

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON
MARYLAND'S ASSOCIATE OF ARTS IN
TEACHING DEGREE

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This dissertation study investigated the student perspective on Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree: the factors that affected their experience, especially with the transfer process, and whether their experiences differed by institution. Using a conceptual framework of social constructionism, viewpoints were gathered through focus groups and individual interviews of 18 community college students in their final semester before transferring to a Maryland university to complete their BA and teaching certification. In addition to focus groups and student interviews, this investigation included interviews with program coordinators, discussions with state administrators, observations of state meetings, and a review of program and state/local policy documents.

This study made contributions around issues of diversity, the Praxis Core Exam, online courses in ECE, and as the first study of the student perspective across multiple two-year institutions. It reports that participants had positive feedback about their teacher education programs but agreed on the need for more practical experience, especially regarding special education content. A clear concern about online coursework in ECE was also expressed. Factors affecting the student experience included misadvising and confusion around transfer that continued after moving to university programs. Administrators and faculty also acknowledged a number of challenges associated with advising, programming and implementation. Students highlighted differences between institutions but noted that most issues could be resolved through better communication, collaboration, and coordination.

This analysis of the student perspective provides a clearer picture of the obstacles and advancements experienced by preservice teachers pursuing an AAT in ECE/SpEd. Since student voices were largely absent from the research on the AAT, this study is useful to two-year programs working to improve retention and transfer, as well as universities working to support transfer students. More research is needed on internet-based classes in teacher education as well as proactive advising (a preemptive approach to working with students). Further investigation of individual programs, coordination, mandatory advising, and mentor programs is also warranted. Given the complexity of the transfer process, especially in EC programs, further research is needed beyond Maryland on the student experience and on potential solutions offered here.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON MARYLAND'S
ASSOCIATE OF ARTS IN TEACHING DEGREE

By

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CHAPTER 1

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ON MARYLAND'S AAT DEGREE

“In spite of a century of effort and good intentions, we have yet to insure that all children have safe homes and access to nutritious food, healthcare, and schools where they and their families are welcome. Although ECE [early childhood education] cannot resolve issues of our society, we can and must do more on behalf of more equitable education and socially just childhoods. We must also do things differently” (New, 2016, p. 14). As suggested by this quote, early childhood is viewed as a critical phase of human development. Over the years, there has been an increased policy focus in the United States on early childhood education as well as a strong global focus on the significance of a child’s early years on their future development. With the interest in harnessing the economic and academic benefits of quality early childhood programs has come a heightened focus on early childhood teacher qualifications and preservice training. We have begun and must continue to ‘do things differently’ in the college classrooms of future educators.

Early childhood is the developmental period from birth to age eight, and early childhood teacher education includes the preparation of teachers who work in a wide variety of early learning settings including public schools, private childcare, Head Start classrooms, and family childcare. Early childhood teacher education has been receiving more attention in the past two decades than it has at any time in the history of the field (Pruitt, Diez, Livesey, & Szymczak, 2017). There is a consensus among those who have a stake or interest in early childhood that work must be done to improve teacher preparation in early learning. In the past few years, a strong movement in the field of

early care and learning has been toward an increase in the quality of teacher preparation. Researchers continue to emphasize further education as a pathway to improved teacher quality; they stress the importance of growing the number of early care providers who have earned at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood (Jean-Sigur, Bell, & Kim, 2016). The results of this scholarship can be seen in jurisdictions such as Washington, DC, which passed new licensing regulations in December 2016 mandating more education for hundreds of childcare teachers. Within the next few years, directors of childcare centers will need to have a bachelor's degree, and childcare teachers an associate's degree. Although this deadline was extended after feedback from the community, the District is at the forefront of a national struggle to determine how best to care for and educate the youngest children (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 2017).

In reviewing the discourse on early childhood teacher education, a key issue that is repeatedly given attention is the need for meaningful collaborative work between two- and four-year higher education institutions to close gaps in preservice teacher preparation and support (Pruitt et al., 2017). Having worked for several years as an early childhood teacher educator at the community college level, I also observed this issue firsthand. On one side, I found that the two-year programs seemed uniquely valuable for students who needed more class schedule flexibility, lower costs, the ability to live at home, and less pressure to finish in a limited time-frame. Yet I also witnessed great struggles for many community college early childhood teacher education students to understand and reach the requirements for transfer; very few of my students went on to four-year schools to

finish their teacher training and certification during the seven years I worked in the program.

To address these struggles, different states across the country have developed varied efforts to improve the transfer process. Higher education programs are being called upon to develop more effective partnerships with one another, with those directly serving young children and families, and with providers of in-service professional development (Couse & Recchia, 2016). The first collaboration on transfer to be formalized in the United States was Maryland's Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree in 2001.

This study is designed to access the perspectives of students enrolled in Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education (ECE/SpEd) AAT program. The ECE/SpEd track was added to the existing secondary and elementary education associate degree options by the state in 2004. Given the growing need for teachers of young children and current efforts to review and revise the AAT in Maryland, research is needed that explores factors that have enhanced or obstructed the experience of preservice teachers at the community college level and reviews their experiences with the transfer process. Little research has been conducted on the ECE/SpEd program; only three studies with limited student participation have been carried out on the experiences of students in the AAT degree programs (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018).

According to Kates (2010), student voices are missing from the knowledge base: "This is unfortunate, because students' perspectives add depth and detail to the emergent understanding of how community college teacher education, transfer, and articulation

ought best be approached” (p. 21). Understanding community college students’ backgrounds and specific concerns can be instrumental in assisting these students in transferring and adjusting to four-year institutions (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Through focus groups and individual interviews with students, as well as analysis of documents from state policy and higher education institutions, this study also investigates how the student experience may differ by the community college and transfer institution the students attended.

The AAT policies in Maryland state that community colleges will offer the first two years of a four-year bachelor’s degree and teacher certification. Most public colleges and universities in the state have entered into AAT articulation agreements with the two-year institutions. A stated goal of the AAT is to contribute to a more diverse teacher pool (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 1995). It is important to look more closely at this goal here as it undergirds this research. The Maryland State Board of Education has declared minority teachers an area of shortage for more than a decade (Maryland Teacher Staffing Reports, 2016-18). Since 2001, there have been other efforts to increase the number of minority teachers. The Howard County Public School System, for example, has partnered with McDaniel College in Maryland to provide full scholarships to low-income students who commit to three years of employment in the Maryland school system after graduation. While many school systems are working to improve the diversity of their teacher corps, this program, Teachers for Tomorrow (T4T), is the first initiative of its kind. Its focus is innovative, not only working to increase the diversity of the teacher workforce overall, but also to provide access to college to talented students with limited resources (Howard County Public School System, 2017).

Twenty-five years ago, a special report was released on educating teachers for cultural diversity (Zeichner, 1993). The report presented as a major policy issue the need to help all teachers acquire the attitudes, knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to work effectively with a diverse student population. It noted that American students would be increasingly different in background from one another and from their teachers, and that the teaching corps was unlikely to change significantly. Those issues, noted 25 years ago, remain or have intensified today: "...the problem of educating teachers for diversity, in most instances, will continue to be one of educating white, monolingual, and mostly female teacher education students during preservice teacher education in college and university settings to teach diverse learners effectively" (Zeichner, 1993, p. 1). Latino, Asian, and multiracial/ multiethnic populations are expected to grow further; children of immigrant families will most likely make up the majority of children under age 5 by 2050 (Jean-Sigur et al., 2016). While the number of young children from diverse immigrant families will continue to get larger in childcare and early learning environments, teachers and teacher candidates do not necessarily feel prepared to work with these diverse populations. According to researchers, additional information regarding diversity needs to be a part of preparation programs for early childhood teachers (Jean-Sigur et al., 2016).

From his review of the literature, Zeichner (1993) notes two crucial attributes of teachers who work with students of all backgrounds: the desire and ability of teachers to learn about the special circumstances of their own students and their communities, and the ability to take this knowledge into account in their teaching. With the understanding of the impactful role of families in early childhood learning settings, this connection to a

student's culture and background seems especially important in the early years (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2009a). Also important is the opportunity for preservice teachers to share their own circumstances and connect with their own experiences. The goal of this investigation -- accessing the student perspective on ECE preservice teacher preparation -- provides a nuanced picture of the experience in transfer preparation and process as well as student challenges and supports. The student perspectives also point out differences in teacher preparation at the two-year and four-year institutions in Maryland. This exploration provides an opportunity for preservice educators to share their outlook on their coursework and experiences as preparation for classroom teaching.

This investigation was developed in response to several areas of consequence to the field. With a large number of teachers beginning their training at the community college level, a smooth transition from two-year to four-year institutions can help them complete that training and become teachers-of-record in classrooms in the state. Another area of consequence this study addresses is the problems and gaps in the preparation and support of future early childhood educators. Also, given the critical nature of early learning and complex pathways to training for teachers of young children, focusing on the AAT in ECE/SpEd is vital to supporting teachers in their important role in children's lives.

This research is also in response to the rich diversity of children in Maryland. Research has shown that children and their families benefit from teachers who are sensitive to their widely varying backgrounds, strengths and needs (Darragh Ernst, Latham, & Bernoteit, 2017). The research supports the belief that the field of early

childhood education needs to develop a workforce that reflects and supports the diversity of children and families in schools and communities (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015). Ryan and Gibson (2016) note that scholars argue for the addition of knowledge in ECE teacher preparation classrooms that moves preservice teachers closer to understanding themselves and their experiences and how their identities inform and impact their relationships with their students. This opportunity for preservice teachers to share their experiences and perspectives adds to our understanding about diversifying the teaching field and strengthening the process of teacher preparation.

Overview of Study Context

In this investigation of the perspective of early childhood preservice teachers who plan to earn an AAT degree, teacher education is an important context to consider. Within that context, the training of teachers for early childhood classrooms is particularly important. The State of Maryland's AAT is a groundbreaking effort in teacher preparation, but transfer concerns when moving from two-year to four-year program and environment need to be better understood and addressed. The student perspective has been almost absent from the research on teacher preparation at community colleges. It has great value, however, in helping educators, administrators and policy makers know what works and why: "Having an incomplete picture of student pathways through college may lead analysts to draw unsupported conclusions... These issues can and should be remedied by current and future generations of researchers" (Goldrick-Rab, 2010, p. 458). Goldrick-Rab calls for interdisciplinary methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to further investigate the public two-year college programs. She notes that community

colleges are being given more attention in public policy circles, making this an opportune time for researchers to increase their focus on these programs.

History of Preservice Teacher Training

The development of teacher training in the United States is a central backdrop on which this study was built. There is great variation in how teachers are trained from state to state, and that lack of uniformity was there from the early days of public education, since its inception in the beginning of the 19th century. Children were first taught by a wide variety of adults, in a complex web of school environments. In the early 1800s, the teacher could be anyone, from a parent to a preacher to a town official or a college professor (Labaree, 2008). In the 1830s, the common schools were established, and teachers became public employees appointed by a school board. Educational requirements were simple for educators at the time; they were merely required to have completed the level of schooling comparable to that which they were hired to teach (Labaree, 2008). The first effort to establish a system of formal training for teachers came with the development of the common school system. A sharp increase in the demand for teachers arose with the adoption of the common school model.

The most prominent form of teacher training was the state normal school, the first of which opened in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1839. The state normal school, which started out at the level of a high school, was a professional program for future teachers. The curriculum was a mix of liberal arts courses, which gave prospective teachers the grounding in subject matter they had not received in their earlier education, and professional courses, which gave them grounding in the art of teaching. In the eyes of reformers like Horace Mann, the primary aim of the state normal school was to prepare a

group of well-educated and professionally skilled teachers who could serve as the model for public school teachers throughout the country (Labaree, 2008).

For much of their history, community and junior colleges have played an important role in teacher training. In 1930, 65% of junior colleges offered courses in teacher education, more than in other vocational fields. During these early years of the twentieth century, many teachers completed all of their training at a community college (Gerdeman, 2001). Unlike today, when most teaching positions in public schools require the equivalent of a four-year university degree and state certification, teaching certificates from junior colleges at that time often met state teaching requirements. Community colleges were in many cases considered to be teacher-training institutions. Today, two-year institutions continue to play a significant role in preparing educators. They offer a broad range of coursework options for students interested in early childhood, elementary, and secondary education, including courses in education, child development, and academic subjects, as well as one-year professional certificates, terminal two-year degrees, and transfer degrees as part of four-year teacher education and certification requirements.

Preservice teacher education in the United States has been the subject of analysis and critical review from various sectors, including the federal government, state and local jurisdictions, think-tanks and nonprofits, as well as by school administrators and practitioners themselves. With the wide range of perspectives, viewpoints, and foci, the American Educational Research Association's Panel on Research and Teacher Education recommended a new research agenda for teacher education and outlined research genres

and processes that point to new directions and useful findings for policy and practice (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009):

Perhaps most importantly, we need studies from differing paradigmatic and epistemological perspectives that examine the links between and among teacher preparation contexts for learning, what teacher candidates actually learn, how their learning is played out in practice in K– 12 schools and classrooms, and how this influences pupils’ learning— all within the context of varying resource allocation, schools, communities, and programs. (p. 2)

This call-to-action undergirds this exploration of teacher preparation for students who start at a two-year college and transfer to a four-year institution to complete their degree and certification.

Community College Role in Teacher Education

Before looking at early childhood teacher education at the community college level specifically, we turn to the community college population in general for a wider perspective. Community colleges are a valuable resource for a large percentage of higher education students; 41% of undergraduates attend community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Also, nearly half of students who are working toward a four-year degree have indicated they have some experience at a two-year college (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). Transfer has continued to serve as an important student pathway in the State of Maryland’s postsecondary education system. In FY14, a total of 9,323 associate’s degrees were awarded in transfer programs at Maryland community colleges, including teacher education. This represented an increase of 4% over transfer program degree numbers from the previous year and 8% over FY12

(Maryland Higher Education Commission [MHEC], 2014). Germane to this investigation, research over the past 30 years indicates there are disadvantages for community college students both in the transfer process and in earning a bachelor's degree when compared with similar students who started their higher education pursuit directly at the university level (Crisp, Carales, & Núñez, 2016). Community college students may take courses that are not accepted at the four-year schools or may miss taking major requirements at the two-year institution before transfer. These difficulties contribute to a longer road to graduation as well as a lower rate of graduation in community college students (Doyle, 2006).

If we look at those students who are on the pathway to teacher certification in Maryland, however, the story is more promising. The policies state that community college students who complete an articulated degree such as the Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) are guaranteed full junior standing and acceptance at one of 20 four-year colleges and universities in the state with approved teacher education programs (Floyd & Walker, 2003). Recent data show that Maryland students in the AAT program graduate and transfer at a higher rate than students in other two-year programs (MHEC, 2014). This information provided incentive to further investigate the AAT, suggesting how we might learn from and support its continued development.

More research is warranted into community college teacher preparation and transfer degree programs given the need for well-trained educators, the complexity of the teaching and learning environment, and the increasing diversity in the early childhood student population with the lack of diversity in the teaching staff. While solid research has been conducted on community college students in teacher education (Floyd &

Walker, 2003; Gerdeman, 2001; Ignash & Slotnick, 2007), there are large gaps in understanding how to support them, and scholars continue to call for additional research to understand the characteristics, experiences, and behaviors of community college students that contribute to successful outcomes (Crisp et al., 2016). Ryan and Gibson (2016) emphasize that research concerning the student perspective is valuable for providing an understanding of those individual experiences in action.

Within this context, it is useful to understand how the AAT came about. Efforts to clarify student pathways in teacher education were strengthened in 2001 when Maryland introduced the Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) degree. It is a voluntary collaboration between two-year and four-year teacher education deans and directors as well as arts and sciences faculty. A looming shortage of certified teachers was a motivating factor moving education leaders to action (MHEC, 1995). These leaders also recognized the state community colleges as a source of student diversity. Community colleges represent a largely untapped source of diverse individuals to potentially enter the profession of teaching (MHEC, 1995).

The AAT was created as an outcomes-based transfer program: it requires a minimum 2.75 cumulative GPA and a satisfactory score on Praxis Core Basic Skills, SAT or ACT exams. The policies state that the degree transfers as a block package to any four-year college or university in the state (Hollander, 2010). Various stakeholders built the different teacher education tracks for these programs. The outcomes and standards for the AAT in early childhood education, for example, were originally prepared by the Consortium of Maryland Early Childhood Faculty and Administrators. The Consortium was also responsible for recommending combining General Education

and Special Education tracks for the ECE AAT; this change enabled an AAT pathway for community college students with the goal of special education certification. Institutions granting the degree have the final word on degree requirements, while each faculty member determines their own curriculum based on common outcomes. Faculty and academic administrators currently serve on oversight councils and continuous review committees for the AAT degrees to ensure that the programs are updated appropriately (University System of Maryland, 2016).

The AAT was created as a block transfer in which the four-year schools reserve spots for students who have earned an AAT, but the student still has to be admitted to the four-year school. All 16 community colleges in Maryland offer the AAT in elementary education and all but one now have the AAT in Early Childhood Education/Special Education. Recent data collected from the two-year institutions give a sense of the scope of these programs: there were 1,836 full-time and 2,593 part-time students in the 16 community college teacher transfer programs in Maryland in 2016 (Maryland Association of Community Colleges, 2017). According to the University System of Maryland (Lee, 2018), students earning the AAT would meet all requirements for transfer to the corresponding baccalaureate teacher education program. The university does not carry out a course-by-course review, but community college students still need to meet the same degree requirements as native students at the receiving institution. For example, the introduction to special education course taken at the community college is not sufficient to meet all special education or inclusion course requirements for four-year teacher education programs. If a student completes the AAT and is accepted for transfer to the

University of Maryland, College Park, they still need to complete an additional lower-level special education course requirement (Cornell-DeMoss, 2018).

History of Early Childhood Education and Teacher Education

Teacher education program content differs based on the level of students to be taught, as well as the subject-matter expertise required. There is variation within early childhood teacher education as well. Is the preservice teacher planning to work in a public school K-3 setting, a Pre-Kindergarten classroom, or a childcare environment? A review of the history of early childhood education helps explain how this variation developed.

Prior to the founding of the very first kindergarten by Freidrich Froebel in Blankenburgh, Germany in 1837, children under the age of seven did not attend school. Less than 40 years after that first school, English-speaking private and public kindergartens were established in Canada and the United States. Later in the 20th century, as women entered the workforce in large numbers, care and education for children in the years before kindergarten grew in importance (Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, 2008). Research indicated that when young children were provided high-quality instruction, they developed skills in the academic, language, and social areas (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). However, research also demonstrated that low-quality ECE programs could contribute to poor developmental outcomes for children (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). In 1965, Lady Bird Johnson held a tea at the White House to announce federal funding for preschool classes which became known as Head Start. This national program “brought into focus the idea of childcare and early education as a public responsibility and entitlement” (Lascarides & Hintz,

2011, p. xv). In recent years, there has been real growth in the support for public preschool for all children. Forty-three states, plus the District of Columbia, provide publicly-funded preschool to three- and four-year-olds. States enrolled almost 1.58 million children in state-funded preschool, including one-third of 4-year-olds in the country. Enrollment of 3-year-olds was nearly 5.7% (National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], 2016).

Soon after the founding of kindergarten, the first teacher-training program for kindergartners was developed in 1780 in Pennsylvania. Steps continued towards building the profession of early childhood education and teacher preparation including the founding of the National Committee on Nursery Schools in 1925. This grew to become the membership organization for the field, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). A critical role for NAEYC is providing recognition for higher education teacher preparation programs. Big questions remain about the basic qualifications necessary for early childhood educators, however. In a 2009 Policy Report by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment based at the University of California, Berkeley, the authors compare the teacher preparation requirements in the K-12 system to that in the early childhood education system. In short, they found a wide variety of standards with each state setting its own qualifications. They found no common baseline of preservice preparation in early childhood education. The study recommends federal leadership in funding for research that examines the critical and most effective elements of early childhood education teacher preparation (Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009). This investigation addresses the need for more

research on preparing early childhood educators by accessing the perspectives of those students who start at the community college level.

From Two-Year to Four-Year Institution: Transfer Issues for ECE Students

As indicated above and developed in the next chapter, transfer between two- and four-year programs presents a hurdle for many AAT students. Articulation agreements and policies are an issue for all transfer degrees across subject areas, institutions, and states. Adding to the complexity is the simultaneous offering of both transfer and non-transfer degrees. While there are differences in requirements between individual states, generally graduates with an associate of arts in early childhood education (AAS) degree (non-transfer) have been fully qualified for certification as directors or senior staff members of childcare programs. They are also able to work as paraprofessionals in public schools, in hospital child-life programs, and as teachers or assistant teachers in several federal childcare programs. These requirements are being strengthened, and many states now require a four-year degree for center directors and paraprofessionals (Cho & Couse, 2008). Individuals with an AAS, however, were never able to work as a classroom teacher in a public school. Some courses that meet AAS requirements, such as childcare administration and school-age childcare, are not accepted as part of the AAT articulation agreement. This would mean a loss of credits for those courses necessary for employment in childcare centers since they are then not included in the four-year degree.

Another challenge in the ECE teacher curriculum has been difficulty in meeting rigorous math and science requirements; students who turn to ECE do not necessarily expect multiple semester math and science courses. Success in these courses is critical given that ECE reaches up to third grade where, developmentally, many children are

ready for more advanced logical reasoning and analysis skills. A final issue with ECE programs is a lack of choice in transfer schools; due to financial constraints, a large number of students are limited to four-year programs within their state which may or may not fit their needs and goals (MHEC, 2015). For instance, many students who earn an AAT from Montgomery College in suburban Maryland reside near Washington, DC. Trinity Washington University would be a convenient choice for those future educators, but the degree does not seamlessly transfer to programs out-of-state.

Rationale for the Study

Many college students across the country begin their studies at two-year institutions. To reiterate, in 2017, 41% of undergraduate students attended public and private two-year colleges. Of full-time undergraduates in 2015, 24% attended community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). These statistics are similar for preservice teachers starting at two-year institutions: more than 50% of teachers attended a community college for at least part of their education, and 20% of teachers began their careers in community college (NCES, 2015). Further, it has been estimated that four out of ten teachers have completed some or all of their math and science course work at a community college (Bragg, 1999). In Maryland, beginning preservice training at a community college is also a common choice.¹ At Montgomery College, for example, Early Childhood Teacher Education ranks in the list of top 20 programs by number of students who graduate and transfer (Montgomery College, 2017). The AAT degree is a key piece for many on the road to teacher certification and, therefore, is part of the call to professionalize teacher training pathways. This study

¹ Statistics on teacher education transfer pathways from the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center are not yet available.

provides an understanding of how and to what extent requirements are made clear to students at the various two-year programs where they start and at the four-year schools to which they transfer. Supporting smooth transitions and timely graduation for preservice teachers is a key goal of this study.

Another motivation to study the AAT degree is the need to diversify the teacher pool. Approximately 50% of Black and Hispanic students begin their studies at a two-year public college, compared to 35.6% of White students and 37.8% of Asian students (Shapiro et al., 2017). Also, as outlined in the recent Kirwan Commission Preliminary Report (2018), there is a shortage of teachers from diverse racial backgrounds in Maryland. The Commission believes, and evidence shows, that some school children respond better to and are inspired by a teacher who “looks like me” (p. 3). Numerous studies have also shown the importance of children having teachers who share similar characteristics and cultures (Perkins & Arvidson, 2016; Villegas & Lucas, 2009; Zeichner, 1993). Classroom teachers in the United States do not represent the varied characteristics of the classroom population, however. This discrepancy sends a negative message about opportunity, achievement, and knowledge not only to Black and Hispanic public-school children, but also to potential teachers. Therefore, utilizing community colleges for preservice teacher education programs can impact the number of Blacks and Hispanics entering university-based teacher education programs (Perkins & Arvidson, 2016). Given Maryland’s rapidly diversifying student demographics and the fact that only 25% of Maryland’s teachers are underrepresented minorities (Maryland Teacher Staffing Reports, 2016-18), the State needs to focus efforts on recruiting a more diverse high-quality teaching workforce. The state community colleges are a source of student

diversity and understanding the circumstances of diverse students working through the AAT program can help inform program and policy recommendations.

The primary reason for this study's specific focus on Maryland's AAT program in Early Childhood Education/Special Education is the critical nature of early learning. Research points to the significance of learning in the early years but there is great disparity in early learning opportunities across the United States (LaParo et al. 2009). Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, and Thornburg (2009) note that not all students have access to high-quality programs. They explore a striking variability across preschool settings where "too many children and families [are] falling through too many cracks and seams at too many levels" (p. 49). Further, there is a consensus among those who have a stake or interest in early childhood that work must be done to improve teacher preparation in early learning. Researchers continue to emphasize further education as a pathway to improved teacher quality; they stress the importance of increasing the number of early care providers who have earned at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood (Jean-Sigur, Bell, & Kim, 2016). This study of the AAT is a step toward that goal.

Research on the ECE/SpEd AAT is especially crucial at this time in the state of Maryland, as is understanding how to support transfer students in completing teacher certification. The Kirwan Commission (2018) has called for universal prekindergarten education there, a goal that will require a significant increase in the number of qualified early childhood teachers. Maryland does not currently offer universal education for 4-year-olds, and the Commission calls for expanding programs so that all 4-year-olds, regardless of income, will have a chance to enroll in a quality full-day program. Further, there are multiple pathways to teaching young children, and multiple degree and

certificate options. The transfer process between 2- and 4-year institutions itself can pose difficulties, but the different pathways to a career in early childhood education make implementation of the AAT in ECE/SpEd particularly challenging. With the exception of public school teachers and Head Start, there is no universal policy regarding who is eligible to teach young children in private childcare centers and family childcare facilities. Each state identifies minimum preservice qualifications for early childhood teaching staff as a part of program licensing regulations (Cho & Couse, 2008). Due to the “decentralized and fragmented nature” (p. 16) of the early learning system throughout the U.S., state officials across the country have difficulty in coordinating policy efforts, with great variation in the training of EC teachers. In-depth information from programs and students in one state can shed light on these issues.

The articulation agreements in Maryland between the community colleges and universities were put in place to help make transfer seamless. However, informal input I gathered from students over the past several years suggested that is not always the case. Often students took courses that were not required of the AAT. This left students frustrated due to extra time and cost to completion. Because of the limited research on the student experience, gathering their perspective helped clarify the cause of confusion and shed light on difficulties they had in adjusting to the university environment and academics. In their investigation of the experiences of early childhood preservice teachers of color, Cheruvu, Souto-Manning, Lenci, and Chin-Calubaquib (2015) emphasize the lack of literature on this population of future educators.

Since student voices are nearly absent from the research on the AAT in Maryland, this study should be useful to two-year programs working to improve retention and

transfer. Given the growing need for early childhood educators with four-year degrees, understanding their specific circumstances can help shape program and policy changes. With movement toward increased academic requirements for early childhood educators, students who complete the AAT may not be marketable in their identified profession without a bachelor's degree and teacher certification. It is particularly prudent for research to target ECE/SpEd AAT students and their perspective.

Current work on improving the AAT makes this input timely: These findings can be useful to the deliberations of Maryland's AAT Oversight Council. As the Council meets and plans for improving the general transfer climate and reevaluates each of the AAT programs, knowledge and insight from current students can help clarify and address issues important to policy building and program improvement. As noted earlier, in the 18 years since the introduction of the AAT policies in Maryland, few scholarly articles have been written about the program and only a few studies have included the voices and experiences of students who participated in it (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018).

Key Elements of the Study

This study aimed to address one main question: What is the student perspective on Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education (ECE/SpEd) AAT program? Three sub-questions guided this investigation:

- What factors have enhanced or obstructed their experience?
- What is their experience with the transfer process?
- Does their experience differ by the community college they attended and/or the transfer institution, and if so, how?

To address these questions, I conducted focus groups and individual interviews with students from four community colleges in the state.² These community colleges represent the two largest metropolitan areas in Maryland as well as the largest teacher preparation programs. They are also a varied sampling of the Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) programs, and students from these schools transfer to a number of different state universities. In order to understand the students' transfer experiences, I interviewed them in both their last semester at the community college and early in their first semester after transfer to the four-year institution.

