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The Preparation and Education of First-Year Teachers: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to provide a policy analysis of the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standard that requires teacher preparation programs to follow their recent graduates during their first years of teaching to demonstrate their positive impact on student growth, satisfaction with their preparation, and effective teaching practices. Using the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards as a conceptual framework, this qualitative study used interviews and observations at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year to discover five first-year teachers' perceptions of their preparation, needs, level of confidence in all areas of teaching, and the ways in which they could have been better or more prepared for the classroom. Their annual teacher evaluations provided insight to their evidence of effective teaching and impact on student growth. Overall, the first-year teachers felt prepared for their first year of teaching and demonstrated effective teaching strategies, but they needed more training on meeting the needs of students with diverse abilities, as well as how to successfully implement curriculum. Their greatest success during the year was experiencing student growth.

Keywords

CAEP, First-Year Teachers, Teacher Perceptions, Teacher Preparation Programs

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Teacher preparation programs are tasked with educating and preparing high-quality, effective teachers to meet the needs of students in diverse classrooms throughout the United States. These programs are held to accreditation standards and licensing requirements that articulate what their graduates should know and be able to do (Darling-Hammond, 2016). According to the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), teacher preparation programs must provide evidence that their graduates are positively impacting student growth and achievement, displaying evidence of effective teaching, and that the graduates and their employers are satisfied with their preparation and performance in order to receive nationally recognized accredited status (CAEP, 2013). While these mandates from CAEP are relatively new, they are changing the way in which teacher preparation programs prepare and track their graduates. There must be systems in place to follow graduates into their first years of teaching in order to assess the impact that graduates are making on their students' growth and achievement, evidence of their effective teaching strategies, and feedback from graduates regarding their preparation and from their employers regarding their satisfaction with the graduate's performance. While the main incentive of meeting CAEP's policy is accreditation, knowing how well their graduates were prepared for the teaching profession, as well as holes that need to be filled in in order for better prepation and satisfaction, may provide teacher preparation programs with information they need to improve their programs.

In order to provide an analysis of the CAEP policy, a qualitative case study was conducted to explore the experiences of recent teacher graduates across the state of Colorado throughout their first year of teaching. The analysis followed the model from the CAEP policy which requires evidence of effective teaching, perceptions of recent graduates regarding preparation, and impact on student growth. The research questions were answered through interviews as the first-year teachers described their preparation, their needs, their level of

confidence in all areas of teaching, and how they could have been better or more prepared for the classroom. In addition, observations of the first-year teachers instructing in their classrooms were conducted and evaluated using the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards rubric, which is the template for the annual teacher evaluations in Colorado. Also, each teacher's annual evaluation from the end of their first year of teaching was analyzed to provide more information regarding her impact on student growth and evidence of effective teaching strategies.

Literature Review

The renewed focus on teacher quality in the United States has heightened the attention on teacher prepration programs and the ways in which these programs are training new teachers for a diverse and changing world, and researchers and policymakers have criticized teacher preparation programs for not preparing high-quality educators that are ready for the demands of the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2014a; Good, 2014; Levine, 2006; Mehta & Doctor, 2013). Programs have been criticized for low admission and graduation standards, outdated curriculum and instruction, and the lack of effective student teaching experiences (Chelsey & Jordan, 2012; Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013; Mehta & Doctor, 2014; Wong & Glass, 2011). The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) adopted new standards in 2013 for accreditation in response to the criticisms regarding teacher preparation programs. The standards required all teacher preparation programs to set minimum criteria for admissions, include rigorous instruction in content and pedagogy, and to develop strong partnerships with elementary and secondary schools where their preservice teachers complete their student teaching experience. The partner schools were also required to provide student teachers with strong mentors and a diverse setting (Heafner, McIntyre, & Spooner, 2014).

In addition, CAEP (2013) included a new policy that required teacher preparation programs to demonstrate their graduates' positive impact on student learning and achievement in their first years of teaching. CAEP indicated that evidence must be shown using multiple measures such as standardized assessments, student portfolios, value-added measures, and student learning and growth objectives required by each individual state. The comprehensive evaluation that states are now using to demonstrate the quality of their teachers is the renewed teacher evaluations (Heafner et al., 2014). CAEP's policy also has required programs to provide evidence that the graduates and their employers are satisfied with the preparation and training they received and that the graduates are effectively implementing the theory, knowledge, and skills they gained from their preparation programs (CAEP, 2013). While the ways in which this information will be gathered has not been clearly defined, teacher preparation programs must now focus on recent graduates and their experiences as first-year teachers.

First-Year Teachers

Studies have been conducted that generalize the issues and challenges that first-year teachers face as they enter their own classrooms. In the past, many first-year teachers suffered reality shock when they began teaching and did not feel fully prepared for all the details and demands of teaching (Veenman, 1984). This has remained true for new teachers as demands have increased throughout the years (Darling-Hammond, 2016). Even though most first-year teachers experience student teaching, often they have not had complete control of a classroom before without the supervision or guidance of a cooperating teacher (Womack-Wynne et al., 2011). In addition, first-year teachers are not used to managing, organizing, and being in complete control of all classroom responsibilities. The most common struggles that first-year teachers have identified are classroom management, instructional organization, planning,

curriculum expectations, evaluations, preparing students for high-stakes tests, and demonstrating student achievement (Chelsey & Jordan, 2012; Freiberg, 2002; Houston, 1993; Smeaton & Waters, 2013; Wodlinger, 1986; Womack-Wynne et al., 2011). The intense pressure for improving student achievement increases frustration and stress for many first-year teachers as well (Franklin & Snow-Gerono, 2005). According to Chelsey and Jordan (2012), first-year teachers reported that they did not have enough experience or preparation in how to teach content effectively, especially in light of the Common Core State Standards. In addition, first-year teachers did not have enough training in effectively implementing technology in their classrooms (Batane & Ngwako, 2017; McKinney, Jone, Strudler, & Quinn, 1999).

