers are placed in secondary schools to learn how to teach, and doing more has not necessary improved their teaching. Annette felt that it was more important for her student teachers to learn how to teach well, even just one or two classes, than to take on a secondary teacher’s entire teaching load. Annette mentioned that other mentors feel differently, contending that it is important for a student teacher to have the real experience of an English teacher for at least two weeks; however, Annette has not given a student-teacher her full teaching load unless she was certain the student teacher was ready for that challenge. Her last four student teachers, who all held jobs outside of their internship, were not ready for that kind of work load during their student-teaching semester. They were not able to manage the time commitment of a full time secondary English teacher.
Julie also said that the schedule of a teacher was “shocking” for her recent student teacher, who was very surprised at the amount of work Julie brought home on a regular basis.

Julie’s student teacher was a non-traditional student with a family at home. 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.” Julie described,

Getting up early in the morning and getting here was a challenge. She [the student 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.

Even trying to ease her into taking on more and more responsibility in the classroom was a really difficult thing. When do you lesson plan? When you’re here in the classroom as an intern, what are your responsibilities? She would spend a lot of time on the computer while I was teaching, when really I had asked her to observe me, but she was planning things, she was looking information up, she was sometimes even completing assignments for school [the once-a-week practicum that is part of the student-teaching seminar], but 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 comments provide important insight into the monumental shift taking place for a student teacher. After four (or more) years of university life, where many students begin taking classes at nine or ten in the morning, perhaps taking evening classes as well, student teachers are suddenly expected to be ready to teach before 8:00 am. At Oakwood South, student teachers must arrive by 7:15 am, and many teachers stay until 4:00 pm or later. They are expected to be in school for over forty hours a week. Their lives must be re-organized around a secondary school schedule, with bells sounding multiple times a day to signal beginnings and endings of classes, lunches, and breaks.
Annette felt that time management became a real problem when student teachers also had jobs. Her last four student teachers have all held additional jobs beyond student teaching, something that the university discourages but does not prohibit. Annette described that her most recent student 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, student 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. If we were their job, it would be a different event. I think that’s one way we’re mooching off of people. Even in the private sector, there are a lot of unpaid internships. We’re supposed to help these people, period.

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, and she had expressed this concern in previous conversations. As a longtime English teacher, Annette understands the time that is 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. Student 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.

While an experienced teacher may be able to lesson plan during the 50-minute planning period given to teachers, an inexperienced teacher needs more time and focus to consider
learning goals and think through how daily lesson plans fit into larger unit plans. Additionally, new teachers are often creating or revising materials for the first time. 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 student teacher, who is learning many of the tasks of a teacher for the first time.

Adapting to the schedule of a secondary English teacher is one of the first challenges a student teacher faces upon beginning a mentorship. Student teachers are suddenly committed to an unpaid job of more than forty hours a week to complete their certification requirements. While they may quickly adjust to an early-morning start with five minutes between classes and very few bathroom breaks, managing the demands on their time will likely be a challenge throughout their internship and subsequent years of teaching. The mentor teachers recognized that it is a significant hurdle for their student teachers.

**Challenges: “It’s hard to go from theory to practicum”**

Corcoran’s 1981 findings on “transition shock” developed from her interest in identifying gaps between what a beginning teacher “knows on a theoretical level and what he or she actually does on a practical level.” Mentor teachers also recognized that one of the most important tasks student teachers learn is how to put theory and beliefs about teaching and learning into practice. Nikki explained,

It’s hard to go from theory to practicum. That’s the hardest part. I think they [student teachers] have a good understanding of what they believe and what they would
like to do in a classroom. To put it into practice is difficult. And you can talk about classroom management, but it takes time and practice.

Student teachers have gained knowledge and understanding pertaining to the teaching of English, and they must now apply that knowledge to a secondary classroom, and specifically to the students currently sitting (or not sitting!) in front of them. They must analyze and evaluate their work according to their beliefs about teaching and learning. Are their methods effective? Are they reaching short term and long term goals?

Nikki’s comment about “going from theory to practicum” included lesson planning as well as classroom management. Student teachers need to be able to structure a unit based on end goals, creating daily and weekly plans that move toward those goals. Nikki added,

They [student teachers] need to be able to structure a unit and be taught the reverse thinking of knowing what your end goal is and being able to work backwards to structure the unit that way, so that they know what daily and weekly lesson plans look like.

This is another way in which student teachers are required to put their goals and knowledge into practice. They must learn to create plans that fit into a secondary schedule (at Oakwood, fifty-minute classes with five sessions a week) and create daily and weekly plans that scaffold their learning goals for the students.

Julie also said that student teachers need practice with planning, and she hoped methods classes would, “teach them to approach unit planning from the back end.” Student teachers need to be prepared to think about what they want to accomplish in the end. She added, “What are the main goals or the main things that they [students] have to learn? How are we going to get there?” Student teachers are challenged to think through their goals and make decisions about how to reach those goals in the limited time that can be dedicated to a concept.
Julie said her recent student teacher, Amber, struggled to make decisions about what she wanted students to learn. Even when Julie would articulate the goals for a unit, her student teacher was unable to determine how to reach those goals. Julie described how she would discuss learning goals for a unit and then give Amber some options. For example, Julie showed Amber some of the vocabulary lists she had created for a novel to be taught in her ninth-grade class. She offered that Amber could use the same lists or that Amber could choose some of her own vocabulary words to teach the students. Julie also showed Amber some of the activities that she had used in the past. Julie was frustrated that Amber would peruse all the materials and then ask her, “What do you want me to teach?” Amber seemed incapable of thinking through the learning goals and was hesitant to make any choices about how to achieve those goals.

Annette agreed that student teachers have been challenged by articulating why a skill is important and how classroom activities would meaningfully address a goal or skill. The ability to articulate a skill and find ways to practice it transfers to any teaching job, so Annette felt that this was one of the most important aspects of learning to teach. An effective teacher must be able to think through the purpose behind assignments and assessments and also evaluate whether that purpose has been achieved.

It’s no surprise that a novice teacher is challenged by the need to think about long-term goals and translate those into daily lesson plans. While it is important for a student teacher to develop a big picture vision of student learning, it is also essential for a student teacher to think through daily plans, minute by minute. Annette wanted her student teachers to learn how to teach “bell to bell,” keeping students engaged from the moment they entered the classroom until the class ended fifty minutes later. Determining daily plans and pacing those plans to align with
student learning goals is a complex task. Learning to plan in reverse, starting with learning objectives and then developing daily plans to meet them, requires significant pedagogical content knowledge. This includes knowledge of curricular goals and strategies for learning. Developing effective lesson plans to reach specific learning objectives, and then pacing those plans to a secondary schedule, is a significant challenge for a student teacher.

**Challenges: “A Tougher World”**

Among other challenges facing student teachers, Renee and Annette both commented on the ways the profession has changed in recent years, and most professionals in the field agree that teachers face an uphill battle of becoming a professional in an era of standardized testing and diminishing support. In a recent blog post about proposed U.S. Department of Education regulations for teacher evaluations, Melanie Shoffner, Rebecca Powell, Anne Elrod Whitney, and Don Zancanella (2015) wrote,

> Every day, teacher educators embrace the difficult task of preparing young people to respond professionally to every possible combination of factors they will meet in their future classrooms. These bright young women and men know their choice of career is held in low regard. They understand that they will work long hours for little external reward. They realize that the public will disregard their intelligence, their ability, and their commitment in seeking to become teachers. They want to teach, however, because they want to do something meaningful, they love their content, they enjoy working with young people. At this point in our country’s history, teachers and teacher educators are doing their best with very little: little support for their work, little understanding of their professionalism, little recognition of the contributory factors to student learning. Yet teachers and teacher educators show up to their classrooms every day, focused on the students they work with rather than the misconceptions they work against.

One year later, Dawn Kirby (2016) reiterated this problem,

> The lack of support that teachers experience is staggering. Emotional support is lacking when the public seems not to realize the essential role literacy teachers have in
education. Practical, concrete support is lacking when teachers face increasing class sizes and salaries near minimum wage despite their level of education, experience, and plain hard work. The negative atmosphere persists and demands for toxic testing of literacy and other learning amass.