A review of community college teacher education programs and participants exposed a gap in the literature where little work has been done to explore the Maryland AAT program and its results. As contextual background for the study, an in-depth review of the literature about Maryland's AAT program was conducted. This included collecting sources and background information from higher education administration officials in the state as well as reviewing documents from higher education institutions and attending state policy meetings. For this investigation, inquiries were made about a broad-range of student experiences from individuals who planned to graduate with the AAT degree from a community college in the state.

Preservice teachers who are studying to be early childhood educators were the focus of this study. The Early Childhood Education/Early Childhood Special Education AAT Degree in Maryland were created to prepare students to teach children in grades PreK to Three. Focus groups were held with students from four of the 16 community

² See Chapter 3 for information on why this number dropped from the original six.

colleges in the state; these participants transferred to six different four-year institutions. It was instructive to collect perspectives on how students from different programs planned for and attempted to make successful transfer to different universities and to look at how they coped with the initial transition. This research did not include students who did not plan to transfer since the focus here was on issues of transfer in the preparation of students to complete a bachelor's degree and teacher certification.

The four community colleges were chosen to represent a variety of programs in the state and a variety of four-year universities to which students most often transfer. These included urban and suburban campuses, small and large, those that are minority-majority as well as less diverse, and those schools with well-developed partnerships and alternately those whose work with partner institutions is less clear-cut. The institutions are also within relatively close driving distance to make separate focus groups (two were held with groups from the largest community college) and individual interviews feasible. To add further detail and depth to the understanding of the different pathways, informal discussions with academic advisors at each institution were held to clarify each institution's understanding of the AAT requirements and transfer process. Any feedback the advisors received from students was also drawn on to make institutional comparisons. Documents provided to advisors as well as students were also collected and reviewed, such as policy statements, briefing documents, course catalogues, and training materials.

The perspectives of students from various teacher education programs in the state of Maryland were central to this research. The focus groups consisted of students from the same community colleges to determine if group experiences differed based on their AAT program. Contact was made with coordinators of the early childhood programs at

each of the four community colleges and six universities to obtain information about students and programs and to assist with the logistics of the investigation. Recruiting visits to a teacher education course required of graduating students were arranged and made on some campuses. The research was briefly described and consent forms provided for students to volunteer to participate. Parker and Tritter (2006) point out that little attention has been paid to the key phase of recruitment in focus group methods. Face-to-face recruitment may be more effective than impersonal email messages sent outlining the proposed plans. For this study, the recruitment and selection of research participants provided the opportunity to research a broad range of viewpoints and experiences, as well as gather information on a variety of community college and four-year programs.

Focus groups were used as a starting point to collect the student perspective. It was not expected that all AAT students preparing to graduate from the four two-year programs would participate in the study. Also, with consideration to optimal focus group size and researcher time constraints, the number of student participants in each group was planned to range in size from four to ten. Due to difficulties in reaching students and arranging group meetings, the size of the focus groups ranged from three to five. After multiple cancelled group meetings, one focus group ended up as three individual interviews. There was value, however, in bringing together a group of preservice teachers to discuss and share their unique experiences. Just as these future educators are learning to do in their future classrooms, the researcher used techniques to bring the group together and create a safe environment for sharing and “synergy” (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 29). Given the complexity of teacher education transfer processes and the potential for a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences in the participants, the focus group

element of this study provided substantive content from individuals as well as from the interactions between respondents themselves.

Focus group meetings and follow-up interviews took place in the spring and summer semester 2018, as students prepared to graduate from community college and transfer to a four-year institution. To gather more detailed and personal information from the participants, as well as parse the interactions amongst participants, interviews were also conducted with each consenting member of the five groups after the focus group meetings. A second round of individual interviews was conducted in the fall of 2018 with those students who transferred, to investigate their transition from two-year college to university. As Seidman (2012) indicates, interviews are meaningful ways to gather individual stories and often we learn more deeply about individual experiences.

Since the number of graduates from AAT programs varies greatly by campus, the precise number of students who would participate in the interviews was unknown. Since the goal for number of participants per college was between 4 and 10, with six colleges, it was estimated that there could be approximately 50 students in this study. As explained in Chapter 3, the final numbers were smaller: 18 participants from four community colleges. These interviews with preservice teachers were key to further understanding how they interpreted their experience with Maryland's AAT program and transfer. Kvale (1996) describes the topic of the qualitative research interview as "the lived world of the subjects and their relation to it" (p. 29), and the purpose as a description and understanding of "the central themes the subjects experience and live toward" (p. 30). These qualitative research interviews met the goal of describing and understanding the meanings of central themes discussed in the focus group sessions, as well as gathering

new information after the students transferred to 4-year institutions. This study made contributions around issues of diversity, the Praxis Core Exam, online courses in ECE, and as the first study of the student perspective across multiple two-year institutions.

Conclusion

This study addresses a lack of research on the perspectives of early childhood teacher education students. Some large-scale survey studies of early childhood teacher education programs have been conducted using self-reports of program administrators along with document examination. Ryan and Gibson (2016) point out, however, that these research efforts do not include insights into how the programs function in action nor how the students experience them. Expectations are high for building a strong early and high-quality childhood education workforce but the schools and institutions that are tasked with training future teachers do not necessarily place high value on this role (Ryan & Gibson, 2016). Given the increased attention on early childhood education, more scrutiny must be placed on preservice teacher preparation programs:

The breadth of content needed by future early childhood educators, the many settings in which they will work, and the comprehensive nature of the outcomes we hope to influence in young children and their families, make the task more daunting, yet critically important. Collective efforts across disciplines and methodological boundaries are likely to produce the kind of knowledge needed to ensure the most effective approaches to ECTE at all levels and in all domains.

(Horm, Hyson, & Winton, 2013, p. 108)

The next chapter reviews the literature pertinent to this proposed investigation. There are relatively few studies specific to the AAT, but there is abundant research on

areas closely related to these specific teacher education programs. The following literature review contains a discussion of teacher preparation in the United States, including the role of the community college and the development and significance of the AAT degree program. Also in Chapter Two is a review of early childhood teacher preparation, including the importance of early childhood education, its unique challenges, and the current push for increased workforce training. Finally, the literature review includes an analysis of higher education policy implementation as well as an examination of community college transfer issues.

Chapter Three provides a detailed discussion of the methodology for this proposed study, including a discussion of both constructivism and social constructionism. This is followed by description of the qualitative approach with information about using a questionnaire, focus groups, and individual interviews. The chapter also includes a discussion of data analysis and coding methods as well as issues of validity and reliability, ending with a discussion of limitations in the proposed approach. Chapter Four presents the findings related to each research question, including the specifics of the data collected and analysis of that data. Chapter Five reviews the major findings of this study in light of their implications for action and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 2016, a panel was created by the State of Maryland with the responsibility of reshaping the state's school systems. The goal was to move the state's education system from adequate to best-performing internationally. This panel, also known as the Kirwan Commission, released its 2019 Interim Report after significant delays and decisions not to offer spending formulas for how to pay for the recommendations. The Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education presented ideas to the General Assembly and Gov. Larry Hogan (R) to consider during the 2019 legislative session. The recommendations included broadly expanding early-childhood education, sharply increasing teacher pay and greatly boosting spending on special education.

On Friday, March 14, 2019, the Maryland House approved a budget for FY 2020 and FY 2021 that aligned with the Kirwan Commission's recommendations. Also on March 14, the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee took final action on its version of the budget, including the components of the Kirwan funding plan for FY 2020 and FY 2021. The work of the Commission is a relevant backdrop to this study of the preparation of early childhood educators. For instance, the data presented noted that Maryland faces significant teacher shortages and that 60% of teachers are recruited from outside Maryland. Importantly, the Commission recommended investing in early childhood education, including free, high quality full-day pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds from families living below the federal poverty level. The Commission also pointed out the need to elevate the rigor of teacher preparation programs (Maryland Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, 2019).

This current political climate reinforces the importance of studying the AAT in Early Childhood Education: the critical nature of early learning. Research should continue to be carried out on early childhood preservice teachers specifically rather than preservice teachers in general due to the significance of learning in the early years and the great disparity in early learning opportunities for children. For example, research shows the positive effects of high-quality pre-K: “We conclude that some positive effects of a high-quality pre-K program are discernible as late as middle school” (Gormley, Phillips, & Anderson, 2017, p. 1). Further, there is consensus among those who have a stake or interest in early childhood that work must be done to improve teacher preparation in early learning. The needs of children in early learning classrooms are complex, and disparities exist in opportunities and quality. Researchers continue to emphasize further education as a pathway to improved teacher quality; they stress the importance of growing the number of early care providers who have earned at least a bachelor’s degree in early childhood (Jean-Sigur, Bell, & Kim, 2016). This study of the AAT is a step toward that goal.

Alongside the work of the Kirwan Commission, the state of Maryland has recently emphasized the significance of community colleges in educating citizens. Maryland’s Governor, Larry Hogan, approved in May 2018 the Maryland Community College Promise Scholarships program and pledged to appropriate \$15 million in FY2020, and each year thereafter. The College Promise Movement “is a commitment to fund a college education for every eligible student, advancing on the path to earn a degree, a certificate, and/or credits that transfer to a four-year university, starting in America’s community colleges... It’s a promise to make the first two years of

community college – at a minimum – as universal, free, and accessible as public high school has been in the 20th Century” (College Promise Campaign 2017-18 Annual Report). These scholarships will help eligible students afford community college. At the same time, Hogan approved a grant program to help eligible students complete their college degrees, at both two-year and four-year institutions. It is in this environment of a strong push for college access and a strong fight against student debt that this research aimed to gather the perspective of community college students.

A review of the literature indicated the need to investigate how community college Early Childhood Education students prepare for transfer and how the receiving institutions provide meaningful support to transfer students in teacher education. Pertinent literature was identified through the search databases JSTOR, SAGE, ProQuest Education Journals, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. Three keyword search groups were used to focus on the research questions: teacher education, early childhood, and policy implementation. The teacher education topic examination included terms such as teacher preparation, community college teacher education, teacher education transfer students, two-year teacher preparation programs, and student perspective of community college teacher education. Search topics for the early childhood stream included early childhood teacher education, student perspective of early childhood teacher education, early childhood community college, early childhood transfer programs, and child development community college. The third search area, policy implementation, included these terms: higher education policy, implementation studies, policy variation in higher education, and transfer articulation policy. To keep the review manageable, sources were mostly limited to publications after the year 2000. Seminal works that were published earlier, however,

were also included. Reference lists from works about teacher education and early childhood were reviewed, which provided additional applicable resources on the topic. Resources included federal, state, and non-profit organization reports, professional association journals, books, and dissertations, all of which provided invaluable information related to this study of Maryland's AAT in ECE.

To situate this examination of early childhood preservice teachers' perspectives on their experiences in Maryland's Associate of Arts in Teaching (AAT) programs, this review of the literature starts with an analysis of teacher preparation in the United States, both in general and in two-year institutions. Next, background is provided on early childhood, both as a period of development and a specific field of teacher education. Closing out the review is an examination of the literature on policy implementation in higher education as this area of scholarship has implications for the examination of the development, growth, and evaluation of Maryland's Associate of Arts degree in early childhood teacher education.

Teacher Preparation in the United States

Prior to the development of university-based teacher preparation programs, most people in the United States did not believe in the necessity of a college education for elementary or high school teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1989). Most major, research universities also did not recognize the value of housing teacher education departments or colleges of education. The road to our current structure of preservice educator programs was influenced by three traditions, according to Feiman-Nemser (1989). First, the normal school tradition played the role of preparing elementary and early childhood teachers. Second, the liberal arts tradition was behind the training of secondary teachers in liberal

arts colleges. Finally, modern universities, through the practice of professionalization, sought to prepare educational leaders. As noted in Chapter One, community and junior colleges also grew to play an important role in teacher training, with many teachers completing their training in two-year institutions. Before most states began requiring a bachelor's degree along with certification in the 1960s, a two-year degree was sufficient to meet state regulations for all teachers (Townsend, 2007). Since community colleges continue to play an important part in teacher education, a further discussion of their role is useful here.

Community College Role in Teacher Education

Community colleges continue to play an essential and growing role in the preparation and professional development of teachers. By the 1960s, two-year institutions were offering an associate degree specific to teacher education in response to the increasing need for pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers in the United States. These educator preparation programs were and still are accessible and affordable; their placement in local colleges enables the easy establishment of relationships with school districts and universities. With their diverse student bodies that represent local populations, community colleges prepare and support teacher candidates from a wide-range of backgrounds and education levels. As noted earlier, community colleges enroll more than 40 percent of all undergraduates as well as the highest proportion of students of color in higher education (Townsend & Ignash, 2003). These numbers have held steady; of students who first enrolled in fall 2010, 49 percent of Black students and 51 percent of Hispanic students started at a two-year public college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017). Therefore, it is likely that two-year institutions will

continue to play an important role for students from minority groups. In addition, many pre-K–12 teachers are typically the first in their families to attend college, and many community college students are first-generation college students (Townsend & Ignash, 2003). With the strong ties community colleges often have to local high schools, they are well-placed to introduce potential future teachers to the field of education.

Barriers and Benefits to Two-Year Teacher Preparation Programs

Before moving on to further discuss the AAT program specifically, I review the potential barriers to completing a preservice teacher program at a two-year college that led to the development of the various AAT degrees and refinement of articulation agreements. Roksa and Keith (2008) examined the impact of state-legislated articulation policies on students' credit hours, time to degree, and completion of bachelor's degrees. The authors used postsecondary transcript data from the National Education Longitudinal Study; they also used student-level data to examine the outcomes after transfer. Roksa and Keith found that required courses completed at the community college were not accepted and had to be retaken at the new institution. This led to significant increase in time to graduate, a greater financial burden, and therefore, a larger number of non-completers. Advising at the two-year and four-year institutions was not coordinated, causing significant confusion, frustration, and often delays to graduation as well as failure to transfer (Roksa & Keith, 2008). Their analysis found that articulation policies do not appear to be associated with decreasing the number of credits needed to complete a bachelor's degree, the time to a bachelor's degree nor the probability of earning that degree. There was great variation, however, among states that did or did not have those

policies. They emphasize that dedicating resources to adequate counseling and transfer advising requires much attention in future research and policy development.

Goldrick-Rab (2010) highlighted other barriers to community college student success. The author reviewed studies from a 25-year period, examining three levels of interactions: how these institutions fit in the larger society, the institutional practices of individual two-year colleges, and the social, economic and academic attributes of their students. A search of databases by the author resulted in more than 3,000 studies since 1985; the examination was culled to 300. The purpose of this review was to clarify areas of struggle faced by community colleges. Specifically, what are barriers to increasing degree achievement among community college students? This multi-level analysis found many factors that affect community college success. For example, on the macro-level, issues such as financial aid and dependence on state and local funds were highlighted. Institutional practices such as the role of faculty and disseminating informational requirements (advising) also impacted success. The author noted a lack of coordination among instructors (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). If students are not prepared properly at the two-year colleges for the upcoming courses at the university-level, their success would be compromised. Finally, issues related to academic challenges, attendance, and social hurdles were found to affect student achievement.

But there are also benefits to starting teacher training at a two-year institution. A clear savings in tuition is a motivation for many students to begin their studies at a community college as is the flexibility of course offerings to accommodate working students and students who are parents. Attending school in one's community and the savings of continuing to live at home also make two-year college programs more

manageable for many students: “In-state tuition and fees at a community college are considerably cheaper than at a public 4-year college, averaging US\$2,963 versus US\$8,244 in nationwide data, and by commuting from home to a community college a student also can avoid the average US\$8,549 cost of room and board at a residential college” (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015, p. 70). Further, lower level courses at large universities can often host more than one hundred students or more, whereas community colleges strive to maintain small numbers (20 to 30) and provide more faculty-student interaction (Kates, 2010; Younger, 2009). Kates conducted interviews of twenty community college graduates who transferred to a four-year college to complete their teacher education degree. These students’ accounts paint clear differences in the two environments and emphasize the importance of teacher educators addressing these differences. For future educators, these smaller classes allow for more faculty/student interaction and active learning that is supportive of the development of effective teachers (Kates, 2010).

Associate of Arts in Teaching Degree (AAT)

Maryland led the way nationally in developing an associate degree in teacher education. According to Townsend and Ignash (2003), state officials were motivated partly by the need for greater system efficiency since, prior to the development of the AAT, there were about 300 individual articulation agreements between Maryland community colleges and four-year public and private schools with teacher education programs. But, as described below, creating a streamlined articulation system presented challenges.

General education requirements. One area of struggle for the institutions involved in the development of articulated transfer pathways is the decision concerning which institution will house which courses. The universities are bound by state accreditation standards; they hold responsibility for student knowledge of core teacher education subjects. During the planning of transfer programs, this can lead to difficult discussions between the four-year and two-year institutions about ensuring that those standards are met. For students starting at two-year colleges, those core courses are taken at the community college level as part of the AAT program policies (Hollander, 2010). The AAT general education requirements are broken down into several categories; the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) recommends that associate of arts (AA) degree programs require at least 50% of their program credits be in the general education core (Ignash & Slotnick, 2007). All of Maryland's AAT programs include 30 to 34 general education requirements which parallel the first two years of bachelor's degree study and transfer to four-year colleges and universities. The general education core required for teacher education majors includes communications, humanities, fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, natural and physical sciences, and mathematics. The number of credits in Maryland community colleges varies by degree program, such as early childhood or secondary science education. Overall, the general education core for Maryland, as well as other states such as Florida, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas, is left unspecified, allowing for a great deal of flexibility in each institution (Ignash & Slotnick, 2007).

The AAT in Maryland. The AAT was intended to provide transfer students an uninterrupted curriculum from their first year to their last; to allow students flexibility to

enroll in courses through any participating institution; to shorten the time to degree completion through the contractual nature of the programs; and to facilitate better communication between faculty members (Hollander, 2010). Consistency in preparation is a central piece of the success of the AAT; no matter where a teacher candidate starts and finishes, they must be equally well-prepared. While the data are somewhat outdated and have not yet been revised, a 2006 report by the Maryland Higher Education Commission outlined the capacity of teacher preparation based on 2004 statistics. Nearly 4,300 community college students took part in the various teacher education transfer programs, with about one third (791) of them seeking the associate of arts in teaching degree program. Three-hundred and thirteen (313) students completed the transfer teacher education programs that year, with 67 students receiving an AAT (Keller, 2006).

There have been unintended consequences of the program which need attention, including student difficulties in navigating the system. This seems to stem from a lack of clear advising and a shortage of transfer-specific counselors (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2015; N. Shapiro, personal communication, March 28, 2016). Some movement has occurred in this area, with the University of Maryland, College Park, for instance, having placed pre-transfer advisors on site at four different community college campuses in 2017 as part of a pilot program. The success of this endeavor has led to consideration of adding advisors to additional campuses. One further difficulty students have in navigating the system occurs because of a lack of consistent course offerings at both the two-year and four-year level. The inability to find courses during the semester they need them can delay student completion (Hollander, 2010).

With the AAT's 18-year history, the time seemed ripe to take a closer look at the successes and struggles of its policies. An AAT Oversight Council was established in 2003 to monitor the degree program. The Council consisted of members from the 2- and 4-year institutions, as well as individuals from the University of Maryland Systems office, the Maryland Higher Education Commission, and the Maryland State Department of Education. A subcommittee was formed in 2009 to create a process for the continuous review of the AAT degrees, and the state of Maryland is currently at work assessing the program (Gronberg-Quinn, 2018). The state also wants to know if graduates from the AAT program are transferring to four-year programs, earning state teacher certification, and becoming classroom teachers of record in Maryland (N. Shapiro, personal communication, March 28, 2016). Graduate feedback can be a valuable gauge of how institutions are serving their students and contributing to the state's educational goals, and this dissertation study included a focus on AAT graduates as they settled into the second half of their teacher preparation program at a Maryland public university. These answers are critical in moving teacher education forward in a meaningful way, to the greater production of a diverse and capable educator workforce.

Early Childhood Teacher Preparation in the United States

This section starts with a brief review of some important recent milestones in the development of the formalized teaching of young children. In all states, public school teachers must earn a bachelor's degree and certification before beginning teaching in a classroom. This is not the case for all environments where young children are taught. In 2010, the National Governor's Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices published a report on early childhood systems across states. The NGA Center's mission is to research

and develop implementation of innovative solutions to policy issues. The report recommended building a statewide system of professional development for all program staff and personnel who work with young children. At the state level, improvement in the following areas was recommended:

- coordination of early childhood professional development policies;
- implementation of research-based standards for early childhood professional development;
- ensuring access to professional development opportunities;
- gathering and use of data on characteristics of the early childhood workforce to improve professional and program quality (Demma [NGA Center for Best Practices], 2010).

The NGA found a lack of information on what constitutes the most effective training and professional development for early childhood professionals. They noted the necessity of building standards to improve program quality in the individual state teacher training and professional development systems.

How Do We Train Early Childhood Teachers?

Early childhood preparation programs (spanning years from birth through age 8) are guided by national standards set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The Association has been setting these standards for more than 25 years, both for four- and five-year programs and associate degree granting institutions. The Association recognizes that early childhood professionals may specialize in three different areas: infants/toddlers, preschool/prekindergarten, or early primary grades. The standards were also written to guide professionals in other roles who work

with young children, spanning public schools, home-family support, and professional support positions such as administrator or advocate at the community, state, or national level. At the core of all training is developmentally appropriate practice which stresses activity-based learning environments based on these standards and what is known about child development and the needs, interests, and abilities of the child.

NAEYC recognizes the growing role of community colleges in early childhood teacher education as well as their potential for supporting a more diverse teacher population and leadership (NAEYC, 2009a). As part of their effort to be responsive to students' varied needs, community colleges offer a variety of educational or degree options. To clarify, the Associate of Arts (AA) degree generally emphasizes the arts, humanities, and social sciences; typically, three-quarters of the work required is general education course work. The AAT discussed above falls into this category. An alternative that many early childhood professionals pursue is the Associate of Sciences (AS) degree, a terminal degree that is not meant for transfer. The AS generally requires one-half of the course work in general education, with substantial mathematics and science courses. The Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree prepares the student for direct employment, with one third of the course work in general education. While many students who seek AAS degrees do not intend to transfer, work is needed to better match the AAS course load with AAT requirements should the student wish to pursue a four-year degree later (Bigham, 2011; Ignash & Slotnick, 2007). Also, important for the field in general, Early and Winton's (2001) data suggest that proportionately more associate degree students work or plan to work with infants and toddlers than do students in four-year programs,

and many entering students have been working in family childcare or childcare administrative positions.

Unique Challenges to Early Childhood Teacher Preparation

Professional preparation for public school teachers is straightforward in most cases, with the earning of a bachelor's degree a minimal requirement across the United States. There are significant differences across states in preparing teachers and childcare staff outside of the public-school system, however. Also, given that many childcare workers are only required to earn a two-year degree, issues arise when they decide to transfer to four-year institutions to continue their education. A brief review of the recent history of preparing early childhood educators, as well as a discussion of where the field stands now follows below.

As noted, there are multiple pathways to teaching young children, and multiple degree and certificate options. While the transfer process between 2- and 4-year institutions itself can pose difficulties, the different pathways to a career in early childhood education make implementation of a transfer degree in ECE challenging. With the exception of public-school teachers and Head Start, there is no universal policy regarding who is eligible to teach young children in private childcare centers and family childcare providers. Each state identifies minimum preservice qualifications for early childhood teaching staff as a part of program licensing regulations. Due to the “decentralized and fragmented nature” of the early learning system throughout the U.S., state officials across the country face difficulties in coordinating policy efforts. Not only are early childhood programs extremely varied and run under a range of departments and funding sources, there is also, as a result, great variation in the preparation of EC teachers

(Cho & Couse, 2008, p. 16). Standardizing education and certification is a step toward improving the preparation of teachers and strengthening the field professionally. These steps may also be a positive step in addressing a large issue for the field: it continues to suffer from teacher shortages and high teacher turnover (Pruitt, Diez, Livesey, & Szymczak, 2017). The AAT policies are proving to be valuable in efforts to address these problems.

Transfer issues for ECE students. Ignash and Slotnick (2007) argue for the development of an AAT degree in each state to build clear pathways to transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. The authors reviewed various programs and noted clear and distinct differences between the methods and practice of teaching for early childhood education, which includes children from birth through Grade 3, and the methods and practice of teaching at the secondary education level, where expertise is required in such subjects as higher mathematics and science. Thus, a one-size-fits-all Associate of Arts in Teaching degree will not be a good fit for all teacher education students. “On the other hand, using different degree titles and names—AA, AS, AAT, AST, and so forth—contributes to the proliferation of degrees that confuses students” (Ignash & Slotnick, 2007, p. 60).

Clear examples of this issue in the state of Maryland are the Infant and Toddler Development and Curriculum Planning course and the School-Age Childcare course offered by community colleges. These courses are recommended for the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential program as well as required for the Early Childhood One Year Certificate and AAS degree. They are not accepted as part of the AAT, however. Many students take these courses as professional development

requirements for their work in childcare but are frustrated when the credits are not accepted as part of a transfer degree. The AAT policies may lead to effective solutions for preparing public-school teachers, but there continue to be difficulties in addressing the variety of options for early childhood teacher preparation.

Differences in education requirements in public school versus childcare.

States are beginning to require that all individuals who work with young children have the equivalent of a four-year degree. At this point, however, many states only require the CDA credential or an Associate of Arts degree to work in a childcare center or pre-school not affiliated with the public-school system. The amount of education required to work with young children varies widely from state to state (Ackerman, 2004). Most state childcare licensing regulations include many options for qualifying for a particular role in a center or school, and state licensing agencies use different procedures to evaluate the qualifications of providers seeking to work in childcare centers or operate family childcare homes. Although all states require public school teachers to hold a bachelor's degree, as recently as 2004, only 58% of early childhood educators had some college-level education or higher (Herzenberg, Price, & Bradley, 2005).

Requirements for early childhood educators are important because studies show that teachers with a four-year degree along with specialized preparation are more responsive to children and provide more meaningful educational activities than those teachers who have a general subject-area degree without preparation specific to working with young children. Saracho and Spodek (2007) conducted a critical analysis of 40 research papers, published between 1989 and 2004, with the purpose of exploring the value of a high level of preparation for all teachers in early childhood education. They

focused on professional development, the importance of a bachelor's degree, and the educational requirements for early childhood teachers. Saracho and Spodek found that research does support the claim that the level of a teacher's professional development has an impact on the quality of early childhood programs and predicts developmental outcomes of children.

Ritblatt, Garrity, Longstreith, Hokoda, and Potter (2013) contend that agreement must be reached on standards for preparation of early childhood educators: "Teachers engaged in early care and education need rigorous, high-quality educational programs that are specifically designed to teach them to provide positive, relationship- and play-based environments and interactions that support developmental outcomes of young children" (p. 48). They make the case in a study of a Child and Family Development Program at a large, urban state university where they collected students' reflections and course syllabi as well as quantitative outcomes on the experiences and perspectives of graduates of the program. The authors reviewed the program using Darling-Hammond's seven core elements of exemplary programs as a framework. They concluded that the program is successful in demonstrating a comprehensive model for early childhood teacher education, including an integration of field experience with coursework, mentoring to provide model teaching, and pedagogies connecting theory with practice (Ritblatt et al., 2013). The authors find that this model exemplifies the importance of quality preparation for educators in meeting society's responsibility to provide quality early care and education. Ackerman (2004) found earlier that the quality of an early childhood setting increases when the teachers have received education specific to early childhood. Also, because teachers take leadership roles in their programs and schools, the

level of education attained becomes a critical piece in overall program quality (Saracho & Spodek, 2007).