These struggles and frustrations have impacted teacher attrition in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2014b). Forty to 50% of new teachers leave within their first five years of teaching (Womack-Wynne et al., 2011). In a study of 113 first-year teachers, Womack-Lynne et al found that 43% felt like they had made the wrong career choice after four months in the classroom, and 63% said that they did not see themselves teaching in 10 years.

While these past studies have provided general pictures of the trends and struggles that first-year teachers face, it is imperative in light of the new policy changes in which teacher preparation programs have to track their graduates to demonstrate satisfaction with their preparation that first-year teachers have the opportunity to share their stories, experiences, and perceptions specifically regarding their training. With the requirements of the CAEP policy, more specific details regarding the perceptions of training and the impact of first-year teachers in the classroom will be discovered. The information will provide valuable insight for teacher preparation programs as they are tasked with improving the quality of their preparation, instruction, and impact in a diverse world.

Conceptual Framework

In the state of Colorado, Senate Bill 10-191 has changed the way teachers are evaluated by creating a new evaluation measurement tool based on the six Colorado Teacher Quality Standards: content knowledge, establishing a classroom environment, facilitating learning, reflecting on practice, demonstrating leadership, and student growth (Colorado Department of Education, 2015). These six domains served as the framework for this study and guided the data collection and analysis. The participants in the study were observed and evaluated using the six Teacher Quality Standards during their student teaching experiences, and the Teacher Quality Standards were used as the evaluation tool for their annual teacher evaluations during their first-year of teaching.

As shown in Figure 1, the six Teacher Quality Standards encompass the most commonly identified factors of teacher quality included in the literature. Standard I states that a teacher demonstrates expertise in content and pedagogical knowledge. Standard II focuses on the safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment that teachers create for their students. High-quality planning and instruction in an environment that facilitates learning for all students is the backbone of Standard III, while Standard IV focuses on the reflective practices that teachers engage in to enhance their practice. Standard V states that teachers demonstrate leadership in their schools, build positive relationships with students, staff, and families, and demonstrate high ethical standards. Standard VI states that teachers positively impact student academic learning and growth.

Positionality

As a former elementary school teacher and a current instructor and supervisor of student teachers in a College of Education, I am passionate about educating and preparing high-quality

teachers for our diverse public schools. My training and experience as a supervisor of student teachers prepared me to observe and identify evidence of quality teaching in the interviews and observations for this case study. In addition, I have used the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards in my instruction and observations as a supervisor and instructor in a teacher preparation program. I was familiar with the first-year teachers in this case study due to my role as an instructor and supervisor in the teacher preparation program; however, I had no supervisory role during their first-year of teaching. My experiences of being a teacher in an elementary school made the setting a familiar one, and my experiences observing student teachers was helpful as I collected and analyzed data; however, I approached the study from the researcher perspective and designed the study to purposely address issues of trustworthiness.

Figure 1. The framework of teacher quality. Adapted from the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards by the Colorado Department of Education (2011). Please see https://www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness/teacherqualitystandardsreferenceguide for more information.

Research Design

In order to explore the experiences of recent teacher graduates during their first year of teaching and discover their perceptions of the training they received in their teacher preparation program, a qualitative case study of five first-year elementary teachers was performed. Conducting a qualitative case study allows the researcher to explore an issue or problem by using a specific case that is within a real-life context or setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Through collecting and analyzing the data in the field, a more comprehensive picture of the details, experiences, and dynamics of the specific situation and experience develops, specifically for this case, the first year of teaching (Patton, 2015). The purpose of the case study was to provide an analysis of the CAEP policy for tracking recent graduates into their first year

of teaching through the experiences and perceptions of five first-year teachers. For this policy analysis, the case study design provided a detailed picture of the experiences and perceptions of five first-year teachers. The following research questions guided the case study:

- How well prepared do first-year teachers feel they are at the beginning, middle, and end of their first year of teaching?
- What evidence of effective teaching do first-year teachers display in their classrooms?
- What areas of strength and areas for growth are identified by first-year teachers?
- What are the preceptions of first-year teachers regarding their preparation, effectiveness, and success during their first year?

Research Sample and Settings

An email was sent to recent graduates from the same teacher preparation program who were beginning their first year of teaching requesting participation in the case study. The five first-year teachers who agreed to participate completed their teacher preparation program coursework at a mid-sized university in southern Colorado and received their elementary teaching license for grades kindergarten through sixth in May 2015. All five first-year teachers in the case study were white females in their early to mid-20s, and they were hired in a variety of elementary schools throughout Colorado upon graduation. In order to ensure that the first-year teachers would be teaching in different schools with diverse populations, purposeful maximum variation sampling was conducted (Creswell, 2013). The benefit of this approach according to Creswell (2013) was the increased likelihood of different perspectives and experiences due to the different settings in which the first-year teachers were instructing. While they received similar training and preparation, their experiences as first-year teachers were impacted by the population, diversity, and overall culture of each elementary school where they taught.

To protect their privacy, each participant chose a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study. Jackie and Susan were hired at the same elementary school in a large city in southern Colorado. The school was Title I, and 85% of the students received free or reduced lunch. During their first year of teaching, Jackie taught fifth grade, and Susan taught second grade.