While some teachers have begun to discourage others from joining a profession that demands much and offers little in return, Annette has been eager to encourage aspiring teachers. She states, very simply, “We need them.” For Annette, this reality has made it very important that she inspire her student teachers. Annette explained,

My goal for student teachers is to have them fall in love with the positive aspects of teaching. We don’t pollute. We don’t sell people things they don’t need. The world is a better place because we do our jobs well…We want people to be teachers. It doesn’t seem like we do sometimes, culturally and otherwise. We need them. It’s an important job. How can I help?

Unfortunately, some of Annette’s past few student teachers decided not to pursue education after completing their coursework and student teaching. Annette told me about a student teacher she mentored a few years ago. During the first week of her internship, the student teacher tried to break up a girl fight. The student teacher got hit and the girls got expelled for striking a teacher. She finished her semester internship, and Annette described that she, “did a fabulous job,” but decided she never wanted to be a teacher. Annette concluded, “Interns now need skills for a tougher world. It’s a tougher world.” This saddens her, because she feels that the profession is so incredibly important. Despite the changes and challenges, Annette still believes that teaching is a great career, so mentoring is important work for her. She fears that current student-teachers are under so much stress that they cannot see all that is positive.

Renee seemed to agree with Annette that changes in our world pose a challenge for new teachers. Renee said,
I think the growing diversity in our population, and not just our high school, but schools in general, with children coming from all over the world, with all different kinds of needs, with families that are broken. Those are big things. Then you couple it with the need to do more, to have larger classrooms. That doesn’t seem to have stopped yet. They [teachers] really need to be reflective learners who care a lot about what’s going on outside of their classrooms as well as what’s going on in their classrooms. That’s what their students are most interested in, and they need to be connected in that way.

Renee recognized the need for student-teachers to be connected and engaged, understanding the diverse backgrounds and needs of their students. This is a tall order for a new teacher, who is still trying to establish a teacher identity and establish an appropriate boundary with students. Renee also acknowledged that determining the boundaries between teachers and students can be difficult.

A thing that a lot of newer teachers are lacking in is classroom management. I could see with interns how sometimes they struggle. They’re close to the age of the students, especially juniors and seniors, and they have a difficult time being open enough with boundaries. I’ve had a couple [of student teachers] in the past five years who really…it was not a problem. But then a couple others who would get walked over or taken advantage of. I think it’s kind of hard when you’re young to find a balance between having students feel like they can come and talk to you, but yet…Alright, you’re crossing the line here. You can’t go over this line.

This is a difficulty that Renee has mentioned before, in previous conversations about mentoring student teachers. Student teachers are excited to be working with real students in secondary classrooms, and they want to be liked by the students. At the same time, student teachers must establish their own authority in the classroom, which can be difficult for someone who is new to the profession and the school. Corcoran (1981) described this paradox for new teachers, the condition of “not knowing” while a teacher is supposed to appear “confident and competent.” She wrote,

It is as if one is caught in a double bind between the beginner’s feeling of insecurity and tentativeness on the one hand and the teacher’s need to act decisively and be in control on the other. To admit to not knowing is to risk vulnerability; to pretend to know is to risk error.
Student teachers are negotiating their authority in another teacher’s classroom while also learning to establish appropriate relationships with adolescent students. Appearing “confident and competent” is a significant challenge in this teaching scenario.

Annette and Renee, both longtime teachers, were concerned about the ways in which the world has changed and the effect of those changes on education. Certainly, student teachers need to be very aware of the world, in the larger sense of understanding life outside their classroom as well as within the microcosm of the classroom. Part of establishing a professional identity is finding ways to manage one’s identity in both worlds, and student teachers are learning to do exactly that. Annette and Renee also recognized that our culture does not prioritize education and is not especially supportive of teachers as professionals. Induction into the teaching profession is a challenge, and both Annette and Renee felt that it has become even more difficult for their most recent student teachers.

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). Novice teachers also reported difficulties with planning “engaging lessons,” and one new teacher discussed the importance of having a theoretical framework to drive planning and support reflection (42). Others reported struggles to define themselves as teachers, especially because their experiences were not what they had anticipated and they did not always feel supported by school administration.

These challenges, noted by the mentor teachers in this study as well as by the novice teachers in McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca’s research, are significant difficulties for those
transitioning into a teaching career. In the following section, mentor teachers also discussed the extensive content knowledge needed for a teacher of secondary English Language Arts.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge in English Language Arts**

The next major issue addressed by mentor teachers was pedagogical content knowledge in English Language Arts. During their mentorship, student teachers have the opportunity to apply the pedagogical content knowledge they have gained (through methods courses, experiences, and observation) to the context of the secondary classroom, increasing their pedagogical content knowledge as they work with expert mentor teachers in their content area.

While four components of pedagogical content knowledge were described in Grossman’s *The Making of a Teacher*, the mentor teachers focused on two areas specifically. Mentor teachers discussed the student teachers’ “knowledge and beliefs about the purposes for teaching a subject at different grade levels” (Grossman, 1990). This component of pedagogical content knowledge was evident when the mentor teachers brought up lesson planning and the challenge of putting theory into practice, which led the mentors to another aspect of pedagogical content knowledge, instructional strategies.

Pedagogical content knowledge in any content area encompasses a vast range of information. In English Language Arts, we tend to focus on the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature as the core components of ELA pedagogical content knowledge. While pedagogical content knowledge is certainly not limited to these two aspects of ELA, this chapter addresses literature and writing as the main components of pedagogical content knowledge because those were the areas that mentor teachers focused on. While each of the mentors
addressed both writing and literature during our interviews, the teachers had more to say about
the need for pedagogical content knowledge in the area of writing. Consequently, more time is
spent in this chapter on pedagogical content knowledge in the area of writing in order to
accurately reflect the concerns of the mentor teachers.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge: “How do you teach literature at a higher level?”**

Many of our student teachers pursue the field of English because they love literature.

Nikki stated,

> I think all of the interns I’ve had have been very passionate about the content
> areas they’ve studied in. The English interns have a definite passion for reading. I don’t
> know about writing as much, but definitely they love reading and talking about
> literature…But my last two interns have been weak in content. They’ve been passionate
> about it, but they’ve been weak in actually being able to teach it.

Nikki’s words described her student teachers’ need for instructional strategies,

Grossman’s fourth component of pedagogical content knowledge. Annette agreed that student
teachers need teaching strategies, and she believed that learning some general strategies for
teaching literature would be helpful for student teachers. She said,

> You can always read a book, so that part [of content knowledge] is easily
> acquired, but what about four different ways to approach a book? So you have different
> strategies in your pocket. There were years where every intern that came through did
> KWL\(^\text{13}\). KWL…KWL…And you know what? It was fine. It worked for them. It was a
> skill that they have. The last few interns, I say, “how about KWL?” They ask, “What’s
> KWL?” (She laughs.) Okay…new teachers, different stuff…It’s not that it has to be
> KWL, but when I say to an intern, “How do you want to approach this book?” They say,
> “What do you mean?” They don’t know.

\(^{13}\) KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learn) is a strategy to help students access prior knowledge and anticipate what can be learned on a topic.
Annette assumed KWL was a strategy learned in methods classes that her interns could then use with almost any topic or content. It worked for the student teachers because they felt confident using it as a teaching strategy and it was a good starting point. In the past years, she has suggested KWL, but interns did not know what it was. Annette clarified that she wasn’t insisting that student teachers learn KWL. Rather, she wanted them to have some strategies for approaching reading with a group of high school students.

While Annette realized that student teachers could not know what they would be asked to teach until they received placement information into a district and grade level, she also said that familiarizing themselves with the literature was not the difficult part. Student teachers need pedagogical content knowledge to think through how to teach literature. They need to think critically about how students connect with the literature while considering their own beliefs about the purposes for teaching it. Instructional strategies are an essential component of the pedagogical content knowledge needed to connect secondary students with the literature.

Julie echoed Nikki and Annette when she told me that student teachers need to know how to teach literature. For Julie, this meant an understanding of Bloom’s taxonomy$^{14}$ and higher level thinking.

Understanding how to teach literature through higher level thinking, not just comprehension, where you understand what the book is about, is a necessary skill. How do we look deeper in the text and look at different devices that the author has used and that kind of thing? How do you teach literature at a higher level? Having some strategies that they [student teachers] could use with students or some skills they could incorporate themselves to get students to take that next step is part of content knowledge.