Where We Stand Now: Current Push for Increased Workforce Research

A wide array of scholarship supports the positive developmental and academic benefits of early childhood education, particularly for children from families with lower-incomes (Ackerman, 2004; Blank, 2010; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). A large national study of 3- and 4-year-olds in various childcare environments was conducted by researchers at four universities. They found that high-quality care positively impacts children's cognitive and social skills, with the improvements remaining through second grade. Those children scored higher on math, language and social skills development through their years in elementary school (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Given these findings, various efforts are underway throughout the United States to encourage staff who care for the youngest learners to gain more education. Ackerman (2004) provided an overview of this work by reviewing published reports and state and federal initiative web sites. The author highlighted specific programs that held promise for improving the preparation and practices of ECE teachers across the United States. For example, in her definition of professional development for early childhood, Ackerman (2004) includes active engagement in learning key skills and specialist knowledge, a focus on what is best for each unique child and family, and a comprehensive system of preparation that includes consideration of the values and ethics of the individual teacher. The voices of the practitioners themselves, however, were not included in this effort to highlight states' work to increase the credentials of EC educators. Ackerman does call on future researchers to examine the implementation and outcomes of these programs as an

important piece in the removal of barriers to further education for these teachers. Hearing from the individual educators themselves would be a necessary part of this effort.

A study aimed at accessing the perspective on the profession of early childhood educators in England was conducted during significant policy changes in early childhood care over the past 15 years (Brock, 2013). With debate carried out in various institutions on how to shape early education policy, the author argued that practitioner voices were missing. Her study solicited the personal voices and professional ideologies of 12 early childhood teachers and used these perspectives to build a model for the field. The researcher took a holistic perspective, allowing the participants themselves to select the issues and raise factors of interest to them. The framework on which she successfully elicited the voices and thinking of the participants was one of a supportive environment with the provision of time to facilitate reflection and produce insights. The researcher drew on the participants' knowledge of the field and understanding of the early learning context in their analysis. Their respect for and interest in the work of early childhood educators were thus important to this study (Brock, 2013).

The typology of the profession developed by Brock plays an important role in outlining what preparation early childhood teachers believe is key to their field. The study aimed to have the participants themselves raise items in order to establish the traits of their professionalism. After a pilot study, the author refined the research methods and developed a mixed methods approach using semi-structured, video-reflective-dialogues, and a focus group meeting as well as questionnaires and email correspondence. The view from the educators themselves adds a vital voice given the focus on increased education for their profession. Briefly, Brock's typology (2013) includes seven dimensions:

specialist knowledge (curriculum, pedagogy), qualifications (appropriate education essential when working with young children), skills (methodologies, teamwork, integration of skills), autonomy (adhering to their values), values (what's best for children), ethics (tension between care and education), and rewards (feelings of reward through one's profession). Other scholars have outlined similar frameworks that show an intersection with these seven areas.

The list developed by Brock (2013) provides some key points seen as valuable by her small group of respondents. The typology may not be comprehensive, but it is important as representative of a collective group of practitioners. "The findings acknowledge the complexity and qualities of their work – the participants demonstrated substantial shared understanding of professionalism that crossed both care and education" (p. 42). The voices confirm the significance of those elements, elements that are included in the requirements outlined by professional organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009). Also, although Brock's sample may have been somewhat diverse (from three different geographic areas, made up of nine females and three males, and including one dual heritage and one South Asian respondent), it did not consider the importance of the diversity of classrooms in which teachers work (Ackerman, 2004). While a role for early childhood professionals in shaping policy with their expertise and knowledge is beyond question, there must be a breadth in the background and location of those professionals. The methods of the data collection in this study may be broad in scope, but the participant backgrounds were not. Brock's study demonstrates the value of including practitioner voices, however, and helped fill a gap in this perspective in early childhood education research.

The AAT in Early Childhood Education

A wide incongruity exists between what scholarship says about the critical role of early educators and the state and national policies that do not support the development and preparation of the professional workforce. Early and Winton (2001) point out that the institutions of higher education (IHEs) have a key role in the existing structure for preparation and must be ready and able to respond to the increased demands for early childhood teacher education. While Maryland's AAT program policies rise to this call, the study by Early and Winton provides some important areas for further focus for programs like the AAT. The purpose of the research was to collect data on numerous early childhood education programs, including characteristics of the faculty in those programs, and descriptions of coursework and practica offered. The authors also compared early childhood programs on variables such as faculty race/ethnicity and described challenges faculty members face in meeting the needs of the early childhood workforce. Early and Winton (2001) surveyed 1,387 IHEs as a nationally representative sample of all IHEs with programs for preparing early childhood teachers (working with children ages 0 to 4). They used a stratified random sample of 600 and interviewed department chairs or program directors from 47 different states plus Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands.

The authors highlight three key findings that hold meaning for both two- and four-year teacher preparation programs. First, their data indicate that IHEs should provide students with challenging new content and experiences in teaching internships appropriate to the changing population of young children served in early childhood programs. Areas of import include teaching English as a second language, working with

children with disabilities, and supporting children from varying cultures and backgrounds. Second, interviewees mentioned transfer and the articulation of credits as areas of concern. While programs like the AAT might be steps toward developing a clear and strong teacher education process, Early and Winton (2001) note that problems can arise in choosing the right path early on. For example, roadblocks have been created by the Applied Associate of Arts (AAS) degree, a terminal degree not included in articulation agreements. Even so, the AAS was found to be the most common type of associate degree offered. Finally, administrative constraints such as lack of resources and excessive use of part-time faculty in early childhood teacher preparation programs were identified as problems that need to be addressed in efforts to strengthen teacher education at the two-year colleges.

To close this section on how early childhood teachers are prepared at community colleges, it is useful to point out concerns raised in the Early and Winton (2001) study as they apply generally to scholarship in this area. Self-report measures, especially by telephone, do not address or specify what is happening at the classroom level. Research on the specific content areas covered in coursework and whether diversity and culture are woven throughout would be valuable. The scholarship in early childhood education is missing the views of students, both full- and part-time as well as those of recent graduates and employers. Given that states make the policies for their IHEs, the data collected need to be broken down and carefully reviewed at the state level to be used to inform program improvement. While Maryland has developed programs and structures to support early childhood preservice educators as they seek preparation and professional development,

issues such as a lack of uniformity in course offerings across the state and inconsistent program information dissemination must still be addressed.

Policy Implementation in Higher Education

As argued above, the student perspective on Maryland's AAT degree is valuable in understanding and improving general teacher preparation. This study also adds to the understanding of the perspective of administrators and faculty on the ECE/SpEd programs and policies. A focus on the AAT in early childhood specifically helps bring into focus the needs of teachers of a vital population, namely those youngest learners from birth to age eight. This final section on the rationale for this study of the AAT degree turns to a wider perspective, moving from the emphasis on programs and students themselves to one of policy implementation: How has the AAT been enacted and what can we learn from its development and execution?

The goal in creating the AAT degree in Maryland in 2001, at a time of severe teacher shortages, was to expand the pipeline so that community colleges would recruit, retain, and transfer more teacher education students in all areas of teacher preparation (McDonough, 2003). With a larger role for the community colleges came a need for greater collaboration with the four-year institutions. Thus, policy makers and institutions had to find a balance between this growth in cooperation and the maintenance of the individual identities of each institution. According to Lindstrom and Rasch (2003), at the time, four-year institutions were concerned about being held accountable for the performance of students whose general education and basic skills development were occurring at other institutions. In general, four-year institutions were also sometimes reluctant to embrace their two-year counterparts. Given these complexities, it seems

timely to review transfer by exploring institutional perspectives. Such an examination can help “educational researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers transition from recognizing a problem (lack of support for transfer students) to understanding its causes, moving us one step closer to providing appropriate supports to this growing and disparate population” (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012, p. 391).

Background of Policy Implementation Research: Historic and Current

Pressman and Wildavsky first used the term ‘implementation studies’ in 1973. They argued that analysis of what occurs after decisions are made and policies are put into action was missing in policy studies at that time. Scholars during the 1970s and 1980s added to the research and understanding of policy implementation, focusing on the debate between top-down and bottom-up approaches (Sabatier, 2005). There was an early theoretical focus on the policy cycle, with scholars looking at it through discrete stages; each stage received subsequent research attention (Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2005). Various top-down approach frameworks were developed maintaining the stages structure. Proponents of the bottom-up view of implementation policy were critical of the top-down approaches, focusing on the observations and actions of participants in policy outcomes. Subsequent work has been done to synthesize the two opposing approaches, with various frameworks proposed. This early work is important from both a theoretical as well as practical viewpoint and is significant for studying policy implementation in higher education, where theory and the work of the real-world meet (Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2005).

While theoretical work toward an understanding of policy implementation slowed during and after the 1980s, recent research in the field has been growing. Higher

education policy implementation is receiving more vigorous examination, with researchers looking at a variety of dimensions to explain policy variations and accepting that implementation is a highly complex process (Honig, 2006). As is evident with higher education issues examined here such as transfer articulation agreements, implementation takes place in fluid settings and problems are never resolved but rather evolve: “Every implementation action simultaneously changes policy problems, policy resources, and policy objectives. New issues, new requirements, new considerations emerge as the process unfolds” (Odden, 1991, p. 189). More recent approaches in the field thus focus on whether there is a start and finish to the implementation, what constitutes failed and successful implementation, and what the best tools are for implementing policies (Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2005). Valuable in looking at higher education policy implementation has been an analysis of pressure by states for reform, a review of the struggle in moving from policy creation to policy in practice, and an examination of the impact of different levels of state governance on implementation (El-Khawas, 2005). In Maryland, for instance, the AAT Oversight Council continues to meet to reevaluate the degrees and work to resolve ongoing issues with transferring from two-year to four-year institution. This may involve moving to include an enforcement mechanism to ensure policy changes are carried out by the individual actors (Gronberg-Quinn, 2018). The research in the field of policy implementation may be of value to current efforts to effect positive change in higher education.

Variation in Policy Implementation

Arguments are made that implementation policy analysis is still needed with respect to research in higher education: “Implementation studies could, however, be

particularly interesting in the present situation for higher education, since it seems evident that public policy, to a great extent, still is shaped during the implementation process" (Gornitzka, Kyvik & Stensaker, 2005, p. 36). As indicated above, variations to public policy occur during the implementation phase. As policies are put in place, employees may potentially alter them. External environments also differ given unique pressures and complexities of that specific situation. To understand how implementation creates significant variation, researchers must look at variables in formal structure, informal practice and environment: "To examine just how the official policies and structure of an institution affect transfer students would ignore the potentially dramatic alterations to policy that take place when those policies are implemented by employees. To ignore the external environment might lead researchers to make recommendations that would not be feasible given the pressures and complexities that arise from operating within that environment" (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012, p. 408).

Policy alone will not produce preferred outcomes, and variations in policy will not be responsible for all differences in outcomes. Examination of policy implementation is part of a multidimensional approach to addressing areas of public concern such as higher education. For example, when reviewing the probability of student transfer from community college to four-year institution, variation in state policy on its own will not improve the rates of transfer or increase the numbers of transfer students who go on to graduate. When considered with other factors such as financial aid, academic advising and counseling programs, and improvements in high school graduation, policy implementation variations are a key factor (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, p. 284). Although admissions standards control which transfer students are accepted by institutions, other

policies and practices enacted at the institutional, departmental, or individual level shape the experiences of those students who eventually do move to four-year campuses (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

In exploring policy implementation, it is important to consider not only the specifics of the policies but also the practices of various institutional agents as well. When reviewing higher education policy, institution-specific factors help shape the experiences of students. For example, although institutional policies may govern various facets of the transfer student experience, those policies are enacted by individuals. Formal policies will be understood differently and even ignored or challenged by staff. Policy implementation is also linked directly to the beliefs about transfer students held by employees at various institutions. These beliefs may be based on assumptions and perceptions, not on hard data (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Institutional factors do play a major role in determining how the university responds to transfer student needs.

For example, The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) conducted lengthy interviews with leaders in higher education as part of a large study of articulation and transfer (Hezel, 2010). One theme that emerged was “faculty and institutional resistance to a top-down approach and university faculty’s reluctance to accept community college courses as equivalent to those of a four-year institution” (p. viii). Factors at the student-level also complicate institutional efforts to improve the transfer student experience. The same study by WICHE found that even after states put in place structural interventions, issues such as the status of the current labor market, student academic interest, and personal as well as family needs complicated student

decision-making (Hezel, 2010). In the case of my study, matters are complicated further by the wide variation in degrees and careers in early childhood.

Research on early childhood teacher education is limited and little has been conducted on policy implementation specifically, leaving significant gaps in the knowledge base. The complexity of factors involved in preparing early childhood educators contributes to this deficiency. The quality of a program is impacted by the institutional setting, the type of program and specific degree, and available resources. The state of Maryland, for instance, as indicated in Chapter One, has a terminal Associate of Arts degree in early childhood, which includes courses that cannot be used towards the Associate of Arts in Teaching degree. National and state standards, policies, and certification requirements also come into play. The AAS degree in Maryland does not lead to certification for early childhood educators, all the more frustrating since Prekindergarten teachers in public schools must earn state certification. For early childhood teacher education, the value of focusing on policy implementation is that it can help faculty and institutions thoughtfully apply the results of current and future research. Research results do not produce change on their own, but the field of policy implementation is potentially very useful to early childhood teacher education because it “attempts to identify the best ways to promote the routine ‘uptake’ of credible research findings,” thereby playing a role in informing dialogues and filling the research gaps (Horn, Hyson, & Winton, 2013, p.108).

The Significance of Policy Implementation to the AAT

Implementation policy research matters but is lacking in the field of early childhood teacher education. Taking one step closer, studies of policy implementation

are valuable in reviewing the ECE AAT policies in Maryland. “Will is generally assumed to be implementers’ dispositions toward educational policy. Capacity is assumed to be the degree to which implementers possess the skills, knowledge, networks, and financial resources to execute reform ideas” (Burch, 2007, p. 89). With 16 separate community college teacher preparation programs across the state, local will and capacity informs the pathways and programs behind each degree as do the relationships between two-year and four-year institutions, both private and public. As Odden (1991) also points out, successful policy implementation depends on knowledge and competency as well as local context, both goals and capacity.

Issues of implementation are still of concern 18 years after the AAT was created in the state of Maryland. On the one hand, these programs are small so there may be a reluctance to expend the time and energy needed to address issues at the department level. Also, Lindstrom and Rasch (2003) point to the difficulty in developing a “single curriculum that fulfills both professional education course requirements and the competency requirements of the state department of education” (p. 24). Finally, as issues of trust and territory can be challenging to address, advising remains a sticking point for many students and institutions (Lindstrom & Rasch, 2003). A close look at the student experience in Maryland will help parse how the variety in institutional enactment of the AAT has impacted individual future educators.

Gap in the Literature: The Student Perspective

“Include student feedback in articulation and transfer policies and practices” (Hezel, 2010, p. 23). At the heart of qualitative research is the desire to better understand the human experience (Bogden & Biklen, 2014). Observing people and studying how

they construct meaning of their experiences provides clarity and depth to investigations of human behavior. As we strive to build quality studies, voices of the participants are a key component. “Paying heed” to multiple voices is a key marker of quality in qualitative research (Tracey, 2010), as is giving attention to the interactions within groups of participants. As Kates (2010) notes, the students’ perspectives add depth and detail to the understanding of their experiences and how to approach improving programs and student success. Including the views of administrators and faculty members in ECE/SpEd AAT programs provides additional valuable insight into the student experience.

Since the AAT was rolled out in Maryland in 2001, there has been no state-wide review of how the students at the community colleges view the program. There have been a few dissertations looking at individual institutions or focusing on transfer policy in Maryland, but no data collected specifically on the student perspective on the Early Childhood/Special Education AAT degree program and none with a view to understanding differences in perspective based on race. The first study of Maryland’s AAT degree in general (Bigham, 2011) aimed to understand the impact of the program using a case study approach. Bigham spoke with 20 graduates of one suburban community college via individual and focus group interviews, asking about their experiences in the AAT specifically. At the time of the study, the author was an Assistant Professor and Program Manager for Education. Some of the participants were her former students, although none were enrolled in her courses at the time. The research, however had clear significance to her work at the community college. “In addition to the lack of statewide information about the AAT, there were no records that

any follow-up surveys or interviews with AAT program participants had ever been done on the campus where the research took place. Without research into the experiences of AAT participants, it was impossible to know how to improve the program from graduates' perspectives” (Bigham, 2011, p. 54). The data collection and analysis indicated positive experiences with the degree as well as pointed to several areas for additional investigation. Participants suggested increasing information and support for transfer planning and ensuring ease of transfer. Based on those results and significant to this study, the researcher recommended reviewing the transfer experiences of AAT graduates: “Students who complete the AAT are not marketable in their identified profession without a bachelor's degree and teacher certification” (Bigham, 2011, p. 137). This study was the first to gather the voices of Maryland AAT students and begin to address that gap in the literature.

A second study was recently published investigating Maryland’s AAT program, also interviewing students from one community college site (Gronberg-Quinn, 2018). The purpose was to examine the obstacles faced and strategies used by students who began their path to teacher certification in an AAT degree program. Fourteen graduates participated in this research effort, half of whom went on to teach in a K–12 school setting; the other half discontinued their studies without attaining teacher certification or employment as a classroom teacher. The thematic areas that were developed through analysis of interview data included obstacles related to advising, transfer, instructor interaction, and cultural differences. A second thematic area focused on personal issues within the participants’ lives such as finances and parenthood. Strategies used by students to overcome obstacles were collected under two umbrellas: support networks

and participants' mining of the grit within themselves. Overall, the students who persevered to become certified, employed teachers reported fewer obstacles than those participants who did not go on to complete a bachelor's degree. Gronberg-Quinn makes the case that the AAT policies have not yet been successful in providing a seamless transfer for students working to become teachers, pointing to a "lack of adherence" to the articulation agreements between the 2- and 4-year institutions (p. 100).

This research did not provide information on which campus of the community college the participants attended nor where they transferred. Also, the bulk of the interview questions and subsequent analysis were about the personal, often traumatic, experiences of the students. In fact, the author noted that the obstacles identified by student participants were not unique to teacher education programs. Of importance, however, were the transfer problems disclosed in this study, especially given the number of years the AAT policies have been in existence and the stated goal of easing transfer issues. Gronberg-Quinn (2018) indicates that "Such issues can often be easily alleviated by a student's advisor while the student is attending a community college: advisor communication with the [university] that the student plans to attend may be all that is needed" (p. 111). This study clarified the advising and transfer issues that have been ongoing. It also calls for more research on the differences between the various AAT degrees as well as an investigation into the enforcement of articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions. My work here is to build on this effort by examining the ECE/SpEd AAT degree, investigating students' views at more than one community college campus, and collecting their perspective once they have transferred.

Another recent analysis of the AAT in the state of Maryland is a case study of transfer articulation policy specifically. Lukszo (2018) aimed to investigate what factors aided and held up AAT policy implementation at two- and four-year institutions. The author used multiple data sources that included interviews of students and higher education officials, state meeting observations, and a review of university, state, and federal documents. Of interest here is that the author had initially tried to conduct focus groups but found them too difficult to organize: “Rather than eliminate student focus groups, I decided to proceed with individual student interviews to maintain the perspective of students in this study” (p. 107). Lukszo (2018) interviewed seven community college transfer students who earned an A.A.T. degree from a Maryland community college and who were attending one of the two universities in her study. Four students came from one two-year institution in the state, two from another, and one from a third school. The participants were asked questions about their expectations of the transfer process and their actual experience with it. Students were delayed in progress to completing their bachelor’s degree due to missing courses or needing to retake certain requirements at the four-year university. Other students were delayed in A.A.T. degree completion due to missing Praxis Core scores, which can impact admission into education programs and coursework after transfer. Lukszo (2018) found that issues such as these occurred when program changes were made at one institution and not clearly communicated to the other institution and when students were misadvised prior to transfer to the university. The number of subjects and institutions in this study is small if used to build understanding of the student perspective on the AAT. The data is an important start, however, to understanding the context in which students train as future

educators in Maryland. As the author points out, further study needs to be done on what AAT students believe has worked and not worked for them on their road to and through their baccalaureate program (Lukszo, 2018).

Since transfer and articulation policies should benefit students, policies or practices that encourage or include student feedback give a voice to those who are most directly impacted. An example outside of Maryland is the work of Kates (2010), mentioned above, who conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews of twenty community college graduates of a two-year program in New York who transferred to a four-year college to complete their teacher education degree. The researcher spoke with the students the summer before they graduated and twice after they started at the four-year campus. The participants graduated with a degree in Education Studies and transferred to the four-year college as Early Childhood or Elementary Education majors. The students represented not only a wide range of ages but also came from extremely diverse ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, but consistent with their limited numbers in early childhood education programs, no males were study participants. The author also held conversations with professors and deans of both institutions and reviewed documents such as articulation agreements and syllabi. Gathering the student perspective before and after transfer provided valuable insights, although a potential drawback was that the researcher was a faculty member of the two-year college at the time of her study.

Participant comments in this research effort focused on the difficult academic transition from two-year to four-year institution: "... every participant described experiencing some cognitive dissonance upon encountering the unfamiliar norms and expectations of the four-year college" (Kates, 2010, p. 34). Students described strategies

for managing these difficulties such as going back to “their more accessible class notes and handouts from the community college in order to plan their fieldwork lessons or to study for tests at the four-year college” (p. 42). Recommendations from the study include how to support the academic success of community college teacher education students and increase the likelihood that they will one day be teachers of record in their own classrooms. The author draws on the students’ accounts in calling for a “learner-centered” approach: “...it is clear that often what was taught and the degree of independence that was expected in mastering it at the four-year college lay beyond what the students could succeed at absent further ‘scaffolding’ from faculty, that is, the support structures a teacher must provide in order for the learner to progress to the next stage or level” (Kates, 2010, p. 45). Kates (2010) provides examples of various approaches, such as seminar, which hold potential to support community college students in the rigor and depth required once they move to the four-year institutions. Given the need for effective, long-serving educators, these student accounts need increased attention.

“Evaluations of transfer and articulation policies and practices should consider the perspectives of the entire range of stakeholders. Consider formal mechanisms to solicit feedback from college students, institutional faculty, high school guidance counselors, parents, and policymakers” (Hezel, 2010, p. 22). This study by Kates aimed to address a lack of research on the perspectives of early childhood teacher education students as well as attend to the lack of data to help programs, institutions and state policymakers identify promising practices and make fully informed decisions. Continued investigation of student and other stakeholder insights and experiences may serve to improve policies and initiatives.

This chapter has reviewed three bodies of literature: (a) general teacher preparation, (b) early childhood teacher preparation specifically, and (c) policy implementation. Community colleges have moved from being a mere component of higher education to a key contributor in facilitating the process of educating future teachers. However, while attention on the community college has grown, students continue to experience difficulties in the transfer from two-year to four-year institutions; these issues have an impact on bachelor's degree completion and thus also influence the preparation of classroom teachers. While a large amount of research has been conducted on student transfer to the four-year institution, much of it is focused post-transfer and limited research has been conducted to identify student experiences prior to transfer (Flaga, 2006). To narrow the gap in research on community college teacher education programs, this study aimed to address one main question: What is the student perspective on Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education (ECE/SpEd) AAT program? This review of the literature about teacher preparation and early childhood teacher education, as well as the discussion of policy implementation in higher education, provides the basis for the three sub-questions guiding this investigation: What factors have enhanced or obstructed their experience? What is their experience with the transfer process? Does the student experience differ by institution and if so, how?

CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF THE STUDY: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Teacher education has been on the radar of policymakers and educational reformers for a number of years. With studies showcasing the importance of teacher quality, and additional scholarship highlighting concerns about the overall quality of American education, it is not surprising that various stakeholders have launched wide-ranging reforms to improve teacher preparation and boost certification and licensing requirements (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2012). It can be argued that the quality of teacher preparation programs has improved in some areas, but these improvements are not far-reaching or wide-ranging; researchers are finding both promising aspects as well as areas of real challenge (Cochran-Smith, 2005). One challenging area is found in the significant differences among state and local policies. States have made varying changes to teacher preparation standards. This has led, however, to more differences in licensure testing across states, making mobility of teachers more difficult. A lack of teacher mobility in turn hampers efforts to address teacher shortages through teacher movement from state to state (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2012).

A closer look at the preparation of teachers at the community college level can provide an outlook on many areas, from state and local policies, to community and student needs, to consistency of teaching standards and licensing requirements. In general, prospective teachers across the country must meet general education course loads in the arts and sciences as well as in schools of education; they also complete observation and student teaching credits in local schools. The specifics, however, are quite variable: the required courses are different from state to state, and within states they vary from professor to professor. A professional curriculum with substantive consistency

does not exist as it does in other professions (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2012). Feiman-Nemser (2001) blames this lack of an overall conceptual framework for the difficulty teacher education students have developing a strong sense of what is “good” teaching: “Separate courses taught by individual faculty in different departments rarely build on or connect to one another, nor do they add up as a coherent preparation for teaching. Without a set of organizing themes, without shared standards, without clear goals for student learning, there is no framework to guide program design or student assessment” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1019-1020).

The lack of a coherent professional curriculum is further complicated when students begin their studies at a two-year college and then move on to a four-year institution. Since public school teachers must earn, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree, community college is now a first rather than final step in the teacher credentialing process. As noted, an important development in the preparation of teachers is the associate of arts degree in the state of Maryland. As the first of its kind in 2001, it served as a model for other state transfer articulation programs. However, with 16 different community colleges in Maryland feeding into numerous universities, the course content of both the general education requirements and the teacher education classes varies considerably.

This study aimed to address the strengthening of Maryland’s AAT program policies by focusing on the student perspective on the early childhood teacher education degree. In particular, I examined the factors that enhanced or obstructed the preparation of these preservice teachers and looked at how early childhood preservice educators described the transfer process as well as the preparation for the four-year institution. The

focus groups and follow-up interview questions allowed the students to share many circumstances and influences that had an impact on their experiences. Because there might have been significant differences across institutions, I compared student experiences at four community colleges and the transfer process that brought them to six 4-year institutions.

As noted in the previous chapters, community colleges are an essential resource for diversifying the teaching force and improving teacher retention. Little research has been done, however, on the programs offered at two-year institutions or the perspectives of the students who are there preparing to be teachers (Kates, 2010). This is a significant gap, especially since it is well-documented that a large proportion of minority, first-generation, and low-income students start their education at two-year colleges. Data sources indicate that 50% of Hispanic students and nearly 50% of African American students start at community college, while 35% of white students do (Shapiro et al., 2017). With an increasingly diverse student population, the perspectives of future teachers of color are critical to improving and strengthening teacher preparation programs. This growing diversity is especially evident in early childhood classrooms. Instruction in American schools has grown to include complex concepts and higher order thinking, and preparation for this education starts at the early childhood level. More needs to be done, therefore, to prepare teachers of young children for diverse classrooms with greater educational goals. Studying the student perspective on Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT policies can help fill the research void and uncover the voices of preservice EC teachers.

Nature of Knowledge

“As researchers, we have to devise for ourselves a research process that serves our purposes best, one that helps us more than any other to answer our research question” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). As Crotty explains, epistemology investigates the nature of knowledge. Epistemological stances are ways of understanding and explaining “how we know what we know” (p. 8). In this study of the student perspective on experiences in Maryland’s AAT program, the insights came from the individual students, faculty members, the researcher, and the social interactions that built their understanding and continue to influence it. Crotty (1998) outlines three possibilities for epistemology, namely, objectivism, constructionism, and subjectivism. Objectivism is the view that meaning resides in objects, without any need for human consciousness or interaction with them. In other words, the meaning is there in the object and we can discover or uncover that meaning through careful research. Constructionism is the epistemological view that there is no meaning without human engagement with the object of the study. Meaning is not discovered, as supposed in objectivism, but rather is “constructed” by the mind and in different ways by different people (Crotty, 1998). It is important to also emphasize that this construction takes place in a social context. Finally, a third epistemological view is subjectivism. This is the belief that meaning is imposed on the object by the subject. The object in this view is dominated by the subject in the meaning-making process and definitions are assigned by the subject.