Marian taught fourth grade in an affluent school district in a large city in southern Colorado. The student population in her elementary school consisted of 80% White, 10% Hispanic, 3% Black, and 7% identifying as other, and 9% received free or reduced lunch. Nicole taught fourth grade in a Title I elementary school in a city in northern Colorado. Eighty percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, and 16% were English Language Learners. Esther taught second grade at a new charter school in a suburb of a large city in northern Colorado. The student population was 87% White, 7% Hispanic, 2% Black, and 4% identifying as other with 4% of the population receiving free or reduced lunch.

Data Collection

In order to discover how the first-year teachers' perceptions and experiences changed during their first-year of teaching, interviews were conducted at the beginning of the school year, after the first semester was complete, and at the end of the school year. Following IRB approval, the first round of semistructured interviews were conducted using 11 interview questions designed to gain the participants' perspectives on the training and preparation they had received in their teacher preparation program, as well as the experiences and lessons they

had learned during their first few weeks as classroom teachers (see Appendix A). All interviews were conducted in person, audio recorded, and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The second round of semistructured interviews occurred at the end of the first semester. Ten interview questions were designed to discover if the participants' perceptions regarding their preparation had changed throughout the semester as well as to gather more information regarding their experiences in their first semester of teaching (see Appendix B). The third round of semistructured interviews was completed at the end of the school year, and the nine interview questions focused more on how their perceptions and experiences had changed and developed throughout the school year (see Appendix C). All of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

Observations were conducted in each of the five classrooms during the first semester and at the end of the school year. As a participant observer, the researcher spent time in each classroom at the beginning and end of the school year. The Colorado Teacher Quality Standards served as a guide for observation and analysis of the practices, instructional strategies, and interactions observed in each classroom. Throughout each observation, the researcher took field notes while observing the teacher instructing, the students working, and other interactions between students and the teacher.

In addition, each first-year teacher's annual evaluation was collected at the end of the school year and analyzed using the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards to determine evidence of effective teaching and impact on student growth as captured by the evaluation. Permission to use each teacher's evaluation was given by the first-year teachers themselves, as well as approved by the IRB. Each evaluation was completed by the first-year teacher's principal and included a rubric of the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards as well as evidence of student growth on classroom and district assessments.

Data Analysis

The process of data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously. According to Yin (2014), case study data can be analyzed both inductively, by noticing patterns in the data and finding possible relationships and themes, and deductively, by using a theoretical or conceptual framework to guide the analysis. Both methods of data analysis were used throughout the coding process. Following each interview, observation, and review of the annual teacher evaluations, analytic memoing occurred where the researcher wrote down her own thoughts and ideas regarding emerging themes and patterns in the data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

The data was coded in cycles (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). During the first cycle of analysis, participants' own language was used to create in vivo codes. In addition, descriptive codes, which summarize the basic topics in the data, were used. Evaluative coding, which makes specific judgments regarding the merits and significance of a program or policy, was also used, in particular when participants focused on the strengths and weaknesses of their preparation. Attribute coding was used to differentiate between types of data, whether interview or observation, time of interview, whether beginning, middle, or end of the school year, and participant and school characteristics (Miles et al., 2014).

During the second cycle of data analysis, deductive analysis was conducted by using the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards. According to Patton (2015), deductive analysis uses an existing framework in order to identify patterns and themes in the data. The Colorado Teacher Quality Standards served as the existing framework for defining and describing quality teaching. The field notes, interviews, and annual evaluations were compared with the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards in order to identify evidence of quality teaching as measured by the standards. For example, the standards defines building positive relationships with students as

evidence of quality teaching, and this was evident in the interviews, observations, and evaluations of each first-year teacher.

During this stage of coding, memoing continued in order to focus on emerging themes and patterns within each case. In addition, a content analysis of the annual teacher evaluations was conducted to identify patterns between the evaluations and the interviews and observations (Patton, 2015). For example, instructional strengths such as high expectations for students and implementing technology in instruction were noted in the evaluations, interviews, and observations. During the content analysis, the text of each annual evaluation was analyzed using the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards as the framework with the standards providing the description of quality teaching.

During the third cycle of data analysis, pattern coding was conducted in order to further categorize and condense the data (Yin, 2014). Similarities and differences between the first-year teachers' feelings and perceptions of preparation from the beginning of the school year to the middle and end of the school year were noted. The patterns discovered in the content analysis of the annual evaluations were compared with those that emerged from the interviews and observations with the first-year teachers. The patterns that emerged from the observations were also compared with the patterns from the interviews. Major themes were identified through pattern coding, memoing, and further review of the data.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation of data sources, which included interviews, observations and the annual teacher evaluations, was used in order to find corroborating evidence in the themes and patterns that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Rich, thick description through details of the participants and schools, as well as participant quotations that supported each theme, was used throughout the case study to provide the readers with a deeper understanding of the experiences of the first-year teachers (Creswell, 2013; Geertz, 1973; Tierney & Clemens, 2013). After identifying themes across the interviews, observations and evaluations, member-checking was performed by sharing the themes, interpretations, and conclusions with each participant in the study (Creswell, 2013), and no changes were needed in the findings. In addition, dependability was established throughout the research process, by following a structured data analysis plan, coding in cycles, and looking for all possible explanations in the data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Findings

After analyzing the interviews, observations, and annual evaluations, six final themes emerged. The themes were identified due to their prominence in the data (See Table 1 for a display of major themes).