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$^{14}$ Bloom’s Taxonomy is a framework created in the 1950s to categorize educational goals, building up from recall, understanding, and application to analysis, evaluation, and creation.
Julie mentioned that her own teacher preparation was strong in this area. She learned a lot of strategies for teaching and took classes in teaching reading for middle-school students as well as teaching reading in content areas. While she said that her background in literature and poetry had some gaps and was not as extensive as other teachers (namely a few of her colleagues who have pursued their master’s degrees in literature), she was confident in her knowledge of teaching methods and in her ability to teach literature. Julie said she, “knows how to teach really well.” Though she did not leave college with a strong background in Victorian literature or Shakespeare, she really did learn how to teach. Julie’s degree in Reading for grades K-12 and English for grades 6-12 focused intently on methods for the teaching of reading. In contrast, many programs for secondary ELA teachers require multiple literature courses, but only one class on the teaching of literature. Reading skills are not necessarily a focus for methods classes in secondary English Language Arts.

Julie also recalled her student-teaching experience, which taught her “so much about methods.” One of her mentor teachers used a Bloom’s taxonomy chart to plan units. Julie explained,

He [one of Julie’s mentor teachers] taught me to plan units around higher level thinking. He had this whole Bloom’s taxonomy grid that he used and we would create activities, with kind of an overarching theme or three themes that we were looking at within a piece of literature or a unit. We would develop all the activities on the different levels of Bloom’s around the themes. Once we developed all the activities, we would go back and pick and choose what to use. It was fascinating. Once I was hired there, he had me go and teach other interns how to use it. To this day, it sticks with me…It really does force you to look at teaching in different ways and meeting the needs of different learners.

Through student teaching, Julie learned pedagogical content knowledge, thinking through instructional strategies with her mentor to make sure her plans achieved learning goals.
In her English nine classes, Julie focuses on teaching students the skill of reading a text, and she mentioned incorporating close reading, which she explained as, “teaching kids to look closely at the text, even just a couple of lines, to discern what the author is saying.” She also mentioned looking at how devices are used in a text as part of the skill of reading. For Julie, like Annette, it wasn’t important that new teachers be scholars of literature. Of much more importance was pedagogical content knowledge, or strategies for how to make the literature accessible to students.

Nikki was the only mentor who brought up a varied knowledge of a diverse collection of literature as necessary for teaching when we talked about student-teacher preparation. She wished she had gotten more exposure to diverse literature, including adolescent literature, in college. In the previous chapter, Nikki expressed her desire for students to have more choice in reading. She valued literature with diverse themes and characters, especially for the students in her prep classes and readings skills classes. When we discussed the content knowledge student teachers need, she included,

I think a wide variety of literature. We have a tendency to, as [another teacher] put it, study dead white guys. I think a lot of schools are fairly traditional in that. I’m going to assume that they’ve gotten better in the last couple decades in putting variety into what students need to study. I think making sure that they [student teachers] know literature from around the world and across the spectrum of ability levels [is necessary] as well.

Because Nikki valued student choice in both reading and writing, knowledge of a wide variety of literature, “across the spectrum of ability levels” was important pedagogical content knowledge for her classes. While the ELA literature curriculum is still fairly traditional at Oakwood South, the teachers have been open to incorporating literature from other cultures and genres. Annette told me that she always hoped to learn new things from her intern teachers. An
intern she worked with a few years ago suggested the book *Scarlet Song* by the Sengalese feminist author Mariama Bâ, and that book is now part of the IB English curriculum at Oakwood South. Annette valued the “exchange of ideas” and wanted to gain new resources and ideas from her mentoring relationships with student teachers.

It was evident from interviews with these mentor teachers that pedagogical content knowledge, and specifically the knowledge of instructional strategies to help students connect with reading, was far more important than extensive knowledge of literature. The mentor teachers never mentioned a need for knowledge of American literature or Shakespearean theatre, even though I know that *Romeo and Juliet* is taught in Nikki, Julie, and Annette’s ninth-grade classes, and American literature is a focus of Annette and Renee’s eleventh-grade classes. Instead, the mentor teachers spoke of the need for student teachers to have teaching strategies for literature in general. Interestingly, this need for pedagogical content knowledge over subject matter expertise was not quite so pronounced when the teachers discussed the teaching of writing and knowledge of grammar.

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

While ELA classes at Oakwood tend to be organized around literature units, writing is an essential component of every English class. In our state, the Common Core State Standards and high stakes testing for juniors (previously the ACT, and changed in 2016 to the SAT) have both drastically affected the writing curriculum. All of the teachers are responding to the push for more informational writing and less expository writing, and the mentor teachers had much to say about the writing skills of their student teachers.
As a former colleague in the English department at Oakwood South, it was no surprise to me that writing skills were of utmost concern to the mentor teachers. In this academically rigorous school district, college preparatory writing skills are essential, and ELA teachers dedicate much time and energy to this purpose. For some of the methods teachers, writing skills were inseparable from knowledge of grammar and mechanics. Unfortunately, the teaching of writing is where the mentors felt that student 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, agreeing that integrated 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. This is problematic for student 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

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15 While I did not share the opinion that learning grammatical terms and structures would lead to better writing, I included knowledge of grammar in this discussion of pedagogical content knowledge in the area of writing because it was deeply entwined in the mentor teachers’ conversations about writing skills.
to assign writing, collect seminar papers a few weeks later, and return writing with comments and a grade. While student 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 Lortie\(^\text{16}\) (1975) may be failing our student 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 student teachers and the teaching of writing. She said,

> They [the student teachers] come in with these crazy, creative ideas. But honestly, that’s not what our students need in college. They 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 said 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 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 education classes. In her opinion,

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\(^{16}\) 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.
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 student teachers did not know how to help her students improve their academic writing.

For Renee, rigor in writing is essential for methods courses preparing student teachers, and she believes that preservice teachers need foundational skills. While Renee admitted that creative projects are great, she also said there’s not much time for that in high school. When we talked about what needs to be taught in methods classes, she said,

Rigor. Rigor in writing, which requires the foundational skills that they have to learn. And they need to…It’s great to do creative projects when you can, but we don’t have as much time to do that anymore. In English 11 or 12, in my classes, I might have some students in special ed and some students who dropped out of IB because they don’t want to read Anna Karenina or something like that. They need to be challenged, too.

Renee implied that student teachers need to be able to work with students who are learning and writing at various ability levels. They need foundational skills in writing that can be applied with special education students as well as honors students so that all students are challenged to improve their writing skills.

Rigor, the term used by Renee to describe writing, includes attention to detail, thoroughness, accuracy, and care. While Renee was the only mentor teacher to use that term, the need for accuracy, correctness, and care in writing came up in conversations with other mentor teachers as well. When I asked Annette about the content knowledge that is necessary for student teachers, she replied,

“The biggest content knowledge lack is in writing and grammar. They aren’t being taught enough of it overall in high school. I feel like we do a good job here at
Oakwood South, but overall they don’t. The world hasn’t caught up. It used to be that you learned all the writing and grammar by eighth grade. Now middle school is happy land, and I want kids to be happy, but I want them to learn. They’re in school to come forth with a set of knowledge and skills.”

Annette understood that student teachers can’t know in advance whether they will be asked to teach *The Grapes of Wrath* or *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but she suggested that they could bring some of their own lessons on writing into their student-teaching experiences. She would be excited if a student teacher arrived with a lesson for teaching active voice that could be revised for her students.

For Annette, student teachers’ expertise in writing and grammar was directly tied to pedagogical content knowledge and the ability to teach writing. She felt that student 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 interns 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 [student 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. It’s bad. I never take a spring intern because my ninth graders then know more than the intern. It’s too hard to catch up.

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 student 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.

When we talked about preparation and methods courses, Julie brought up grammar, writing, and literary analysis. Nikki also said student-teachers need “very solid writing skills,” essentially echoing Julie’s words. 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 are practicing 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 repeated, “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 student 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.

Nikki and I also talked about ‘teacher as writer’, and the amount of time that should be spent on grammar in a university writing methods course. Nikki continued,

Well, there is the revision process. You do have to have the basis of knowledge for grammar to be able to revise your own work. It is part and parcel of being a writer. I just don’t remember being talked to that way as a student, “You are a writer. You have to be a writer so that you’re teaching others how to do what you do.”