In this study of the perspective of community college teacher education students, meaning was viewed as “constructed” rather than discovered or imposed. It was guided by a constructionist process exemplified by Young (2010) in research with teachers as

co-researchers studying culturally relevant pedagogy. Young provided clear examples of engaging with the data and working with the participants and their differing views to create new meaning. She shared her data with the participants throughout and asked for their input, comments, and feedback, both positive and critical, on the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the data. Young also demonstrated the social context of constructed meaning, noting a variety of understandings in the participants' responses about "academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness" (Young, 2010, p. 253). Plans for future work further revealed a constructionist stance, with researcher and practitioners addressing issues together on the ground through inquiry-based discourse and ongoing reflection where collaboration and problem-solving are at the forefront (Young, 2010).

Wood and Bennett (2000) also built their analysis of early childhood educators on a constructionist framework. The researchers worked with nine early childhood teachers and investigated their theories of play and the relationship of the theories to practice. The authors pointed to a need to understand more about how teachers construct knowledge and how that knowledge varies from teacher to teacher. They also reflected on the "situated nature of teacher knowledge in specific teaching contexts which themselves are an important element in teacher learning, and a significant mediator between teachers' knowledge and practice" (Wood & Bennett, 2000, p. 636). This theoretical orientation undergirds their research design.

There are similarities to Young (2010) in the way Wood and Bennett approach knowledge from the constructionist epistemology as described by Crotty (1998). In the introduction to their article on teachers' professional learning, the authors referred to the

changing nature of knowledge, specifically how it varies related to context. They point out how teachers' knowledge fluctuates depending on influences such as experience and professional development (Wood & Bennett, 2000). As Young (2010) emphasized, knowledge is built on the ground, within the individuals and through their interactions with others, as in inquiry-based discourse, collaborative action and personal reflection.

Conceptual Framework: Constructivism vs. Social Constructionism

“...we do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and objects in the world...” (Crotty, 1998, p. 44). With a grounding in the active and constructed nature of knowledge, a framework on which to build a study of preservice early childhood educator can be outlined. Two possibilities are reviewed here: constructivism and social constructionism. In this examination of the perspectives of community college students, it was possible to build an understanding of constructivism in the education environment with a focus on early childhood teacher preparation. Powell and Kalina (2009) offer two major types of constructivism: Piaget's individual or cognitive constructivism and Vygotsky's social cognitive constructivism. Piaget's main focus of constructivism relates to the individual and how the individual constructs knowledge (Piaget, 1953). Vygotsky believed that there were variables such as social interaction, culture, and language that affected how the individual acquired knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). While the advantages and disadvantages of these perspectives are still debated today, the actual process of learning with meaning and students constructing concepts to create knowledge are common to both types (Powell & Kalina, 2009). It is important to distinguish accounts of constructionism where a social dimension of meaning is at center stage from those where

it is not. The use of ‘constructionism’ for the former and ‘constructivism’ for the latter can be found in the literature, although the terminology is not consistent (Crotty, 1998). In this study, the term constructivism is used for epistemological frameworks focusing exclusively on creating meaning with the individual and constructionism where the focus is on the social or collective making of meaning.

Constructivism from this view focuses on the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that we make sense of the world based on our involvement with the world and how we reflect on that involvement (Crotty, 1998). On the other side, social constructionism emphasizes the culture in which we live and work: our environment shapes the way in which we see and even feel things, and gives us our unique view of the world. Constructionism posits that truth is not out there waiting for us to find it, but rather it grows from our engagement with our world and the realities we experience (Crotty, 1998). While constructing meaning takes place in each individual mind, interactions between people and their world and their interpretations are the grounding on which knowledge is built. In this view of constructing meaning, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. There are no binding interpretations, rather the meaning-making activities are of key interest since they shape the action taken or not taken (Lincoln & Guba, 2005). This orientation to knowledge is well suited to research questions about the student perspective on transfer preparation and experiences with the transfer process.

In a study of preservice teachers, the theory of social constructionism can be especially valuable: “Teacher learning is understood as socially negotiated and contingent on knowledge of self, students, subject matter, curricula, and setting. Moreover, it

emerges from a process of reshaping existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers” (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p. 730). The perspective of future teachers turns on the interactions within their college classroom and the learning happening with professors and classmates in those environments. Also significant, however, is that thinking and ideas about teaching are shaped by the social activities with children, parents, teacher mentors, and the preservice teachers’ own histories and educational experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Investigating the development of future teachers is, thus, a socially mediated activity. Future teachers’ understanding of the world develops based on the specific social activities in which they engage, in their preservice preparation, in their life outside of the classroom, in their future schools. For example, a preservice teacher’s description of a classroom activity as being successful or their description of the abilities of specific students is a socially-based idea of success or struggle. In other words, these portrayals are based on what sociohistorical meaning is given to those activities and abilities in their particular society or particular educational system (Johnson & Golombek, 2003).

In outlining the conceptual framework for this study of the community college student perspective on Maryland’s early childhood teacher education degree program, a key area of focus was the diversity of the community college student population. Again, community colleges are an essential resource for diversifying the teaching force and improving teacher retention. A grounding in constructionism helps keep the research here open to the unique experiences of community college students whose population is made up of a large proportion of people of color, more individuals who are working their

way through school, and more students who are first in their families to pursue higher education.

As Schwandt (2000) noted, the historical and sociocultural dimensions of experiences are backdrops to our understanding of them. As individuals, we come up with ways to make meaning of our experiences and then adjust those meanings as we have new experiences. We must also be aware of the backdrops of our participants' experiences when conducting research grounded in constructionism. Preservice teachers bring their own unique backgrounds, interact within and across different two-year and four-year programs, and must be prepared to work with children and families who also have relevant and varying life stories. Care was taken in this research to construct interpretations of data in an environment of shared and conflicting understandings, practices, and language. The use of open-ended questions, varied data collection tools, and attention during coding were important strategies in keeping with this conceptual framework.

Methodology

"We construct our knowledge of the world through the lens of our individual life experiences. In this sense, every classroom is multicultural, since no two life stories are exactly the same" (Purnell, Ali, Begum, & Carter, 2007, p. 424). The amount of research conducted on community college students is small when considering the large body of studies about students in higher education in general (Bahr, 2011). Even more concerning is that qualitative research on community college students is quite rare. Bahr (2011) argues that the essential cycle, where quantitative work informs qualitative research, which in turn informs quantitative research, is largely broken when considering the study

of community college students. Rich and detailed qualitative data and analyses are vital to understand quantitative research. With the growing importance of the role of two-year institutions in preparing future educators, this gap becomes especially glaring when looking at the experiences of preservice teachers at the community college level. Their own accounts of what works and does not work in the preparation of teachers who start at a two-year institution are critical to our understanding of how to best train early childhood educators through transfer and articulation. Qualitative research methods, including opportunities for students to share at length their stories and the meaning of their experiences, were used here to address this omission.

Qualitative Approach

“...an embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research. Researchers have never before had so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, and methods of analysis to draw upon and utilize” (Leavy, 2013, p. 234). In the choice of a qualitative research approach to investigate preservice teachers, this researcher was prepared to consider her own worldview. The approach to this study, including the language, methodology, and methods, was consistent with her own perspective on teaching and learning, and, more specifically, teacher education. Using a constructionist framework, this teacher education research included developing more detailed foci as data were collected rather than testing predetermined hypotheses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The concern of this investigation was understanding the participants’ views and actions from their unique perspective. Given the open-ended style of qualitative approaches, participants answer from their own frame of reference rather than from a set of prepared queries. This is sometimes termed unstructured or open-ended research,

planned with broad questions, but with flexibility in follow-up questions to allow for detailed descriptions, unanticipated answers, and unique perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), there are five features found in all qualitative research:

- 1) *Naturalistic environment*. This term refers to the importance of the setting in which human behavior happens. Qualitative researchers try to conduct their work in the location where it occurs, if possible. In this proposed study, meetings with students were held on campus whenever possible.
- 2) *Descriptive data*. The written word is a critical component of qualitative work, and word choice is significant in illuminating the behavior being studied. Transcripts of the focus group meetings and individual interviews were shared with participants to ensure the appropriate meaning was related. Drafts of the chapters of this study were shared with the dissertation committee and colleagues to promote clarity of thought and word as well as to avoid repetition.
- 3) *Concern with the process*. Qualitative scholars look at the processes by which outcomes are formed. For example, how did the participants come to where they are or what led them to these ideas or places in time? Appendix A demonstrates how the focus group protocol and individual interview questions were aimed at this concern.
- 4) *Inductive*. The premises collected through the research process are combined to build a conclusion or relay a final picture. This takes shape as various perspectives are gathered. For this study, accessing the perspectives of students at

four community colleges provides a picture of the pathways through early childhood teacher education in Maryland.

- 5) *Meaning*. While qualitative research can be done from objectivist or subjectivist perspectives, most qualitative researchers emphasize making sense or meaning, focusing on the participant perspectives. In this investigation, the notes and transcripts from focus group meetings and individual interviews were examined and compared, and patterns and codes tracked. Data were analyzed and compared across individual contributions.

As indicated above, these five features are supported by practices central to qualitative inquiry. One practice is establishing credibility, or clearly linking the research findings to aspects of real life to show the genuineness of the findings. Member checking, or asking participants to review the outcomes of transcriptions, is an important step in building credibility. Triangulation, through gathering varied perspectives and multiple voices, also adds to the trustworthiness and reliability of data. This is important not only in the collection phase but also during the data analysis and report writing phase. Member reflections “allow for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration” (Tracey, 2010, p. 844).

Another practice of central importance to qualitative research is self-reflexivity, considered to be honesty and authenticity with one’s self, one’s research, and one’s audience (Tracey, 2010). Rather than trying to keep the scholar removed from the research, and presenting the evidence in as objective a form as possible, self-reflexivity calls for documenting the strengths and shortcomings of the researcher, and being clear

about their potential influence as a participant and interpreter of the research.

Transparency has a role in qualitative practice as well. The researcher must reveal the study's challenges and share any unexpected changes and adjustments that occurred, highlighting transformations in the focus of the research (Tracey, 2010). For this study, the researcher's background was described to participants as well as included in the written analysis to note any potential conflicts. Any shifts in plans or changes with participants are clearly noted here in the final report as well.

Overall Design of the Study

In order to bring together a broad-range of student experiences, participants were recruited who planned to graduate with the AAT in ECE/SpEd degree from different community colleges in the state. This section outlines the methods used to study the student perspective, including what background information was used, how participants were recruited and chosen, and which methods were employed to collect and analyze data. Focus groups were hosted in the spring semester before students planned to graduate with their associate degree and follow-up interviews were conducted while they were still at the two-year institution as well as additional interviews held in the fall semester once they transferred to a four-year university in the state. Information was also gathered on those two students who planned to graduate and transfer but did not yet complete the process. The primary focus for the fall interviews, however, was on the transfer process, how it worked at different campuses, and what problems students might have encountered. See Table 1 for the list of community colleges that participants attended, how many ECE AAT students transferred, and the universities to which students most often transferred.

Table 1 (data supplied by institutions)

Where ECE/SpEd AAT Students Transferred (2016)

Community College	Number of Transfers 2016	4-year with most Transfers	4-year with Second Largest
Community College A	20	Tern U Satellite	Mallard U
Community College D	11	Tanager	Mallard U
Community College C	8	Tern	Tanager
Community College B	4	Tern	Sparrow

Participant Selection: Institutions and Students

There are 16 two-year teacher education programs in Maryland. To facilitate a comparison of student perspectives on different programs, focus groups were held at or near the different campuses for students on that campus. Information was gathered on what factors enhanced or obstructed their experience in their specific ECE/SpEd AAT program, as well as on their transfer preparation and process and how these differed by institution. Originally, seven community colleges were chosen for this investigation. One program (the smallest of the seven) had only five graduates, none of whom responded to the recruiting email. The program coordinator was unwilling to provide class time for a recruiting visit, and the distance was too great for an unplanned stop on campus. The second institution (with 10 graduates) indicated they would distribute the recruitment email to students but none responded. That institution was also unreceptive to an on-campus visit. Finally, the third institution conducted gatekeeping to a level that kept the researcher from meeting instructors and students. The ECE program coordinator restricted access to program faculty, advisors, and students.

The final four schools were chosen based on three criteria. First, they represented different sizes: the smallest campus had a total student enrollment in the 2016-17 academic year of 11,842 and the largest community college had a total student population on three campuses of 23,916 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Community College Enrollment and Education Degrees Awarded (Trends in Degrees and Certificates by Program, Maryland Higher Education Institutions, 2004-2017, March 2018, Maryland Higher Education Commission)

Community College	Total Student Enrollment 2016-17	Early Childhood Education AAT/AA degrees awarded, 2016
Community College A	23,916	30/8
Community College D	13,904	0/21
Community College C	21,416	8/11
Community College B	11,842	10/6

*Coding is done by individual institutions and therefore inconsistencies exist in the numbers (for example, an enrollment of 0 for Community College D may be a reporting discrepancy)

A second important criterion was location: With planned focus groups on each campus, as well as two follow-up interviews with all participants, ease of access by car or public transportation was critical for reasonable completion of data collection. All four campuses are within an hour of either the Washington, DC or Baltimore metropolitan areas. The third criterion for selection was diversity of student participants: the community colleges vary from suburban environment with a majority white population to a more urban location with majority-minority student enrollment. The universities to which the students most often transfer also represent a diversity of location, size, and student representation (see Table 3). One important note is that annual enrollment

declined between 2012 and 2017 in all but the largest community college ECE AAT programs in this study (MHEC, 2017).

Table 3
University Enrollment, Location and Education Degrees Awarded
 (from, Maryland Higher Education Commission)

Maryland University	Approximate Full-Time Undergraduate Student Enrollment, 2016-17	Early Childhood Education and ECE/SpEd degrees awarded, 2016
Mallard University	28,500	23
Tanager University	11,000	*
Tern University	19,000	100
Bluebird University	5,000	17
Nighthawk University	2,500	26
Sparrow University	3,000	21

*unavailable; students choose major, such as Psychology, and earn ECE certificate separately

Contact was made with early childhood teacher education faculty or program coordinators at each institution by telephone or email. In all of the final cases, the faculty member or program coordinator was willing to support this study. Three of the four community colleges required approval from their own Institutional Review Board offices before I could initiate contact with students. In general, the IRB process was efficient, although one director started a review of the IRB application and then left the institution before its completion, delaying the study by several months. The program coordinators either provided an introduction to the appropriate person to assist with the study or specific information about reaching current students planning to graduate. For the spring 2018 data collection, each coordinator at the four community colleges was asked about a current class for the researcher to visit for recruitment purposes. If there were no classes

in which graduating AAT ECE/SpEd students would have enrolled, a recruitment message was sent via email to the program coordinator who then forwarded the message to the students. Visits by the researcher were planned wherever feasible and recruitment information was presented and handed to the students. The IRB consent form from the University of Maryland was also distributed during this first contact (see Appendices D and F).

It took several months to gather contact information and responses for the final four community colleges, with some institutions more willing and able to help than others. Some program coordinators were quick to respond to email messages while, for some institutions, multiple phone calls were made and messages had to be sent to multiple individuals. When no responses were forthcoming, contact was made with the appropriate Dean's office. As indicated, two of the original seven institutions were removed from the study due to small numbers of students enrolled in the ECE/SpEd AAT program as well as a lack of interest on the part of the coordinators. The third community college, which is a majority-minority program but with a small ECE program, had strict gatekeeping that disallowed contact between the researcher and their students, even though IRB permission had been granted through their Research, Assessment, and Effectiveness office.

To compensate for losing that majority-minority campus in this study, contact was made with the program coordinator at the four-year university (pseudonym Bluebird) where most of those students transferred. They agreed to send a recruiting email to their ECE students. Three students responded and participated, although they came from Community College A. Further, it took several months of sending email messages and

making phone calls to reach all of the program coordinators of the four-year universities where participants transferred. Most were willing to speak about their transfer programs and gave generously of their time on phone conversations and in responding to follow-up email clarifications.

Table 4

Number of Focus Group Participants by Institution

Community College	Focus Group Participants
Community College A	Group 1 = 4 Group 2 = 2
Community College B	3
Community College C	3 (individual meetings)
Community College D	3
Bluebird University	3

After the students expressed interest in the study either in person or via email, a formal letter of invitation was distributed, including information about the focus groups and interviews, and a brief questionnaire seeking demographic information as well as factors relevant to the study (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Interested participants were asked to return the questionnaire (together with the IRB consent form if they were not met with face-to-face) to participate in the focus group and follow-up individual interviews. Four individuals completed the paperwork but then did not follow-through to participate in discussions. Another four expressed interest via email but did not complete any other part of the process.

Since scheduling is often difficult for students with work, school and additional responsibilities, information on availability for the focus group meeting was gathered

from the start using the questionnaire. One goal of the questionnaire was also to gather a racially and culturally diverse group of women and men, with varied backgrounds and ages, and from different geographic areas. Other than those who did not choose to participate, all students who were interested were selected to join the study. The final group of 18 participants was indeed diverse, although only one male responded and participated.

Table 5

Race and Ethnicity of Student Participants

Race/Ethnicity	Total Students	Percentage of Participant Population
African American or Black	4	22%
Caucasian or White (non-Hispanic)	7	39%
Asian American or Pacific Islander	0	0%
Hispanic or Latino/a	6	33%
Multi-racial	1	6%

Data Collection

A single method of data collection would not have been adequate to provide all the information needed for this study; a range of methods and data sources was required. Multiple techniques are also recommended for triangulation, where the different methods are used as a check on one another (Maxwell, 2013). These strategies are addressed in more detail in the discussion of validation and reliability. For this study, information was gathered from preservice teachers using focus groups, individual interviews, follow-up interviews (in person and by phone, if necessary), and a demographic questionnaire with open-ended queries. Triangulation was carried out by cross checking information from students through interviews with faculty, academic advisors, and early childhood

education program coordinators at the community colleges and universities (see Table 6). When possible, these interviews were conducted in person; otherwise, phone interviews were held. Phone conversations with state policy makers and higher education officials also served data triangulation purposes, as did the review of contextual documents from state policy groups and higher education institutions.

Table 6

Study Interviewees at Two- and Four-Year Institutions

Interviewee	Position	Race/Ethnicity	Gender
Community College A	Professor/ECE Program Coordinator	Latina	F
Community College B	Professor/Education Department Chair	White	F
Community College C	Teacher Education Department Chair	White	M
Community College C	Coordinator, Teacher Education	White	F
Community College D	Director, Teacher Education and Child Care	White	F
Mallard University	Academic Advisor, College of Education	White	F
Mallard University	Director of Student Services, CoE	White	F
Nighthawk University	Academic Advisor, School of Education	White	F
Sparrow University	Associate Professor, Education	White	F
Tanager University	Assistant Professor, Early Childhood	White	F
Tern University	Chair, Early Childhood Education	African American or Black	F
University System of Maryland	Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs	White	F
University System of Maryland	Associate Vice Chancellor (ret.)	White	F

Focus groups can be especially useful when the topic or population under investigation has not been broadly studied in the past (Morgan, 1998). Individual interviews have been shown to be valuable in building on comparisons among several

populations; the time advantage of focus groups relative to individual interviews is valuable in comparing different groups (Morgan, 1998). The questions for the focus group and individual sessions each align with one or more of the research questions for this investigation (see Appendices A and B). Both the focus groups and individual interviews were audio-recorded, and the participants were given an opportunity to review the transcriptions and provide further thought on their contributions. These meetings gave students the chance to share the circumstances and influences that had an impact on their experiences in the ECE/SpEd AAT program.

An additional data collection strategy was informal discussions with academic advisors and faculty at each institution: Feedback from advisors and instructors on each campus was collected and used to make institutional comparisons. This information helped clarify each institution's understanding of and supports for the AAT policy requirements and transfer process. It added further detail with which to compare programs and clarification of the different pathways from two-year to four-year institutions. Documents provided to advisors as part of their ongoing professional development as well as those provided to students were also reviewed, such as policy statements, briefing documents, course catalogues, and training materials. In order to add background from higher education policy institutions in the state, a review of web sites for various Maryland State education institutions, including the Maryland State Department of Education, Maryland Higher Education Commission, and University System of Maryland was conducted to locate the contact information for staff. Early childhood education colleagues on community college and university campuses were approached for their viewpoint as well as for advice on who might be able to help build a

historic perspective on the teacher education transfer programs. I had in-person and phone conversations with five higher education staff and administrators as well as at least one early childhood faculty, program coordinators or academic advisors from each community college and four-year institution.

Questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) that included open-ended questions about transfer preparation and procedures was used to help develop a diverse participant pool and to collect information that would be helpful in guiding the focus group discussions (See Tables 4 – 9 in Appendix G for participant demographics and questionnaire results). The form was used to facilitate communication between the interviewer and the participants and to record basic data about the students that informed the choice of participants. In this study, all ECE/SpEd AAT students planning to graduate from each of the four community college campuses were recruited. An ideal mix of students in this study would have included more than one male, although finding male participants was difficult given their very small numbers in early childhood teacher education programs in Maryland (MHEC, 2015). Since community colleges include many nontraditional students, it was also important to have participants who are older than the average recent high school graduate. A mix of racial and ethnic background was also significant here, given the diverse make-up of community college students and the stated goal of investigating the AAT policies' roles in diversifying the teacher pool in the state. The questionnaire was an important tool on those campuses where the number of students planning to transfer was too large for focus group participation (e.g., above the recommended limit of six), and participants could be chosen based on desired diversity.

In either case, collecting communication details early in the investigation avoided confusion and missed appointments (Seidman, 2012).

Focus groups. A qualitative method that involves a small number of people is the focus group; these individuals gather in an informal group discussion that is “focused” around a specific topic or set of issues. The formal use of focus group methods can be traced back to the early 1940s and government-sponsored studies about U.S. involvement in World War II (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). The original focus groups were tightly controlled by the researcher and used to gather specific information from people about defined topics. The work by researchers Lazarsfeld and Merton laid a foundation for future qualitative research using focus groups. The authors’ legacy is two-fold: “(1) capturing people’s responses in real space and time in the context of face-to-face interactions and (2) strategically ‘focusing’ interview prompts based on themes that are generated in these face-to-face interactions and that are considered particularly important to the researchers” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009, p. 2). Merton also worked with Kendall on a groundbreaking article (Merton & Kendall, 1946) that became a founding text for focus group research. This article and subsequent book (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990) lay out a four-step process for conducting the focused interview. The researcher first gathers participants who have been involved in some area or instance, then develops a set of hypotheses based on analysis of the phenomena under study. Third, the researcher develops a set of questions to test the hypotheses; and fourth, the researcher tries to determine how the participants view the situation.

In the decades following these early efforts, qualitative scholars have moved to exercise less control over the flow of focus groups. They seldom, for example, explicitly

develop and test formal hypotheses, although they do generate and check on assumptions and themes throughout the data collection process. There is also considerable variability in the degree to which groups are “managed” by the researcher rather than developing in more free-flowing and self-organizing ways. When they are allowed to be more free-flowing, focus groups can lessen the role of the researcher, allowing participants to “take over” or “own” the interview space (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

Although focus groups are not naturally occurring events, researchers can create more natural interactions in focus groups than in individual interviews where the role of the interviewer can be overwhelming. These developments in focus group methods informed the approach that was taken in this investigation. The researcher set the agenda and encouraged broad participation, but kept the conversation focused on the research questions. The interactions among group members also provided guidance for more naturally occurring follow-up interview questions with individual students.

Use of focus groups in this study. Recruitment of students from various teacher education programs in Maryland provided a benefit to this proposed research. Parker and Tritter (2006) point out that little attention has been paid to the key phase of recruitment in focus group methods. For this study, the recruitment and selection of research participants provided the opportunity to research a broad range of viewpoints and experiences as well as gather information on a variety of community college programs. Parker and Tritter (2006) note that discussions of focus groups often lack details on how participants were selected; even more importantly, the discussion fails to take these issues into consideration in the analysis and interpretation of the data. During the initial

recruitment phase, care was taken to give prospective participants a clear understanding of the purpose of the study and to select the most diverse pool of participants possible.

As with interviews, the focus group method gathers individual responses in a face-to-face setting. The additional aspect of generating ideas and themes as they emerged through the group context provided significant value to this method. A possibility of participants learning and gaining insight from one another was also kept in mind. Given the complexity of teacher education, transfer processes, and the potential for a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences in the participants, the focus group element of this study provided substantial content for discussion. As Parker and Tritter (2006) have found, focus groups are valuable because they provide one method for “capturing group interaction and harnessing the dynamics involved to prompt fuller and deeper discussion and the triggering of new ideas” (p. 29).

Finally, the role of the researcher in focus group meetings should be considered. The potential is there for the facilitator to provide useful feedback to the participants as well as guide the conversation in helpful directions. There is no easy separation between the “researcher” and the “researched” in this form of focus group usage (Parker & Tritter, 2006). These “positions in dialogue” are not objective but neither are the roles of teachers and teacher educators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). To maintain a clarity in researcher role as facilitator rather than active participant, the planned questions and follow-up questions were carefully tracked. Individual interviews taking place after the focus group sessions allowed student participants to make amendments and adjustments to their comments.

Benefits and limitations of focus group research. Focus groups are an efficient way to collect data from multiple participants and thereby possibly increase the overall number of participants in a study. Another benefit is that these groups are social entities; a social environment can generate a sense of being part of something bigger, create a feeling of cohesiveness, and allow participants to have a comfort in sharing information (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Also, the interactions that occur among participants can yield valuable data and create possibilities for spontaneous responses. In this particular study, the discussions and sharing of personal stories helped the participants; the preservice educators expressed that they gained insights, resources and contacts to help them cope with various problems that might arise as they move forward in their preparation.

As with any data collection method, there are limitations as well as benefits to focus group research. Difficulties could have arisen in both the collection and analysis of focus group data. The researcher needed to maintain the role of facilitator, staying on the periphery as the interactions among participants were most important (Parker & Tritter, 2006). The researcher was also transparent about her efforts and noted any difficulties in group member participation. Another limitation in focus group research can be the difficulty people have in exploring topics about which little is known. Since students were sharing their personal experiences, this did not seem to be an issue. A final limitation in focus group research can be seen in the analysis of the data. There are multiple interactions at work in groups and no possibility to control for these variables. For example, individual stories or memories may be affected by the discussions of others. One way to address this potential problem, which is built into this research design, is to

give each participant adequate time to review the transcripts and provide follow-up and amend their contribution (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

Interviews in teacher education. The study began with focus group meetings followed by individual interviews. In order to gather more detailed and personal information from the participants, interviews were conducted subsequent to the focus group meetings with each consenting member of the four groups of community college students. A second round of interviews happened in the fall semester once students had transferred to four-year universities. As Seidman (2012) indicates, interviews are meaningful ways to gather individual stories and learn more about individual experiences.

The individual interviews were held in public spaces at or near the students' campus, or by phone, and discussions ran for approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Open-ended questions were used primarily to allow the participants to gain comfort with the environment and give them time to reflect on and explore their experiences. The goal of the first round of interviews was to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience in the AAT program at their community college. "An open-ended question, unlike a leading question, establishes the territory to be explored while allowing the participant to take any direction he or she wants. It does not presume an answer" (Seidman, 2012, p. 87). These interviews were aimed at understanding the participant's subjective experience, at finding out what the program was like for them. Asking what something was like for participants gave them the chance to reconstruct their experience according to their own sense of what was important, without the guidance or input of the interviewer (Kvale, 1996).

In general, the interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on a particular area of the subjects' life (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, information was gathered in the words of 18 preservice teachers on their experience with Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT program. Kvale (1996) describes the topic of the qualitative research interview as "the lived world of the subjects and their relation to it" (p. 29), and the purpose as a description and understanding of "the central themes the subjects experience" (p. 30). The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and understand the meanings of central themes in the world of the subjects. A key to success in using interviewing as a research technique is an interest in others. A researcher's words and actions must point to the belief that others' stories are important (Seidman, 2012). Then, the main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say, both the factual and implicit. Kvale (1996) suggests reformulating the message in the course of the interview and sending it back to the participant to obtain confirmation or disapproval of the interpretation. This strategy was used in both the initial and follow-up interviews in this study. In other words, the research interview sought to describe specific situations, not provide general opinions.