Table 1. *First-Year Teachers: The Major Themes, Exemplar Quotes, and Data Triangulation*

Major Theme	Exemplar Quotes	Triangulation
Areas of best preparation	"The actual experience of being in the classroom, what it's like to teach, and what happens and how to react when things happen, that was	Interviews: Beginning, middle, and end of the year

	definitely the most valuable experience." Interview; Beginning of the year	
Areas of need in preparation	"I wish we had looked at different ways to run curriculums, even like multiple ways to do one curriculum because that's where I feel like I'm struggling the most." Interview: Middle of the year	Interviews; Beginning, middle, and end of the year
Greatest challenges	"We have so many meetings and so much data that we have to show and talk about. . . . it doesn't feel like it leaves enough time to plan and reflect and decide what we are going to do." Interview: Middle of the year	Interviews; Beginning, middle, and end of the year; Observations
Commitment to professional development	"Whenever there was an opportunity for training that came up within the school, I went to that training." Interview: End of the year	Interviews: Beginning, middle, and end of the year
Evidence of high-quality teaching	"You are on to something! Let's go back into the text and find more text evidence to support your ideas." Observation: End of the year	Interviews; Beginning, middle, and end of the year; Observations; Annual evaluations
Perceptions of student growth	"[Esther] is very professional and collaborates with all stakeholders to ensure student growth." Annual evaluation	Interviews; Beginning, middle, and end of the year; Observations; Annual evaluations

Theme 1: Areas of Best Preparation

Student teaching experience. All five first-year teachers felt as though they had received adequate preparation to begin their teaching career. For all of them, it was the experience of student teaching for a full year in the elementary classroom that made the most difference in their preparation. Each first-year teacher had been in an elementary classroom from the first day of school in August until they graduated from the teacher preparation program in May. They had experienced setting up a classroom, getting to know students from the beginning of the school year, implementing classroom procedures and expectations, attending staff and data meetings, as well as daily instruction, assessments, field trips, parent/teacher conferences, and observing student growth over time. As Marian pointed out, "The actual experience of being in the classroom, what it's like to teach, and what happens and how to react when things happen, that was definitely the most valuable experience." Esther reiterated that being in the classroom provided her with more confidence when she started her first year of teaching: "I did not feel nervous, I did not feel scared to start. I felt very prepared."

While time spent in the classroom was the most beneficial for all of them, their varying student teaching experiences and the schools where they student taught impacted the degree to which they felt prepared. Nicole student taught in a public Montessori school. She appreciated the training and the exposure to the Montessori manipulatives and style; however, she felt like her student teaching experience was not representative of the school where she was hired, a Title I school that was highly impacted with English Language Learners and students with disabilities. Nicole did not have the same exposure to students of diverse abilities that student teachers in traditional public schools received. In addition, she said:

> I felt like being in a public Montessori school was not useful, not realistic. I didn't learn how to use curriculum and how to tear it apart and figure out those different things. . . . I didn't know what to expect coming into this school.

Her student teaching experience had not fully prepared her for the traditional classroom.

Coursework. As part of their teacher preparation program, the first-year teachers were required to take methods courses. For all five teachers, the majority of the classes they took were worthwhile and provided them with strategies, resources, information, and ideas that they had implemented in their classrooms during their first year of teaching. According to Susan, "knowing how to relate the standards to your content and the content to your standards" was an area she felt most prepared in due to the assignments and practice she had in her methods courses. She went on to explain that applying what she learned in her courses to the classroom where she was student teaching prepared her for her first year as well. Similarly, Marian felt prepared to plan lessons based on the standards. In her words, "I felt really prepared with lesson planning, just the basics of where you start a lesson to where you end it. Pulling it form the standards, that was huge." By the end of the year, Jackie realized how often she had used the ideas and strategies she had received from her course instructors. She referred to them as her "bag of tricks," and as she said, "you don't realize how much you will even use something that was given to you for a second grade idea in fifth grade . . . that bag of tricks made a huge difference." She had returned to her class materials and notes from her coursework to find strategies and ideas to implement throughout her first year of teaching.

Theme 2: Areas of Need

Curriculum. By mid-year, their perceptions on how prepared they were for their first-year had not changed. They reiterated that their student teaching experiences had been the most

valuable training and preparation; however, they were able to better identify their areas of need after a semester of day-to-day life in the classroom. All of the teachers felt like they had not received enough preparation in using and implementing curriculum. Nicole stated, "I wish we had looked at different ways to run curriculums, even like multiple ways to do one curriculum because that's where I feel like I'm struggling the most." Jackie noted that only one of her professors had demonstrated how to use curriculum: "More hands-on training with [curriculum] would have helped . . . even if you're using a different curriculum [in your own classroom], being able to analyze and figure out what they mean, that would have helped." While each school in which the five teachers were teaching used different curriculum for each subject area, the exposure to and experience working with a variety of curriculum in their methods courses would have helped them feel more prepared for using the curriculum they were later assigned.

Meeting students' needs. By mid-year, the first-year teachers felt as though they needed more support in teaching students with diverse abilities. According to the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards, high-quality teachers have the tools to adapt their teaching for the benefit of all students across all ability levels; however, this was an area the participants viewed as lacking from their preparation. Both Nicole and Jackie did not feel like they had received enough training in special education, and they were both teaching in Title I schools that were highly impacted with students with special needs. Nicole did not feel as though she had enough resources or training to support her students who were identified as special education: "I don't know who qualifies as special ed, so until you actually have a face to put to it, it's hard to understand." Similarly, Jackie needed more training in the Response-to-Intervention (RtI) process, which uses student assessment data to provide support to students with learning and behavior needs, as well as more resources for understanding Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and special education services.