Our conversation shifted to a recent blog post by Paula Uriarte, a teacher from Idaho who began to write assignments with her students. Uriarte (2016) wrote, “Modeling is hard work, but it provides insight into the quality, relevance, and difficulty of an assignment.” Uriarte said that it also gave her credibility with her students, and the result was that students were “empowered to take risks” in their own writing. Nikki spoke about writing the papers that she assigned her students and how much teachers could learn from writing with their students. Nikki said,

I think that’s brilliant. And so common-sense at the same time. If I don’t want to write the assignment I’m giving my students, then why would I give it to them? You know? It’s really made me re-think the kinds of things that I have my students write. But I just took the teaching of writing [a course in Nikki’s master’s program], and we focused a lot on that.
When Nikki talked about how she helped student teachers who might be lacking in skills, she returned back to the need for student teachers to model and to our discussion about writing with students, concluding,

I probably should require my interns to write their own papers and assignments. I believe that’s something that is important. I didn’t think about that until just now, but if I’m going to do that as a teacher, then I should have the interns do that as well. I believe this is an important way to teach, and it would show you the holes in your assignments. You know, actually that probably would be a good requirement for them.

I definitely talked to my intern this fall a lot about modeling. Model, model, model. I think it was even written down back here (Nikki points to the teacher’s technology cart). He [Nikki’s most recent student teacher] watched me and the special education teacher in my room a lot for how we did that. If you have to write the assignment, you implicitly have a model for the students, and it does help you think through it. …That’s one of the most important things. You have to model what you want for your students. It’s good practice.

Though it seemed common sense, Nikki realized that she had not asked her student teachers to write alongside her students, even though she had started to do it herself. While she stressed the importance of modeling for students, she had not always applied modeling to writing. Through our conversation, Nikki concluded that it was important to model skills for students, so student teachers should write with students and model what they are doing.

We’re here to teach kids skills, the skills of summarizing, of analyzing, of synthesizing. We’re not here to tell them what the answers are. The kids coming into ninth grade, they’re used to giving the right answer or having the teacher tell them what to do. I wish that we would go back to more exploratory learning. Let me teach you how to write a paper, but you pick the topic, you write the content, and I can help you with the revising. I think they would find their voice a lot easier.

Though Nikki spoke extensively about the teaching of writing, she did not focus on grammatical knowledge as much as other mentors, commenting early in the interview that she was sure it had already been brought up many times by the other participants in the study. Her comment confirmed what I had already discovered; mentor teachers were very frustrated by a
lack of content knowledge where grammar was concerned, and everyone was aware of this problem. Although it was not the focus of my study, nor the focus of any of my interview questions, the mentor teachers discussed knowledge of grammar and conventions as an important aspect of preparation to teach English Language Arts. Most of the mentors addressed this issue with student teachers within the first few minutes of our recorded interviews, and various solutions were offered.

When I asked Annette about what student teachers should have gained from the university, she said,

I don’t understand why, in Spanish, you come to the university and no one says, “Oh, you got an A from [a colleague in the Spanish department].” They say, “Here’s your Spanish competency test.” Then, “you belong in this class.” English is a language, and just because you speak it doesn’t mean that you write it competently. We need an English competency test that’s not just for people who speak English as a second language. Just to say, “We aren’t mad. This isn’t a problem, but you don’t know what a verb is. How’s that going to work for you teaching high school English?” So, here’s the class where we spend two weeks on parts of speech, two weeks on sentence structure. Community college has that down. They look at your skills and they place you where you belong and they make a stronger effort to land students in the place that is their next step.

Annette felt that the university needed an English competency test that wasn’t just for students who learned it as a second language. In her opinion, students who did not know parts of speech should have been required to take a class and learn how the language works. Annette felt that student teachers could not teach high-school students without that knowledge. The lack of knowledge about grammar and usage was a serious problem when Annette mentored student teachers. She explained that she taught compound and complex sentence structures in her ninth-grade classes, and student teachers often did not even understand dependent and independent
clauses. Annette reasoned that student teachers could not teach ninth-grade students what they (student teachers) did not already know.

Renee also strongly believed that “systemic teaching of grammar” was absolutely necessary for students. She explained,

I’ve already given you my spiel about grammar and its role in writing. Today I’m teaching pronouns to students. We’re reviewing pronouns for the SAT. And what I realize is, I’m showing them lists of pronouns, personal pronouns. They don’t understand that a nominative case pronoun is used for replacing a subject or predicative nominative, and an objective case pronoun is used for a direct object or a prepositional phrase. They don’t get it because they don’t know it. So I’m stuck trying to figure out, at eleventh grade, how much can I give them without starting from scratch. I can’t do that. We don’t have time for that. But this really is something that we need to look at and teach systemically for writing.

Renee had mentioned in previous conversations that student teachers were lacking in knowledge about the structure of language. Renee said that her best [11th grade] writers were those who had teachers who “systemically teach grammar” at the Oakwood middle schools, though she added that students who read more were also better writers. In writing, she added, “correctness counts.” Renee suggested,

I think they [preservice teachers] should have to pass a grammar skills class. I really do. It is a major part of writing, whether they want to ignore it or not. It is a major part of writing. It is the math of writing. It’s like, “Me and my friends went to the movies on Saturday.” It’s so prevalent that they [students] don’t hear it [the incorrect grammar]. When we learned a new skill, we got drilled, which is such an old, bad word, but we got drilled so that you actually heard what was right. Maybe language is changing and I’m full of it, but in writing [correctness] still counts.

Nikki spoke extensively about the grammar and usage test that she had to pass before she could enroll for her student-teaching semester. She said that the tests ensured proficiency, and she found her college grammar class to be incredibly valuable to her. Nikki described,

One thing I loved that my college did, and I’ve heard that a lot of universities used to and don’t anymore, we had five tests that we had to take before we were allowed
to student teach. We had to take a huge grammar test and a huge lit terms test. Those were the two big ones. Most people took them two or three times before they passed them, and you could start taking them your sophomore year. You just had to pass them before you student taught. There was also a usage test and a spelling test. I forget the last one, but there were five tests. To me, as a student, it was a headache, but it made sure you were pretty proficient in those areas. And those are the areas I hear our teachers complain about, that the interns don’t have proficiency. I know Julie was frustrated with her intern’s spelling mistakes. It’s that professional piece of teaching.

The tests were application. Write a sentence with a gerund, things like that. You really had to know your stuff. I don’t remember ever learning the term gerund before I took my grammar class. You had to take this grammar interim class (a three-week class between fall and spring semesters, offered in January), and the professors who taught it were hilarious and a lot of fun. It was the most fun class, and I learned so much in that class. I learned so much about grammar. We had a textbook with practice exercises, but in class we did a lot of “in context” stuff. A lot of it was playing with language, too. We looked at how newspaper titles can be interpreted two ways…just thinking about how you use words…Every secondary ed English major had to take it. It was the best class I took. I learned a lot and it was so much fun. We did talk about grammar rules, but we played with language. It was a really fun class, and there was collaboration between students and the two professors who team-taught it. It was the most valuable class I took, other than my methods class.

Julie also told me that her teacher preparation coursework included a course in methods of teaching grammar, along with other methods courses in reading skills and general teaching methods. She described,

I remember taking the grammar methods class. We learned how to teach grammar. You were expected to already come with an understanding of grammar. We’re talking about diagramming sentences and that kind of thing. You were to come in already understanding that and learn how to teach that.

All of the mentor teachers believed that coursework, perhaps with the addition of testing, would ensure content knowledge competency in the area of grammar and writing.

This repeated concern about knowledge of grammar and correctness is a sticky issue, because research dating back to the 1970s has shown that grammar taught outside of the context of writing does not improve writing skills. And yet mentor teachers all felt that grammatical knowledge and correct usage was a major problem for student teachers, who lost credibility with
students and with their mentors. In the area of writing, the mentor teachers felt that extensive knowledge of grammar was directly related to a teacher’s ability to assist students with their own writing.

It’s evident that mentor teachers were most concerned that preservice teachers develop instructional strategies as a foundation for teaching. In the area of literature, goal-oriented instructional strategies were needed to build reading skills and draw students to literature, encouraging them to think critically about reading. In writing, teachers were concerned about instructional strategies that would help students understand language and improve their own writing.

I was not surprised that all of the mentor teachers brought up pedagogical content knowledge and felt that student teachers should be better prepared in their methods courses. This pedagogical content knowledge included writing skills and a foundation of grammatical understanding along with strategies for the teaching of literature. All of the mentors felt that the university should better prepare student teachers in that area.