Interviews with the individuals who are part of an educational institution are a key method for researchers to investigate the organization and its processes. For community colleges and other institutions of higher education, students make up an important group whose experiences must be explored. A great deal of research is done on schooling in the United States, yet little of it is based on studies involving the perspectives of the students and the many others who constitute the school experience (Seidman, 2012). Interviewing

is a strong method of inquiry for the researcher who is interested in studying organizations in higher education, including learning about student experiences in the classroom, with advising, in transferring, and what meaning students make of that experience.

Considerations in research interviews. Research interviews occur in a social setting, raising areas of concern that should be addressed before planning and conducting begins. Seidman (2012) points out that research is often done by people in positions of power. He sees this as an especially difficult issue in the United States where much of the social structure is inequitable. Care was taken by the researcher to give the participants a sense of ownership of the experiences they shared. This was done by meeting in neutral settings, acknowledging difficulties and successes shared by participants, and asking follow-up questions that showed active and engaged listening. Second, interviewers need to be aware of specific skills necessary to conduct successful sessions. An important technique used in this data collection process was giving the participant adequate time to consider and provide their answer. Seidman (2012) notes that new interviewers are often uncomfortable with silence and jump in too quickly with a question to fill the void. In the context here, where participants must reflect on personal beliefs about and experiences in teaching and learning, time for thoughtfulness was critical to development of meaningful interactions.

Finally, individual interviewing relationships occur in a social context, where there may be positive feelings and respect on both sides or anxiety on either or both sides (Kvale, 1996). “Although an interviewer might attempt to isolate the interviewing relationship from that context and make it unique to the interviewer and the participant,

the social forces of class, ethnicity, race, and gender, as well as other social identities, impose themselves” (Seidman, 2012, p. 97). The interviewer in this study was conscious of the interpersonal dynamics during interactions with participants and took them into account later during data analysis. For example, two of the 18 participants had been students in a course with the researcher. This previous relationship of instructor/student may have affected the student responses in face-to-face interactions. The other participants were also aware of my past teaching at a community college and current work as a university academic advisor and PhD candidate. This could cause some students discomfort in sharing personal information and details about who they perceived to be the researcher’s colleagues. To counter this, each focus group and interview was started with a brief discussion of the anonymity of the participant responses and a reminder about the use of pseudonyms for individuals and institutions. An awareness on the part of the researcher of her own experiences with these dynamics and a sensitivity to the effect of them on participants was important. The interviewer tried to maintain a clear professionalism to promote comfort in the environment as well as independent responses from the participants. Brief clarification on privacy for the students who studied with the interviewer was provided.

Interviews with focus groups. Some researchers have used focus groups as precursor to investigations, while others have used them as follow-up to verify findings (Vaughn, Shum, & Sinagub, 1996). In this study, the group interviews were a starting point to guide question development for further exploration during the individual interviews. Prior to the follow-up interviews, students were sent the transcriptions of their focus group meeting. Similarly, they were sent their first individual interview transcripts

to review before their second one-on-one session. This author transcribed all interactions, listening to the taped conversations while typing them into a word processing document. A review of their comments and corrections was a brief part of each interview, although very few and only minor changes were requested. These interview sessions were also valuable opportunities for the participants to share information that they may have been hesitant to speak about in front of the larger group. Multiple methods, such as group and individual discussions, review of transcripts and member checks, and a questionnaire, were used here to gain information about the different aspects of each student's experiences, with the hope of broadening the range and depth of information: "This strategy generates a dialogue among the results of different methods, an engagement with differences in findings that forces you to reexamine your understanding of what is going on" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 104).

Specific questions to guide the focus group discussion as well as the individual interviews are outlined in Appendices A and B. Every effort was made to follow recommended criteria for both constructing and evaluating questions—that questions be brief, relevant, unambiguous, specific, and objective (Peterson, 2000). For the focus group meetings and interviews, deep listening was critical: "Treat every word as having the potential to unlock the mystery of the subject's way of viewing the world" (Seidman, 2012, p. 81). A guided conversation approach, which is neither structured nor unstructured but rather semi-structured, was used to keep the conversation comfortable but also moving in a productive direction. The predetermined questions prompted discussion and the researcher then had the opportunity to explore particular responses.

Data Analysis and Coding

“I want to emphasize that reading and thinking about your interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories and applying these to your data, analyzing narrative structure and contextual relationships, and creating matrices and other displays are *all* important forms of data analyses” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). Reviewing and reflecting on notes and transcripts from the focus groups, interviews, and AAT materials from the colleges and universities and higher education institutions was ongoing throughout the data collection process.

As Creswell (2007) noted, coding data from open-ended interviewing can be difficult. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desired, and it also allowed the researcher to ask probing questions as a means of follow-up, allowing the participants to fully express their viewpoints and experiences (Turner, 2010). Since open-ended interviews allow participants to fully express their responses in detail, it can be challenging for researchers to extract similar themes or codes from the interview transcripts as they would with less open-ended responses. However, this reduces researcher biases within the study, particularly when the interviewing process involves many participants (Turner, 2010).

The data collected for this study through focus groups, interviews, and review of background materials was coded and analyzed in a way well-suited to detailed individual perspectives. The analysis promoted rich and varied uses of the data which in turn developed meaningful insights. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) suggest the four following options:

- 1) Constant comparison analysis: This method includes comparing all incidents collected in each category, integrating the categories, and then using the emergent outline to write a theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- 2) Classical content analysis: The analysis here includes identifying smaller groupings of the data and placing a code with each small group. These codes then are placed into similar groupings and counted, rather than into thematic groupings.
- 3) Keywords-in-context: Each word spoken by a focus group member is reviewed in this process with thought to the words uttered before and after it, and to the words used by other participants.
- 4) Discourse analysis: In this final method, conversations between group members are evaluated as well as the interchanges between the moderator and the focus group members. Examining these interactions provides richer data and more meaningful analysis.

The classical content method was selected, with a step-by-step analysis of each grouping of data and the development of a system of categories. Transcripts and other data sources were reviewed and uploaded to NVivo software. Significant statements from each source were coded and moved into groups named for their content, such as Praxis Core Basic Skills Exam or Field Experience. Each category or group was reviewed and revised as the analysis of each data source continued. The number of items in each coding group was counted and those with only one or two instances were removed or absorbed in other groups. For example, only one student mentioned commuting issues and this generic problem was dropped from consideration. While “Financial Aid” was an

initial coding group, those student comments were absorbed in “Non-Academic Supports” or “General Challenges.” Other categories were merged if significant overlap was found and the final groups were collected as significant thematic areas. An example of this combination is placing Financial Aid, Good Advising, Internships, and Praxis Core Preparation under a Supports Provided category. This method was well-suited to the focus on student perspective and experience rather than keywords or conversation. For instance, the constant comparison method is most effectively used when the goal is developing a theory, whereas this study was focused on sharing varying perspectives. Also, discourse analysis is conversation focused, while this investigation had at its core the experiences of students. Conversations were used in the data collection process, but it is the expressed perspectives that are at the core of this research.

The participants agreed to the recording of all meetings; notes were stored on a password-protected laptop computer. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommend recording hunches and important insights during the data collection before they are forgotten, rather than focusing on detailed descriptions alone. In general, if too much time passes before interactions are transcribed, some of the context and perceptions can be lost. Immediately following each focus group session and individual interview, before the transcriptions of the recordings take place, I wrote brief summaries or memos and highlighted important ideas so that more detailed information could be pursued in the follow-up interviews. After reading the transcripts, I refined follow-up questions. Since data were collected from four community college groups and numerous individuals, it was important to maintain separate online storage files for each one for comparative purposes and to keep the coding separate in the initial phases of analysis.

While the data were collected, a coding system using the classical content method was developed. Classical content analysis is relevant for the individual interviews and focus groups in this study as well as for the review of advising and policy documents. It enabled this researcher to sift through the large volumes of data in a systematic fashion and was a useful technique to discover and describe the focus of individual, group, and institutional materials (Holsti, 1969). It also allowed inferences to be made based on one method of data collection which could then be substantiated using other methods. Analysis was started by searching through the data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics of importance and interest to the study. The researcher then highlighted small groups of words and phrases to represent the topics and patterns. These words and phrases are coding categories. NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis package, was used to code and manage the data. This program provided tools to identify patterns in coding as well as allowed for formatting and editing documents without affecting the existing coding.

The next step was to develop a list of pertinent coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Some examples of these are setting/context codes, perspectives held by subjects, subjects' way of thinking about people and objects, process codes, activity codes, event codes, relationship and social structure codes, and narrative codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Within those general codes, specific categories were defined. Some examples of varied categories from previous qualitative studies included the physical setting and resources of the community college and the university, poor transfer advising, lack of communication with instructors, helpful relationships with instructors, and feelings of academic inadequacy. Some specific categories from this study of the student

perspective on Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT policies are: special education preparation is lacking in the AAT curriculum; field experience is the most important part of the teacher education preparation program; and academic advising is viewed negatively by most AAT students. Codes that led to the development of these categories included poor or incorrect advising leading to delayed graduation, positive memories of the field experience placements, and additional special education coursework as a suggested improvement. The advising and special education codes would be categorized as factors that obstructed the student's experiences while the field experience enhanced their education. As indicated above, the number of items in each category was counted and categories with only one or two codes were removed or the items recoded. Other categories were merged if significant overlap was found and the final groups were collected as significant thematic areas. Categories were analyzed and connected across individuals, and then across campuses. The factors that impacted student experiences differed by individual and institution. Certain codes, however, were general to community college attendance and others spoke directly to a specific AAT program.

Both the larger themes and individual categories were kept in focus in the presentation of the final analysis. Identifying relationships among the different elements of the analysis rather than keeping them fragmented into categories was critical in developing a complete picture of the experience of the students (Maxwell, 2013). Once the coding categories were established and the data were coded, matrices were constructed for common codes across the different institutions. This helped the researcher view each concept across the interviews, documents, and focus group meetings, and keep the analysis informed by the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). A goal of this analysis

was to uncover whether the student experiences differed by the community college they attended and/or the transfer institution. For example, a connection across categories at several institutions, such as supportive ECE/SpEd academic advisors and clear course requirements, highlighted a similarity rather than a difference in experiences based on the specific community college attended.

Validity and Reliability

“An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain, or theorise” (Hammersley, 1992, p. 69). Concerns related to validity in qualitative research have been a part of academic dialogue for decades. These issues are still significant and make up a large part of university education: “Reminiscent of the paradigm wars, qualitative research, validity safeguards included, is the object of intense scrutiny and critique” (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 320). The issue of validity raises ethical questions concerning trustworthiness, which is crucial in establishing confidence in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, what is the process for a researcher to progress from perhaps hundreds of pages of interview and focus group notes as well as policy and program documents to a final analysis report? Using different data-collection techniques and collecting data from numerous subjects about similar topics, is often referred to as triangulation, and is a step towards validity (Bodgen & Biklen, 2014). For instance, checking comments of one participant against those of others is important in supporting or challenging conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). Meeting with a number of participants also allows for connecting their experiences and building on them with the experiences of other participants.

Collecting data over time with extensive interviews of a good number of individuals and checking these data against official documents provided rich data in the process of ruling out validity threats. Respondent validation, or member checks, where the researcher systematically solicited feedback about the data from the participants in the study was another vital step in ruling out the chance of misinterpretation of data (Maxwell, 2013). Each participant in this study was presented the transcription of their comments via email within a few weeks of their interaction; they then had at least two weeks to respond with changes and comments to the data.

Another key concern in qualitative research is reliability (Golafshani, 2003). Joppe (2000) defines reliability as: "...[t]he extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study...and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable" (p. 1). This definition emphasizes the idea of replicability or repeatability of results or observations. For this study using focus groups and individual interviews, a key to reliability was minimizing the effect of the interviewer and the interview process as well as focus group procedures on how the participants responded and reconstructed their experience (Seidman, 2012). For example, using the same protocols for each focus group and interview, such as holding all meetings in comfortable spaces where students could speak freely, following a similar question format, and giving each student equal time and opportunity to participate, helped ensure reliability of data in this study.

As an ethical consideration, reliability is affected by researcher perspectives and their efforts to eliminate bias and increase truthfulness about the social phenomenon

being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The researcher is part of the interview process: they ask questions, respond to the participant, and at times even share their own experiences. The interviewers also work with the material, select from it, interpret, describe, and analyze it. To keep reliability issues in full view, or the ability to reproduce a study, the researcher should acknowledge and affirm their role as well as clarify their part in being adaptable in responding to situations as they arise (Seidman, 2012). Openness about research decisions, such as changes to follow-up questions during a focus group meeting, is necessary in efforts to allow the replication of a study. For this investigation, all adjustments made to the focus group process, such as room changes, question amendments, and issues that come up for participants, were documented and shared in the final accounting.

In considering the focus group method, the interviewer has less control given the group environment. It is difficult to ensure that participants will follow stipulations: “Like other qualitative research methods and techniques, focus groups have the potential to generate unexpected and unpredictable outcomes both in terms of the data gathered and the complexities of the research process as a whole” (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p.32). The group may be made up of participants from a variety of backgrounds, with differences in status, position, and specific needs. These variances highlight the importance for the researcher to recognize individual participants and emphasize data sensitivity and confidentiality (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Professional codes of conduct therefore play an important role in helping ensure reliability and validity of a study and the data collected. Participants and institutions in this study were given pseudonyms for confidentiality and the notes and recordings were locked away to prevent exposure. All

individuals in the focus group and individual interviews had the opportunity to pass on any question asked of them and had the option to leave the study at any time.

Limitations to this Study

Keeping the number of participants in each focus group for this study to no more than six students allowed for the gathering of deeper and more detailed information. The small sample size from each community college, however, can be seen as a limitation as can the limit of four two-year institutions; there are 16 such programs in the state of Maryland. The four chosen programs, however, represent a variety of environments, student bodies, and communities. In addition, a goal for this study was to find groups of students who represent the diversity found on two-year campuses: gender, age, race, and ethnicity. This diversity creates its own complications, however: while community college student populations are diverse, the characteristics of individuals such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity are not isolated characteristics. These features can sometimes conflict and shift in meaning and impact (Stanley & Slattery, 2003). Checking for clarity and meaning with each participant helped address these intertwined characteristics. For example, some students claimed that they did not get timely information, but in further discussion, those students admitted to not frequently checking their official school email account. Triangulation—using the questionnaire data, focus group discussions, and the interviews—also helped clarify the complicated individual contributions.

Second, accessing the perspectives of students has limits in that self-report measures such as these may not adequately correlate with behavior, and memories of past coursework may be uncertain. Also, several students indicated they self-selected for this study to help others so future AAT degree seekers would not have to struggle in the same manner. Thus, participants may have experienced more hardship than students who did

not volunteer. Another issue raised earlier is that freely speaking about deeply personal details with a focus group of unknown participants may have hindered the interactions of some students. The rapport-building elements, such as opening the meetings with small talk and time to share experiences, were helpful in addressing this potential limitation. Tools were available to aid in quickly breaking down barriers and building relationships with students. For example, starting by learning and practicing names helped each group member feel respected. Also, sharing personal stories in pairs before speaking out to the entire group helped break down any misconceptions that might have formed in larger gathering; mixing up the pairs allowed for all members to become familiar with the others. Finally, the facilitator sat with the larger group to build trust and lessen barriers.

Related to the discussion of validity and reliability are the beliefs and feelings a researcher brings to data collection, especially focus group gatherings. Being mindful of them is especially critical in working with a diverse group of students. Stanley and Slattery (2003) outline an interesting experience with this in their own work:

As we analyzed this excerpt, we recognized that we brought our own biases and assumptions into the conversation. For example, Patrick aggressively pursued multiple angles to elicit information about students' experiences because he perceived there was more field material to uncover related to race and gender. Christine, on the other hand, did not perceive a hidden agenda on the part of the students and attempted to move the discussion to closure when she perceived that we had saturated the dialogue on these issues. In our analysis, we uncovered two possible reasons for these approaches. First, our assumptions about student experiences around issues of race influenced our line of questioning... In

examining the transcript, we discovered that Patrick dominated the dialogue to elicit responses that conformed to his assumptions. (p. 711)

This excerpt illustrates the importance of seeking participants who were not students in one of my past classes. Familiarity may allow bias to enter the process on the part of both the researcher and subject. Only two of the 18 were known to the researcher, having been students in a past course. Also, a diverse group of participants was important to keep hidden assumptions or agendas from taking over the process. For instance, if the researcher has expectations for the type of student perspectives to be shared, a variety of students from different schools and neighborhoods would help ensure the viewpoints are not slanted in one direction or another.

Conclusion

To summarize, a qualitative study using focus groups and individual interviews was used to study the student perspective on the community college teacher education programs in Maryland. Focus groups as well as interviews were conducted with 18 early childhood teacher education students representing four 2-year and six 4-year institutions in the state. Documents were also reviewed and analyzed, including those provided to advisors as part of their ongoing professional development and information provided to students in the ECE/SpEd AAT programs. Policy statements from the state of Maryland and institutions of higher education as well as briefing documents, course catalogues, and education materials were also examined.

This exploration of community college early childhood teacher education programs is valuable on many levels. First, a stated goal in a recent Maryland State Department of Education report (2015) is the need to examine and revise policies

governing the transfer credits from the AAT in early childhood education to the four-year college early childhood education programs to enhance the smooth and consistent transfer of credits for all AAT students. Second, given the diverse population at community colleges, this study adds perspectives that have not been previously recorded and considered. Teacher education programs must acknowledge that recruiting more teachers of color requires preparation that addresses all the needs of its future educators (Brown, 2014).

Finally, there is a growing chorus to provide quality early childhood education for children prior to kindergarten. The Kirwan Commission has recommended full-day education for 3-year-olds from low-income households and universal pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds. The need will thus be great for trained teachers of three- and four-year-olds:

Maryland is widely regarded as a leader in early childhood education in the United States... However, unlike 10 other states, Maryland does not offer universal education for 4-year-olds. Maryland must expand its current early childhood education program so that all 4-year-olds, regardless of income, have an opportunity to enroll in a quality full-day program... Three-year-olds from low-income families should also have access to a quality full-day program. Provision of a full-day program must be given to special education children regardless of family income. (Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education Preliminary Report, 2018)

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This investigation examines the perspective of early childhood preservice teachers who started at the community college and planned to earn an AAT degree. The State of Maryland's AAT was developed as a groundbreaking effort in teacher preparation and was the first of its kind in the United States. Ongoing transfer issues in moving from two-year to four-year programs, however, have led to calls for further review of the degree program (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018): "It would be beneficial for future AAT graduates, and other community college transfer students, to investigate the transfer experiences of students who have gone on to 4-year institutions" (Bigham, 2011, p. 144). The student perspective is mostly missing from the research on teacher preparation at community colleges, but it is critical in helping educators, administrators and policy makers understand what has been working in community college teacher preparation and why areas of struggle still exist for students.

Research Questions and Supporting Data

The central goal of this study was to answer the question: What is the student perspective on Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education (ECE/SpEd) AAT program? Included in the investigation are three sub-questions: What factors have enhanced or obstructed their experience? What is their experience with the transfer process? Does their experience differ by the community college they attended and/or the transfer institution and if so, how? To address these questions, I conducted focus groups, individual interviews, and follow-up transfer interviews with students from four community colleges in Maryland. These 18 students continued their preservice training at six universities, both private and public. In order to understand the students' transfer

experiences, I interviewed them in both their last semester at the community college and early in their first semester after transfer to the four-year institution. In this chapter, I present the findings from my study. Sources of data used to inform these findings included student focus groups, individual follow-up and post-transfer interviews, discussion with program coordinators, and state policy and program document review. I reached saturation and redundancy after interviewing students at the third community college since no new themes emerged. But the additional students from the fourth community college and the added focus group with students who had just transferred provided valuable illumination of the themes.

A coding system using the classical content method was developed to analyze the data. This system allowed the researcher to filter large volumes of data in a systematic way as well as discover and describe the focus of a wide variety of materials (Holsti, 1969). Four themes arose from the analysis of focus group, interview, and document review data: Advising remains a key area of impact on the student experience; both causes of and solutions to student concerns are found at the programmatic level; students have their own ideas to improve AAT program policies, and some programs have workable models that can be implemented across the state; and due to differences across two- and four-year institutions, solutions at the policy level will enhance transfer for all students. These themes developed as coded data were organized into four categories: program issues, advising concerns, student supports, and policy implementation.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

As exemplified by Young (2010), this work was guided by a constructionist process where the researcher engages with the data and works with the participants and

their differing views to create new meaning. Data were shared with the participants throughout and they were asked for their input, comments, and feedback, both positive and critical, on the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the data. Young (2010) also demonstrated the social context of constructed meaning, noting a variety of understandings in the participants' responses about "academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness" (p. 253). Interactions between participants and between participant and researcher moved the conversations in varying directions and impacted the experiences that were shared and discussed. As Wood and Bennett (2000) noted, these discussions with other preservice educators can influence teacher knowledge. Participation in these research discussions helped build knowledge from the ground up, expanding the perspective of these future educators within the individuals and through their interactions with others (Young, 2010).

Preservice teachers come from varied and unique backgrounds, must interact in often dissimilar two-year and four-year programs, and must be prepared to work with children and families who also have varying backgrounds and life stories. Care was taken in this study to interpret the data in an environment of shared and conflicting understandings, practices, and language. The use of open-ended questions, multiple data collection tools, and care during coding were important strategies in keeping with a critical spirit. The analysis turns now to each of the four themes and the specific findings within the themes.

Theme One: Advising as Key Area of Impact

Although research efforts with a focus on the student perspective on teacher preparation at community college have been minimal, the work that has been completed consistently points to difficulties in academic advising (Hezel, 2010; Kates, 2010;

Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Participants in this investigation were asked about both meaningful learning experiences and challenging aspects of their degree program and pointed regularly to dissatisfaction with their advising at the two-year institutions. Follow-up questions about advising specifically were part of the individual interviews as well. The research and analysis in this study yielded four foci in the advising thematic area: general advising across multiple campuses, academic advising at two-year institutions specifically, delays caused by inadequate academic advising, and the helpful results of articulation agreements.

Problems across campuses. General advising (in contrast with education department advising) received negative reviews across all focus groups and individual interviews. A disconnect became increasingly apparent in student comments: new ECE/SpEd teacher education students at some two-year institutions are funneled through the counseling offices to get individual academic advising and assistance in setting their schedules although, most often, general advisors are not prepared to guide students in these specific majors. According to the participants in this study, most general counselors did not have correct information or knowledge about the teacher education early childhood program. “It’s all so complicated, and you hear so many different answers” (Lily, Community College A). A specific problem highlighted by Ellie at Community College B is the confusion between differing teacher education pathways: “Scheduling is an issue since I didn’t start as Early Childhood. The advisor got confused between Early Childhood and Elementary.” On the administrative side, there seems to be great variability both on individual campuses and across campuses. A faculty member and ECE coordinator at Community College A indicated that the college had provided

advising training in the past for faculty but that this training is no longer in place: “I have met with Counseling, however have not been offered specific training nor have the adjuncts I know.” At Community College B, a change in staff has resulted in uneven advising: “There is a dedicated education advisor in the Counseling Department. The long-time education advisor recently retired and it is taking time for the new hire to get up to speed.” In phone and email discussions with faculty on different campuses, follow-up questions were tailored to investigate the availability and level of training for cadre advising³ and for advising resources.

Given the multiple teacher education degrees offered through community colleges, including the AAS in ECE and many different AAT subject-area options, it may not be feasible to expect all general academic advisors to be trained in and maintain knowledge of the multitude of possibilities. If students are funneled to faculty advisors in their program areas, these faculty members must then be trained: A coordinator from Community College B mentioned more than once that whether or not students were provided appropriate information depended on which instructor they approached. This lack of consistency is made more complicated when colleges offer programs on multiple campuses. As participants pointed out, the complexities are too great for students to navigate without guidance, especially given the difficulties of also transferring between schools. Ellie at Community College B was frustrated with course recommendations: “I ended up taking courses together that were not supposed to be taken concurrently. I managed to get through, but it was not ideal and due to someone’s mistake.” Lily

³ Cadre advisors are faculty from academic units trained and placed in general advising campus offices.

(Community College A) mentioned the year-long delay she would have experienced if she had not heard about the transfer deadline from a classmate.

Whitney, who attended Community College A, hopes that future teachers will benefit from her contributions: “If they can improve on guiding the next generation so they don’t have to try and figure things out on their own, that is important.” Once advisors and faculty are properly trained, they also need to be made available and accessible to students with variable schedules on multiple campuses. Availability of general advising information and ease of access to specific transfer material would also have a significant impact: “My only issues were about advising (not knowing about the Tern University transfer requirements) and a lack of availability of information for students like me who work full-time during the day” (Violet, Community College C).

Issues at two-year institutions. Academic advising at the community colleges caused significant frustration and struggles for several students who joined in this study. While participants, with few exceptions, gave high marks to instructors at two-year colleges, advising and transfer issues posed obstructions for students: “What I didn’t realize with transferring was, oh, I got my AAT and will go straight into the program. But no, I still have to take more, I have to take 24 more credits before I can get into Tern University main campus (Danielle, Community College A).” A coordinator of the ECE program at Community College A confirmed the belief that the AAT transfer procedures are difficult for students: they begin their higher education experience unfamiliar with the requirements of the transfer process and are unclear on where to turn for help. Difficulties remain when students do find an appropriate contact in the education department. Participants in this research shared that faculty are supportive, but often

lacking in training on advising and program requirements. This included training in new software and other support programs: Students suffer when there are gaps in the adoption of technology. Advising software such as Starfish is being adopted by two colleges and two university programs in this study and preparation is critical for its appropriate use. The two coordinators on those campuses mentioned the year-long process of training staff in use of the new software.

ECE/SpEd AAT students also struggle when advising pathways are not clear or staffing changes are made without interim adjustments for student care. The coordinator at Community College D indicated that a new advisor was hired with no previous advising training. Student participants expressed significant disillusionment with the loss of expertise due to the change of personnel. Finally, students struggled to find the correct advisor:

I feel like people don't know what's going on in the advising department at Community College C. The initial person was helpful, but they weren't my set advisor. I had to do my own research and actually seek out the helpful advisor. It was trial and error for me in choosing courses. I wish I didn't have to go online and try and figure it all out on my own. The advisors would send me to someone and that person would say they weren't allowed to talk to me and I would get the run-around (Sophia, Community College C).

Probing for more information during these conversations helped clarify the nature of the students' experience. Asking follow-up questions often led to a more nuanced understanding. For example, in some cases like this, the "run-around" was an attempt to get the student to the individual who had the necessary and correct information. The

participants here, however, were left with feelings of frustration rather than contentment in being supported. Again, it was both an issue of accessibility of individuals and information: “The advisor blew me off, didn’t care. ‘You have to apply one year in advance.’ I told her they need to get that information distributed sooner. In my case, I did not know” (Danielle, Community College A).

Delays caused by inadequate advising. Community college students from this study in the ECE/SpEd AAT programs in Maryland are frustrated by poor advising. More troublesome is the delay in graduation and transfer due to incorrect academic advising. Students in each focus group mentioned the cost and frustration of delays in their education due to advising errors: “I wish I had been offered support and information ahead of time about Tern’s requirements. I could have taken the two courses before I got there, so now I’ve lost an entire semester” (Violet, Community College C). The Coordinator at Nighthawk University indicated that their process for academic advising and planning works well while also acknowledging the impact of delays on students who transfer there from two-year programs in the state of Maryland:

There are not too many glitches in the process. The Admissions folks are very familiar with the community college programs. The issue is more often when a student gets out of sync with the timing. Life happens and maybe they had to drop a course. Nighthawk offers spring internship semesters for those folks. If they come to the coordinator quickly, they can usually address problems, but later in the game can be an issue.