In addition, the teachers did not feel like they had enough training to meet the needs of their English Language Learners (ELL). Even though an ELL class was not required by the teacher preparation program, Esther took the class as an elective, because she believed that "if I wouldn't have taken that, and I had been in any school setting, I would think it was very necessary . . . it opened my eyes and it was very intriguing and important." Nicole, whose classroom was highly impacted with ELLs, did not think she had enough training in that area. For Marian, who taught in a more affluent elementary school, more training on providing enrichment for gifted and talented students was an identified need: "Those students that could teach the math lesson, they're so high. Finding something for them that doesn't make them bored to tears . . . gifted and talented, a seminar on it or something would have been really good." She reiterated that need at the end of the school year: "[I needed more] tools, programs that help teachers, support teachers, provide differentiation for students . . . it's a lot and you're always looking for more as a teacher." More specific strategies and training for the diverse needs of students would have helped the first-year teachers feel more prepared.

Theme 3: Commitment to Professional Development

While all five first-year teachers identified areas of need in their preparation, it was evident that they had all sought out more training during their first year of teaching. While all five teachers were part of an induction program during their first year, they all attended training and classes above and beyond the requirements of their induction programs. They attended trainings on specific programs and curriculum, assessments and testing, as well as classroom management. "Whenever there was an opportunity for training that came up within the school, I went to that training," Marian said. Susan has done the same because she believed it was

imperative to "take the initiative to make sure that I'm doing everything I can to support my students."

In addition to formal trainings, they all regularly met with their teammates and other staff at the schools for support and advice. As Jackie stated, "Talking to everybody and not being afraid to ask for help and seek advice in other areas is huge." Esther reiterated:

> I have great teammates . . . so if I ever have questions about the timing or the pacing or am I doing this right, I can ask them, and I'm not afraid to ask if I'm doing something wrong or are we supposed to be doing it like this.

All five of the first-year teachers reported that they had sought the advice and guidance of the special education team, gifted and talented teachers, school counselors, and administration at their schools throughout their first year when they needed more support for individual students. Relying on teammates and staff helped all of them navigate through their first year of teaching. It is also evidence of reflective teaching, as identified by the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards, because they were focused on professional growth and the application of new skills to improve their practice.

Theme 4: Evidence of High-Quality Teaching

Connecting with students. When observed in their classrooms, each teacher demonstrated evidence of high-quality as identified by the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards. During the interviews, each teacher identified areas they felt were personal strengths, and their identified areas of strength were evident in the observations as well. All five teachers identified one of their greatest strengths to be building relationships with their students and creating a community in their classrooms. According to Nicole, her greatest strength was "connecting with them. Which has really helped because even if they don't like math, they respect me and like school, and that's huge." Similarly, Susan said,

> Building connections and relationships with kids. I can tell when they are having an off day, and they are willing to talk and be open and honest with me about it. [I ask] what can we do today to get you to be successful in here?

Marian noted, "I've worked really hard to get to know [my students] and who they are and their personalities and how they learn so that I can teach them better."

It was evident in each observation that the five first-year teachers had connected with their students. Marian acknowledged her students who were on task during their writing assignment while she walked around providing one-on-one support. Nicole pointed out specific ways that students had correctly used diagrams to represent equations, praising them for their hard work and asking questions to prompt problem-solving. Esther repeatedly used "I noticed" statements, such as "I noticed that you counted by fives to get the answer" and "I noticed that you were using active listening." In her classroom, there was a lot of laughter, praise, and mutual respect.

The Colorado Teacher Quality Standard III states that teachers establish a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment, and that they foster a positive, nurturing relationship with their students. These qualities were evident as each teacher interacted with their students, provided instruction and clear expectations, and gave specific praise to individual students and the class as a whole.

Instructional strengths. Each first-year teacher demonstrated other strengths captured in the Teacher Quality Standards as well during each classroom observation. During one

observation, Jackie led her students in an interactive writing assignment as they looked for text evidence in an article about explorers. Throughout her lesson, she integrated technology to enhance student learning, which is evidence of planning and delivering effective instruction, the second Colorado Teacher Quality Standard. Susan provided clear expectations and modeled how to use visualization skills during a whole group reading lesson, which is also meeting the standard for effective instruction. Marian, Esther, and Nicole all engaged students in the "I Do, We Do, You Do" lesson format in which they demonstrated how to solve a problem, worked together as a class, and provided students with independent practice as well. Overall, their knowledge of the content and curriculum in each observation was evident as they delivered instruction that met the academic standards and followed the curriculum expectations. By the end of the year, it was clear that each first-year teacher had grown in their classroom management techniques, instructional strategies, and confidence. Throughout the year they displayed evidence of effective teaching as described by the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards.

Annual teacher evaluations. Evidence of high-quality teaching was also captured in each teacher's annual evaluation. Each evaluation was structured differently depending on the school and district. Although Colorado mandates that 50% of the annual evaluation is based on the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards rubric and 50% is evidence of student growth, the schools have autonomy to decide the format of the evaluation and how the student-growth part of the evaluation will be determined (Colorado Department of Education, 2011). Despite the different formats, each teacher was given a rating based on their instructional practices, as measured by the rubric, as well as their impact on student growth. All five first-year teachers were rated as effective overall. This rating indicated that each teacher had demonstrated high-quality practices throughout their first year of teaching.