On the other hand, I was surprised that mentor teachers did not expect student teachers to be well-prepared by the university in the area of classroom management. Instead, the mentor teachers felt that classroom management was an essential skill, but one that needed to be learned during student teaching, in the context of a real classroom. Because this was a skill learned in context, they accepted responsibility for helping preservice teachers with that aspect of teaching secondary students.
Classroom Management

Another issue addressed by mentor teachers was classroom management, though not to the extent that I had believed it would be addressed. In my experience as a methods instructor, most preservice teachers have been very concerned about classroom management. In fact, not being able to manage an out-of-control group of adolescents is one of their greatest fears. In a reflective final exam, one student wrote, “I am most concerned with discipline. I have always been a passive person…I can’t let my students walk over me.” Another wrote, “I’m worried that if I’m not confident with the material that my students will notice and not respect my authority.” Managing a group of adolescents often requires that a teacher make a quick decision on how to handle a situation, and that’s especially intimidating for an inexperienced, new teacher. It’s even scarier for a student teacher who is likely new to the school, unfamiliar with the students and their behaviors, and perhaps anxious about teaching in someone else’s classroom.

Because classroom management is such a significant concern for preservice teachers, I expected it to also be a major issue for mentor teachers. While the mentors did discuss some facets of classroom management, it became clear that they did not expect student teachers to be previously experienced in that aspect of teaching. Therefore, when we discussed what student teachers needed to gain from university coursework and methods classes, classroom management was not a priority. Instead, the mentor teachers generally felt that preservice teachers would learn classroom management from them, through observation and modeling.
Classroom Management: “Just practical experience”

When Nikki spoke about classroom management, she confirmed that most student teachers were unprepared to manage a classroom. Nikki was especially concerned about confidence. She mentioned that she worked with one intern who was very shy and quiet, a self-proclaimed introvert, and it was particularly difficult to help that intern develop the confidence needed to address and manage a group of students. Nikki said, “I can teach somebody how to manage their classroom by modeling it for them. But how to be in front of the classroom if you don’t have that confidence, I can’t teach that.”

While Nikki was concerned about confidence in a student teacher, she also emphasized the importance of competence. For Nikki, competence in English was directly tied to classroom management because the students would not respect an incompetent teacher. She explained,

A lot of it [classroom management] is just practical experience. You have to see it being done. Skills in the content area have to be solid ahead of time. And lately we haven’t had interns that are real solid in skills in content area. And really that feeds on whether they can manage a classroom. Because if you’re up there and you’re incompetent, the kids aren’t going to respect you. They’re not dumb. Julie’s intern definitely had that issue. She spelled stuff wrong all the time. That was just one little piece of it. The kids didn’t really respect her.”

For Nikki, classroom management was “practical experience,” learned in the context of a secondary classroom. Nikki expected that student teachers would learn classroom management from watching how she managed the classroom. In contrast, she specified that content area knowledge had to already “be solid.” Nikki implied that student teachers who arrived in her classroom with solid content knowledge and confidence would learn classroom management through observation and practice.
Like Nikki, Annette felt that classroom management was meant to be learned during the student teaching experience, through observation and practice with real students. In fact, Annette specified that classroom management was the most important thing that student teachers learned from the student-teaching experience.

You can teach yourself a lot. How much have we taught ourselves through the years? Oh, so much. You teach yourself a lot. So the most important thing that they get out of student teaching, for me, is classroom management skills, which involves the skill to teach bell to bell, to have meaningful activities, to be able to articulate why this skill is important, because those skills will transfer to whatever job they [student teachers] have.

I think it was Sharon Draper who wrote the book *Teaching from the Heart*\(^{17}\). She’s really writing that book for first year teachers. She was an English teacher. She says in the book that it will be ten years when you start teaching until you teach kids like you. What she meant by that was kids that love being in school. You don’t start out teaching IB [International Baccalaureate advanced classes].

Those classroom management skills are survival. And where are they [student teachers] likely to be hired? They’re likely to be hired in a district with high turnover. Why is there high turnover? Because of the classroom management skills, because of the urban background of the kids, so the most important thing is classroom management skills. And part of that is your confidence.

Annette felt that classroom management skills were essential, but she did not expect preservice teachers to learn how to manage a classroom through university coursework. Instead, she expected to teach those skills to her student teachers. Like Nikki, Annette also brought up the importance of confidence in classroom management. Annette wanted her student teachers to learn to keep students engaged throughout an entire class period, “bell to bell.” She also wanted them to use that time meaningfully and to develop confidence in their teaching. These were

\(^{17}\) Sharon Draper, the 1997 National Teacher of the Year, published *Teaching From the Heart* (2000) to offer inspiration and encouragement to teachers despite the difficulties of the profession. The Amazon.com review notes, “It is the kind of book that a mentor teacher passes on to a student teacher, or a college professor assigns to his or her students as they begin their own teaching careers.”
skills Annette felt that she could effectively teach her student teachers. On the topic of classroom management, she continued,

I have very good classroom management skills. I can bring them [student teachers] up to speed and help them get those skills because they live it in my room. For me, classroom management skills are not the issue. They can get it from me.

While Annette felt that classroom management was an essential component of effective teaching, and a necessary goal for student teachers, she also reiterated that student teachers would learn those skills in her classroom. She did not expect student teachers to arrive from the university with classroom management skills. Both Annette and Nikki expected to help student teachers develop effective management practices as part of the mentoring process, helping them with the confidence and experience needed.

In research contrasting the practices of new and veteran teachers, McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) found that confidence and experience contributed significantly to differences in classroom management styles among the new and veteran teachers surveyed. Of course, the researchers acknowledged that confidence was a result of experience, and therefore it was difficult to attain confidence without the benefit of experience (86). Without experience, new teachers relied on more authoritarian styles of classroom management as an attempt to portray confidence and control. New teachers were more inclined to establish rules and punishments in order to manage their classrooms, while veteran teachers were more likely to manage their classrooms through the building of relationships with students (88).

Perhaps this distinction between the ways that new and veteran teachers approached classroom management calls to attention another challenge of student teaching. A student
teacher, without the benefit of experience and confidence, may struggle to use relationships as a classroom management technique despite observing that it is effective for a mentor teacher.

Both Nikki and Annette felt that confidence was directly tied to classroom management skills, and both teachers also felt that classroom management was best learned in the context of the classroom through observation of a mentor teacher and modeling. For both Nikki and Annette, classroom management was an important objective of student teaching, and both teachers felt the responsibility to demonstrate the classroom management skills they expected student teachers to learn.

As preservice teachers struggle with classroom management fears, it may help to know that these mentor teachers did not expect student teachers to arrive with experience in classroom management, nor did they expect student teachers to bring classroom rules and procedures into their student-teaching placements. Instead, the mentor teachers fully expected that student teachers would learn classroom management skills while student teaching, through observation, modeling, and support from the mentors. Mentor teachers wanted student teachers to arrive in their classrooms with a positive attitude, confidence, and competence in their content areas. The message from the mentor teachers affirmed that, armed with confidence and pedagogical content knowledge, student teachers could successfully learn the classroom management skills that would be needed in their future careers. The mentor teachers were committed to helping student teachers develop those skills.

I found that secondary mentor teachers did not expect ELA methods courses to teach good classroom management skills, but I really wanted to know what they did expect ELA methods courses to teach. As a former secondary ELA teacher who has now transitioned into an
ELA methods instructor at the university, I genuinely wanted to understand the mentor teachers’ perceptions of what I now do. I specifically asked mentor teachers to voice their opinions and critiques. One of the motivating factors of this study was to include mentor teacher voices in the conversation about teacher preparation because I wanted their voices to help bridge the gap between university teacher preparation programs and the secondary schools where new teachers teach. I asked the mentor teachers, “If you could meet with the English Education department at the university, what would you want to talk about?” and “What would you like to tell the ELA methods instructors who prepare student teachers?” I hoped for their honest appraisal.

The Secondary School-University Relationship: Improving Teacher Preparation

The fourth category of interest was a direct result of questions I posed asking the mentors to address the work of the ELA methods courses. Methods courses aim to prepare student teachers for their (often) first experiences leading a classroom. Although student teaching may be a preservice teacher’s first experience planning daily lessons and larger units, managing a classroom, assessing student learning, and participating as a professional in a secondary-school community, it is also the culminating experience of a preservice teacher’s education. For many student teachers, their first real teaching experience is also end of their formal education. There is a lot at stake for student teachers, so it makes sense that the methods courses would help preservice teachers make the transition from coursework to field experience. Instead, the gap between universities and secondary schools continues to contribute to the struggles of new teachers.
The gap that Finders, Crank, and Kramer (2013) addressed in their research is also felt by secondary ELA teachers. Finders, Crank, and Kramer pronounced a “nonalignment” between preservice teacher Erika Kramer’s university coursework and her field experiences. They described the “vast gap between university preparation and the realities of the high school or middle school curricula” (11). Their solution was to simply discuss the problem with preservice teachers in their methods courses, effectively warning the preservice teachers that the gap existed. There was no mention of any attempt to communicate with secondary teachers. After my interviews with mentor teachers, it was evident that the nonalignment described by Finders, Crank, and Kramer was also a problem for secondary teachers like Renee and Annette.