Students shared that they also knew of others who lost time and money due to problems with course advice they were provided: “I’ve heard that from several people. I

know people who are not graduating with us because they got bad advice from the counseling office” (Jacqueline, Community College B). As indicated earlier, part of the problem arises from several community colleges having multiple campuses. Having worked at a community college with three campuses, I knew to ask follow-up questions about what specific differences there were. These questions led to instances of different advising responses, lack of transfer fairs⁴ on smaller locations, and varied opportunities depending on the campus attended: “I wish they had more education programs on this campus. I’ll get emails about education events, but they are on the main campus and it’s just too far for me” (Whitney, Community College A).

Articulation agreements are helpful. Significant progress has been made over the years in improving transfer articulation across the state of Maryland. While not a solution to all the issues faced by students, retention of credits when moving to a four-year university is a significant concern. Data have not been collected for teacher education majors specifically, but they give a clear picture of improvement overall. In the last two decades, data collected voluntarily from students indicate a substantial decrease in the number of credits lost (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2015). In 1996, only 12.8% of respondents reported receiving credits for all classes in which they earned a “C” or better at the community college; survey respondents in 2016 reported an increase to nearly half (48.7%) (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2015).

By the accounts of both community college and university coordinators and faculty who participated in this study, articulation agreements for the AAT in ECE/SpEd between campuses have gotten stronger and understanding of the process is clearer.

⁴ Transfer fairs provide information from numerous colleges on programs, campus life, and admissions policies as they pertain to transfer students.

Violet (Community College C), for example, talked about having a clear pathway to transfer: “I think the preparation process for transfer students is sufficient. The school offers transfer information days and information is given by advisors to help students understand and prepare.” University staff in this study also thought they were well-prepared to work with students coming through the AAT process: “A majority of AAT ECE/SpEd students come from Community College A. They are getting good advice from the university advisor on site there. A new pre-transfer advisor has been placed on site at Community College A, as well as at Community College D and at another community college in the region” (Coordinator, Teacher Education, Mallard University).

On the student side, Hailey (Community College B) had a positive experience with course planning; she transferred to Sparrow University, a private institution that is not required to accept the articulation of AAT courses: “My advisor here planned out my whole first semester. Actually, we all met in the summer for orientation advising and they were there with us to resolve any conflicts. We were all in one room together and it worked very well.” A Program Coordinator at Community College B, who was involved at the beginning in the development of the AAT policies, believes it has been a success, especially the elementary education track. She considers the current review of outcomes by the state to be important, however, and coming at a valuable time.

Articulation is not without sticking points, however. The Program Coordinator from Community College B sees a significant problem with Tern University, where most students from Community College B transfer and which plays an important role in teacher education overall. She learned about this issue from her students: The Early Childhood Education degree program requires nine credits of science (Biology, Physical

Sciences, and a Science elective) while the Special Education track calls for only six science credits (Physical Sciences and Biology) but adds a required Communications course. These are the differences that were to be eliminated with the development of the statewide articulation agreements. There are other remaining glitches related to articulation at the college-level that frustrate students as well as increase their expenses and delay their graduation. Similar to Leah, most students in this study expressed frustration with the lack of knowledge available about articulation agreements with transfer institutions: “The only reason I’m going to Nighthawk University is because my friend knew about it. Your research is worth it for this. I asked at Community College D and they looked at me as though I was dumb. They couldn’t tell me anything about Nighthawk, so I got all the information from my friend.”

Half the participants also shared transfer articulation obstacles once they left the two-year campus and arrived at the four-year. In my role as facilitator, I encouraged participants to share their experiences with the knowledge that this was a safe space and their input would remain anonymous. Hunter, a student at Bluebird University after transferring from Community College A, was still finding it difficult to get answers pertaining to his AAT requirements. One example he shared was about a math course: he was told to take a specific course but already had credit for it. He knew he was in the wrong course since the content was repetitive, but could not get a clear answer until three semesters later: “I hate to say negative things, but in one meeting, they said ‘Oh, yes, you are our education students, we want to keep you in our hands’. But I feel like somewhere in those hands are cracks and I’ve fallen through the cracks” (Hunter, Bluebird

University). We turn now to a second area of thematic focus, obstacles and improvements that are evident at the program level at individual institutions.

Theme Two: Programmatic-level Obstructions and Enhancements

Student participants in this study shared significant feedback about their individual advising experiences at both the two-year and four-year institutions as they pursued an AAT in ECE/SpEd and transferred to complete their bachelor's degree and teacher certification. They also provided feedback on issues at the program level, sharing both causes of obstructions to their experiences as well as answers to future concerns. For example, Tanager University requires a foreign language and Physical Education course as part of their Early Childhood Certification (with no early childhood major offered, students pursue a Psychology degree along with certification). Eliana noted that she would have taken those courses at Community College D if the program requirements were clarified. These concerns are different than those about individual contacts and relationships as well as different from policy-level issues. Students were asked about key memories of their studies at the two-year institutions which brought out both positive feelings and areas needing improvement. Their perspectives at the program level are organized into three areas: positive feedback about teacher education programs, online courses as instances of concern, and other general program comments.

Teacher education programs viewed positively. The teacher education programs and teacher education faculty at community colleges are viewed positively by students in this study. Participants found teacher education instructors at the two-year schools to be helpful in three areas: academic, non-academic and career. For example, Whitney (Community College A) found her instructors to be uniformly dedicated and

understanding of her unique circumstances: “All my education instructors were really helpful and accommodating. They gave attention to detail and to my needs when I was struggling. They made time for me, provided extensions, that helped me a lot.” Julia (Community College A) also shared the importance of the college faculty in giving academic support: “... the education professors here have a ton of experience and background and their expertise is so valuable. Their stories are interesting and helpful, too.”

Participants also mentioned non-academic supports in their praise of the two-year community college programs. Arianna (Community College D) discussed a former instructor’s compassion beyond the classroom: “One teacher who retired and now only teaches one class really cared and was thorough. She had a lot of experience in the classroom, ran a childcare center. She asked me to stay in touch and really meant it.” Nora agreed that the non-academic elements at Community College A made a difference for her. She discussed the teacher education program and opportunities it provided: “I really like the overall environment. I live near a regional community college but I heard so many good things about the Education Department at Community College A. The student life is good, I like it.”

A final area of support participants highlighted was career pathways and guidance. Julia indicated that her instructors at Community College B provided motivation and passion about her field of choice: “But my math teachers and education teachers, the way they would go about teaching, they made me feel so good, and that renewed my commitment to teaching. I want to make people feel like that. I met some really great individuals.” As professional programs, according to these students, the

teacher education degrees are successful in delivering career guidance: “It wasn’t the impact of a course or courses, but my time at Community College D reinforced my desire to teach. The field experience really helped with my confidence in being in a classroom and reaffirmed my choice to teach” (Leah).

Community College A offers a cohort program and coordinators at Community College B and D refer to their Early Childhood Education degree program as based on a cohort program model. Cohort here refers to banding together a group of students in a specific degree program. Students from these programs mentioned this organized approach as helpful in all areas of student services and support. According to Community College A, their cohort students benefit from structured scheduling, content specific study sessions, close interaction with faculty and mentors, required one-on-one advising, and opportunities for leadership and social involvement. Cohort participants are also provided structured support in researching and applying to transfer schools to complete their four-year certification program. According to the developer of the program at Community College A, cohort students have much higher rates of on-time graduation and successful transfer to area schools. While Community College B does not offer an organized cohort program, the coordinator refers to the structure of the program as based on a cohort model. For example, the college runs Learning Circles in fall and spring where teachers, administrators and students from the college and the public school classroom placements are invited; they discuss their experiences with teachers from placement sites and build valuable support networks.

Online courses source of dissatisfaction. A strong area of dissatisfaction at the program level comes from the offering of online courses. After more than one student

mentioned a frustration with online classes, and since these courses were not part of the focus group script, I made a point of asking whether or not students took online courses as part of their AAT and then let the conversation flow. All but two students in this study took at least one online course as part of their AAT degree. Participants expressed concern about the online course curricula and a lack of communication from online teachers; the students from Bluebird University were dissatisfied with instructors who were based in a different geographic region. All participants agreed, even those who did not choose to take a technology-based course, that online classes were not appropriate for teacher education courses. A discussion between Eliana and Arianna from Community College D provides a general synopsis of the participant views:

They are adding online courses but those don't work in the education field. It's unfortunate, and some people are fighting it. They have to be intentional about what they offer online. Not education! English 101 worked online, but teaching is a specialty and courses should be in-person to help teachers best prepare.

(Eliana)

Right, we need hands-on, face-to-face interactions. Students don't learn enough to have their own classroom if they are only learning online. (Arianna)

These concerns came up for students at all campuses, both college and university. During their interviews for this study, the program coordinator at Community College D and a former director of the Education Department at Community College A both discussed the pressure of competition with online universities⁵ and thus the need to offer those classes

⁵ Childcare companies are offering to pay for online degrees for their employees but not necessarily for face-to-face degrees. This is understandable due to scheduling issues, but

for their AAT students. Also, all two-year institutions indicated the importance of efforts to meet unique scheduling needs of ECE students.

The problem now, as evidenced by student concerns here, is that many students are dissatisfied with online courses, especially education-centered classes. This is uniquely problematic for early childhood majors. Ava at Community College A was satisfied with her degree, except for the online courses: “The only really negative experience I had was with online classes. I don’t recommend them, but sometimes you just had to take it for scheduling reasons. I enjoyed the teachers face-to-face but they weren’t good online.” Another student was explicit about the need to work face-to-face as an integral part of teacher preparation: “They really need to work on the early childhood online courses they offer. The teachers need to be responsive and the online stuff on Blackboard needs to be updated. So far, the two internet courses I’ve taken are the worst of my whole college career and we can’t miss out on that important classroom training” (Camila, Bluebird University). A final student found the online courses to be difficult to manage and the instructors hard to reach:

I’m actually having a hard time with both of my online courses. One of them won’t even answer email. The other one took a long time, but they finally answered a phone message. Seems the problem is that both teachers are off campus, so inaccessible. I had to ask other students for information on

problematic given the current state of online courses. large childcare company, Bright Horizons, with nearly 20,000 teachers and staff serving more than 100,000 children worldwide, began a tuition reimbursement program in 2018: “Bright Horizons today launched a program that will provide free college tuition for all full-time employees in the company’s early education centers and preschools. The program is the first of its kind in the education field and will allow employees to earn an associate and bachelor’s degree in early childhood education for free” (Bright Horizons, 2018).

assignments since the professors wouldn't respond. The students agreed with me that this is not a reasonable learning environment. (Hailey, Community College B)

Each program is responsible for these courses as well as how many online courses they offer. This is especially significant for early childhood educators. Given the efforts to train para-educators and childcare staff who work full-time, blended and online courses are a significant piece of preservice teacher training. Effective fall semester, 2019, Community College A will offer a fully-online AAS degree: "This curriculum is designed to prepare students to work with children from infancy through age eight in a variety of early childhood settings. The curriculum has a core of 34 credit hours directly related to early childhood education. The curriculum is designed so that it can be completed within four semesters, but it can be extended over a longer time.... part-time students should consult an adviser." In small print at the bottom of the Advising Worksheet is a disclaimer: "This degree is a career program and may not readily transfer to four year colleges/universities (except in special cases)." This could be yet another roadblock for early childhood preservice educators; if they pursue the online degree for convenience and career advancement in the childcare field, they will not then be able to automatically apply that degree to the future pursuit of teacher certification.

Other areas of struggle. Other areas of contention were mentioned by participants during the focus group meetings and individual follow-up interviews as well as by program coordinators and state officials. One difficulty is the small size of many of these early childhood education programs. The question is how to fill classes so they will run often enough to keep students on track to graduate on-time; coordinators indicated

and participants in this study noticed that at times there were too few students to fill certain required classes. Some programs struggled with retaining adjunct faculty and this had a significant impact on the ability of students, such as Jacqueline at Community College B, to finish key coursework:

They kept cancelling classes or bumping them up an hour. Three of us could not make the new time that interfered with our other class. That education professor let us out early and helped make this work. I had tried three times to take that course, but they kept cancelling. I even talked to the department head and he apologized but explained turnover was a real problem.

This problem is not unique to early childhood but has greater impact given its role as a professional preparation degree with restricted requirements and inflexible classroom internships during junior and senior year.

Another related issue is the concern about scheduling when students move from a flexible two-year program to a four-year university where the curriculum runs full-time during the day due to the public school schedule. Other researchers have also discussed these difficulties (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2019). Most community college students worked during the day and took night and online courses as they moved toward their AAT degree. They expressed difficulty in making the shift to daytime-only courses, and were concerned about not being able to work during the required teaching internship. A few participants in this research wondered if the bachelor's degree would take them longer than two years beyond the AAT to complete because of this.

While some students worried about the time commitment of the public-school teaching component, others complained about the observation piece of their AAT program, expressing a preference to “teach” rather than “observe.” I allowed participants to share their concerns in our discussions, noting aloud that observation is a skill requirement in teacher education courses. Participants showed a variety of levels in understanding the necessity of observation in education; a focus on the variance in observation opportunities and training might be an area of additional focus needed at the program level. This leads us to the third thematic area that arose from this study, possibilities for improving the pathways of the ECE/SpEd AAT and improvements that are already in operation.

Theme Three: Ideas for Improvement and Workable Models

No formal evaluation of Maryland’s AAT policies and programs had been conducted by the start of this research, although the AAT Oversight Council does meet regularly to work through policy changes and program issues. These are important opportunities for two-year and four-year representatives to come together. Also, the Maryland Higher Education Commission collects data annually on community college students and institutions. It does not, however, provide specific AAT graduation or transfer rates. Its survey every four years of community college graduates does not include outcomes by disciplinary area, so no information specific to teacher education is available. The participants in this study were asked specifically about the transfer experience in individual follow-up interviews after they moved to four-year schools, although transfer concerns were brought up at all points during the data collection process. They provided specific feedback on their personal challenges and experiences

with the ECE/SpED AAT and transfer process, as well as suggestions for improving this degree program. They also pointed to successful areas of the degree program that could be replicated throughout the state. This thematic area included three emphases that arose from the review and analysis of data: Necessary resources, pathways to Praxis Core exam success, and teacher education content.

Necessary resources. In the course of the focus group meetings and interviews, students had the opportunity to think back on their two or more years at the community college. While many participants started out by indicating a lack of good academic advising, after thought and reflection, and sometimes after listening to other focus group members, three students remembered resources they were provided that were of assistance. The researcher also encouraged further consideration by allowing for time and space between comments and asking clarifying questions. “I do now remember that one of my education professors did provide a PowerPoint with all the course information and dates and checklists. I have that PowerPoint and it’s been helping me follow the steps to graduation” (Whitney, Community College A).

Those students who were provided printed documents and lists early on were able to rely on self-direction and demonstrated self-sufficiency. Julia was satisfied with the information provided her during her time at Community College A: “I didn’t have transfer issues. I guess two professors I had – they gave us the pamphlets and then went over it all with us.” Some problems shared by participants in this study were admittedly due to lack of individual effort, but good advising and planning resources still made a difference: “My first advisor was great. She explained what I had to take and when and

was just super helpful. She helped with a vision for coming semesters, planning for graduation. There were no real challenges for me” (Leah, Community College D).

On the other side, half of the students did demonstrate great effort but were given incorrect guidance that set them back. Some were told to register for courses that were not required of their degree (such as an early childhood course that is not part of the AAT), others told to repeat courses for which they already had credit, and still more were advised to take a course that met requirements for a different track (elementary versus early childhood). This led to ideas by various study members of how to smooth the pathway to a four-year teacher education degree and teacher certification.

One idea shared by Sophia at Community College C was to provide basic information on the most popular transfer institutions at all community colleges: “I wish they would have information on the colleges that are most popular, like Tern University and Tanager University, and make the requirements clear so we could go in more prepared.” Another student went further, asking that everyone be provided early in their community college program the requirements for various four-year schools to help in preparing and making a choice: “I think they should help us look at the different four-year college programs earlier. I would recommend that they give us the four-year requirement information based on various institutions that we plan on transferring to, in advance so we can decide what would work best for us, and which credits to take” (Eliana, Community College D). Students throughout this study indicated their belief that those institutions which provide clear and accessible information are also those programs that support students on a smooth pathway to their own early childhood classroom.

Pathways to Praxis Core Exam Success.

A nationwide study of preservice teachers by the National Education Association and Educational Testing Service found a large gap in Praxis I scores between White and African American participants (Nettles, Scatton, Steinberg, & Tyler, 2011). Another longitudinal study of African American and Latino undergraduates seeking admission into a university teacher education program concluded that Praxis I “is an inequitable TEP [teacher education program] admissions tool because it establishes a single standard to assess the capabilities of talented students who have had unequal educational opportunities and unequal access to the knowledge needed to attain passing scores on the test” (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006, p. 567). The studies of the AAT program and policies in Maryland (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018) also indicate the Praxis Core Basic Skills test is still a road-block for students even after years of effort. “Most administrators in this study cited that completing the Basic Skills Test is a major barrier for A.A.T. students. Specifically, students may not take the test in time for graduation or transfer, or they may fail and have to retake the test, both of which can delay transfer or result in transfer credit problems” (Lukszo, 2018, p. 173).

More than 60% of participants in this research were student of color and the Praxis Core requirements came up as a roadblock in every focus group meeting. The Praxis Core exam continues to hold students back from graduation and transfer, as the coordinator at Community College B pointed out:

Early childhood education students continue to struggle with the Basic Skills tests. Ten of our students will not graduate this spring because of this. Starting in the fall, students will not be able to walk in the graduation ceremony without

passing the Praxis Core test. It is expensive and takes time. Why can't their scholarships pay for it since it is a required step in graduation? We continue to push for this.

Paying the cost of the exam is a start, but this will not help non-scholarship students at community colleges or pay for the retakes that are common. Hailey, from Community College B, shared her feelings about the skills test: "The Praxis stressed me out so much. I had to take it eight times and pay for it eight times. In high school, since the state was paying, they had us take it. None of us passed and it made us feel badly. We had no preparation but they told us it would be useful to see what it looks like."

Hailey elaborated further in the follow-up conversation after transferring from the two-year institution to a private four university in the state:

I feel like the institutions could make this whole process smoother. So many students are just not getting through [the Praxis] and struggling. I do appreciate that Community College B really pushed us on the Praxis, pushed us to get it done. There are quite a few students at Sparrow University who are still doing prerequisite coursework because they haven't yet passed the Praxis.

One improvement that was made was the acceptance of SAT or ACT scores in lieu of the Praxis Core exam. Another option to consider is to allow greater flexibility in the testing standards. Changes in the individual tests scores and composite totals may allow for more options for students who are just one or two points below the passing scores (Ross, 2005). For students whose standardized test scores are too low, the Praxis Core is the most common alternative. Both student and faculty participants alike believe more specific and structured support is needed for preservice educators to be successful at the

Praxis Core. Several students thought a required Praxis Core preparation course would be valuable (optional for those who pass) and all faculty and coordinators who contributed to this research recognized the need to improve their test review options:

I think the transferring process needs improvements. I think a specific way to help in this area would be to attend a mandatory seminar or workshop once students get close to graduation, perhaps once they reach 30 credits. In this workshop, things such as the Praxis test can be discussed and the other test options such as the SAT or the ACT. (Julia, Community College A)

Teacher Education Content. This investigation of the AAT in Early Childhood Education/Special Education was aimed at discovering the student perspective on the program and its policies and how the students experienced the transfer process. An unexpected result was the emphasis participants placed on their concern about preparation to work with young children who have special needs. These concerns were not voiced in other studies of the student perspective on Maryland's AAT degree; this may be related to the focus here on early childhood. Volunteers in each research focus group here conveyed their belief that special education training is lacking in the AAT degree curriculum.

An important part of the focus group structure was to build community at the start with refreshments and sharing stories; this helped to promote interaction between participants. In this case, the other focus group members were quick to jump in and agree with Ava (Community College A): "My passion is SpEd and the one course is not enough. Taking it online is especially bad. Some people only get a "C" and really aren't ready. This is a downfall to this program." Given the positive feedback in this study on

teacher education training at the two-year colleges, this complaint stood out as significant. “The SpEd class was hard for me since it was all new. I don’t feel prepared after just that one course” (Julia, Community College A).

Not only is the limited content an issue for the AAT, but the concern continued even after students transferred to four-year programs. Camila worried about appropriate training: “For the AAT, there is only one SpEd course required. It’s not right to say I had a specialty in SpEd when I only had one course. There is still time at Bluebird University, but one class in community college is not enough; an introductory course does not cover the content.” Students at other university campuses were also concerned that the final two years of their degree would not provide enough additional expertise in the area of special education.

Across the four community colleges and for all participants in this research, the field experience component is of utmost importance to future early childhood educator’s preparation efforts: “The internship class was most meaningful and helped the most because I got to see what it was really like in a classroom, interact with the students, and contribute to the lesson planning” (Sophia, Community College C). This is similar to evidence from previous studies that also showed practical experience to be critical to the retention of preservice teachers and development of their self-belief (Bigham, 2011).

Interestingly, most individuals in this research expressed frustration that the early childhood degree programs required two observation experience components rather than direct teaching experience. Julia at Community College A shared: “Also, we need more than just observation. Tern University Satellite is hard because we weren’t prepared with the field experience like Elementary Education students get. It would help to be on the

same level.” Samantha emphasized a difference between her program and that of other colleges: “Community College C requires an internship for Early Childhood Education; it’s the only community college that does as far as I know. After the two 90-hour courses, you then do your internship, partnering up with a county public school.” The Community College C online catalogue clarifies: “EDXXX provides students with a supervised field-based experience in an approved child care setting or other educational setting where students spend 45 hours during the semester. Students produce and present a professional portfolio.” These programmatic solutions may work at individual institutions, but improvements that can be made at the state level may work to help ECE/SpEd AAT degree seekers across the state. We turn now to those policy-level and implementation struggles and ideas for enhancement.

Theme Four: Solutions at the Policy Level

As indicated above, the AAT Oversight Council, consisting of individuals from two- and four year institutions, MHEC, MSDE and the University System of Maryland, continues its meetings and is currently in the process of reevaluating each of the seven AAT degree programs. I attended three meetings of the Council and collected notes from several others. General questions were asked of study participants about differences between their two- and four-year experience, and follow-up questions specific to comments made in the focus groups also informed the data analysis in this theme. Information from students, faculty, and administrators about the ECE/SpEd AAT degree points to several areas of needed improvement in the area of policy implementation across the state. These areas under Theme Four include: gathering statewide data from

community colleges and universities, building collaboration between institutions, and addressing the individual nature of those institutions.

Gathering data from two- and four-year institutions. Discussions with program coordinators and state policy staff, as well as a review of program and advising documents from the various colleges and universities, made clear that implementation of the AAT degree has been varied and inconsistent. Several individuals interviewed lamented the absence of data on the pathways of students from two-year program to four-year teacher education degree and certification to becoming the teacher of record in an early childhood classroom. My attendance at Oversight Council meetings indicated the Council members' interest in knowing about statewide and institution-specific patterns in AAT degree program enrollment, rate of matriculation, graduation, and career placement. The Maryland Longitudinal Data System (MLDS) Center, however, does not have this information and a plan to collect it has not yet been developed. The Program Director at Community College C shared the belief that they need more data from the MLDS Center to track whether the graduates of the AAT ECE/SpEd program went on to complete their four-year degree and whether they then moved on to a teaching job, and also how long they stayed working as a teacher of record. Without the complete picture of associate degree completion, transfer, and career persistence, programs cannot act to improve pathways or make them consistent across institutions.

Building Collaborative Relations. Student concerns about achievement of the two-year degree, Praxis Core exam completion, and transfer to four-year university for teacher certification can be met through a more uniform implementation of AAT policy. As indicated under the Resources section of Theme 3 above, several participants asked

whether the community colleges can provide specific information on individual four-year institution requirements for students who want to transfer. Better collaboration and sharing of information between two- and four-institutions to allow for transparency and clarity in the curriculum could help avoid setbacks, delays and frustrations for many students. In the words of participants: “I believe better communication is needed between the community colleges and the universities” (Samantha, Community College C). “They all need to be on the same page, community colleges and universities and all advisors. It all feels scattered” (Leah, Community College, D). “Have the information on the colleges that are most popular, like Tern, Tanager University, make the requirements clear so we could go in more prepared” (Sophia, Community College C). This area of two-year/four-year institution coordination has not been a focus of recent AAT studies, although Lukszo (2018) did note the findings on the importance of cross-sector collaboration in earlier literature on transfer articulation implementation.

Addressing the individual nature of institutions. In general, personal connections at the community colleges made a difference for most students in this study. The mission of many two-year institutions is closely linked to the communities in which they operate. Community College A, for instance, vows to enrich the life of the community as well as meet the dynamic challenges facing that community. Many students at two-year campuses rely on staff and instructors for added support. Relationships with individual faculty had a significant impact on student success. As described by Katherine at Bluebird University: “I feel really spoiled by Community College A with their instructors and advisors; they were so hands-on, making sure we knew everything that could benefit us.”

Danielle, who also attended Community College A, recalled significant support: “I wasn’t officially in the cohort, but I had a good relationship with my advisor (an education professor). She is the reason why I am here at Tern University. I had missed the Tern University Satellite deadline and she told me to go ahead and apply to the main campus.” Ellie, too, had a special connection with a professor at Community College B: “But my mentor teacher ended up being a friend of mine. She was absolutely terrific and made me decide third grade is where I want to be. She was one of the best...”

Also, implementation of the AAT policy resulted in a wide variance of advising options at the community colleges reviewed. The chair of the Education Department at Community College B mentioned more than once during our discussion that the availability of appropriate information for ECE students was dependent on the faculty member with whom the student interacted. This input informed follow-up questioning during the focus group meetings; when students indicated concerns about advising, the researcher asked about the possibility of some positive supports. This individuality of advising quality is clear in the words of Lily: “A professor at Community College A was key in helping me, by steering me to the county’s childcare scholarship and reaching out to them on my behalf. She is the biggest reason I am graduating.”

A wide variance in advising quality in general points to the possibility of a solution at the state-level. According to a coordinator at Nighthawk University, a private institution in the state, every student they accept from community colleges brings in different courses and has a different academic history, even those with the AAT ECE/SpEd degree. This points to a significant issue at the policy level: the ECE/SpEd AAT is not fully accepted across the state or fully supported. The Program Director at

Community College D indicated frustration with one local state university that does not have AAT articulation agreements; students from her two-year program are unable to take advantage of this school, even though it is geographically the most convenient. At Mallard University, ECE/SpEd students are required to develop a parallel plan, a pathway to an alternate major that can be pursued concurrently with the teaching major; many AAT transfers end up declaring a Family Studies major as the requirements are the best match with ECE/SpEd requirements.

Solutions to transfer issues when viewed with a policy implementation lens seem reasonable and doable if small, individual differences can be resolved through communication between stakeholders. As noted by Lukszo (2018), “Not having a common understanding among stakeholders can lead to different implementation outcomes at the institutional level. Having a common understanding of goals allows stakeholders to work together for a mutual purpose. Clear communication about policy goals could help ensure that a state vision is correctly translated at the campus level” (p. 236-7).

Summary

In this chapter, the findings of this study of Maryland’s AAT degree in ECE/SpEd were presented. Four themes were developed as data from focus group, interview, and document analysis were coded and organized in four different categories: program issues, advising concerns, student supports, and policy implementation. The four themes that were built from the data analysis were: Advising remains a key area of impact on the student experience; both causes of and solutions to student concerns are found at the programmatic level; students have their own ideas to improve the AAT, and some

programs have workable models that can be implemented across the state; and due to differences across two- and four-year institutions, solutions at the policy level would enhance transfer for all students, given differences across two-year and four-year institution AAT degree implementation. In the next chapter, implications of these findings are explored. I discuss those implications in the areas of programmatic solutions, advising and support, and policy implementation. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Maryland created the Associate of Arts in Teaching degree for elementary education in 2001. It subsequently added degree tracks in various secondary areas as well as in early childhood education. The early childhood degree added a special education focus in 2016. Even with this long history, areas needing improvement are still evident in these degree programs. To contribute to the knowledge base on strengthening and easing the pathway from two-year to four-year institution and teacher certification, this study focused on the student perspective on the AAT in Maryland. Recent studies have indicated the value in collecting student data:

In addition to implementing reforms with an eye toward equity, it is essential that colleges collect and analyze student data to ensure that reforms are in fact leading to improvements for all students. In addition to looking at overall averages, colleges should perform subgroup analyses to determine whether the reforms they implement have differential impacts—and then investigate through interviews and other qualitative methods why gaps persist when they do—to identify areas where further reform is needed. (Bailey, 2018, p. 2)

This investigation collected the perspective of early childhood preservice teachers who started at the community college and planned to earn an AAT degree before transferring to a university and earning teacher certification. We turn now to a summary of the main findings outlined in Chapter Four and a review of the implications of those findings.