According to their evaluations, each first-year teacher demonstrated their effectiveness in the five quality standards measured on the rubric: expertise in content and pedagogy; safe, respectful, inclusive learning environment; high-quality planning and instruction; reflective practices; and leadership. While their level of proficiency varied, the first-year teachers were acknowledged for effectively building relationships with students, demonstrating collaboration and teamwork, implementing content effectively, and facilitating learning in the classroom. Areas for growth were also indicated on the evaluations, and for each teacher, the areas of growth were related to differentiating instruction and classroom practices in order to meet the needs of all students.

Prior to being evaluated, all five of the first-year teachers had identified differentiating instruction as a need in the mid-year interviews. They had all reported that they needed more strategies and tools for meeting the needs of students with diverse abilities. From the evidence in their annual evaluations, the principals identified this need as well. While this area of need was identified in the evaluations, overall, each teacher had evidence of effective and high-quality instruction throughout their first-year of teaching.

Theme 5: Greatest Challenges

Classroom responsibilities. At the beginning of the year, one of the biggest challenges that the first-year teachers mentioned was the learning curve that comes with managing, organizing, and being responsible for their own classrooms. In Marian's words, "not knowing what you don't know" with regards to all of the programs, procedures, and responsibilities of a new school and classroom was challenging. As she said, "You can learn about what it looks like to teach for so long—until you're there, it's not the same." Jackie also reiterated that there is no way to be "100% prepared for your first year, it's not even humanly possible, stuff comes up that you just didn't know." Likewise, Nicole found that no matter how much preparation

she had received, "you just have to get in the classroom. You really won't know until you know, until you're there." While they felt as prepared as they could for starting their first-year of teaching, there were challenges that arose due to the fact that they were now the classroom teacher. The student teaching experience prepared them for many aspects of the demands of teaching; however, as Esther pointed out,

> It's a whole other level when you're actually on your own, planning every little aspect. You don't really get that when you're student teaching because someone has already done that for you, all the little things someone has done for you.

Taking responsibility for all aspects of teaching, which they had not fully understood as student teachers, created a learning curve during their first year.

Parents. By the end of the year, communicating with parents was a challenge that the first-year teachers identified. None of the five first-year teachers felt like they had received enough training or coaching on how to deal with difficult parents or how to effectively communicate with parents. The expectations from parents were different depending on the demographics of the schools. For Nicole, she struggled with not having enough support from parents when dealing with behavior issues. The parents at Marian's school wanted so much information regarding the needs of their children that she felt overwhelmed: "They're really supportive and they really care about their students, but trying to meet their expectations and being able to communicate clearly with them is challenging." Learning how to navigate the expectations or lack of support from parents was another piece of the puzzle for the first-year teachers.

Theme 6: Perceptions of Student Growth

By mid-year, all five teachers identified that moments of student learning and seeing students grow during the first semester was their greatest reward and success of the first year. According to Esther, "Seeing my students do it independently knowing that I taught them is really rewarding. It means you've done your job and you taught them what they needed to know." Jackie mentioned the "a-ha" moments in the classroom as her biggest reward: "When you get to see them, when you know that you helped them reach that, it's so incredible, especially this first year." Marian also mentioned that "seeing where they were and where they've come, seeing their progress" made her feel successful. Similarly, Susan said:

> I love watching their growth right now. There are students who were really, really low and they're not where they need to be, but they've made some tremendous growth. And seeing that and saying, I'm not messing them up! It's so great!

For Nicole, "It's really cool when they get it and they're excited about it and they love learning."

By the end of the year, student growth was still their greatest feeling of success. For Susan, "Just watching them grow and develop over time is probably the best part, that's why I do it." For all five of the first-year teachers, the growth that their students had experienced throughout the year, both individually and as a class, made their first year feel like a success.

Annual teacher evaluations. At mid-year, all five felt the success of seeing their students grow; however, they were all concerned about future assessments and their annual teacher evaluations because 50% of their evaluations were based on measures of student growth. By mid-year, they had not experienced the evaluation, and one thing was evident across

all five mid-year interviews: they were all unsure of what their evaluations looked like and what data and assessments would be used to evaluate them. There was confusion as to what assessments would be used in the 50% student growth piece of their evaluations, as it differed from school to school. Student growth is an indicator of quality in the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards, and while the first-year teachers had experienced student growth in their classrooms, they were most apprehensive of the assessments that would be used to measure their impact as teachers on their annual evaluations. However, by the end of the year, all five teachers had been through the annual evaluation process and felt more confident because their positive impact on student growth was captured in their evaluations. For all five of the teachers, student growth was calculated by using a mixture of classroom assessments and standardized tests, and all five first-year teachers demonstrated student growth in the assessments used for their evaluations.

Discussion

The CAEP policy includes several components that teacher preparation programs must fulfill in order to demonstrate that they are effectively preparing their graduates for the classroom: evidence of effective teaching, positive impact on student growth, and graduate and employer satisfaction with their preparation. Employer satisfaction was not measured in this case study; however, the other components of the CAEP policy were met through interviews, observations, and review of the annual teacher evaluations. The themes that emerged from the experiences and perceptions of first-year teachers provide detailed information regarding their needs, successes, and impact on students.

Due to this CAEP policy, programs must track their graduates in order to determine their perceptions regarding their training, specifically that it was relevant and effective. The five first-year teachers in this case study felt prepared to begin their first year of teaching, but there were areas in which they needed more preparation in order to feel more confident and successful during their first year. The student teaching experiences provided them with the greatest preparation as they had opportunities to observe, practice, implement lessons and training, and receive coaching and mentoring from their cooperating teacher throughout the school year. As noted in the literature, these experiences during student teaching positively impact the effectiveness and quality of preparation for the first year of teaching (Coggshall, Bivona, & Reschly, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2014b; Good, 2014).