**The Secondary School-University Relationship: “They don’t really jibe”**

Renee, who served as a mentor coach and mentored many student 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.” She continued,

They [professors] need to be in a classroom and see what kids really need. If they look at the Common Core alone, they would see that we have moved in the direction of…You want to call it “skills-based,” I call it “foundational.” We’ve moved in the direction of foundational needs for writing, which weren’t there.

Renee felt that methods instructors were out-of-touch with what secondary students really needed to learn. Though I can attest that the methods instructors at Southwest State are knowledgeable about the Common Core curriculum, Renee felt that “foundational” skills were not being emphasized enough in methods courses.

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. [Southwest State] has traditionally been really horrible at it.

This was one of Annette’s major criticisms of the university from which most of her student teachers earned their teaching certification: the university instructors did not spent 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 Gustavis Adolphus supervised their intern teachers throughout the student-teaching semester, spending significant
hours in the secondary classrooms where their student 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 student
teachers, and she felt that the interns were better prepared when professors spent time in the
secondary schools, observing the interns and working directly with the mentor teachers. This is
the kind of relationship advocated by the CEE Summit of 2005 (Dickson & Smagorinsky et al.).

The Secondary School-University Relationship: Collaboration on “Something Practical”

While Nikki and Julie were both more hesitant to offer specific steps for addressing the
gap between university teacher preparation programs and their own classrooms, they did offer
some suggestions. Julie suggested that student teachers simply needed more practice creating
and delivering lessons. She suggested,

I know that it’s difficult to find opportunities for students to practice actually
delivering lessons, but maybe delivering them within the college classroom for practice?
I think the more that they [student teachers] can practice the carrying out of the methods,
the more prepared they’ll be when they come into a real classroom.

For Julie, the gap between the university and secondary schools was most evident when her
student teacher needed to plan a lesson to address learning goals and carry it out. Julie felt that
more practice actually planning and delivering a lesson would have been beneficial.
Annette had also previously mentioned that it would be great if her student teachers arrived with some previously created lesson or unit plans, and she specifically mentioned that she would like to see them bring in plans for teaching structures of writing. Annette used active voice as an example, stating that she would love to have a student teacher bring in a lesson for teaching active voice that could be modified for use with her students.

When I spoke with Nikki, I found that this planning and preparation did take place in her university’s teacher preparation program. Nikki described her methods course in the teaching of writing, which was required to be taken in the semester prior to student teaching. By mid-semester, everyone in her college class had knowledge of their student-teaching placements. Nikki prepared a unit to be used in her student-teaching classroom as part of her methods coursework. What is significant is that she collaborated with both the university methods professor and the mentor teacher assigned to work with her the following semester. Together, they addressed gaps and make revisions. She said,

It gave me a unit to be prepared with, and that was the first unit I taught, so I had something practical. Then both my professor and my mentor teacher were able to walk me through some of the places where this might not work, asking, “did you think about trying this?”

For Nikki, this collaboration contributed to her positive transition from university coursework to student teaching. She had a lesson already prepared to use in her student-teaching semester, and it was a lesson that her mentor teacher and methods instructor had both helped her to create.

While Nikki did not state that methods instructors needed to spend time in secondary classrooms, it’s evident that collaboration among Nikki, her methods instructor, and her future mentor teacher was helpful for her. This is likely the kind of collaboration Renee and Annette wished for when they suggested that professors visit their classrooms to see what they are teaching, what the
students are writing, and what skills are being emphasized. Figure 5.2 provides an overview of mentor teachers’ suggestions for how the university might improve teacher preparation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Julie</th>
<th>Nikki</th>
<th>Annette</th>
<th>Renee</th>
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<tr>
<td>More practice creating and delivering lessons</td>
<td>Collaboration among methods instructors and mentor teachers</td>
<td>Methods instructors spending time in secondary classrooms</td>
<td>Methods instructors spending time in secondary classrooms</td>
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Figure 5.2 Suggestions for Improving the Secondary School-University Relationship

Based on our interviews, mentor teachers would welcome collaboration with university methods instructors. Annette and Renee, longtime teachers and mentors for many student teachers, felt strongly that the university instructors were uninformed about what was happening in secondary ELA classrooms. As a result, the student 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 students to help new teachers learn and practice, and the mentor teachers genuinely wanted student 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 perhaps the only way to address the gap still existing between the institutions.

A final issue addressed by mentor teachers could be categorized as attitude, disposition, or personality. Though I originally saw this as just one aspect of teaching, it became clear that other themes revolved around it. Though mentor teachers used different phrases or descriptions, I noticed that this aspect of attitude or disposition came up in conversations about content knowledge, classroom management, and dealing with challenges of student teaching.

The following section is called “A Teachable Spirit” and refers to an aspect of disposition that each of the teachers discussed. The phrase was originally coined by Renee and also used by Annette to describe a necessary trait of student teachers. While Nikki and Julie did not use this term, they referred to similar descriptions of how a student teacher should approach teaching. For all of the mentors, “a teachable spirit” was essential to the success of the mentorship.

**Dispositions and Traits of Successful Teachers: “A Teachable Spirit”**

Perhaps the most important theme addressed by each of the teachers I interviewed was an aspect of personality or disposition. CAEP, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (formerly known as The National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education, NCATE), addressed disposition in the NCATE *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions*, published in 2008. The first standard addressed the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions of teacher candidates, describing that teacher candidates should, “demonstrate classroom behaviors that create caring and supportive learning environments and encourage self-directed learning by all students” (Unit Standards in Effect
Further explanation specified that teacher candidates should “foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom” (Unit Standards in Effect 2008). Interestingly, when mentor teachers discussed the dispositions of student teachers, they also focused on the need for a student teacher to be an active learner and to have a desire to learn new things. They talked about collaboration and the importance of a student teacher considering advice and suggestions. Finally, supportive interaction between a mentor and a student teacher was also discussed as an essential part of student teaching. NCATE’s standards focused on the relationships of teachers to their students; Similarly, the mentor teachers focused on the relationship between mentor and student teacher. The same traits recommended by NCATE for teacher candidates to cultivate in their own classrooms also applied to student teachers, who are acting as students learning the skill of teaching.

Annette was the first to use the term, “a teachable spirit,” which she said was a phrase she picked up from Renee. When I asked Annette to describe what she meant, she explained that a student teacher should be humble, yet confident, and also self-motivated and self-monitoring. Essentially, she described an active learner. Annette continued by telling a story in which she asked intern teachers to grade vocabulary cards. Her ninth-grade students were instructed to use active voice in the sentences they wrote for their vocabulary cards. One year, Annette’s intern admitted that he did not know what active voice was. Annette provided the intern with notes that she used to teach active voice to ninth graders, suggesting that the intern read through the notes and ask her some questions. The intern responded that it wasn’t taught in college; therefore, he should not be expected to grade the vocabulary cards based on the students’ use of active voice.
Essentially, he refused to help grade the assignment because he didn’t already have the necessary content knowledge to do so.

In contrast, when the same scenario came up the following year with a new intern, and Annette again provided some notes, the next intern thanked her and read through the notes. The intern asked questions and they graded some of the vocabulary cards together to make sure that the intern understood. Annette said that this intern continued to ask questions throughout the semester, demonstrating “a teachable spirit.” The intern was willing to ask questions and solicit help, learning and growing throughout the semester and taking advantage of Annette’s time and resources. It was clear, through our conversations, that Annette valued a self-directed learner who was eager to learn through collaboration.