Summary and Discussion of Key Findings

“Few studies are recorded in the community college literature that deal with the students' perceptions of the transfer process and what knowledge students have of the

transfer support systems often provided by both the community college and their four-year college counterpart” (Davies & Dickmann, 1998, p. 543). Subsequent studies indicate that little has changed in twenty years, and the student perception is still lacking in more current research (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012). This study of the student perspective on the Maryland’s ECE/SpEd AAT program has investigated the views and experiences of 18 community college pre-service teachers as they graduated with a two-year degree and transferred on to a four-year university in the state.

The main goal of this research was to answer the question: What is the student perspective on Maryland's Early Childhood Education/Special Education (ECE/SpEd) AAT program? Three sub-questions were included in the investigation:

- What factors have enhanced or obstructed their experience?
- What is their experience with the transfer process?
- Does their experience differ by the community college they attended and/or the transfer institution and if so, how?

To address these questions, I conducted focus groups, individual interviews, and follow-up transfer interviews with students from four community colleges in Maryland. These 18 students continued their preservice training at six universities, both private and public. In order to understand the students’ transfer experiences, I interviewed them in both their last semester at the community college and early in their first semester after transfer to the four-year institution.

To reiterate, the value of this exploration of community college early childhood teacher education programs is evident on a number of levels. A stated goal of the Maryland State Department of Education (2003) is to examine and revise policies

governing the transfer credits from the AAT in early childhood education to the four-year college early childhood education programs to improve transfer of credits for all AAT students. Also, this research adds the student perspective, one that has not been well-explored or documented and that could help address the needs of all future educators. Lastly, the need is great for trained teachers of three- and four-year-olds. This study made contributions to the field of teacher preparation around issues of diversity, the Praxis Core Exam, online courses in ECE, and as the first study of the student perspective across multiple two-year institutions. Results indicated that long-standing issues with the ECE/SpEd AAT in Maryland still exist, but students are satisfied with many aspects of their community college education and solutions to problems with the AAT are readily available.

We start this discussion with Sub-Question One: What factors did students in this study find either enhanced or obstructed their experience with the AAT degree in ECE/SpEd? We find enduring problems but also ready solutions. On the side of obstacles for students, advising remains a key point of impact on the student experience. Areas of emphasis were four-fold: problems with general advising across campuses, academic advising issues at two-year institutions, delays caused by inadequate advising, and the helpfulness as well as remaining weaknesses of articulation agreements. Previous studies (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018) indicated these same difficulties for students. While online courses have been identified in earlier research (Bigham, 2011; Lukszo, 2018), they came up often as an area of complaint here.

The analysis of the data collected for this research also showed areas of satisfaction: teacher education programs, staff and coursework are viewed positively. A

surprising area of focus for participants was sharing potential solutions to their concerns at the programmatic level. Lukszo (2018) emphasized the value in collaboration, but in this study, students themselves highlighted the significance of coordination between the two-year and four-year institutions. Three students also mentioned the need to adjust the AAS ECE degree to better match the AAT for future transfer, as also noted by Bigham (2011) and Ignash and Slotnick (2007). Finally, solutions to the continuing issues with the AAT degree in Maryland, with student ideas to improve the AAT, and some workable models from existing programs that can be implemented across the state were clustered in three areas. Necessary resources included items mentioned by participants that they believed were crucial to their success. A second area included pathways to Praxis Core exam success, or ideas with which to help students complete the Basic Skills test requirement. Lastly, participants discussed the teacher education content and additions or adjustments they hoped to see.

The second sub-question asked students about their experience with the transfer process. Some problems are ongoing and have been noted by other studies (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2019), such as student concerns about scheduling due to full-time, day-time jobs. Participants here shared struggles with and obstructions to degree completion and transfer as students did in previous explorations as well (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018). A surprising point of discussion in all focus groups was that solutions to transfer issues were seen as reasonable and doable. Other scholars have noted coordination between community colleges and four-year campuses as problematic (Boatman & Soliz, 2018), but this point was initiated by student participants in the current study. Again, the preservice ECE teachers in this effort

saw much of the problem as a lack of communication and coordination between institutions on all levels, leading to administrative issues, advising confusion and complexities, and misunderstandings between two- and four-year campuses.

The final sub-question asked if the experience of AAT students differed by the community college they attended and/or the transfer institution and if so, how it differed. Variation in student experience can be viewed in three areas: first, the individual nature of institutions; second, instructors and program requirements; and finally, the level of collaboration with other institutions. In general, some differences are organic, given the location of the college, size of the school and program, number of campuses, as well as make-up of the student body. For instance, participants attending colleges with multiple campuses expressed frustration that academic and social offerings were not available in all locations. Other differences in student experience are based on the variations in instructors as well as structure of the program. Students noted institutional differences in emphasis on practical experience, which has been shown to be critical to the retention of preservice teachers and development of their self-belief (Bigham, 2011). As others have also found (Brock, 2013; Early & Winton, 2010), students here pointed out variations in clinical experiences in the ECE/SpEd AAT programs, and called for more practicum opportunities and training in working with students with special needs. Finally, while most students called for greater communication and coordination between institutions, a few participants noted positive experiences due to work between schools; when advisors or faculty shared information, the students benefitted. Those same staff members noted a need for more data from two- and four-year institutions to improve coordination.

In answer to the main research question about the student perspective on Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT program, three main points stand out. First, participants had positive feedback about their teacher education programs on all campuses but agreed on the need for more practical experience, especially regarding special education content. A clear concern about online coursework in early childhood education also came to the front. Second, advising and transfer problems are ongoing on two-year campuses and continue as students move to the four-year programs. The third point students highlighted was that most issues they encountered could be resolved through better communication, collaboration, and coordination between institutions.

It is important to address the students' lack of discussion about diversity issues. Given the growing mix of students in classrooms across the state and heterogeneous student population in community colleges, two rationales for this study were preparing diverse students for teaching and preparing students to teach for diversity. While study participants did not mention diversity directly, either as part of their own experience with the AAT or as part of their field work in classrooms, one-third of the students did indirectly address the importance of race during discussions of course content, financial support, and student opportunities. These comments were made only by students of color, however. Their involvement with diverse coursework and organizations was seen as an enhancement of their experience overall. The three individuals attending Bluebird University after transfer from Community College A were uniformly positive about their experience in the required Black History course, as exemplified by Katherine: "I really like that we have to take the African American history course. It is so interesting and makes me realize how ignorant I am. Being in a white body, I am now learning to

understand other perspectives and experiences. I wouldn't trade this for anything. To get that gift, that perspective and understanding. I am really satisfied with that.”

Ava and Julia (Community College A) talked about financial support through part-time jobs they started after recommendation by their early childhood education advisor. They are working in a local non-profit that assists Latino youth and their families who live in high-poverty areas of the county. The same two students were also recommended for involvement in a leadership group for Latina women by their advisor at Tern University Satellite. Finally, Eliana (Community College D) is part of a scholarship program at Tanager University that provides academic and professional coaching to develop high-quality teachers in STEM fields for urban schools. Eliana shared her commitment to social justice as part of this program and the value of reaching children living in poverty and who are without high-quality education opportunities. These instances show enhancements in the higher education experience overall for diverse preservice educators as well as preparation for reaching a more diverse public school population.

In the next section, I present the implications of my findings as delineated in Chapter Four and connect these findings to previous research as well as possible future study. In review, the themes that arose from the analysis of the data included the importance of advising, programmatic causes of and solutions to student concerns, the availability of workable models at individual institutions, and policy-level solutions. Falling in line with these themes, the implications or unique contributions of this study can be organized into three areas: programmatic, advising and support, and policy implementation.

Implications

Despite promising ideas and contrary to recent media articles, guided pathways by themselves are not the sole answer for addressing transfer articulation challenges. Instead, guided pathways can represent one strategy among many to improve transfer pathways, such as strong general transfer articulation policies, sound community college or pre-transfer advising systems, and strong collaboration between K-12 and community college recruiters to help students understand their degree options. (Lukszo, 2018, p. 222)

As in the recent research by Lukszo (2018) and Gronberg-Quinn (2018), the feedback from participants about Maryland's AAT was mixed. Students in this study of the state's AAT in ECE/SpEd had positive comments about the teacher education coursework and staff. This is reflected in other research as well; the first study of the student perspective on Maryland's AAT policies gathered positive feedback about the teacher education program at one of the state's community colleges. "Interviewees described the AAT program as 'really good', 'great', 'wonderful', and 'a nice thing to have', and FCC as a place where they received a quality education. I regularly heard comments about the 'awesome' instructors and 'quality' teachers at FCC" (Bigham, 2011, p.77). Participants shared struggles and obstructions to degree completion and transfer as students did in previous explorations as well (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018). Administrators and faculty also highlighted issues with transfer due to advising errors, communication shortfalls between institutions, and policy implementation differences. However, they also suggested students were responsible for proactively searching out needed degree and transfer process information. Presented in

the next section, and important to the results here, are the possible solutions discussed by participants as well as developed by the researcher for future early childhood preservice educators beginning their training at the community college (See Table 6).

Programmatic Solutions at Work

Solutions to problems with the ECE/SpEd AAT policies and policy implementation at the individual institution program level were suggested during the course of this study. They fall under three categories: transfer specific, early childhood education program specific, and general degree issues.

Table 7: Suggested Improvements to the ECE/SpEd AAT

Programmatic Solutions	General Advising and Support	Policy Implementation
Establish University Transfer Advisors	Provide online forms and instructions for faculty and advisors	Establish cooperation leading to AAS/AAT adjustments
Develop and require an AAT Seminar	Make advising both mandatory and proactive	Establish a State-level Coordinator position
Provide standardized Praxis Core preparation	Boost and standardize faculty advising training	Offer a State transfer or regional AAT orientation
Offer Cohort Programs	Offer Mentor programs	
Review all online offerings		

Transfer specific solutions. Starting with transfer problems, unintended consequences of the ECE/SpEd AAT degree programs and policies have been noted, including student difficulties in navigating transfer across the system. Many of these issues stem from a lack of clear advising or incorrect guidance provided by staff and faculty. As Early and Winton (2001) also noted, transfer and the articulation of credits have been areas of concern for students as has the difficulty in choosing the right path early on in their education. One solution offered in other reports is to train and place

transfer-specific counselors in the two- and four-year institutions (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2015; N. Shapiro, personal communication, March 28, 2016). Mallard University received a grant to build such a network of transfer advisors and has placed them at three community colleges. Due to the success of this program, it will be continued through line funding by the university. While these advisors support students from all majors, the structure could be a model for other institutions and specific programs like teacher education.

All participants called for clearer and earlier transfer advising guidance. Sparrow University offers a transfer seminar, required of all AAT students on their four-year campus. A seminar is a logical place to address advising topics early on and a required “AAT Seminar” could be the answer to student struggles and complaints. The difficulty may come in instituting a required one-credit course without additional cost to students. This may also be a roadblock in offering Praxis Core preparation to aid in the graduation delays and stress due to this basic skills test requirement. Praxis Core has been noted as an area of obstruction in the other studies of Maryland’s AAT degree (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018). As indicated by students and coordinators, the various two- and four-year institutions in this study provide review sessions and some guidance for Praxis Core review. Why reinvent the wheel at each community college? A committee may be able to develop a state-wide program for Praxis Core preparation given that the issues are similar across institutions and that teacher certification is a state-run process as well as a clear priority across Maryland.

ECE Program Specific. Particular to resolving issues that arise in the early childhood education program, some AAT students thought a cohort model would benefit

all preservice teacher educators. On the programmatic level, participants in this current study were in agreement that various institutions already had successful student support models. The cohort programs (participants used “model” and “program” interchangeably) offered at Community College A, and to a lesser extent at Community College B and D, provide students with the information and advisor access that students attending other institutions were lacking. This is done through mandatory meetings and information sessions, required academic plans, and easy access to information through the cohort mentors.

A note of caution, however, came from a faculty coordinator at Community College A. The cohorts have grown in size to a level that staff can no longer support the required three advising meetings and these mandatory advising appointments have been removed. In order to provide the level of individual support needed for meaningful cohorts, institutions would have to provide more cohort leaders and mentors. Another area of question is whether or not non-cohort students also benefit from the extra supports available to the cohort participants. While there was no clear evidence from this research effort since cohort programs were not part of the investigation, this would be a worthwhile area of future study. Collecting both qualitative and quantitative information about cohort models across the country, especially from early childhood teacher education programs, would aid in the planning and building of successful supports for preservice educators in the future.

A recent report of the Maryland Teacher Induction, Retention, and Advancement Act of 2016 Workgroup (2017) highlighted the need to redesign teacher training “through enhanced clinical experiences, performance-based assessments, and other reforms

...necessary to equip beginning teachers to make the professional transition more smoothly and to be effective educators that remain in the profession” (p. 32-33).

Participants in this current study also called for increased clinical experiences in the ECE/SpEd AAT program as well as more training in working with students with special needs. These results are on par with the typology of the profession developed by Brock (2013) in outlining what preparation early childhood teachers believe is key to their field. That study aimed to have the participants themselves advance items in order to establish the traits of their professionalism that included specialist knowledge and skills as well as appropriate qualifications for working with young children (Brock, 2013).

Early and Winton (2010) also called for increased ECE training: Their data show that teacher education programs should provide students with more challenging content and experiences in teaching internships with young children. Changes at the program level will address many concerns and difficulties experienced by AAT ECE/SpEd students. Community College D has a workable model for adding a teaching internship (in addition to the observation components) to the ECE curriculum, as is currently required in the elementary education curriculum. The institution requires two different placements as part of their field experience course, with a focus on comparison and contrast of teaching, programming, and administration in the two schools.

Another program change possibility would impact the ECE/SpEd degree as it currently stands. A coordinator at Community College B offered a suggestion for the smaller community college campuses: combine their Elementary (K-6) and Early Childhood (PK-3) course offerings. This would provide more sections for students to help them stay on track to graduate and also spread institutional resources more broadly

to more students since elementary programs are much larger than the early childhood departments. This change would also ease the development of an AAT seminar in which advising topics would be addressed early on. Early Childhood and Elementary faculty could work together to build and run these required one-credit courses. Some universities already offer transfer seminars where they review advising issues but also teacher education content missing from the community college curriculum, so robust models are readily available. A potential drawback to a combination of these two degree programs is the loss of focus and expertise on the earliest learning years; the Elementary track additionally encompasses fourth through sixth grade, with significantly different developmental needs and issues. Smaller campuses would need to address challenges in curriculum planning and advising before a serious investigation of such a structural change is considered.

General degree issues. Moving to the third category of general degree issues, any changes to the AAT degree requirements would require participation of faculty and staff. As noted earlier by the program coordinator at Community College B, problems arose for students when faculty were not uniform in their commitment to student support and transfer knowledge. Goldrick-Rab (2010) noted a lack of coordination among instructors, which is an important consideration if improvements to transfer degrees are to be implemented. Most participants were satisfied with their academic training through the AAT degree program, but three participants did express concerns.

Lily (Community College A) indicated a lack of preparation: “Tern University Satellite is hard because we weren’t ready with the field experience like Elementary Education students get. It would help to be on the same level.” If students are not

prepared properly at the two-year colleges for the upcoming courses at the university-level, for example, their success will be compromised. Participant comments from Kates (2010) focused on the difficult academic transition from two-year to four-year institution and that is an area of potential further investigation for the ECE/SpEd AAT: "... every participant described experiencing some cognitive dissonance upon encountering the unfamiliar norms and expectations of the four-year college" (Kates, 2010, p. 34). Students described strategies for managing these difficulties such as going back to "their more accessible class notes and handouts from the community college in order to plan their fieldwork lessons or to study for tests at the four-year college" (p. 42).

Participants in this research agreed that online classes were convenient and valuable in certain circumstances, but not always appropriate for helping prepare future educators for teaching in classrooms. Regarding courses run remotely, other studies also found issues for students taking online courses in teacher education (Bigham, 2011; Lukszo, 2018). Of interest here is the struggle between two-year and four-year institution surrounding online coursework. Lukszo points out the varying pedagogical philosophies guiding the organizations. Two universities in Maryland do not currently offer online classes through their Colleges of Education because of a belief that instruction must be face-to-face to simulate classroom instruction. "Many community colleges, however, offer online classes because this method of learning offers as much accessibility as possible, especially to students who are working adults and have families to care for during the day. These tensions are not easily reconcilable – community colleges and universities have very distinct missions and purposes" (Lukszo, 2018, p. 228). This viewpoint was highlighted in a conversation with a coordinator at Mallard University:

“[We] have been having serious discussions about night and online classes but are still a full-time daytime program. We recognize that classroom teachers, full-time employees need flexibility, however.” It was not expected that students in this current study would provide extensive feedback on the academic transition from two-year to four-year institution since most participants were in their first semester after transfer. Program choices, however, must be recognized as needing buy-in from all stakeholders.

Advising and Support for Transfer Students

A second area of unique contribution and where solutions to problems with the ECE/SpEd AAT were identified is in advising and support. Bigham (2011) was the first to gather the voices of Maryland AAT students. The data collection and analysis here indicated positive experiences with the degree as well as pointed to several areas for additional investigation. Participants suggested increasing information and support for transfer planning and ensuring ease of transfer. Issues and possible resolutions were discovered and suggested during the course of this current study in four general support categories: Resources and planning, mandatory advising, new staff training, and student support.

Resources and planning. As indicated in Chapter Four and in other research (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018), academic advising for the AAT has been and continues to be an area of struggle for institutions and students alike. Several student participants talked about getting needed information from friends and classmates. Often this information was key to making correct choices, but information without official confirmation could also be incorrect. This points to the value of readily

available verified information, both online and in print, up-to-date and accessible, and verified through the regular training of and review for advisors and faculty.

Turning to resources and planning, other scholars have noted that a lack of resources and excessive use of part-time faculty in early childhood teacher preparation programs were identified as problems that need to be addressed in efforts to strengthen teacher education at the two-year colleges (Early & Winton, 2001). To make resources readily available, some institutions provide online advising resources, including curriculum checklists and graduation pathways. On the other side, three students in this study mentioned carrying around a curriculum checklist during the time they spent at the community college. At the point of gathering for the focus group, these students still had the original handouts they were given in their first semester and were using them to track coursework and plan out semesters. Most institutions are providing all materials in digital format; the value of printed handouts may be something for advisors to consider. As part of my review of advising materials for this study, I asked for handouts from all institutions. Community College C alone had no printed advising information; I was directed to the web site for any and all questions.

A useful example of planning support for ECE/SpEd AAT students comes from the Child Care Career and Professional Development Fund (CCCPDF), which is run by the state and provides a coordinator who acts as an advisor for those students who are awarded the fund. The CCCPDF is a tuition assistance program for child care providers to obtain a college education at participating colleges and universities in Maryland. Funding is available for child care providers to earn a college degree in the following areas: Early Childhood Education, Child Development, Elementary Education, and

Special Education. According to Community College D, students are supplied an electronic planner to track their progress. They must indicate which program they are following, whether they are full- or part-time, and if they will take summer and/or winter classes. Students who are part of the CCCPDF are required to complete this planner for each semester in which they reapply. Transfer problems experienced by students in this study may be addressed in the future through a system based on this action-oriented advising model used by CCCPDF. As Gronberg-Quinn (2018) indicated, issues with transfer can be efficiently and clearly addressed by the academic advisor at the two-year institution in communication with the teacher education advisor at the university which the student plans to attend. This study clarified the advising and transfer issues that have been ongoing. It also calls for more research on the differences between the various AAT degrees as well as an investigation into the enforcement of articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions. As a start, the AAT Oversight Council is currently reviewing all AAT programs and policies and has called for more longitudinal data from MLDS Center.

Mandatory advising. The second area of implication under advising and support in this study of the student perspective on the ECE/SpEd AAT degree is mandatory advising. Four-year institutions require students to complete mandatory advising each semester before they are able to register for classes. A solution for the student complaints about improper advising information would be to make advising with an education coordinator mandatory for AAT ECE/SpEd students at the community colleges. This could solve the common problem of taking a wrong class or missing a graduation or transfer requirement at the two-year schools. The community college coordinators

interviewed for this study indicated no mandatory advising each semester for students at their institutions. Training of staff and additional access to online student records may be a stumbling block to instituting this type of solution. Another issue with mandatory advising was mentioned by Hunter at Bluebird University: “You have to get someone to sign off on your plan every semester in order to get your advising hold lifted and be able to register for the coming semester. My initial advisor left for Arizona and I had no one to sign it. So I had to track someone down until that first advisor came back. But it is really hard for me to find an available advisor since I live over an hour away.” An alternative option might be mandatory activities offered through course management systems like Blackboard or Canvas, or advising videos that are linked to content quizzes and academic plan requirements which are then reviewed by an advisor. For students who struggle to meet on campus, using Skype, FaceTime, or phone calls might be reasonable. These types of activities might be especially useful if students can have ongoing access to the material.

New staff training. New staff training also came up as a significant area under advising and support needing attention in plans to improve how Maryland’s AAT ECE SpEd degree program is implemented. As clarified in Chapter Four, students shared that they were given incorrect guidance by new staff who were unaware of the specific ECE and transfer requirements. This points to an additional lack of appropriate training for advisors on AAT information, requirements, and resources. When an individual with the detailed AAT and ECE/SpEd knowledge leaves their position, whether at the two-year or four-year institution, this should not mean a change in quality in advising of students. Students in this study experienced set-backs in their pursuit of their degree due to lack of

training in new staff. Each advisor and coordinator who was interviewed shared the challenge of filling in the information gaps when a long-time employee leaves and takes the institutional knowledge with them. A focus on regular and consistent new staff and faculty training is key; while some institutions provide this, most did not. Advising training cannot be optional for anyone who works with the complexities of the ECE/SpEd AAT degree.

One example of an institution reaching out to faculty to provide transfer-specific training came from Community College A. Importantly, they have a full-time staff member focused on transfer issues with the title of Director of Transfer and Prior Learning Design. That office sent a list of four recommended steps to all faculty to assist them in providing critical transfer planning with their students. Step One was to have students attend the fall transfer fairs as part of a classroom assignment or for extra credit. The Director of Transfer recommended that each student who attends the fair be given a worksheet to use with the institutional representatives, completion of which could be part of the assignment. The second recommended step was to host a classroom presentation. Two full-time transfer staff members are available to attend classes to provide a brief presentation on transfer. Third, the director suggested faculty have their students attend the Transfer Information Session, a new offering that covers the basics of researching institutions, applying for transfer, transfer deadlines, financial aid and scholarships, articulation agreements, and credit transfer. Finally, the fourth step recommended showing students the new transfer web site which provides easily accessible information for students, faculty and staff. These steps could be adopted as the

start of developing a state-wide AAT transfer support program. A starting point might be follow-up with institutions who have these nascent initiatives.

Student support. Finally, student support was the fourth category of unique contribution in the area of the advising and support for transfer students. The Praxis Core Basic Skills Exam, came up often in the data collection phase of this study. Two possible solutions were also presented by participants: two students suggested taking the exam right out of high school, when the content was fresh for them. No coordinators mentioned this but a student wondered if the Praxis Core exam could be addressed at orientation. Also mentioned by half of the participants was the development of a review course for the Praxis Core exam for those who might need it. Three participants noted they would not need a course to review for the exam, and two suggested an alternate one-credit option could be offered.

Peer mentor programs at the community colleges might be developed similar to those provided at some universities. Tern University offers a Transfer Mentor Program specifically designed to aid new transfer students, for instance. Peer mentors might also help with preparation for the Praxis Core Basic Skills Exam; pairing up students who have passed the test with those students still preparing could make sense since many students already turn to friends and classmates. Students in secondary education AAT degree programs might be a strong resource for the ECE/SpEd students. Peer mentors might also be an important option given the difficult adjustment to the university some students may have, not just academically but also socially and emotionally. Community colleges are important in helping develop future teachers who may not otherwise be available to fill the gaps in early childhood classroom teaching.

Policy Implementation: Issues and Answers

Implications from this study also fall under the area of policy implementation. Circumstances related to policy implementation issues that arose from this research are placed in three categories: Administrative, confusion and complexities, and collaboration between institutions. As noted by Boatman and Soliz (2018):

The guarantee that courses successfully completed at one institution will transfer to another appeals to students and legislators, but requires considerable coordination on behalf of the public colleges in the state/region. The tradeoff between simplicity across the state and individuality across campuses is an important implementation issue to be considered. (p. 476)

Discussions with faculty, program coordinators, and state officials indicate a willingness among most to continue the hard work of coordination and communication necessary for implementation of the AAT, but there is a lack of informational and staff support capacity on campus in some institutions and individuals. The awareness of weakness in their programs did not always translate to the inclination to solve the issues, though; thus a lack of will. There are also instances where no staff resources are available to plan and implement solutions, even if some will to better implement policies is apparent. As evidenced below, administrative issues and confusion about policies were found across all four community college campuses.

The goal of the AAT policies to increase ease and simplicity in transferring fits with state needs for more well-trained teachers and Maryland's hope for more locally-trained teachers. At the same time, however, "it may also require more complicated negotiations across institutions with disparate requirements and degree programs"

(Boatman & Soliz, 2018, p. 476). In this area of collaboration and communication across campuses, whether between two-year or from two- to four-year, data collected for this study indicated that both the will and capacity of ECE/SpEd teacher education programs were lacking. Addressing concerns of students on campus is given priority but addressing policy implementation issues at a state level is not central to any individual's position in the early childhood teacher education departments. Since policies related to the AAT are implemented by individuals, the issues raised here impact programs at the student level: "A related lesson from detailed studies of the implementation process is that change ultimately is a problem of the smallest unit. At each point in the policy process, a policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it" (Odden, 1991, p. 189). We turn now to the three research categories of administrative, confusion and complexities, and collaboration between institutions.

Administrative issues. In the area of administration, other scholars have noted the confusion around the Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree; while many students who seek AAS degrees do not intend to transfer, the AAS course load is not well-matched with AAT requirements should the student wish to pursue a four-year degree later (Bigham, 2011; Ignash & Slotnick, 2007). A one-size-fits-all Associate of Arts in Teaching degree will not cover the myriad possibilities for working with young children but using different degree titles and names—ranging from AA to AAS to AAT—only adds to misunderstandings and mistakes (Ignash & Slotnick, 2007).

Research results do not produce change on their own, but the field of policy implementation is potentially very useful to early childhood teacher education because it "attempts to identify the best ways to promote the routine 'uptake' of credible research

findings,” thereby playing a role in informing dialogues and filling the research gaps (Horm, Hyson, & Winton, 2013, p.108). Administrative changes to policy through agreements between institutions may result in more preservice teachers completing degrees that provide multiple pathways and job opportunities. For example, adjustments to a few courses under the AAS and AAT were recommended. Jacqueline at Community College B offered this solution: “An improvement I would suggest is letting students know, if they are interested in working in childcare, they should take the School-Age Child Care course. It should be made part of the AAT, or at least an option. Since many students would need it for their childcare positions, it could be swapped out with another required course.”

Confusion and complexities. A second focus that surfaced in the area of policy implementation is that of confusion around the operation of this state program given its complexities. The input from students, coordinators and faculty about the Maryland AAT in ECE/SpEd indicated a problem of missing important transfer and application deadlines. Community colleges are already relying heavily on adjunct faculty so finding the time and resources to provide up-to-date information to adjuncts who then must clearly deliver it to potential transfer students may not be feasible. It is also not possible for general advisors to stay on top of all majors, and the job thus falls to the teacher education coordinators. However, many coordinators are over-extended with full teaching loads; perhaps a student worker teamed with an administrative staff person could be tasked with reaching out to all AAT ECE/SpEd students to check on their progress, discuss important deadlines, and provide the names and contact information for the individuals who can assist them.