However, it is important to note that the schools where the first-year teachers completed their student teaching impacted their degree of preparation. For Nicole, the Montessori student teaching experience did not easily transfer to her first-year because the population of students and the style, demands, and expectations of her school were drastically different from the school where she student taught. She did not have the training she needed for instructing and meeting the needs of a more diverse population of students, and therefore, felt that she had not received relevant or realistic training.

Teacher preparation programs are designed to prepare teachers to go into any school and be a high-quality teacher. This requires that the classroom experience is realistic and transferrable so that the teachers graduating from the program are ready to enter a variety of schools and have the tools they need for success. As Darling-Hammond (2014b) stated, the most effective student teaching experience provides student teachers with the opportunity to put theory into practice and meet the needs of a diverse population of students. All five of the first-year teachers were teaching in diverse schools with a myriad of needs, and their identified areas of need were reflective of the schools where they were teaching.

Classrooms today reflect the ever-increasing ethnic and socioeconomic student diversity of the United States, as well as diverse learning needs, and first-year teachers are not

provided with enough training and preparation for meeting these needs (Greenbery et al., 2013). This was true for the five first-year teachers in the case study as well. Overall, the first-year teachers did not feel as though they had enough preparation for instructing and providing effective interventions for their students with diverse needs, which included students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and gifted and talented students. Weaving specific strategies for meeting the diverse needs of students into every content area and educational methods course during the preparation program would provide new students with a stronger foundation for meeting the needs of students. By including more specific coursework that is reflective of the diverse classrooms of today, as well as ensuring that student teachers are placed in classrooms that also reflect this diversity, first-year teachers will have more specific preparation and skills as they begin their careers.

Another component of the CAEP policy is that programs must demonstrate that their graduates are effectively implementing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that they learned in their teacher preparation programs in their classrooms. This component is also reflected in the research question of this case study: what evidence of effective teaching do first-year teachers display in their classrooms? The five first-year teachers all demonstrated evidence of effective teaching in their classrooms as captured by the observations and their annual teacher evaluations. Specifically, they demonstrated their knowledge of content and curriculum, integration of technology, facilitation of a safe, respectful learning environment, and positive relationships with students.

As part of their teacher preparation program, they had all learned the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards and had been observed using the standards in all of their formal observations during their student teaching experiences. Since all public schools in the state are required to use the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards for their annual teacher evaluations, the first-year teachers felt well prepared for how the state and their schools identified high-quality teaching. This connection between their preparation and practice was important in their confidence for demonstrating these qualities in their classrooms. Their exposure to the standards helped them identify their own strengths in the classroom as well; all five first-year teachers believed that building positive relationships with their students, specifically Colorado Teacher Quality Standard II, was their greatest strength.

Despite their familiarity with the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards, at mid-year they all demonstrated confusion regarding their own annual teacher evaluations and how assessments would be used to determine if they had positively impacted student growth. Once they experienced the process by the end of the year, they were no longer apprehensive; however, they had not received clear information regarding how they would be evaluated until late into their first year of teaching. Similarly, Brown, Bay-Borelli, and Scott (2015) found that new teachers are often unaware and have not received enough training regarding new teacher evaluation policies and how these policies and expectations will directly impact them. While teacher preparation programs could include more information regarding policies that will impact them as they go into the teaching field, it is also the responsibility of school districts and administrators to provide specific information and training regarding evaluations and assessments for their new teachers. Having this information earlier in the school year would have helped the first-year teachers feel more prepared to meet the expectations of their evaluations.

Despite their initial apprehension regarding their annual teacher evaluations and how student growth would be calculated, all five first-year teachers were rated as effective based on the Colorado Teacher Quality Standards rubric and the assessments used to demonstrate student growth. When asked to identify their area of greatest success during their first year, they all stated that watching their students grow and knowing they had a direct impact on their learning was their biggest accomplishment. Not only did they feel successful due to the growth

captured on their annual teacher evaluations, they also felt successful when they observed their students having "a-ha" moments and witnessed individual and collective growth in academics and behavior throughout the year.

By the end of the year, all five first-year teachers were satisfied with their decision to become teachers. Some noted that they did not know if they would always teach in an elementary school; however, their overall experience of building relationships with their students, impacting student growth, and growing as an educator made their first year worth the challenges.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was that it only addressed first-year teachers' perceptions of their preparation at the elementary school level. First-year teachers were interviewed and observed in a variety of elementary schools with different demographics and needs in order to determine their level of preparation for teaching in a wide variety of schools. However, further studies of teachers at the middle and high school levels would provide a broader perspective of first-year teachers' perceptions.

Another limitation is that all of the first-year teachers in this case study are white females. While this is representative of the graduates of the teacher preparation program, as 99% of the elementary graduates were white females, gaining the perspectives of a more diverse population of elementary teachers could also add more insight into the preparation and experiences of first-year teachers. In addition, the first-year teachers in the case study were from one teacher preparation program. While the CAEP policy requires that individual teacher preparation programs provide the information included in this case study regarding their specific program, including perceptions of first-year teachers from different programs may help teacher preparation programs across the country continue to identify the themes, areas of strength and need, and implement suggestions from their own graduates who are in the field. The major themes and findings may not be easily generalized to the overall population for first-year teachers and teacher preparation programs due to their localized focus. However, the transferability of the findings are evident across the experiences of first-year teachers, as well as their principals and university supervisors.