In a later interview, Annette also mentioned other traits that reflect NCATE’s Standards. NCATE specifically noted the need for teacher candidates to foster “caring and supportive learning environments” (Unit Standards in Effect 2008). Annette said student teachers needed to be kind and patient. Annette also valued humility and the ability to admit mistakes and try again. She described,

Renee uses the phrase, “teachable spirit.” They [student teachers] need to be kind. They need to be patient. They need a can-do attitude. I’ll figure this out. They really need humility. How many times have I said, “Well, I screwed that up.” If you’re teaching six hours a day, you’re not going to get everything right all the time no matter how good you are. You need to be able to say, “Sorry. That didn’t go as well as I wanted it to. I’m going to fix it tomorrow.” I’ve seen lists of dispositions [for teachers], but ultimately those are the traits that would work best in my classroom.

For Annette, “a teachable spirit” included an eagerness to learn new things. Renee also focused on this trait as important to the mentorship. Renee said,
If they [student teachers] have a teachable spirit, I will show them whatever they want to learn about, whatever part they want to work on, whether it’s skills like we’ve been talking about or content knowledge. [Mentoring] can be tough unless the student teacher has that desire to be the best they can be.

Like Annette, Renee has been willing to work with student teachers on any aspect of teaching, but student teachers needed to open to learning and growing. Renee stated that teaching skills or content knowledge was difficult if a student teacher did not have the desire to improve. She added,

They [student teachers] need to have a teachable spirit. That’s a big deal, I think. They also need interpersonal skills to help students make connections they might not be able to make otherwise. [Student teachers need] an approachable demeanor with strong boundaries. That’s really important, and that goes along with interpersonal skills, but boundaries are important too.

Like Annette, Renee’s description of “a teachable spirit” also prioritized active inquiry on the part of a student teacher. She also mentioned interpersonal skills, which fosters supportive interaction and collaboration, as described in NCATE’s Standards.

Julie used a parallel phrase to explain the same idea. For Julie, “a willing spirit,” was essential, and this was a specific challenge she faced while mentoring her recent student teacher, Amber. During the internship, when Julie and Amber talked about accepting feedback, it became evident that this aspect of disposition was important. Amber wanted Julie to be honest with her, but she admitted that she had trouble accepting any criticism. Previous employers had told Amber that she was not good at taking constructive criticism. Julie said, “Hearing, “you need to do more of this” or “you need to consider this,” was hard for her [Amber] to hear. So, that open, honest piece, being willing to take feedback, I think that was key.” Julie realized that accepting feedback was a challenge for Amber, but Julie also felt it was necessary for learning from the mentorship. When Julie described working with Amber, she explained,
A willing spirit, which in the case of Amber, it was there sometimes and at other times it wasn’t. That was kind of confusing for me. In the beginning she seemed very willing, but then every once in a while she would say something that made it seem like she was trying to do what she was supposed to do and be willing, but she wasn’t always feeling willing. I think that came from a lack of confidence.

Julie felt that Amber wanted to be willing to learn and grow, but Amber struggled to react appropriately to criticism, becoming tense or angry if Julie suggested a change. When Julie talked about accepting criticism, she added, “It’s not for the sake of me being critical. It’s for the sake of growth. That’s what we’re all here for.” For Julie, a willing spirit involved,

- Flexibility…being able to change as needed or see things differently. And having a curiosity about different ways of doing things and the confidence to ask about them. That’s something that’s necessary, but it takes time to develop.

Julie also described a willing spirit as, “a desire to learn more about the craft of teaching, even when that means receiving constructive criticism,” and “a willingness to seek out feedback and then put it to good use without excuses.” Julie added that teachers should have a positive attitude, knowing that “it’s impossible to be great at everything” and they should make student growth and learning their first priority.

Nikki also discussed these aspects of disposition indirectly, especially in regards to previous student teachers. In fact, she mentioned that though her most recent student teacher was weak in content knowledge, he worked hard to improve, taking suggestions and making changes throughout the semester. Though Nikki felt that he would have benefitted from another semester of student teaching, she noted that he had made significant progress, and this was important. Nikki said that this student teacher was now employed in a long-term substitute teaching position, and she was hopeful that he was continuing to put her advice to use, gaining more experience and growing as a professional while filling in for another teacher.
For all of the teachers, a teachable spirit indicated an openness to suggestions for improvement, a positive attitude, and the ability to learn and bounce back from failures. This aspect of disposition affected every other aspect of teaching. Student teachers with a teachable spirit were more often able to deal with the challenges they faced, including challenges of time management, planning, classroom management, and professionalism. While not necessarily more knowledgeable about content, those with a teachable spirit were willing to acknowledge and accept gaps in their knowledge and learn what was needed. Both Annette and Renee specified that they were willing to teach preservice teachers anything they needed to know. Annette said that her own student teaching made her aware of all of the gaps in her knowledge of English Language Arts, and she worked hard to learn the content knowledge she was lacking. She has never expected her student teachers to know it all, but she did expect them to approach the mentorship with a teachable spirit open to learning as much as possible. The success of a mentoring relationship, and the growth of a student teacher from student to professional, explicitly hinged on this willingness to learn and grow. Without a teachable spirit, the mentorship failed to achieve its objectives.

**Conclusion**

From this study, it’s clear to see that both content knowledge and non-academic traits are important for student teaching. In fact, without the “teachable spirit,” the ability to accept feedback, reflect, learn, and grow, even a preservice teacher with extensive content knowledge may struggle to make the transition into a secondary classroom. It’s also evident from this study that mentor teachers saw a need for more collaboration with institutions of higher education.
The next chapter addresses this need by discussing implications for the field of English Education. Knowledge gained from this study will be significant for teacher educators, preservice teachers, and mentor teachers. Chapter six acknowledges the differences in values and priorities that may exist between university-based teacher educators and secondary English mentor teachers, but also suggests that they have much in common, and the collaboration and communication that has begun at CCCC and NCTE Special Interest Groups (SIG) is one way to bridge the existing gap.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

Implications for the Field of English Education

My study reveals the “hidden labor” and “invisible drama” of mentoring preservice teachers by giving mentor teachers a voice in the field of English Education (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). This work provides new knowledge about the experiences of mentor teachers and also brings their perspectives forward regarding preservice teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, their ability to put theory into practice with real students, and the necessity of establishing relationships between university methods instructors and secondary teachers. If the field wants to include the perspectives of mentor teachers in English Education scholarship, as Rush and Scherff (2010) request 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.

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. This study achieves that goal. The experiences and opinions of secondary mentors are the backbone of the project. The voices of Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee, four experienced practitioners of secondary English,
are heard throughout the study. I hope this work becomes one of many studies in which mentor teachers can be heard.

**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. The formation of Special Interest Groups (SIGs) at CCCC and NCTE are a result of Alsup, Brockman, Bush, and Letcher’s (2011) belief in the importance of in-person conversations between secondary and postsecondary teachers.

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 student teachers and her years of serving as a coordinator, Renee did not feel that her opinion was valued by the College of Education, 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. While universities may want to protect their time, especially knowing that mentoring is essentially volunteer work, the mentors in this study wished to be more involved. 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) also discerned that secondary and postsecondary English teachers had much in common and could learn from collaborative work and conversations across institutions. Perhaps conversations and connections are the best way to address the historical disconnect, gap, or gulf between institutions.

**Implications for Preservice Teachers**

This dissertation also has implications for preservice teachers who are preparing to enter secondary English education. Preservice teachers can learn from the experiences of mentor
teachers in their field. As Erinn Bentley (2013) acknowledged, mentor teachers have “insider” knowledge about how secondary schools work, and they understand the contexts in which new graduates will teach. Mentors have also experienced the challenges of being a new teacher. The rollercoaster of emotions described by McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005), from exhilaration to exhaustion, and the challenges of induction into the profession are not surprising to them. Mentors can help new teachers prepare for this experience.

The mentors in this study also spoke about the challenges that will face student teachers as they transition from college student to professional educator. Of particular note is the challenge of balancing time. Student teachers are working an unpaid, full-time job, and mentors recognized that other obligations were difficult for student teachers to manage because of the long hours of teaching and the additional time needed for preparation, planning, grading, and reflection. Understanding this reality, and knowing that feelings of frustration and burnout are not uncommon for new teachers, may help student teachers prepare mentally.

Mentor teachers also discussed the importance of teaching strategies for reading and writing. While they appreciated student teachers’ enthusiasm for literature, they encouraged student teachers to think beyond reading comprehension and consider student learning goals and strategies for reaching those learning goals. Annette specifically wished that student teachers would come to her classroom prepared with strategies and ideas that could be applied to what her students were studying, and Nikki mentioned how beneficial it was for her to be able to work with her mentor and university methods instructor to prepare some lessons ahead of student teaching. If this kind of collaboration and communication between methods instructors and mentor teachers can occur, student teachers could benefit from having some prepared teaching
strategies tied to learning goals in their student teaching placements. Even in the absence of university-secondary collaborations, student teachers might keep a notebook of teaching ideas or strategies throughout their methods coursework to later serve them as student teachers.