A broader solution to many of the information sharing and flow problems could be a state-level AAT transfer coordinator. It would make sense to have someone at the state level coordinate the distribution of this information. A state-level coordinator could also ensure that transfer fairs were regional and provided all needed information for pursuing a transfer degree in teacher education. An example of a non-profit organization developing this type of program comes from Texas, where the Texas Association for College Admission Counseling runs regional transfer fairs in different parts of the state. Finally, a transfer orientation for all AAT students should be a place where many issues are clarified. Since there is variance in how these events are run at local institutions, a state-wide set of requirements could help ensure critical and updated information is supplied. Mandating important information in an accessible format ensures valuable transfer events while allowing for individual, institutional differences.

Collaboration. Finally, a solution to policy issues that arose most often during this research process was increased communication and collaboration between individuals and between institutions. A sub-question to the main research question about the student perspective on Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT program was about student expectations of the transfer process and their actual experience with it. Students indicated experiencing delays in progress to completing both their AAT and bachelor's degrees due to missing courses or Praxis Core scores, as well as being forced to retake certain requirements at the four-year university. At times, these issues occurred when program changes were made at one institution and not clearly communicated to the other institution or when students were misadvised prior to transfer to a university. At other

times, delays and frustrations arose when requirements were simply misunderstood. This was the case in other research findings on the AAT policies and programs:

One community college representative exclaimed that he had been providing students with incorrect information about guaranteed admission into education programs. Although efforts to help correct this information have occurred, such as through the creation of the Quick Facts Sheet, confusion about admissions policies continue to be a problem across the state. (Lukszo, 2018, p. 172)

This confusion is exacerbated for students pursuing ECE/SpEd certification. As discussed in Chapter Two, there are multiple pathways to teaching young children, and multiple degree and certificate options. The transfer process between two- and four-year institutions itself poses difficulties, but the different pathways to a career in early childhood education make implementation of a transfer degree in ECE additionally challenging. A coordinator at the state level who disseminates changes and updates and brings together institutions and individuals for collaborative training and information sessions could resolve these long-standing issues. In the state-level meetings and institutional discussions conducted for this study, there were no discussions of developing such a position. A deeper level of understanding between two- and four-year institutions may help them enhance the experience for early childhood preservice educators and also help build a larger and more diverse pool of future teachers in early learning classrooms (Kates, 2010; Lukszo, 2018).

Future Research

The analysis of the data collected in this study was organized into three areas of significance and contribution to the field: programmatic, advising and support, and policy

implementation. Solutions to problems with the ECE/SpEd AAT at the programmatic level were suggested during the course of this study and fell into three categories: transfer specific, early childhood education program specific, and general degree issues. A network of university transfer advisors working at community colleges is a possible model on which to build specific teacher education supports. Another solution could be an “AAT Seminar” offered at both the two- and four year campuses. Also suggested was a statewide preparation program for the required basic skills test. Some participants in this research thought a cohort model was uniquely helpful and all believed in the value of their field experience and internship opportunities, calling for an increase in these requirements. Finally, although online coursework was not a focus here, participants were strongly opposed to this type of delivery of early childhood teacher education content. Further focus on and review of internet-based classes should be a vital area for future research.

Online classes in general are now part of the fabric of most institutions, offering flexibility in staffing and scheduling. It would be valuable to know why students in this study disavow online courses for early childhood education, especially since scheduling is also a difficulty for them. More detailed qualitative information about the cause of student disaffection as well as quantitative data about faculty response time, the nature of interactions in the computer-based classes and success in courses that built on the online content would provide significant insight into how to best utilize these flexible courses in teacher education. A broader survey-based study to gather student perspectives on a larger scale could be developed based on the findings laid out in this research effort.

Obstructions to AAT degree completion and possible resolutions to transfer issues were suggested during the course of this study in four general advising and support categories: Resources and planning, mandatory advising, new staff training, and student support. To address the lack of resources expressed by participants, institutions should consider offering clear and easily accessible online forms and instructions as well as ensuring all faculty advisors have printed handouts for students to carry with them as references.

Another area of focus for further study could be the impact of more proactive advising (a preemptive approach to working with students, formally known as intrusive advising) as well as mandatory advising. A comparative study of early childhood education student experiences across their two-year, four-year, and classroom placements might focus on the difference in transfer and career success for students who were provided proactive and mandatory advising and those who were not. Coordinator participants in this study concurred on the need for longitudinal studies of ECE educators in order to fully understand their pathways to and time commitment in public school classrooms. This model could be used to build a longitudinal study of students who start at the community college, transfer to a four-year institution, and become the teacher of record in an early childhood classroom. Two changes are warranted, the first being that more time is needed to find and contact participants and then organize focus groups and interviews. Investigators should start discussions with institutions to find students at the beginning of fall semester for spring focus groups. The IRB approval process should start even earlier. Second, the researcher should start with coordinators or advisors at each campus and gain access to students and EC classes through the department. This

adds a level of legitimacy and connection for the participants. Understanding the impact of different types of advising will be necessary to develop additional training of faculty and staff, an improvement that would address many student and program coordinator complaints, especially given the more complex early childhood education offerings.

A final opportunity for future investigation of strengthening advising and support on the teacher education pathway is the development of mentor programs, either peer- or faculty-based. A mixed methods study could provide data on participant, mentor, and staff numbers, financial support, resources used or needed, and programmatic elements while a survey of students could add the perspective of the mentees. As in this study, interviews or focus groups would bring an important qualitative focus that might dig deeper into participant views and add the insights of those experiencing the program.

Implications from this study also fall under the area of policy implementation. Circumstances related to policy implementation issues that arose from this research are placed in three categories: Administrative, confusion and complexities, and collaboration between institutions. First, administrative improvements made through policy changes could be developed between community colleges and universities. The AAT Oversight Council has the role of reviewing the AAT degrees, but it does not include all stakeholders. A few adjustments to the AAS and AAT based on cooperation between institutions could result in a smooth transition and more preservice teachers completing Bachelor of Arts degrees. Confusion surrounding AAT policies and the complexities surrounding the ECE/SpEd degrees in particular could be addressed by the creation of a state-level coordinator position. This individual could ensure that ongoing changes and adjustments would be shared with all state institutions. The AAT coordinator for the state

could also be responsible for developing a transfer orientation for the AAT which would then be offered on all campuses. A state-level coordinator could also support the collaboration between institutions and their staffs.

This is an area for deeper investigation. A recent study (Lukszo, 2018) found the implementation of transfer articulation policies to be of critical importance and recommended research on subject-specific state transfer articulation policies. Research is needed on articulation policies and agreements across subjects, institutions, and states. The review here of Maryland's ECE/SpEd AAT degree serves as one such effort but an examination of other subject areas and other states would be useful to further develop transfer policy implementation knowledge. Quantitative, cross-state studies have not been conducted of teacher transfer degree programs specifically. Collecting comparative data as well as qualitative descriptions of student experiences would add greatly to the field. A statewide exit survey of AAT students from both two- and four-year programs would build on the qualitative research conducted here and previously (Bigham, 2011; Gronberg-Quinn, 2018; Lukszo, 2018).

These wide-ranging areas for continued research may well lead to improved movement through community college and on to an early childhood classroom teaching position. The transfer articulation policies developed in 2001 in the state of Maryland were key steps in defining pathways from two-year colleges to four-year universities; students still face complexities, however, when trying to find their way through course choices and individual institutional requirements. "Articulation agreements alone may be necessary but not sufficient conditions for improving transfer, and particularly for improving post-transfer success" (Boatman & Soliz, 2018, p. 475). Given the complexity

of the transfer process, especially for early childhood preservice educators, further research is needed on the student experience and on potential solutions offered here. As noted, both quantitative and qualitative efforts will be needed to add to the knowledge about transfer and early childhood education program transfers in particular; further highlighting the student perspective to build on this current effort would deepen the insights.

While much has been accomplished in understanding and resolving student transfer issues, much remains to be addressed, as evidenced by similarities to Davies and Dickmann in 1998. The authors gathered the student perspective in a different state with non-teaching majors, but similar information was found in this study, and student feedback remains the same today:

One very specific theme upon which almost every focus group member agreed was the inadequacy of easily obtainable, clearly described, accurate information on the transfer policy and process. In coding the focus group responses, the information theme was generated. Students complained about not knowing where to acquire information on transfer, about the information being inaccurate, about having questions to ask and not knowing to whom to turn to have them answered, and the age old question of transfer of specific community courses to the university. (p. 554)

And finally, another critical area of future research is explicitly eliciting perspectives from ECE students on teaching for diversity. Despite anticipating the centrality of this theme for this study, students did not bring up diversity in relation to their AAT program preparation specifically. This was surprising given the prominence of

the theme in the scholarly literature. An additional feature of a future study to elicit the student perspective on diversity should be the perspective of program administrators as well. This population in my study was overwhelmingly non-minority, making their feedback on diversity issues in college and early childhood classrooms significant. Preparing teachers for diverse classrooms is not a prominent aspect of all teacher education programs. The outcomes presented by the four community colleges here related to preparing educators to teach diverse students are not uniform and the courses themselves vary depending on institution and instructor. Given the recent integration of the Early Childhood with the Special Education track, it may be that broader diversity issues are given less attention. While there is a required course introducing special education, there is no particular course on preparing educators for working with diverse populations in the AAT program.

Research in this area of the ECE/SpEd AAT is needed, such as beginning with a review of course syllabi to evaluate the opportunities instructors provide for preservice educators to develop skills and knowledge for working with children and families who are diverse. Lim and A'Ole-Boune (2005) have offered an extensive research plan to evaluate early childhood teacher education programs : “In thinking of a design that can measure effectiveness of personnel preparation programs, we would like to propose a longitudinal design that involves multiple approaches (e.g., content analysis, questionnaires, observation, interviews) assessing multiple perspectives (i.e., from faculty, syllabi, students, graduates, employers, and families). A scale that can measure the quality of personnel preparation programs will need to be developed” (p. 235). Using

NAEYC's Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs would be a valuable resource for development of a quality scale.

In closing, the four most pressing follow-up studies to this research are as follows. First, a longitudinal, mixed methods study of early childhood educators should be conducted, building on the methods used here. A quantitative, cross-state study of teacher transfer degrees, with advising as a key component, is also recommended. Third, a survey of the use and content of online courses in early childhood teacher education programs is an important follow-up to the results here. Lastly, qualitative research to elicit student perspectives on diversity in early childhood education, both in teacher education programs and in preparation for teaching in diverse early learning classrooms is a critical next step.

Conclusion

Of importance to this study, more than 50% of teachers attended a community college for at least part of their education, and 20% of teachers began their careers in community college (NCES, 2015). The AAT degree is therefore a crucial piece in training future educators and professionalizing teacher training pathways. Because of the absence of student voices from research on Maryland's AAT, this study focused on the student perspective with the goals of improving the preparation, retention, and transfer of teaching candidates, as well as informing universities working to accommodate and support their community college transfers. With a growing need for early childhood educators who have earned four-year degrees, understanding their specific circumstances should help shape program and policy changes and improvements. The increased academic requirements for early childhood teachers highlight the need to understand and

support AAT ECE/SpEd students as they move forward to a bachelor's degree, teacher certification, and ultimately their own early learning classrooms.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the findings of this study will act in support of smooth transitions and timely graduation for preservice teachers. There is agreement in the field of early learning that teacher preparation must be improved. Further education is an important pathway to improved teacher quality which will require increasing the number of early care providers who have earned at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood (Jean-Sigur, Bell, & Kim, 2016). This study of the AAT is a step toward that goal.

Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

1. Please introduce yourself by first name and tell us where you attended community college and to which university you will transfer.
2. Looking back on your experiences in the AAT program, what are some key memories you have about your studies here?
3. Tell us about some of the instructors and classes that provided the most meaningful learning experiences for you. Any shortcomings or concerns?
4. Do you have a strong memory to share about the transfer process up to this point in your preservice teacher education program?
5. Looking back on your experiences in the AAT program, what were the most challenging aspects of the program? The most positive?
6. If you could change one thing about the AAT program, what would it be?
7. Do you believe your AAT program provided you with what you will need to be successful at the 4-year school? Why or why not?
8. Anything you want to add about your experience we haven't discussed yet?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

(Spring Individual Interview Questions)

AAT

1. During the focus group meeting, you and (or) others mentioned.....? Could you elaborate? Was that also your experience?
2. What factors during your time at [community college] served as supports for you? Challenges? (e.g., instructors, work schedules, school policies, race, disabilities).
3. What are your thoughts about the advising you have received, pre-transfer? (Follow up on Focus Group comments)
4. If there was one thing you could have changed about your experience at [community college], what would it be and why? (Follow up on Focus Group comments).
5. Tell me a little more about your background and what brought you to the AAT program at [Community College]. You indicated... could you elaborate...
6. Which courses had the biggest impact on you as a future teacher, and what was it about those courses that resonates with you?
7. Which courses were most challenging to you and why?
8. What about your instructors? For those you remember most clearly, what was it about them that sticks with you?
9. Any specific changes you would make to the program?

(Fall Individual Interview Questions)

TRANSFER

1. How do your experiences here at XX compare to your time at the community college? Similarities? Differences?
2. Did your work at the two-year school prepare you for your university requirements? How did it or how did it not? (Consider the student bodies, campus resources, academic requirements, professors, etc.).
3. What about your transfer to [University]? What can you tell me about how the process worked/did not work for you?
4. What are the ways in which [University] has been most helpful in your goal to be a certified EC teacher?
5. What are your biggest concerns about the program? How could they be overcome?
6. How do your experiences at the university compare to your time at the community college? Can you describe specific differences? How you are adjusting?
7. If you think they are needed, do you have specific ideas of how to improve the process?
8. Did you have time to review the transcript of our first interview as well as my summary of the focus group meeting? Are there any corrections needed to my recording of your responses? Is there anything you would like to add?
9. In the time since the focus group and interview about your time at [community

- college], have you had additional thoughts or insights you would like to share?
10. (If they haven't already been answered, I will ask one or two tailored questions for clarification and elaboration based on the original responses of each individual participant.)

For Maryland Education Officials: Policy Questions

1. What was your role in the development and/or revisions of the AAT in Maryland?
2. What can you tell me about how the different courses were developed for meeting the state standards at the two-year institutions? Do you have any knowledge of the arts standards in particular and how that process worked?
3. What type of data analysis has been carried out on AAT students to date? What would you like to see investigated, and what information would be helpful moving forward?
4. After 16 years, how would you like to see the AAT revised or updated?

For Academic Advisors and Faculty: Program and Transfer Questions

1. How many advisors are available to ECE AAT students? Do you have specific transfer advising?
2. How are Advisors who work with ECE AAT students trained? Do you have faculty cadre training or part-time adjunct training? Are they provided training on the software used like Starfish or Advise on the Web? Do you have training materials or professional development resources for advising?
3. How do students find the appropriate advisor? Are there set hours for ECE advising? Are there required meetings with advisors?
4. What materials do you provide the students about the AAT and transfer in general? What support is available for the Praxis Core Basic Skills exam?
5. Do you have any specific feedback from students you could share about their experiences with the ECE AAT and the transfer process?

Appendix C: Recruitment Scripts

1) AAT Program Coordinators/Faculty

Hello. My name is Anita Weisburger and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am in the early stages of data collection for my dissertation in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership in the College of Education. My research is focused on the student perspective of the early childhood AAT program at Maryland community colleges. I would greatly appreciate it if you could help me locate students in your program who are planning to graduate with an AAT this semester and also plan to transfer to a four-year university in the state to complete their teaching certification. Do you think I might speak to a group of them in one of their final required classes? If that is not feasible, would you be able to send them a recruitment email message from me?

Finally, I would also like to speak with you briefly about your ECE/SpEd AAT program. If you are amenable, I will get back in touch to set up a convenient time for a phone conversation.

I am hopeful that my work with these students will provide valuable insights to the field of early childhood teacher preparation. My email contact is aweisbu1@umd.edu; my cell phone number is 240-485-7112. Thank you for your help, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Best wishes, Anita Weisburger, University of Maryland, College Park

2) AAT Program Academic/Transfer Advisors

Hello. My name is Anita Weisburger and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am in the early stages of data collection for my dissertation in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership in the College of Education. My research is focused on the student perspective of the early childhood AAT program at Maryland community colleges. I would like to speak with you briefly about your work with students in the ECE/SpEd AAT program. If you are amenable, I will get back in touch to set up a convenient time for a phone conversation.

I am hopeful that my work with these students will provide valuable insights to the field of early childhood teacher preparation. My email contact is aweisbu1@umd.edu; my cell phone number is 240-485-7112. Thank you for your help, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Best wishes, Anita Weisburger, University of Maryland, College Park

3) Teacher Education Student

Hello. My name is Anita Weisburger and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am in the early stages of data collection for my dissertation in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership in the College of Education.

I am very interested in speaking with you about your two-year and four-year early childhood teacher preparation program experience. I am investigating the student perspective of Maryland's AAT programs. My research process will start with a focus group meeting at your community college, followed by individual interviews, and then finish with another individual interview once you transfer in the fall. Total amount of time over the next five to six months will be about five hours. I will provide snacks and gift cards to participants.

I am hopeful that our work together will provide valuable insights to the field of early childhood teacher preparation. If you are interested and available to work with me, please respond to this message. My email contact is aweisbu1@umd.edu; my cell phone number is 240-485-7112. Thank you very much for your consideration!

Sincerely, Anita Weisburger, University of Maryland, College Park

4) University Early Childhood Teacher Education Program Coordinators/Faculty

Hello. My name is Anita Weisburger and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am in the early stages of data collection for my dissertation in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership in the College of Education. My research is focused on the student perspective of the AAT program at Maryland community colleges. I would like to speak with you briefly about your work with students who have transferred from an ECE/SpEd AAT program. If you are amenable, I will get back in touch to set up a convenient time for a phone conversation. I am hopeful that my work with these students will provide valuable insights to the field of early childhood teacher preparation. My email contact is aweisbu1@umd.edu; my cell phone number is 240-485-7112. Thank you for your help, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Best wishes, Anita Weisburger, University of Maryland, College Park

Appendix D: Letter of Invitation

Dear [insert name],

My name is Anita Weisburger and I am currently a fourth-year doctoral student at the University of Maryland-College Park. I am now beginning to collect data and complete my dissertation.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study that will explore the student perspective of the AAT program at community colleges in Maryland. If you are planning to graduate from an early childhood education teacher education transfer degree program and also plan to transfer to a four-year university in Maryland, you are eligible to participate in this study! To conduct this research, I require participants who are willing to engage in a series of meetings over a six-month period that will take a total of approximately five hours. You should expect to:

- Participate in an audiotaped individual interview with me (lasting approximately one hour).
- Participate in a focus group meeting along with three to nine other students. This will be audiotaped and last for approximately two hours. We will discuss your experiences as an AAT student as well as your perceptions of the transfer process.
- Lastly, participate in a follow-up interview with me lasting about one hour once you have transferred to a university in the fall.

To the extent possible, protecting your privacy, confidentiality, and identity are important to me. To maintain safety in the research process, I will do the following:

- You will be given a pseudonym (of your choice) that will be used when reporting the study.
- All conversations will be audiotaped, transcribed and sent to you for content and intent verification.
- When the research project has been completed, all audio files and transcripts will be destroyed.

Finally, your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate and you can end your participation at any time without penalty. You may also decline to answer any question I ask during our conversation. If the above is agreeable to you, you will be asked to sign and date a consent form at our first meeting. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in this research project. I look forward to working with you. Your participation is appreciated and important to the success of this study.

If interested, please reply by email or call my cell so I can contact you to schedule our first meeting. Also, be sure to provide a phone number at which you can be reached. Contact me at 240.485.7112 or aweisbu1@umd.edu

Sincerely, Anita Weisburger, PhD Candidate, University of Maryland, College Park

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

- 1) What is your age? _____
- 2) What is your gender?
 - a) Female b) Male c) Transgendered d) Other _____
- 3) What is your racial background?
 - a) African American/Black
 - b) Latino/Hispanic
 - c) Mixed race (please specify) _____
 - d) Caucasian
 - e) Other (please specify) _____

6) Name of Hometown/State

7) Name of High School _____

8) Undergraduate Institution(s)

Institution Name(s)	Years/Dates Enrolled	Major (s)	Part-/Full- time	Degree(s) earned
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1)

2)

9) Current year in studies and location:

OVER

10) Dates and Times of Availability for Focus Group and Interviews:

11) To what degree were you supported at [CC] in your efforts to prepare to transfer to a four-year program to complete your teaching certification?

Circle One:

Greatly To a good extent Somewhat Very little Not at all

12) To which university do you plan to transfer?

13) What were the specific supports provided to you at [CC]?

14) In what **areas** should there be improvement in preparing students to transfer? Do you have specific ideas to help improve the transfer process?

15) Name (for scheduling purposes)

Appendix F: Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	Early Childhood Teacher Preparation at Maryland Community Colleges: A Student Perspective
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Anita Weisburger, a graduate student under the supervision of Dr. Linda Valli, at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are involved in the field of education as a teacher candidate. The purpose of this effort is to investigate the student perspective of Maryland’s Early Childhood Associate of Arts in Teaching degree. This will include a discussion of factors that have enhanced or obstructed your preparation, and a description of the transfer process as well as the preparation it provided for the 4-year institution.
Procedures	<p>The procedures involve focus group meetings and individual interviews with current early childhood teacher education students. Audio recordings will be made of the interviews, and field notes will be taken as well as audio-recordings of the focus group sessions. Initial interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. The two-hour focus group session will be followed by two individual 60-minute interviews scheduled at each participant’s convenience. Total amount of time for each participant will be approximately five hours. See list of interview questions attached.</p> <p>In addition, phone interviews will be conducted with state officials and faculty/advisors about the AAT and higher education policy; written notes will be taken of these conversations. These phone interviews should last no longer than one hour.</p> <p>All information from the students will be audio-recorded anonymously. There will be no identifiers that can be linked to the participants. Each participant will be given or choose a pseudonym.</p>
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There are no known risks from participating in this research study.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits to the participants in this study. However, possible benefits include identification of teaching resources, networking with other educators and professional development opportunities. Other potential benefits to be gained from this research include a better understanding of the different AAT offerings throughout the state as well as pathways for teacher

	<p>candidates transferring from two-year to four-year institutions, and a distillation of how early childhood teacher education students come to their views of the teaching profession.</p>
Confidentiality	<p>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by allowing access to the data only to Anita Weisburger, principal researcher. Loss of confidentiality will also be minimized by keeping all data secure in a locked cabinet and password protected computer.</p> <p>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>
Compensation	<p>Student participants will be given a snack (non-alcoholic beverage and food) at the focus group before the start of the two-hour session to provide time to get to know one another and get comfortable in the environment. \$25 gift cards to a teacher supply web site will be provided to those participants who complete all three steps of the study as recognition of their time and effort.</p>
Right to Withdraw and Questions	<p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Anita Weisburger</i> <i>700 Gist Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910</i> <i>aweisbu1@umd.edu</i> <i>240-485-7112</i></p>
Participant Rights	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p>

	<i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i>	
Statement of Consent	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix G: Participant Demographics and Questionnaire Results

Table 8

Age of Student Participants

Age	Total Students	Percentage of Participant Population
16-24	13	72.2%
25-35	4	22.2%
36-45	1	5.5%
45+	0	0%

Table 9

Results of Questionnaire: To what degree were you supported at your community college in your efforts to prepare to transfer to a four-year program to complete your teaching certification?

Answer chosen	Total Students	Percentage of Participant Population
Greatly	7	39%
To a good extent	5	28%
Somewhat	1	5.5%
Very Little	1	5.5%
Not at All	0	0%
Did Not Transfer	1	5.5%
None	3	17%

Table 10
Background Information on Study Participants

Name	Age	Two-year Institution/ Focus Group	Four-year Institution	Transfer Status at Time of Follow-up
Lily	24	Community College A/1	Mallard University	Junior status
Julia	21	Community College A/1	Tern U Satellite	Junior status
Ava	21	Community College A/1	Tern U Satellite	Junior status
Danielle	22	Community College A/1	Tern University	Junior? status
Jacqueline	31	Community College B/1	N/A	Waiting to apply for one or two years
Hailey	20	Community College B/1	Sparrow University	Junior
Ellie	21	Community College B/1	Sparrow University	Junior
Samantha	20	Community College C/1	N/A	Delayed
Violet	26	Community College C/1	Tern University	Sophomore (applied to TE)
Sophia	24	Community College C/1	Tanager University	Junior(Psyc)
Eliana	19	Community College D/1	Tanager University	Junior (Psyc)
Arianna	24	Community College D/2	Tern University	Junior
Leah	21	Community College D/3	Nighthawk University	Junior
Nora	23	Community College A/2	NA	Applying
Whitney	26	Community College A/2	NA	Applying
Hunter	42	Community College A/3	Bluebird University	Graduating May with BA
Katherine	31	Community College A/3	Bluebird University	Junior ECE
Camila	24	Community College A/3	Bluebird University	Junior ECE

Appendix H: Coding Tables

Table 11

Research Question #1: Themes and Initial Codes

Themes	Theme Names	Initial Codes
Theme 1	The Teacher Education programs and teacher education faculty at community colleges are viewed positively by students	Field Experience Cohort Program Teacher Education Courses Key Memories Positive Memories
Theme 2	Special Education training is lacking in the AAT curriculum	Changes recommended Improvements needed Teacher Education Courses Teacher Education Program
Theme 3	Field experience is the most important part of their teacher education preparation	Field Experience General Supports Provided Internship/Professional Program
Theme 4	Academic advising is viewed negatively by most AAT students	Transfer Process Transfer Advising Articulation of CC Courses Transition from CC
Theme 5	Online offerings are problematic, especially for teacher education requirements	Online Courses Changes Recommended Instructors/Courses Non-Education Courses Staffing Problems Improvements Needed

Table 12**Research Question #2: Themes and Initial Codes**

Themes	Theme Names	Initial Codes
Theme 1	Academic advising at the community colleges causes significant struggles	Advising Complaints Transfer Advising Transfer Fairs Multiple Campuses General Challenges Key Memories
Theme 2	The Praxis Core exam continues to hold students back from graduation and transfer	Praxis Core Exam Changes recommended Preparation for 4-Year General Challenges
Theme 3	A lack of communication between 2-year and 4-year institutions is seen as a substantial issue	Non-academic supports Transfer process memories Improvements needed Transition from CC Communication
Theme 4	Individual faculty make the difference for many students	Instructors/Courses Helpful Advising Positive Memories Key Memories General Supports Provided

Table 13**Research Question #3: Themes and Initial Codes**

Themes	Theme Names	Initial Codes
Theme 1	Most students expressed frustration with transferring but a small number were satisfied	Transfer Advising Transfer Fairs Advising Complaints Helpful Advising Instructors/Courses Transfer Process Memories Cohort Program General Supports Provided
Theme 2		Non-Academic Supports

	Solutions to transfer issues seem reasonable and doable	Changes Recommended Improvements Needed Communication Website Use
Theme 3	Institutions that provide clear and accessible information allow students to follow a smooth pathway	Advising Complaints General Supports Provided Transfer Process Transition from CC Articulation of Courses

Table 14

Research Question #4: Themes and Initial Codes

Themes	Theme Names	Initial Codes
Theme 1	Experiences were not uniformly positive when reviewing teacher education programs in 4-year institutions	General Supports Provided Teacher Education Program Internships/Professional program Praxis Core Exam Online Courses Scheduling
Theme 2	Transfer experiences varied based on sending and receiving institution	Transfer Process Memories Transfer Advising Transition from CC
Theme 3	Advising experiences varied but concerns were widespread	Changes Recommended Advising Complaints Articulation of Courses Preparation for 4-year Helpful Advising

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