Conclusion and Implications

The first-year teachers in this case study felt most prepared to begin their teaching career due to their student teaching experiences; methods courses that provided direct instruction with curriculum, standards, and strategies; and their experience with the Teacher Quality Standards which helped them to understand the qualities of effective teaching and how to implement them in their classrooms. However, there were areas of need as well, including non-effective courses, lack of training regarding students of diverse abilities, unrealistic student teaching experiences, and lack of specific training for implementing curriculum. While this was a small sample of first-year teachers, the themes were evident. Having a more robust database of first-year teachers may help teacher preparation programs continue to identify the themes, areas of strength and need, and implement suggestions from their own graduates who are in the field. In addition, future research regarding the employers' perceptions of and satisfaction with first-year teachers' preparation may provide teacher preparation programs with another layer of insight regarding the strengths and needs of their programs.

As this case study demonstrates, following the CAEP policy provides teacher preparation programs with valuable and specific information regarding how well prepared their graduates were for the classroom. The feedback from graduates will help programs identify the

areas in which teachers were best prepared and the areas where they needed more instruction and support. Teacher preparation programs should use the feedback and suggestions to implement changes in their program in order to provide new teachers with more support in the identified areas of need. By using the information provided by the CAEP policy, there is the potential for teacher preparation programs to improve their practice to ensure that they are preparing high-quality educators and engaging in continuous improvement efforts.

The CAEP policy may also provide the opportunity for programs, states, and accrediting bodies to identify trends of highly successful programs and components of programs that best prepare teachers for the field. For example, from this case study, it was evident that the structure of a program, specifically the year-long student teaching experience, was a valuable component that provided the student teachers with rich experiences that better prepared them for teaching. For other programs that do not include as long of a student teaching experience, this may be an important component to consider that would better prepare their students. By identifying these components, programs across the country can strengthen their training and preparation by using the suggestions and experiences of their own graduates, as well as the trends and perceptions of first-year teachers throughout the United States.

There are many positive implications with regards to the CAEP policy and the potential for program and preparation improvement. However, as this case study demonstrates, the process of gathering the information needed to meet the requirements of the policy was time-consuming and required IRB approval, as well as consent and approval from the principals and first-year teachers involved. With that in mind, meeting the requirements of the policy provides important information; however, the processes for meeting all the requirements could be difficult for teacher preparation programs to create and sustain due to time and budget constraints (Bramberger, Rugh, & Mabry, 2012). There is not enough time to interview and observe every graduate from every program, so implementing a survey or conducting focus groups may be a better option. In addition, it may be difficult to provide evidence that first-year teachers are positively impacting student growth without access to the annual teacher evaluations, which are not public information and require IRB approval to obtain. While the aim of the policy is positive and has the potential for providing teacher preparation programs, policymakers, accrediting bodies, and educational researchers with valuable information regarding the preparation and experiences of first-year teachers, it may be challenging to collect all of the information required in a time and cost-effective manner.

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Appendix A

Beginning of the School Year

1. Tell me about the preparation you received from your teacher education program. What kind of classes did you take? What experience did you have in the classroom?
2. How well prepared do you feel for beginning your first year of teaching?
3. What are your areas of strength in the classroom?
4. What are areas in which you want to grow?
5. What have been the most challenging experiences you have faced so far this year?
6. What have been the biggest rewards?
7. What do you wish you would have known before you began your first year?
8. In what areas do you feel you've had the best preparation? In what areas do you feel like you needed more support?
9. What suggestions for change would you give your teacher education program so they can better prepare new teachers in the future?
10. In what ways will you seek out more support, guidance, and preparation as you continue this first year?
11. What is one thing you want new graduates to know about the first year of teaching?

Appendix B

After First Semester

1. You are a semester into your first year of teaching, how have your perceptions regarding the training you received changed? Are there areas were you feel the most prepared? Least prepared? Needing more preparation?
2. What have been the most challenging experiences you have faced so far this year?
3. What have been the biggest rewards?
4. What have been the biggest surprises?
5. For your program, you received a degree in a different area of emphasis and then took the licensure. How did that impact your preparation? How do you feel about having an area of emphasis outside of teaching? Has it made a positive impact on your teaching?
6. If you had the choice to major in elementary education as opposed to the program that you were involved in, would you have done so? Why or why not? What else do you think you would have received regarding preparation had you done so?

7. In what areas do you feel you've had the best preparation? In what areas do you feel like you needed more support?
8. In what ways have you sought out more support, guidance, and preparation this semester?
9. Tell me about the emphasis your school has on student achievement. What are your requirements as a teacher? (Teacher evaluations?) How well prepared were you to meet these expectations?
10. Teacher preparation programs are required to track their graduates and use student achievement data to show their positive impact on student learning. What is your response to this?

Appendix C

End of the Year

1. You are now at the end of your first year of teaching! As you reflect on your first year, what has been your greatest reward? Challenge?
2. Now that you are at the end of your first year, how have your perceptions regarding the training you received in your teacher preparation program changed? Are there areas were you feel the most prepared? Least prepared? Needing more preparation?
3. In what areas did you seek out the most support, guidance, training this year?
4. Tell me about your annual teacher evaluation process. How were observations incorporated? How was student achievement data included?
5. Did you feel prepared for impacting student growth this year? What did you learn in the process?
6. How have you grown and changed as a teacher this year?
7. What have been your greatest strengths this year? What are your areas of need and growth?
8. How have your perceptions of teaching changed this year?
9. What would you like your teacher preparation program to know after a year's experience?

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