Mentor teachers were also concerned about grammar, understanding that student teachers’ ethos with students and parents could be easily undermined by repeated grammatical mistakes. Annette acknowledged that she never expects intern teachers to know it all, but she does hope they will have the drive to seek out what they do not understand. Renee agreed that many grammatical uncertainties could be resolved if student teachers would take the time to consult a manual, learning for themselves when they find that there are holes in their understanding of a concept. In the age of Google, Grammar Girl, the Purdue OWL, and Dr. Grammar, a manual might not be necessary. However, the idea that teachers are responsible to learn for themselves what they need to teach their students may be a new concept for student teachers. In fact, even veteran teachers are constant students, always learning more about the topic they teach.

On the topic of classroom management, notoriously a major concern for student teachers, it may be reassuring to know that mentors in this study did not expect student teachers to instinctively know how to manage a classroom. Instead, they encouraged student teachers to learn from observing their mentors. They understood that managing a classroom of diverse adolescent learners is a very challenging aspect of learning to teach. The mentors also discussed the importance of a professional demeanor with students, presenting oneself with confidence. As Corcoran (1981) described, the beginning teacher’s paradox is “the need to appear competent and confident,” projecting a teacher identity, despite the insecurity of being in a new situation.
Student teachers are struggling with this paradox. Corcoran continued, “to admit to not knowing is to risk vulnerability; to pretend to know is to risk error.” This is the paradox in which student teachers will likely find themselves. Awareness of this challenge may help student teachers and mentors plan for paradox scenarios and reflect on those that occur.

Mentor teachers also spoke extensively about the qualities needed for student teaching. The mentors were committed to helping their student teachers practice and grow, but that could only happen if the student teachers were also committed to growth. They hoped that student teachers would approach their classes with a positive, “can-do” attitude. Annette commented that all teachers make mistakes, but it was important for a new teacher to be open minded and try again. All of the participants brought up the importance of accepting feedback. For these teachers, the “teachable spirit” was evident in a person who would be reflective, open-minded, accepting of guidance, and willing to change. Understandably, these are important qualities for a student teacher who is acting as an apprentice in the classroom.

Just as there is no one correct way to teach adolescents, and we can agree that pedagogy is affected by a myriad of factors, there is also no one way to gain pedagogical content knowledge. As Barnes and Smagorinsky (2016) found, pedagogical content knowledge is attributed to many sources, and often those sources are in dissonance. Although the numerous teachers in their study credited most of their knowledge to methods coursework and fieldwork, their pedagogical knowledge was also affected by context: students, school district, state mandates, and federal educational policy, as well as liberal arts classes, colleagues, and professional development training. For preservice teachers, it’s important to recognize the variety of factors that will influence their development as teachers. They should also know that
these influences may not agree. In fact, multiple studies attest to the dissonance that can occur between coursework and fieldwork (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016; Bieler, 2010; Bullough & Draper, 2004; Finders, Crank, & Kramer, 2013; Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Preservice teachers should be aware that this dissonance is a possibility. Rather than presenting university courses and classroom teachers on a binary of right against wrong, and putting preservice teachers in a mediating role, preservice teachers should be aware that competing philosophies exist. As they develop professionally, they should consider research on student learning, the context of their own students, and the learning goals for their classes. If we prepare preservice teachers as reflective practitioners who see themselves as researchers in their own classrooms, a pitting of “towers and trenches” (Milner, 2010) will no longer define relationships between universities and secondary schools.

**Implications for Mentor Teachers**

Finally, this study may also be of value to secondary mentor teachers. Goerling (2013) believed that effective mentors in English are essential to the future of education, and his call for more mentors is urgent. For secondary teachers who are considering the work of mentoring, this study brings insight into that work. The experiences shared by Julie, Nikki, Annette, and Renee can help new mentor teachers anticipate the challenges of mentoring a preservice teacher. After reading this study, a new mentor may anticipate the challenge of helping a student teacher connect learning theories to classroom practices. Mentor teachers familiar with this research will also be aware of “transition shock” (Corcoran, 1981) or “praxis shock,” (Smagorinsky et al., 2004), understanding that new teachers are often challenged by the transition from university
student to secondary teacher. The dissonance that may occur between methods courses and secondary classrooms is normal, and perhaps secondary mentors can help student teachers to apply their coursework in the secondary classroom context. Mentors can certainly help new teachers navigate this transition by bringing awareness to it.

Simply being aware of the struggles of new teachers, and hearing about experiences shared by other mentor teachers can also open honest dialogues and break down barriers between student teachers and mentors. The mentors in this study spoke about disposition and relationships. When mentor teachers work with a student teacher, they commit to sharing their work, their supplies, their students, and their classroom space with a student teacher every day for an entire semester, usually at least fifteen weeks. Relationships and communication are important. Mentors wanted to know that student teachers could be flexible and positive. They wanted student teachers to be accept their feedback and try again. Julie specifically spoke about an instance of communication breakdown that affected her relationship with Amber and, ultimately, Amber’s experience in her classroom. Amber was unable to accept feedback and learn from it. Julie said that she wished she had spoken with Amber earlier in the semester about how to accept feedback and grow from mistakes. It would have changed the trajectory of the mentorship and opened communication between them. For future mentors, it may be helpful to address communication and their relationship expectations in order to start the semester with clarity.
Distinct Perspectives on a Common Goal

Ultimately, this study addresses two perspectives on the topic of preparing future teachers. There is much scholarship available on the priorities of university-based methods instructors. 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 student 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. Student 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 student teacher had a
teachable spirit. This perspective makes sense, especially when we consider that the mentor’s job is to inspire the student 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.

While these 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, I would expect that disconnect to become less pronounced.

**Future Directions**

Future research in this area should continue to solicit the voices of mentor teachers. While this study was limited by time and place, this narrative inquiry work with mentor teachers should be replicated in order to provide a larger sampling of mentor teachers from diverse regions, working in rural, suburban, and urban contexts.

Future studies in this area might also address the impact of university-secondary collaborative work. The participants of this study wanted to collaborate and communicate with
university instructors. They invited them into their classrooms, and expressed a desire to be invited to the university campus for collaborative work. If the collaboration desired by these mentors was implemented as a goal teacher preparation programs, further research might look at the effects of university-secondary collaboration on mentor teachers, student teachers, and methods instructors.

Future studies might also address the benefits for mentor teachers working with student teachers. In this study, Annette said that she always hoped to learn from her student teacher, and she enjoyed collaborative work and the sharing of resources and ideas. Future work with mentor teachers could explore this concept further.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Individual interview protocols

INTERVIEW 1: Thank you for your participation in this study. My goal for today is to learn more about you and your experiences as a teacher and as a mentor of student teachers.

1. Tell me about your own student-teaching experience.
2. Tell me about your teaching philosophy. What are some things you believe deeply about the teaching of English?
3. Tell me your beliefs about the teaching of writing.
4. Tell me your story as a mentor teacher.
   Possible probes
   a. How did you become a mentor for student teachers?
   b. How did you learn to mentor student teachers?
   c. What are your strengths as a mentor?
   d. In what areas do you wish you were more prepared as a mentor?
5. What are your goals for student teachers?
6. Can you share some success stories working with student teachers?

*Ask about basic info (college background, certifications, years teaching ELA, number of student teachers mentored…)

INTERVIEW 2: Thank you for your participation in a second interview. Today I hope we can talk about student teaching and new teacher preparation.

1. What are the challenges of a student teacher?
2. What content knowledge do student teachers need?
3. Along with knowledge, what skills and dispositions do the best student teachers possess?
4. What do you expect students to have gained from university teacher preparation coursework prior to student teaching?
5. How do you work with student teachers who are lacking in skills, dispositions, or pedagogical content knowledge?
6. If you could meet with the English Education department at the university, what would you want to talk about?
   a. What would you like to tell the methods instructors who prepare student teachers?
   b. What is the university doing well?
   c. What is the university not doing well?
Appendix B

HSIRB approval

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: October 15, 2015

To: Jonathan Bush, Principal Investigator
   Lindsay Jeffers, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 15-09-32

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Preparing Teachers in English Language Arts: Mentor Teachers Speak” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: October 14, 2016